

The COLLECTED NOVELS
of JOSÉ
SARAMAGO

winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
URSULA K. LE GUIN

The Collected Novels of José Saramago

José Saramago

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The Double, 2002
Seeing, 2004
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Nichole Witt e. K., Frankfurt am Main, Germany
The Elephant's Journey, 2008

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[Baltasar & Blimunda](#) (1987)

A heretical priest during the time of the Spanish Inquisition is building a flying machine, with three people to help him: Domenico Scarlatti and a pair of lovers, Baltasar, a one-handed soldier, and Blimunda, the slender daughter of a witch.

[The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis](#) (1991)

The year is 1936, the city, Lisbon. Ricardo Reis, a middle-aged doctor and poet, has returned to his native country after sixteen years in Brazil. He spends hours walking the steep rain-filled streets.

[The Gospel According to Jesus Christ](#) (1994)

A deft psychological portrait of a savior who is at once the Son of God and a young man of this earth.

[The Stone Raft](#) (1995)

One day the Iberian Peninsula breaks off from the rest of the continent and drifts away into the Atlantic Ocean.

[The History of the Siege of Lisbon](#) (1997)

A proofreader alters a key word in an account of the 1147 siege of Lisbon—then under Moorish rule—by crusaders. This uncharacteristic decision will lead him into an affair of the heart that changes the course of European history.

[Blindness](#) (1998)

A city is struck by an epidemic of "white blindness." Only a doctor's wife is spared, and she must guide seven strangers through the dangerous new circumstances.

[The Tale of the Unknown Island](#) (1999)

This is the story of a man who asks the king for a boat and of the woman who decides to follow him on his adventure.

[All the Names](#) (2000)

Senhor José, a low-level clerk in the Central Registry, chances upon the records of a young woman and becomes obsessed with the idea of finding her.

[The Cave](#) (2002)

An elderly potter struggles to make a living. His son-in-law, a security guard at the Center, is assigned to guard an excavation-in-progress that will change the family's life forever.

[The Double](#) (2004)

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, a high school history teacher, rents a video and is surprised to

discover an extra in the film looks exactly like him. It is, in fact, his double.

[Seeing](#) (2006)

On election day in the capital, all the citizens rush out to vote, but they leave their ballots mysteriously blank.

[Death with Interruptions](#) (2008)

Death sits in her chilly apartment, where she lives alone with her scythe and filing cabinets, and contemplates her experiment: what if people stopped dying?

[The Elephant's Journey](#) (2010)

Based on a true story, the tale of an elephant who walked from Lisbon to Vienna in 1551.

INTRODUCTION

IT'S FITTING THAT the novels of José Saramago should have an electronic edition, a virtual presence, for it was Saramago who first spoke of virtual literature—a fiction that "seems to have detached itself from reality in order better to reveal its invisible mysteries" (The Notebook). He credits Jorge Luis Borges with the invention of this genre, but he himself brought to it the one quality of greatness that Borges's fictions lack: a passionate and compassionate interest in ordinary people and everyday human life.

We probably don't really need any more categories, but virtual literature might be a useful one, differing from science fiction and speculative fiction with their extrapolative bent, fantasy with its wholly imagined realities, satire with its meliorative indignation, magic realism which is indigenous to South America, and modernist realism with its fixation on the banal. I see virtual literature sharing ground with all these genres, as indeed they all overlap, yet differing from them insofar as its aim is, as Saramago put it, the revelation of mystery.

In his books, this is revelation of the most secular and unpretentious kind—no grand epiphanies, only a gathering and slow arrival of light, as in the hour before sunrise. The mystery revealed is that of daylight, of seeing the world clearly, the mystery that happens literally every day.

Saramago died in the summer of 2010, at eighty-seven. He wrote his first major novel when he was over sixty, and finished his last, *Cain*, a little before he died.

I have to go on speaking of him in the present tense, he lives so vividly in his writings, these works of a "senior citizen," our patronizing euphemism for the dreaded words "old man." His extraordinary gifts of invention and narration, his radical intelligence, wit, humor, good sense, and goodness of heart, will shine out to anyone who values such qualities in an artist, but his age gives his art a singular edge. He has news for us all, including old readers tired of hearing the young or the wannabe young telling us the stuff we used to tell everybody when we were young. Saramago has left all the heavy breathing decades behind him. He has grown up. Heresy as it may seem to the cultists of youth, he is more than he was when he was young, more of a man, a person, an artist. He's been farther and learned more. He is the only novelist of my generation who tells me what I didn't know, or rather, what I didn't know I knew: the only one I still learn from. He had the time and the courage to earn that subtle and unpretentious kind of understanding we call, inadequately, wisdom. But it's not the glib reassurance often labeled wisdom. He's anything but reassuring. Though he doesn't parrot the counsels of despair, he has little confidence in that kindly trickster, hope.

Radical means "of the root," and Saramago was a deeply rooted man. Accepting the Nobel Prize in a king's court, he spoke with passion and simplicity of his grandparents in the plains of the Alentejo, peasants, very poor people, to him a lifelong, beloved presence and moral example. He was radically conservative in the true meaning of the word, which has nothing to do with the reactionary quacking of the neocons, whom he despised. An atheist and socialist, he spoke out, and suffered for, not mere beliefs or opinions, but rational convictions, formed on a clear ethical framework which could be reduced almost to a sentence, but a sentence of immensely complex political, social, and spiritual implication: it is wrong to hurt people weaker than you are.

His international reputation has suffered most from his steadfast opposition to Israeli aggression against Palestine. His demand that Israel, remembering the suffering of the Jews, cease to inflict the same kind of suffering on its neighbors, has cost him the approval of those who conflate opposition to Israel's aggressive policy with anti-Semitism. To him religion doesn't enter into it, while Jewish history simply supports his argument: it is a matter of the powerful hurting those weaker than they are.

Saramago famously said, "God is the silence of the universe, and man is the cry that gives meaning to that silence" (The Notebook). He isn't often so dramatically epigrammatic. I would describe his usual attitude to God as inquisitive, incredulous, humorous, and patient—about as far from the ranting professional atheist as you can get. Yet he is an atheist, anticlerical, and distrustful of religion; and the potentates of piety of course detest him, a dislike he cordially returns. In his fascinating Notebook (blogs from 2008 and 2009) he castigates the mufti of Saudi Arabia, who, as he says, by legalizing marriage for girls of ten, legalized pederasty, and the pope of Rome, so reluctant to condemn pederasty among his priests—again a matter of the powerful hurting the defenseless. Saramago's atheism is of a piece with his feminism, his fierce outrage at the mistreatment, underpayment, and devaluing of women, the way men misuse the power over them given them by every society. And this is all of a piece with his socialism. He is on the side of the underdog.

He is without sentimentality. In his understanding of people Saramago brings us something very rare: a disillusion that allows affection and admiration, a clear-sighted forgiveness. He doesn't expect too much of us. He is perhaps closer in spirit and in humor to our first great novelist, Cervantes, than any novelist since. When the dream of reason and the hope of justice are endlessly disappointed, cynicism is the easy out; but Saramago the stubborn peasant will not take the easy out.

Of course he was no peasant. He worked his way up from ancestral poverty, through working as a garage mechanic, to become an educated, cultivated intellectual and man of letters, an editor and journalist. For years a city dweller, he loved Lisbon, and he deals as an insider with the issues of urban/industrial life. Yet often in his novels he also looks on that life from a place outside the city, a place where people make their own living with their own hands. He offers no idyllic pastoral regression, but a realistic sense of where

and how common people genuinely connect with what is left of our common world.

The most visibly radical thing about his novels is the punctuation. Readers may be put off by his use of commas instead of periods and his refusal to paragraph, which makes the page a forbidding block of print, and the dialogue frequently a puzzle as to who is speaking. This is a radical regression, on the way back to the medieval manuscript with no spaces between the words. I don't know his reason for these idiosyncrasies. I learned to accept them, but still dislike them; his use of what teachers call "comma fault" or "run-on sentences" makes me read too fast, breathlessly, losing the shape of the sentence and the speech-and-pause rhythm of conversation.

Grant him that quirk, and his prose, in the hands of his splendid translators, is clear, cogent, lively, robust, perfectly suited to narrative. He wastes no words. He is a great storyteller. (Try reading him aloud.) And the stories he has to tell are not like any others.

Here are some brief notes about them, reflections on my own process of learning how to read Saramago, an education by no means completed.

His first published novel, *Risen from the Ground*, is not available at this time in English. It is, I gather, about the peasants of the Alentejo, and he refers to it as the book "where the way of narrating my novels was born," which makes me long to see it.

Baltasar and Blimunda, published in Portugal in 1982, earned prompt acclaim in Europe. A historical fantasy, full of such unexpected and unpredictable elements as Domenico Scarlatti, the Inquisition, a witch, and an airplane, it is odd, charming, funny, teasing. To me it seems a lovable warm-up for the greater novels to come, but it made his reputation, and many hold it to be among his best.

Of all his books, I have the most difficulty with *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*. This is Saramago at his most intellectually Borgesian. Also perhaps at his most Portuguese. It asks of the reader, if not some knowledge of its subjects (the writer Fernando Pessoa, Portuguese literary culture, the city of Lisbon), at least a fascination with masks, doubles, assumed identities, which Saramago certainly had and I almost entirely lack. A reader who shares that fascination with him will find this (and later *The Double*) a treasure.

Of his next book, in his autobiography for the Nobel Prize he says simply, "In consequence of the Portuguese government censorship of *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991), vetoing its presentation for the European Literary Prize under the pretext that the book was offensive to Catholics, my wife and I transferred our residence to the island of Lanzarote in the Canaries." Most men who leave their homeland in protest against tyrannical bigotry go off shouting, pointing their fingers, shaking their fists. He just "transferred his residence." I confess that the subject of the book is, again, not of the highest interest to me, but it is a subtle, kind, and quietly unsettling work, an outstanding

addition to the long list of Jesus novels (which may begin, as the title of this one implies, with the Gospels themselves).

The Stone Raft is a lovely novel, which had the very rare fortune of being turned into a lovely movie, made in Spain. Europe comes apart at the Pyrenees, so that the Iberian Peninsula begins drifting slowly off toward the Canary Islands, toward America ... Saramago takes full advantage of this opportunity to make fun of the impatient and impotent pomposity of governments and the media when faced with events beyond the scope of bureaucrats and pundits, and also to explore the responses of some obscure citizens, "ordinary people," as we call them, to the same mysterious events. This is one of his funniest books. And here also we find the first important Saramago dog. I tend to rank his novels with a dog in them higher than the ones without. I'm not sure why; it may have something to do with his refusal to consider man as central in the scheme of things. The more people fixate on humanity, it sometimes seems, the less humane they are.

Next—he was in his seventies now, and writing a novel every year or two—comes The History of the Siege of Lisbon. The first time I read it, I liked it, but felt stupid and inadequate because it is or appears to be about the founding event of Portuguese history, and I know no Portuguese history. I was reading too carelessly to realize that my ignorance made no difference at all. Rereading it, I found that of course everything you need to know is in the novel: the "real" history of what happened in the twelfth century when the Christians besieged the Moors in Lisbon, and the "virtual" history that comes to be interwoven with it, through the change of a single word, a deliberate mistake introduced into a new History of the Siege of Lisbon by a proofreader in Lisbon in the twentieth century. And the hero of the story (and the love story) is the proofreader. That alone was enough to win my heart.

Immediately after this mellow and meditative tale comes Blindness (its Portuguese title is An Essay on Blindness), which won its author the Nobel Prize. It is the most deeply frightening novel I have ever read.

It was the first of Saramago's that I tried to read—my friend the poet Naomi Replansky said I had to. I tried and failed. The punctuation annoyed me, but the story itself appalled me.

To be willing to read about terrible cruelty, I need to trust the author. Trust unquestioningly, the way one trusts Primo Levi. Too many writers use violence and cruelty to sell their books, to "thrill" readers who have been trained to think nothing is interesting but "action," or to keep their own demons at bay by loosing them on other people. I don't read those books. I will let a writer torture me only if I accept his reasons for doing so. I had to find out Saramago's reasons. So at that point I got hold of all his books then in print in English and read them. Too hastily, too carelessly, as I have said, but I was ignorant—I was learning how to read Saramago. To read him is, in fact, an education, a relearning how to see the world, a new way of understanding ...as it is with

all the great novelists, from Cervantes through Austen to Tolstoy, Woolf, García Márquez...

Having learned that I could trust this author absolutely, I went back and read *Blindness*. To me it is an almost unbearably moving novel and the truest parable of the twentieth century. (I have not seen the film based on it; I did not trust the filmmakers.) It completely changed my idea of what literature, at this strange time of paralysis in crisis, can be and do.

Soon after *Blindness* came the story "The Tale of the Unknown Island," an endearing and witty fable, and soon after that, *All the Names*, perhaps the most Kafkaesque of his novels, with its satire of a monstrous bureaucracy. Comparing Saramago with Kafka is a tricky business, though; I can't imagine Saramago writing "Metamorphosis" any more than I can imagine Kafka writing a love story. And *All the Names*, with its unforgettable Registry that leads back into impenetrable darkness, its protagonist the clerk Senhor José, driven to seek the person behind one of the innumerable names in the files of the Registry, if not exactly a love story, is a story about love.

After the *Journey to Portugal*, a detailed guidebook of his native land not included in this anthology, Saramago wrote *The Cave*, which I have to say in some ways I like the best of all, because I like the people in it so much. Saramago will tell us what the book is about—though when he wrote this in *The Notebook* he wasn't talking about his novel but about the world he saw in May 2009:

Every day species of plants and animals are disappearing, along with languages and professions. The rich always get richer and the poor always get poorer ... Ignorance is expanding in a truly terrifying manner. Nowadays we have an acute crisis in the distribution of wealth. Mineral exploitation has reached diabolical proportions. Multinationals dominate the world. I don't know whether shadows or images are screening reality from us. Perhaps we could discuss the subject indefinitely; what is already clear is that we have lost our critical capacity to analyze what is happening in the world. We seem to be locked inside Plato's cave. We have jettisoned our responsibility for thought and action. We have turned ourselves into inert beings incapable of the sense of outrage, the refusal to conform, the capacity to protest, that were such strong features of our recent past. We are reaching the end of a civilization and I don't welcome its final trumpet. In my opinion, neoliberalism is a new form of totalitarianism disguised as democracy, of which it retains almost nothing but a semblance. The shopping mall is the symbol of our times. But there is still another miniature and fast-disappearing world, that of small industries and artisanry...

This is the framework of *The Cave*, an extraordinarily rich book that uses science-fictional extrapolation with great skill in the service of a subtle and complex philosophical meditation that is at the same time, and above all, a powerful novel of character. It is worth noting that one of the principal characters is a dog.

In 2004 came *The Double*, which I found rather hard going but have not yet reread, so my judgment on it now would be worthless. After that came *Seeing*, which picks up the setting and some of the characters of *Blindness* but uses them in an entirely different way (nobody could accuse Saramago of writing the same book over, or anything like the same book). It is a heavy-hitting political satire, very dark—far darker, paradoxically, in its end and implications than *Blindness*.

By now the author was well into his eighties, and not surprisingly chose to write a book about death. *Death with Interruptions* is the English title. The premise is irresistible. Death (who isn't one person but many, each with a locality she's responsible for—bureaucracy, after all, is everywhere) gets sick of her job and takes a vacation from it. This is a major theme in Saramago, the humble employee who decides to do something just a little out of line, just this once ... So in the region for which this particular Death is responsible, nobody dies. The resulting problems are drawn with a very dry humor. Death herself is an interesting person, but to me the book comes alive (if I may put it so) halfway through, with the appearance of the cellist, and the dog.

In the year in which I am writing this, 2010, *The Elephant's Journey* was published in English, very shortly after the author's death. If it were his last book, no author could have a more perfect final word—but it isn't his last. There is *Cain* yet to come, the novel whose name he wouldn't tell anybody while he was writing it because, he said, if you knew that, you'd know everything about it. Which is hardly the case ... but soon we'll know.

The true story of the elephant, Solomon, who walked and went by ship from Portugal to Vienna in the sixteenth century, and the soldiers, archdukes, and others who accompanied him, may be Saramago's most perfect work of art, as pure and true and indestructible as a Mozart aria or a folk song. I wrote of it in a review for the *Guardian*: "In his Nobel talk, Saramago said, 'As I could not and did not aspire to venture beyond my little plot of cultivated land, all I had left was the possibility of digging down, underneath, towards the roots. My own but also the world's, if I can be allowed such an immoderate ambition.' That hard, patient digging is what gives so light and delightful a book as this its depth and weight. It is no mere fable, as the story of an elephant's journey through the follies and superstitions of sixteenth-century Europe might well be. It has no moral. There is no happy ending. The elephant Solomon will get to Vienna, yes; and then two years later he will die. But his footprints may remain across the reader's mind, deep, round impressions in the dirt, not leading to the Austrian Imperial Court or anywhere else yet known, but indicating, perhaps, a more permanently rewarding direction to be followed."

Those tracks are now imprinted on electrons as well as in the dirt, on the page, in the mind; they are now in the vibrations in our computers, the symbols on our screens, as real and intangible as light itself, for all who will to see and read and follow.

URSULA K. LE GUIN
October 2010

BALTASAR AND BLIMUNDA

Translated from the Portugese
by Giovanni Pontiero

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O Q S R P N

In memoriam Giovanni Pontiero

A man was on his way to the gallows when he met another, who asked him: Where are you going, my friend? And the condemned man replied: I'm not going anywhere. They're taking me by force.

Padre Manuel Velho

João

Je sais que je tombe dans l'inexplicable, quand j'affirme que la réalité—cette notion si flottante—la connaissance la plus exacte possible des êtres est notre point de contact, et notre voie d'accès aux choses qui dépassent la réalité.

Marguerite Yourcenar

DOM JOÃO, THE FIFTH monarch so named on the royal list, will pay a visit this night to the bedchamber of the Queen, Dona Maria Ana Josefa, who arrived more than two years ago from Austria to provide heirs for the Portuguese crown, and so far has shown no signs of becoming pregnant. Already there are rumours at court, both within and without the royal palace, that the Queen is barren, an insinuation that is carefully guarded from hostile ears and tongues and confided only to intimates. That anyone should blame the King is unthinkable, first because infertility is an evil that befalls not men but women, who for that very reason are often disowned and second, because there is material evidence, should such a thing be necessary, in the horde of bastards produced by the royal semen, who populate the kingdom and even at this moment are forming a procession in the square. Moreover, it is not the King but the Queen who spends all her time in prayer, beseeching a child from heaven, for two good reasons. The first reason is that a king, especially a king of Portugal, does not ask for something that he alone can provide, and the second reason is that a woman is essentially a vessel made to be filled, a natural supplicant, whether she pleads in novenas or in occasional prayers. But neither the perseverance of the King who, unless there is some canonical or physiological impediment, vigorously performs his royal duty twice weekly, nor the patience and humility of the Queen, who, besides praying, subjects herself to total immobility after her husband's withdrawal, so that their generative secretions may fertilise undisturbed, hers scant from a lack of incentive and time, and because of her deep moral scruples, the King's prodigious, as one might expect from a man who is not yet twenty-two years of age, neither the one factor nor the other has succeeded so far in causing Dona Maria Ana's womb to become swollen. Yet God is almighty.

Almost as mighty as God is the replica of the Basilica of St Peter in Rome that the King is building. It is a construction without a base or foundation, resting on a table-top, which does not need to be very solid to take the weight of a model in miniature of the original basilica, the pieces lying scattered, waiting to be inserted by the old method of tongue and groove, and they are handled with the utmost reverence by the four footmen on duty. The chest in which they are stored gives off an odour of incense, and the red velvet cloths in which they are separately wrapped, so that the faces of the statues do not scratch against the capitals of the columns, reflect the light cast by the huge candelabras. The building is almost ready. All the walls have been hinged together, and the columns have been firmly slotted into place under the cornice with the name and title of Paolo V Borghese inscribed in Latin which the King no longer reads, although it always gives him enormous pleasure to observe that the ordinal number after the Pope's name corresponds to the V that comes after his own. In a king, modesty would be a sign of weakness. He starts to place the effigies of prophets and saints into the appropriate grooves on top of the walls and the footman gives a low bow as he removes each statue from its precious velvet wrappings. One by one, he hands the King a statue of some prophet lying face down, or of some saint turned the wrong way around, but no one heeds this unintentional irreverence as the King proceeds to restore the order and solemnity that befits sacred objects and turning them upright, he inserts each vigilant

statue into its rightful position. What the statues see from their lofty setting is not St Peter's Square but the King of Portugal and his retinue of footmen. They see the floor of the dais and the screens looking on to the Royal Chapel, and tomorrow at early Mass, unless they have already been wrapped up and put back in the chest, the statues will see the King devoutly attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass with his entourage, different nobles from those who are with him at present, for the week is ending and others are due to take their place. Beneath the dais where we are standing, there is a second dais, also hidden by screens, but there are no pieces here waiting to be assembled, it is an oratory or a chapel where the Queen attends Mass privately, yet not even this holy place has been conducive to pregnancy. Now all that remains to be set in position is the dome by Michelangelo, a copy of that remarkable achievement in stone which, because of its massive proportions, is kept in a separate chest and, as the final, and crowning piece, is treated with special care. The footmen make haste to assist the King and, with a resounding clatter, the tenons and mortises are fitted together and the job is finished. If the overwhelming noise that echoes throughout the chapel should penetrate the long corridors and spacious apartments of the palace into the chamber where the Queen is waiting, she will know that her husband is on his way.

Let her wait. The King is still preparing himself before retiring for the night. His footmen have helped him to undress and have garbed him in the appropriate ceremonial robes, each garment passing from hand to hand with as much reverence as if they were the relics of holy virgins, and this ceremony is enacted in the presence of other servants and pages, one opens the huge chest, another draws back the curtains, one raises the candle, while another trims the wick, two footmen stand to attention, and two more follow suit, while several others hover in the background with no apparent duties to fulfil. At long last, thanks to their combined labours, the King is ready, one of the nobles in attendance straightens a last fold, another adjusts the embroidered nightshirt, and any moment now, Dom João V will be heading for the Queen's bedchamber. The vessel is waiting to be filled.

Now Dom Nuno da Cunha, the bishop who heads the Inquisition makes his entrance accompanied by an elderly Franciscan friar. Before he approaches the King to deliver his news, there is an elaborate ritual to be observed with reverences and salutations, pauses and retreats, the established protocol when approaching the monarch, and these formalities we shall treat as having been duly observed, given the urgency of the bishop's visit and the nervous tremors of the elderly friar. Dom João V and the Inquisitor withdraw to one side, and the latter explains, The friar who stands before you is Friar Antony of St Joseph, to whom I have confided Your Majesty's distress at the Queen's inability to bear you children. I begged of him that he should intercede on Your Majesty's behalf, so that God may grant you succession, and he replied that Your Majesty will have children if he so wishes, and then I asked him what he meant by these obscure words, since it is well known that Your Majesty wishes to have children, and he replied in plain words that if Your Majesty promises to build a convent in the town of Mafra, God will grant you an heir,

and after delivering this message, Dom Nunofell silent and bade the friar approach.

The King inquired, Is what His Eminence the bishop has just told me true, that if I promise to build a convent in Maфра I shall have heirs to succeed me and the friar replied, It is true, Your Majesty, but only if the convent is entrusted to the Franciscan Order and the King asked him, How do you know these things and Friar Antony replied, I know, although I cannot explain how I came to know, for I am only the instrument through which the truth is spoken, Your Majesty need only respond with faith, Build the convent and you will soon have offspring, should you refuse, it will be up to God to decide. The King dismissed the friar with a gesture and then asked Dom Nuno da Cunha, Is this friar a man of virtue, whereupon the bishop replied, There is no man more virtuous in the Franciscan Order. Reassured that the pledge requested of him was worthy, Dom João, the fifth monarch by that name, raised his voice so that all present might hear him speak, and so that what he had to say would be reported throughout the city and the realm the following day, I promise, by my royal word, that I shall build a Franciscan convent in the town of Maфра if the Queen gives me an heir within a year from this day, and everyone present rejoined, May God heed Your Majesty, although no one knew who or what was to be put to the test, Almighty God Himself, the virtue of Friar Antony, the King's potency, or the Queen's questionable fertility.

Meanwhile, Dona Maria Ana is conversing with her Portuguese chief lady-in-waiting, the Marchioness de Unhão. They have already discussed the religious devotions of the day, their visit to the convent of the discalced Carmelites of the Immaculate Conception at Cardais, and the novena of St Francis Xavier, which is due to start tomorrow in the parish of St Roch, the conversation one might expect between a queen and a woman of noble birth, exclamatory and at the same time fearful, as they invoke the names of saints and martyrs, their tones becoming poignant whenever the conversation touches on the trials and sufferings of holy men and women, even if these simply consisted in mortifying the flesh by means of fasting and wearing hairshirts. The King's imminent arrival, however, has been announced, and he comes with burning zeal, eager and excited at the thought of this mystical union of his carnal duty and the pledge he has just made to Almighty God through the mediation and good offices of Friar Antony of St Joseph. The King enters the Queen's bedroom accompanied by two footmen, who start to remove his outer garments, the Marchioness, assisted by a lady-in-waiting of equal rank who came with the Queen from Austria, doing the same for the Queen, passing each garment to another noblewoman, the participants in this ritual make quite a gathering, their Royal Highnesses bow solemnly to each other, the formalities seem interminable, until finally the footmen depart through one door and the ladies-in-waiting through another where they will wait in separate anterooms until the act is over and they are summoned to escort the King back to his apartments which were occupied by the Dowager Queen when the King's late father was still alive, and the ladies-in-waiting come to settle Dona Maria Ana under the eiderdown that she also brought from Austria, for she cannot sleep without it, be it summer or winter. This eiderdown is so suffocating, even during the chilly nights

of February, that Dom João V finds it impossible to spend the entire night with the Queen, although it was different during the first months of marriage, when the novelty outweighed the considerable discomfort of waking to find himself bathed in perspiration, his own as well as that of the Queen, who slept with the covers pulled over her head, her body accumulating odours and secretions. Accustomed to a northern climate, Dona Maria Ana cannot bear the torrid heat of Lisbon. She covers herself from head to foot with the huge, overstuffed eiderdown, and there she remains, curled up like a mole that has found a boulder in its path and is trying to decide on which side it should continue to burrow its tunnel.

The King and Queen are wearing long nightshirts that trail on the ground, the King's has an embroidered hem, while the Queen's has much more elaborate trimmings, so that not even the tip of her big toe can be seen, for of all the immodesties known to man, this is probably the most audacious. Dom João guides Dona Maria Ana by the hand to the bed, like a gentleman leading his partner on to the dance floor. Before ascending the steps, each kneels on his or her respective side of the bed and says the prescribed prayers, for fear of dying unconfessed during sexual intercourse, Dom João V determined that his efforts should bear fruit on this occasion, his hopes redoubled as he trusts in God's assistance and in his own virile strength, and protesting his faith, he begs the Almighty to give him an heir. As for Dona Maria Ana, one may assume that she is imploring the same divine favour, unless for some reason she enjoys special dispensations under the seal of the confessional.

The King and Queen are now settled in bed. This is the bed that was dispatched from Holland when the Queen arrived from Austria, specially ordered by the King, and it cost him seventy-five thousand cruzados, for in Portugal no craftsmen of such excellence are to be found and were they to be found, they would certainly earn less. An untrained eye would find it difficult to tell that this magnificent piece of furniture is made of wood, concealed as it is under ornate drapes woven with gold threads and lavishly embroidered with rosettes, not to mention the overhanging canopy, which resembles a papal baldachin. When the bed was newly installed, there were no bedbugs although once in use, the warmth of human bodies attracted an infestation, but whether these bedbugs were lurking in the palace apartments or came from the city, no one knows. The elaborate curtains and hangings in the Queen's bedroom made it impractical to smoke them out, so there was no other remedy but to make an offering of fifty réis to St Alexis every year, in the hope that he would rid the Queen and all of us from this plague and the insufferable itching. On nights when the King visits the Queen, the bedbugs come out at a much later hour because of the heaving of the mattress, for they are insects who enjoy peace and quiet and prefer to discover their victims asleep. In the King's bed, too, there are yet more bedbugs waiting for their share of blood, for His Majesty's blood tastes no better or worse than that of the other inhabitants of the city, whether blue or otherwise.

Dona Maria Ana extends a moist hand to the King, which, despite having been

heated under the covers, soon grows cold in the chilly atmosphere of the bedchamber and the King, who has already done his duty, and is feeling quite hopeful after a most convincing and skilful performance, gives Dona Maria Ana a kiss as his Queen and as the future mother of his child, unless Friar Antony of St Joseph has been rash with his promises. It is Dona Maria Ana who tugs the bell-pull, whereupon the King's footmen enter from one side and the Queen's ladies-in-waiting from the other. Various odours hover in the air and one of them is unmistakable for without its presence the long-awaited miracle could not possibly take place, and besides, the much-quoted immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary occurred but once so that the world might know that Almighty God, when He so chooses, has no need of men, though He cannot dispense with women.

Notwithstanding constant reassurances from her confessor, on these occasions Dona Maria Ana is overcome by a sense of guilt. Once the King and his retinue have departed, and the ladies-in-waiting, who remain in attendance until she is ready to fall asleep, have withdrawn, the Queen always feels a moral obligation to fall to her knees and pray for forgiveness but at her doctors' insistence she must not stir, lest she disturb the incubation, so she resigns herself to muttering her prayers in bed, the rosary beads slipping ever more slowly through her fingers, until finally she falls asleep in the midst of a Hail Mary full of grace, that Mary for whom it was all so easy, blessed be the fruit of thy womb Jesus, while in her own anguished womb she hopes at least for a son, Dear Lord, at least one son. She has never confessed to this involuntary pride because remote and involuntary, so much so that were she to be called to judgment she would truthfully swear that she had always addressed her prayers to the Virgin and her holy womb. These are the meanderings of her subconscious mind like those other dreams no one can explain, that Dona Maria Ana always experiences when the King comes to her bed, in which she finds herself crossing the Palace Square alongside the slaughterhouses, lifting her skirts before her as she flounders in the slimy mud smelling of men when they relieve themselves, while the ghost of her brother-in-law, the Infante Dom Francisco, whose former apartments she now occupies, reappears and dances all around her, raised on stilts like a black stork. Neither has she discussed this dream with her confessor, besides, what explanation could he possibly give her in return, since no such case is mentioned in the Manual for a Perfect Confession. Let Dona Maria Ana slumber in peace, submerged under that mountain of draperies and plumes as the bedbugs begin to emerge from every crease and fold, dropping from the canopy above to hasten their journey.

Dom João V will also dream tonight. He will see the Tree of Jesse sprout from his penis, covered with leaves and populated by the ancestors of Christ, and even by Christ Himself, the Heir of All Kingdoms, then the tree will vanish and in its place will appear the tall columns, bell towers, domes, and belfries of a Franciscan convent, which is unmistakable because of the habit worn by Friar Antony of St Joseph, whom the King can see throwing open the church doors. Such dreams are not common amongst kings, but Portugal has been well served by imaginative monarchs.

OUR PEOPLE HAS BEEN equally well served by miracles. It is too early, however, to speak of the miracle that is now being prepared, which is not so much a miracle as a divine favour, a downward glance at once compassionate and propitious upon a barren womb, which will give birth to a child at the appropriate hour, but this is the moment to speak of genuine and proven miracles which, having come from the same burning bush, the zealous Franciscan order, augur well for the promise made by the King.

Consider the notorious episode of the death of Friar Michael of the Annunciation, the provincial-elect of the Third Order of St Francis whose election, let it be said in passing although not without relevance, took place amid violent opposition by the parishioners of St Mary Magdalen, because of some obscure resentment, which was so vehement that, when Friar Michael died, lawsuits were still being fought and no one knew when, if ever, they would finally be settled, what with admonitions and petitions, judgments and appeals, the constant wrangling ending only after the good friar's death. It is certain that Friar Michael died not of a broken heart but of a malignant fever that might have been typhus or typhoid or some other, unnamed plague, a common enough death in a city where there are so few drinking fountains and where country folk think nothing of filling their barrels from water troughs intended for horses. Friar Michael of the Annunciation, however, was such a good-natured fellow that even after death he repaid evil with good, and if during his lifetime he carried out charitable works, once dead he worked wonders, the first of these being to prove the doctors wrong when they feared that the body would soon rot and recommended burial without delay, because not only did the friar's mortal remains fail to rot, but for three whole days they filled the Church of Our Lady of Jesus, where his body was exposed, with the sweetest perfume, and instead of becoming rigid, the limbs of his body remained flexible, as if he were still alive.

These were wonders of a lesser order but of the highest esteem, yet the miracles themselves were so extraordinary, that people flocked from all over the city to witness this prodigy and to profit therefrom, for it has been attested that in the very same church, sight was restored to the blind and limbs to the maimed, and so many people had gathered on the church steps, that punches and knife wounds were exchanged in the struggle to gain entry, causing some to lose lives that would nevermore be regained, miracle or no miracle. But perhaps those lives would have been restored, had the friar's corpse not been spirited away and secretly buried after three days, on account of the general pandemonium. Deprived of any hope of being healed until some new saint should come among them, deaf-mutes and cripples, if the latter had a free hand, cuffed one another in despair and frustration, screaming abuse and invoking all the saints in heaven, until the priests came out to bless the crowd, which, thus reassured and for lack of anything better, finally dispersed.

To be honest, this is a nation of thieves, what the eye sees the hand filches, and because there is so much faith that goes unrewarded, the churches are looted with daring and irreverence, as happened last year in Guimarães, also in the Church of St Francis, who, having shunned all worldly goods during his lifetime, allows himself to be robbed of

everything in eternity, but then the order is supported by the vigilant presence of St Antony, who takes it amiss if anyone despoils his altars and chapels, as happened in Guimarães and subsequently in Lisbon.

In that city, thieves intent upon plunder climbed up to a window and found the saint waiting to greet them, he gave them such a fright that the wretch at the top of the ladder fell to the ground without breaking any bones, it is true, but he was paralysed and could not move, and his accomplices anxiously tried to remove him from the scene of the crime, for even among thieves one often finds generous, merciful souls, but to no avail, an incident not without precedent, for it also happened in the case of Agnes, the sister of St Clare, when St Francis still travelled the world, exactly five hundred years ago, in the year twelve hundred and eleven, but it was not theft on that occasion or it might have been theft, because they wanted to abduct Agnes and steal her from Our Lord. The thief remained transfixed as if struck by the hand of God or the devil's claw from the depths of hell, and there he lay until the following morning, when the local inhabitants discovered him and carried him to the church altar, so that he might be healed by some singular miracle, and, strange to relate, the statue of St Antony could be seen sweating profusely and for such a long time that judges and notaries could be summoned to verify the miracle, which consisted of a perspiring wooden statue and the thief's recovery when they wiped his face with a towel dampened with the saint's sweat. No sooner done than the thief got to his feet, healed and repentant.

Not all crimes, however, are so easily resolved. In Lisbon, for example, where another miracle was widely known, no one has yet been able to confirm who was responsible for the theft, although suspicions could be aired about a certain party who might be pardoned because of the good intentions that motivated the crime. It happened that some thief or thieves broke into the Convent of St Francis of Xabregas, through the skylight of a chapel adjacent to that of St Antony, and he or they made straight for the high altar and took the three altar lamps, and vanished by the same route in less time than it takes to recite the Nicene Creed. That someone could remove the lamps from their hooks and carry them off in darkness for greater safety, and then stumble and cause a commotion without anyone rushing to the scene to investigate, would lead one to suspect complicity, were it not for the fact that at that very moment the friars were engaged in their customary practice, noisily summoning the community to midnight matins with rattles and handbells, enabling the thief to escape and had he caused an even greater commotion the friars would not have heard him, from which one may assume that the culprit was perfectly familiar with the convent schedule.

As the friars began to file into the church, they found it plunged into darkness. The lay brother in charge was already resigning himself to the punishment he was certain to incur for this omission, which defied explanation, because the friars observed and confirmed by touch and smell that it was not the oil that was missing, spilled as it was all over the floor, but the silver altar lamps. The sacrilege was all too recent, for the chains from which the missing lamps had been hanging were still swaying gently, whispering in

the language of copper, We've had a narrow escape. We've had a narrow escape.

Some of the friars rushed out immediately into the nearby streets, divided up into several patrols, had they apprehended the thief, one cannot imagine what they might have done to him in their mercy, but they found no trace of him or of his accomplices, if there were any, which is not surprising, for it was already after midnight and the moon was waning. The friars puffed and panted as they chased through the neighbourhood at a sluggish pace, before finally returning to the convent empty-handed. Meantime, other friars, believing that the thief might have concealed himself in the church by some cunning ruse, searched the place thoroughly from choir to sacristy, everyone treading on sandalled feet in this frantic search, tripping over the hems of habits, raising the lids of chests, moving cupboards, and shaking out vestments, an elderly friar known for his virtuous ways and staunch faith noticed that the altar of St Antony had not been violated by thieving hands, despite its array of solid silver, which was prized for its value and craftsmanship. The holy friar found himself bemused, just as we should have been bemused had we been present, because it was quite obvious that the thief had entered from the skylight overhead and in order to remove the lamps from the high altar, must have passed right by the chapel of St Antony. Inflamed with holy zeal and indignation, the friar turned on St Antony and rebuked him, as if he were a servant caught neglecting his duties, Some saint you are, to protect only your own silver while watching the rest get stolen, well, in return you'll be left without anything, and with these harsh words, the friar entered the chapel and began to strip it of all its contents, removing not only the silver but the altar cloths and other furnishings as well, and once the chapel was bare, he started stripping the statue of St Antony, who saw his removable halo vanish along with his cross, and would soon have found himself without the Child Jesus in his arms if several friars had not come to the rescue, who feeling the punishment was excessive, persuaded the enraged old man to leave at least the Child Jesus for the consolation of the disgraced saint. The old friar considered their plea for a moment before replying, Very well, then, let the Child Jesus remain as his guarantor until the lamps are returned. Since it was now almost two o'clock and several hours had elapsed while the search and episode just narrated took place, the friars retired to their cells, some of them seriously worried that St Antony would come to avenge this insult.

Next day, about eleven o'clock, someone knocked at the convent door, a student who, it should be explained immediately, had been aspiring to join the order for some considerable time and who visited the friars at every possible opportunity, this information being provided, first, because it is true and the truth is always worthwhile, and, second, to assist those who enjoy deciphering criss-cross patterns of words and events, in short, the student knocked at the convent door and said he wished to speak to the Superior. Permission granted, the student was shown into his presence, he kissed the prior's ring, or the cord hanging from his habit, or it might have been the hem, for this detail has never been fully clarified, and informed His Reverence that he had overheard in the city that the lamps were to be found in the Monastery of Cotovia, which belonged to

the Jesuits and was located some distance away, in the Bairro Alto of St Roch. At first the prior was inclined to mistrust this information, coming as it did from a student who could have been taken for a scoundrel had he not been an aspirant to holy orders, although one often finds the two roles coincide, and besides, it seemed unlikely that thieves would hand over to Cotovia what they had taken from Xabregas, locations so different and remote from each other, religious orders with so little in common, and almost a league apart as the crow flies. Therefore prudence demanded that the student's information should be investigated and a suitably cautious member of the community was dispatched, accompanied by the aforesaid student, from Xabregas to Cotovia, and they entered the city on foot through the Gate of the Holy Cross, and so that the reader may be apprised of all the facts, it is worth noting the itinerary they followed before finally reaching their destination. Passing close by the Church of St Stephanie, they walked alongside the Church of St Michael, passed the Church of St Peter and entered the Gate known by the same name, heading down towards the river by the Outlook of the Conde de Linhares, before turning right and going through the Sea-Gate to the Old Pillary, names and landmarks no longer in existence, they avoided the Rua Nova dos Mercadores, a street which even to this day is the haunt of money-lenders, and after skirting the Rossio they arrived at the Outlook of St Roch and finally reached the Monastery of Cotovia, where they knocked and entered, and having been ushered before the rector, the friar explained, This student who accompanies me has brought news to Xabregas that the altar lamps stolen from our church last night are to be found here, That is so, from what I have been told, it would appear that about two o'clock there was a loud knocking at the door, and when the porter asked the caller what he wanted, a voice replied through the peephole that he should open the door immediately because the caller was anxious to return some goods, and when the porter came to give me this strange news, I ordered that the door be opened, and there we found the altar lamps, somewhat dented and with a few of the embellishments damaged, here they are, and if there is anything missing you have our assurance that we found them in this condition, Did anyone catch sight of the caller, No, we saw no one, some of the fathers went out into the street, but they found no one.

The altar lamps were duly returned to Xabregas, and the reader may believe what he likes. Could it have been the student after all who was the culprit, devising this cunning strategy in order to force his way into the convent and don the habit of St Francis, as he did in the end, and could he have stolen and then returned the altar lamps in the hope that the worthiness of his intentions would absolve him from this wicked sin on the Day of Final Judgment, or could it have been St Antony, responsible for so many different miracles in the past, who also worked this miracle, upon finding himself suddenly deprived of all his silver because of the holy wrath of a friar who knew full well what he was doing, just like the boatmen and sailors of the Tagus who punish the saint when he fails to fulfil their wishes or reward their pledges by plunging him headfirst into the waters of the river, not so much the discomfort, because the lungs of any saint worthy of that name are as capable of breathing the air we all share, as gills of breathing

the water which is the sky of fishes, but the mortification of knowing that the humble soles of his feet are exposed, and the sorrow of finding himself without silver and almost without the Child Jesus, make St Antony the most miraculous of saints, especially when it comes to finding lost objects. In the end, the student would have been completely exonerated, had he not become involved in yet another dubious episode.

Given similar precedents, because the Franciscans are so well endowed with means to change, overturn, or hasten the natural order of things, even the recalcitrant womb of the Queen must respond to the solemn injunction of a miracle. All the more so since the Franciscan Order has been petitioning for a convent in Mafra since the year sixteen hundred and twenty-four, a time when the King of Portugal was a Felipe imported from Spain, who had little interest in the religious communities of Portugal and persisted in withholding his permission throughout the sixteen years of his reign. This did not deter initiatives on the part of the friars, and the prestige of noble patrons in the town was invoked, but the influence of the province of Arrábida petitioning for the convent appeared to have diminished and its resolve had weakened, for only recently, which one can say of something that happened six years ago, in seventeen hundred and five, the same thing occurred, the Royal Court of Appeal turned down the petition, and expressed itself strongly, if not altogether disrespectfully, about the material and spiritual interests of the Church, and had the audacity to declare the petition inopportune, the realm being already overburdened with mendicant orders and other inconveniences dictated by human wisdom. The judges of the Court of Appeal reserved the right to determine what those inconveniences dictated by human wisdom might be, but now they will have to hold their tongues and bury their dark thoughts, for Friar Antony of St Joseph has promised that once the friars have their convent there will be an heir to the throne. A pledge has been made, the Queen will give birth, and the Franciscan Order will gather the palm of victory, just as it has gathered so many palms of martyrdom. A hundred years of waiting is no great sacrifice for those who count on living for all eternity.

We saw how the student was finally exonerated of blame in the episode of the stolen altar lamps. But it would be folly to suggest that because of secrets divulged in the confessional the friars knew of the Queen's pregnancy even before the Queen herself knew and could confide in the King. Just as it would be wrong to suggest that Dona Maria Ana, because she was such a pious lady, agreed to remain silent until the appearance of God's chosen messenger, the virtuous Friar Antony. Nor can anyone say the King will be counting the moons from the night the pledge was given until the day the child is born, and find the cycle complete. There is nothing to add to what has already been said.

So let not Franciscans be impugned, unless they should become involved in other equally dubious intrigues.

IN THE COURSE OF the year some people die from having overindulged during their lifetime, which explains why apoplectic fits recur one after another, why sometimes only one is needed to dispatch a victim to his grave, and why even when spared death they remain paralysed down one side, their mouths all twisted, sometimes unable to speak, and without hope of an effective cure apart from continuous blood-lettings. But many more people die from malnutrition, unable to survive on a miserable diet of sardines and rice along with some lettuce, and a little meat when the nation celebrates the King's birthday. May God grant that our river yield an abundance of fish, and let us give praise to the Holy Trinity with this intention in mind. And may lettuce and other produce arrive from the surrounding countryside, transported in great baskets filled to the brim by the country swains and maidens who do not excel in these labours. And may there be no intolerable shortage of rice. For this city, more than any other, is a mouth that gorges itself on one side and starves on the other, and there is no happy medium between ruddy and pale complexions, between bulging and bony hips, between great paunches and shrivelled bellies. But Lent, like the rising sun, is for everyone.

The excesses of Shrovetide could be seen throughout the city, those who could afford it stuffed themselves with poultry and mutton, with doughnuts and fritters, outrages were committed on every street corner by those who never miss an opportunity to take liberties, derisive tails were pinned to fugitive backs, water was squirted on faces with syringes meant for other purposes, the unwary were spanked with strings of onions, and wine was imbibed, accompanied by the inevitable belching and vomiting, there was a clanging of pots and pans, bagpipes were played, and if more people did not end up rolling on the ground, in the side streets, squares, and alleyways, it is only because the city is filthy, its roads full of sewage and rubbish, crawling with mangy dogs and stray cats, and mud everywhere even when there is no rain. Now the time has come to pay for all these excesses, the time to mortify the soul so that the flesh may feign repentance, the depraved, rebellious flesh of this pathetic and obscene pigsty known as Lisbon.

The Lenten procession is about to commence. Let us mortify our flesh with fasting and abstinence, let us punish our bodies with flagellation. By eating frugally, we can purify our thoughts, through suffering we can purge our souls. The penitents, all of them male, head the procession, and they are followed by the friars who carry the banners bearing images of the Virgin and of Christ crucified. Behind them comes the bishop under an ornate canopy, and then the effigies of saints carried on litters, followed by an endless regiment of priests, confraternities, and guilds, all of whom are intent upon salvation, some convinced they are already damned, others tortured by uncertainty until they are summoned to Judgment, and there may even be some among them who are quietly thinking that the world has been mad since it was conceived. The procession wends its way through the crowds lining the streets, and as it passes, men and women prostrate themselves on the ground, claw their faces, tear their hair out, and inflict blows on themselves, while the bishop makes fleeting signs of the cross to right and left and the acolyte swings his thurible. Lisbon stinks, but the incense bestows meaning on this putrid

stench of decay, a stench that comes from the wickedness of the flesh, for the soul is fragrant.

Women can be seen watching from the windows, as is the custom. The penitents walk slowly, with balls and chains twisted round their ankles, or with their arms holding massive iron bars across their shoulders as if they were suspended from a cross, or they scourge themselves with leather thongs ending in balls of solid wax spiked with glass splinters, and these flagellants are considered to be the highlight of the spectacle, as real blood flows down their backs and they give out loud cries, of pleasure as much as pain, which we should find a little strange if we did not know that some of the penitents have spotted their mistresses at the windows, and they are in the procession not so much for the salvation of their souls as for inciting carnal pleasures, those already experienced and those still to come.

The penitents wear small coloured ribbons, pinned to their hoods or to the thongs, every man has his own colours, so if the mistress of his desire, languishing at her window consumed with pity for her suffering swain, perhaps even with that pleasure later to become known as sadism, should fail to recognise his face or gait amid the bustle of penitents, banners, and spectators who cry out in terror and supplication, and the chanting of litanies as the canopies lurch menacingly and the effigies collide, she will at least be able to recognise, from the ribbons in pink, green, yellow, and lilac, and even red and sky-blue, he who is her slave and admirer, who dedicates his flagellation to her, and who, unable to speak, roars like a rutting bull, and when the other women on the street and the mistress herself feel that he is not flogging himself with enough force to inflict open wounds and draw blood for everyone to see, then the female choir erupts into a hideous wailing, as if possessed, inciting the men to greater violence, they want to hear the whips crack and see the blood flow as it flowed from the Divine Saviour, only then will their bodies throb under their petticoats, and their thighs open and contract to the rhythm and excitement of the flagellants' procession. As the penitent arrives beneath the window of his beloved, she throws him a haughty glance, she is probably chaperoned by her mother, cousin, or governess, or by some indulgent grandmother or sour old aunt, but they are all aware of what is happening, thanks to their own memories, recent or distant, that God has nothing to do with all this fornication, the ecstasies at the windows mirroring the ecstasies on the street below, the flagellant on his knees, whipping himself into a frenzy and calling out in pain, while the woman ogles the vanquished male and parts her lips to drink his blood and the rest. The procession has paused, allowing the ritual to be concluded, the bishop has bestowed his blessing and consecration, the woman experiences languorous sensations, and the man passes on, relieved that he can now stop scourging himself with quite so much vigour, for now it is the turn of others to satisfy the cravings of their mistresses.

Once they have started to mortify their flesh and observe the rules of fasting, it seems that they will have to tolerate these privations until Easter and they must suppress their natural inclinations until the shadows pass from the countenance of Holy Mother

Church, now that the Passion and death of Christ are nigh. It could be the phosphoric richness of fish that stimulates carnal desire, or the unfortunate custom of allowing women to visit churches unaccompanied during Lent, whereas for the rest of the year they are kept safely indoors, unless they are prostitutes or belong to the lower classes, women of noble birth leaving their homes only to go to church, and only on three other occasions during their lifetime, for baptism, marriage, and burial, for the rest of the time they are confined within the sanctuary of their homes, and perhaps the aforementioned custom shows just how unbearable Lent can be, because the Lenten period is a time of anticipated death and a warning for all to heed, and so while husbands take precautions, or feign to take precautions so that their wives will not do anything other than attend to their religious duties, the women look forward to Lent in order to enjoy some freedom, although they may not venture forth unaccompanied without risking scandal, their chaperones sharing the same desires and the same need to satisfy them, and so between one church and the next, women can arrange clandestine meetings, while the chaperones converse and intrigue, and when the ladies and their chaperones meet again before some altar, both parties know that Lent does not exist and that the world has been blissfully mad ever since it was conceived. The streets of Lisbon are full of women all dressed alike, their heads covered with mantillas and shawls that have only the tiniest opening to allow the ladies to signal with their eyes or lips, a common means of secretly exchanging forbidden sentiments and illicit desires, throughout the streets of this city, where there is a church on every corner and a convent in every quarter, spring is in the air and turning everyone's head, and when no breeze blows, there is always the sighing of those who unburden their souls in the confessionals, or in secluded places conducive to other forms of confession, as adulterous flesh wavers on the brink of pleasure and damnation, for the one is as inviting as the other during this period of abstinence, bare altars, solemn mourning, and omnipresent sin.

By day their ingenuous husbands will be enjoying, or at least pretending to enjoy, their siestas, by night, when streets and squares mysteriously fill with crowds smelling of onion and lavender, and the murmur of prayers can be heard through the open doors of churches, they feel at greater ease as they will not have long to wait now, someone is already knocking at the door, steps can be heard on the stair, mistress and maid arrive, conversing intimately, and the black slave, too, if she has been brought along and through the chinks the light of a candle or oil lamp can be seen, the husband pretends to wake, the wife pretends that she has awakened him, and if he asks any questions, we know what her reply will be, she has come back exhausted, footsore, and with stiff joints, but feeling spiritually consoled, and she utters the magic number, I have visited seven churches, she says, with such vehemence that she has been guilty either of excessive piety or of some monstrous sin.

Queens are denied these opportunities of unburdening their souls, especially if they have been made pregnant and by their legitimate husband, who for nine months will no longer come near them, a rule widely accepted but sometimes broken. Dona Maria Ana

has every reason to exercise discretion, given the strict piety with which she had been brought up in Austria and her wholehearted compliance with the friar's strategy, thus showing, or at least giving the impression, that the child being conceived in her womb is as much a daughter for the King of Portugal as for God Himself, in exchange for a convent.

Dona Maria Ana retires to her bedchamber at an early hour and says her prayers in singsong harmony with her ladies-in-waiting before getting into bed, and then, once settled underneath her eiderdown, she resumes her prayers, and prays on and on, while the ladies-in-waiting start to nod but fight their drowsiness like wise women, if not wise virgins, and finally withdraw, all that remains to watch over her is the light from the lamp, and the lady-in-waiting on duty, who spends the night on a low couch by the Queen's bed, will soon be asleep, free to dream if she so chooses, but what is being dreamed behind those eyelids is of no great importance, what interests us is the frightening thought still troubling Dona Maria Ana as she is about to fall asleep, that on Maundy Thursday she will have to go to the Church of the Mother of God, where the nuns will unveil the Holy Shroud in her presence before showing it to the faithful, a shroud that bears the clear impression of the Body of Christ, the one true Holy Shroud that exists in the Christian world, ladies and gentlemen, just as all the others are the one true Holy Shroud, or they would not all be shown at the same hour in so many different churches throughout the world, but because this one happens to be in Portugal it is the truest Holy Shroud of all and altogether unique. When still conscious, Dona Maria Ana imagines herself bending over the sacred cloth, but it is difficult to say whether or not she is about to kiss it with reverence, because suddenly she falls asleep and finds herself in a carriage that is taking her back to the Palace at dead of night with an escort of halberdiers, when unexpectedly a man appears on horseback, returning from the chase, accompanied by four servants mounted on mules, with furred and feathered creatures inside nets dangling from their pommels, the mysterious horseman races toward the carriage, his shotgun at the ready, the horse's hooves cause sparks to ignite on the cobbles, and smoke erupts from its nostrils, and when he charges like a thunderbolt through the Queen's guard and reaches the carriage steps, where he brings his mount to a halt with some difficulty, the flames of the torches illumine his face, it is the Infante Dom Francisco, from what land of dreams could he have come, and why should he appear time and time again. The horse is startled, no doubt because of the clattering of the carriage on the cobblestones, but when the Queen compares these dreams she observes that the Infante comes a little closer each time, What can he want, and what does she want.

For some Lent is a dream, for others a vigil. The Easter festivities passed and wives returned to the gloom of their apartments and their cumbersome petticoats, at home there are a few more cuckolds, who can be quite violent when infidelities are practised out of season. And since we are now on the subject of birds, it is time to listen in church to the canaries singing rapturously of love from their cages decorated with ribbons and flowers, while the friars preaching in the pulpits presume to speak of holier things. It is

Ascension Thursday, and the singing of the birds soars to the vaults of heaven regardless of whether our prayers follow, without their assistance, our prayers have little hope of reaching God, so perhaps we shall all remain silent.

THIS SCRUFFY-LOOKING FELLOW with his rattling sword and ill-assorted clothes, even though barefoot, has the air of a soldier, and his name is Baltasar Mateus, otherwise known as Sete-Sóis or Seven Suns. He was dismissed from the army where he was of no further use once his left hand was amputated at the wrist after being shattered by gunfire at Jerez de los Caballeros, in the ambitious campaign we fought last October with eleven thousand men, only to end with the loss of two hundred of our soldiers and the rout of the survivors, who were pursued by the Spanish cavalry dispatched from Badajoz. We withdrew to Olivença with the booty we had taken in Barcarrota, feeling much too downhearted to enjoy it, gaining little by the ten leagues march there, and then making a rapid retreat over the same distance, only to leave behind on the battlefield so many casualties and the shattered hand of Baltasar Sete-Sóis. By great good fortune, or by the special grace of the scapular he was wearing around his neck, his wound did not become gangrenous, nor did they burst his veins with the force of the tourniquet applied to stop the bleeding, and thanks to the surgeon's skill, it was only a matter of disarticulating the man's tendons, without having to cut through the bone with a handsaw. The stump was treated with medicinal herbs, and Sete-Sóis had such healthy flesh that after two months the wound was completely healed.

Having saved little or nothing of his soldier's pay, Sete-Sóis begged for alms in Évora till he had enough money to pay the blacksmith and the saddler for an iron hook to replace his hand. This was how he spent the winter, putting aside half of the money he managed to collect, reserving half of the other half for the journey ahead, and spending the rest on food and wine. It was already spring by the time he had paid off the final instalment he owed the saddler and collected the iron hook, as well as a spike he had ordered, because Baltasar Sete-Sóis fancied the idea of having an alternative left hand. Crafted leather fittings were skilfully attached to the tempered irons, and there were two straps of different lengths to attach the implements to the elbow and shoulder for greater support. Sete-Sóis began his journey when it was rumoured that the garrison at Beira was to remain there instead of coming to the assistance of the troops in Alentejo, where there was an even greater shortage of food than in the other provinces. The army was in tatters, barefoot and reduced to rags, the soldiers pilfered from the farmers and refused to go on fighting, a considerable number went over to the enemy, while many others deserted, travelling off the beaten track, looting in order to eat, raping any women they encountered on the way, in short, taking their revenge on innocent people who owed them nothing and shared their despair. Sete-Sóis, maimed and bedraggled, travelled the main highway to Lisbon, deprived of his left hand, part of which had remained in Spain and part in Portugal, and all because of a strategic war to decide who was to occupy the Spanish throne, an Austrian Charles or a French Philip, but no one Portuguese, whether unimpaired or one-handed, intact or mutilated, unless to leave severed limbs or lost lives behind on the battlefield is not only the destiny of soldiers who have nothing but the ground to sit on. Sete-Sóis left Évora and passed through Montemor, accompanied by neither friar nor demon, for when it came to extending a begging hand, the one he possessed was sufficient.

Sete-Sóis went at his leisure. There was no one waiting to greet him in Lisbon, and in Mafra, which he had left many years ago to join His Majesty's Infantry, his father and mother, if they remember him, will think he is alive since no one has reported him dead or believe him to be dead because they have no proof he is still alive. All will be revealed in good time. The sun shines brightly and there has been no rain, the countryside is covered with flowers and the birds are singing. Sete-Sóis carries his irons in his knapsack, for there are moments, sometimes whole hours, when he imagines he can feel his hand, as if it were still there at the end of his arm, and it gives him enormous pleasure to imagine himself whole and entire just as Charles and Philip will sit whole and entire on their thrones, for thrones they will certainly have when the war is over. Sete-Sóis is content, so long as he does not look to find that his hand is missing, to feel an itching at the tip of his index finger and imagine that he is scratching the spot with his thumb. And when he starts to dream tonight, if he catches a glimpse of himself in his sleep he will see that he has no limbs missing, and will be able to rest his tired head on the palms of both hands.

Baltasar keeps the irons in his knapsack for another good reason. He very quickly discovered that whenever he wears them, especially the spike, people refuse him alms, or give him very little, although they always feel obliged to give him a few coins because of the sword he carries on his hip, despite the fact that everyone carries a sword, even the black slaves, but not with the gallant air of a professional soldier, who might wield it this very moment, if provoked. And unless the number of travellers outweighs the fear provoked by the presence of this brigand, who stands in the middle of the road, barring their passage and begging alms, alms for a poor soldier who has lost his hand and who but for a miracle might have lost his life, for the solitary traveller does not want this plea to turn to aggression, coins soon fall into the outstretched hand, and Baltasar is grateful that his right hand has been spared.

After passing through Pegões, at the edge of the vast pine forests, where the soil becomes arid, Baltasar, using his teeth, attached the spike to his stump, also useful as a dagger if necessary, for this was a time when deadly weapons such as daggers were forbidden, but Sete-Sóis enjoyed what might be termed immunity, so, doubly armed with spike and sword, he set off amid the shadows of the trees. A little farther on he would kill one of two men who tried to rob him, even though he told them that he was carrying no money, but after a war in which so many have lost their lives, this encounter need not concern us, except to note that Sete-Sóis then substituted the hook for the spike so he could drag the corpse off the path, making good use of both implements. The robber who escaped stalked him for another half-league through the pine groves, but finally gave up the chase, continuing to curse and insult him from a distance but with no real conviction this would have much effect.

When Sete-Sóis reached Aldegalega, it was already growing dark. He ate some fried sardines and drank a bowl of wine, and with barely enough money left for the next stage of his journey, let alone for lodgings at an inn, he sheltered in a barn, underneath some

carts, and there he slept wrapped in his cloak, but with his left arm and the spike exposed. He spent the night peacefully. He dreamt of the battle at Jerez de los Caballeros and knew that this time the Portuguese would be victorious under the leadership of Baltasar Sete-Sóis, who carried his severed left hand in his right hand, a prodigious talisman against which the Spaniards could not defend themselves with either shield or exorcism. When he opened his eyes, the first light of dawn had still not appeared on the eastern horizon, he felt a sharp pain in his left arm, which was not surprising, since the spike was pressing on the stump. He untied the straps and, using his imagination, all the more vivid at night, and especially in the pitch-black darkness under the carts, Baltasar convinced himself he still had two hands even if he could not see them. Both of them. He tucked his knapsack under his left arm, curled up under his cloak, and went back to sleep. At least he had managed to survive the war. He might have a limb missing, but he was still alive.

As dawn broke, he got to his feet. The sky was clear and transparent, and even the palest stars could be seen in the distance. It was a fine day on which to be entering Lisbon, and with time to linger before continuing his journey, he postponed any decision. Burying his hand in the knapsack, he took out his shoddy boots, which he had not worn once during the journey from Alentejo and had he worn them, he would have been obliged to discard them after such a long march, and demanding new skills from his right hand and using his stump, as yet untrained, he managed to get his feet into them, otherwise he would have them covered in blisters and calluses, accustomed as he was to walking in bare feet during his time as a peasant, then as a soldier, when there was never enough money to buy food, let alone to mend one's boots. For there is no existence more miserable than a soldier's.

When he reached the docks, the sun was already high. The tide was in, and the ferryman alerted any remaining passengers embarking for Lisbon that he was about to cast off. Baltasar Sete-Sóis ran up the gangway, his irons jangling inside his knapsack, and when a witty fellow quipped that the one-handed man was obviously carrying horseshoes in his sack to protect them, Sete-Sóis looked at him askance and, putting his right hand into his knapsack, drew out the spike. If that was not congealed blood on the iron, it looked uncannily like the real thing. The witty fellow averted his eyes, recommended his soul to St Christopher, who is reputed to protect travellers from evil encounters and other misfortunes, and from that moment until they reached Lisbon he did not utter another word. A woman sat down beside Sete-Sóis, unpacked her provisions, and invited those around her, out of politeness rather than any willingness to share her food, but with the soldier it was different, and she insisted at such length that Baltasar finally accepted. Baltasar did not like to eat in the presence of others with that solitary hand of his which made for difficulties, the bread slipping between his fingers and the meat dropping on the floor, but the woman spread his food on a large slice of bread, and by manoeuvring with his fingers and the tip of the penknife he had drawn from his pocket, he managed to eat quite comfortably and with a certain finesse. The woman and

her husband were old enough to be his parents, this was no flirtation over the waters of the Tagus, but friendship and compassion towards a man who had come back from the war, maimed for life.

The ferryman raised a small triangular sail, the wind assisted the tide, and both wind and tide assisted the ship. The oarsmen, restored by alcohol and a good night's rest, rowed steadily at an easy pace. When they rounded the coastline, the ship was buffeted by a strong current, it was like a journey to paradise, with the sunlight flickering on the surface of the water, and two shoals of porpoises, first one, then the other, were crossing in front of the ship, their skins dark and shiny, their movements arched as if they were striving to reach the sky. On the other side, towering above the water and in the far distance, Lisbon could be seen stretching beyond the city walls. The castle dominated the panorama, while church towers and spires rose above the rooftops of the houses below, a blurred conglomeration of gables. The ferryman began to tell a story, An amusing thing happened yesterday, if anyone is interested, and everyone was interested, because storytelling is a pleasant way to while away the time, and this was a long journey. The English fleet, which can be seen over there in front of the coast of Santos, anchored yesterday, and is carrying troops on their way to Catalonia, bringing reinforcements to the army awaiting them, and with the fleet arrived a ship carrying a number of criminals on their way to exile on the island of Barbados, and some fifty prostitutes who were also going there, to form a new colony, for in such places the honest and the dishonest amount to pretty much the same thing, but the ship's captain, old devil that he is, thought they could form a much better colony in Lisbon, so he decided to lighten his cargo and ordered that the women be put ashore, I've seen some of those slender English wenches for myself, and some of them are quite attractive. The ferryman laughed in anticipation, as if he were drawing up his own plans for carnal navigation and calculating the profits to be made from those who would board his ship, while the oarsmen from the Algarve roared with laughter, Sete-Sôis stretched out like a cat basking in the heat of the sun, the woman with the provisions pretended not to be listening, her husband vacillated, wondering whether he should look amused or remain solemn, because he could not take such tales seriously, nor was it to be expected of one who came from the distant region of Pancas, where from the day a man is born until the day he dies, everyday life, real or imagined, is the same old drudge. Hitting on one idea, then another, and for some mysterious reason linking the two, he then asked the soldier, How old are you, sir, whereupon Baltasar replied, I am twenty-six years of age.

There stood Lisbon, presented on the palm of the earth, a façade of high walls and tall houses. The ship landed at Ribeira, the boatswain manoeuvred the vessel alongside the quay, the sail having been lowered beforehand, and with one concerted movement the oarsmen on the mooring side raised their oars, while those on the other side of the ship strained to keep the vessel steady, one final turn of the rudder, a rope was thrown over their heads, and it was as if the two banks of the river had suddenly been joined together. Because of the receding tide, the quay was rather high, and Baltasar assisted

the woman with the basket and her husband, while the witty fellow got to his feet smartly and without a word took one leap and landed safely.

There was a confusion of fishing boats and caravels unloading cargo, the foremen hurled insults and bullied the black stevedores, who worked in pairs and were drenched by the water trickling from the baskets and bespattering their faces and arms with fish scales. It looked as if the entire population of Lisbon had congregated in the market place. Sete-Sóis could feel his mouth watering, it seemed as if all the hunger accumulated during the four years of war was now bursting the dykes of resignation and self-control. He felt his stomach contract in knots, and his eyes searched instinctively for the woman who had offered him food, where could she have gone with that passive husband of hers who was probably staring at the women in the crowd and trying to catch a glimpse of the English whores, for every man is entitled to his dreams.

With little money in his pocket except for a few copper coins that jingled far less than the irons in his knapsack, Baltasar had to decide where to go next, to Mafra, where he would find it difficult to wield a hoe with only one hand, or to the Royal Palace, where he might receive alms because of his disability. Someone had made this suggestion in Évora, while warning him that you had to beg with insistence and at great length and to be sure to flatter your benefactors, for even when you adopted these tactics, you could still become hoarse or drop dead without seeing so much as the colour of a coin. When all else failed, you could turn to the guilds, who dispensed charity, or the convents, where you were always certain of a bowl of soup and a slice of bread. Besides, a man who has lost his left hand does not have much to complain about, if he still has his right hand to extend to passers-by or a sharp spike with which to intimidate them.

Sete-Sóis strolled across the fish market. The fishwives hollered at potential buyers, vying for their attention with waving arms that jangled with gold bracelets, and screaming oaths, hands on hearts, bosoms heaving with necklaces, crosses, charms, and chains, all made from Brazilian gold, as were the large earrings they wore in every conceivable shape, valued possessions that enhance a woman's beauty. In the middle of this filthy rabble, the fishwives looked remarkably clean and tidy, as if untainted even by the smell of the fish they handled. At the door of a tavern standing next to a jeweller's shop, Baltasar bought three grilled sardines on top of the indispensable slice of bread, and blowing and nibbling as he went, he headed for the Palace. He entered the slaughterhouse that looked on to the square, to feast his eyes on the gaping carcasses of pigs and oxen, on whole sides of beef and pork hanging from hooks. He promised himself a banquet of roast meats just as soon as he could afford it, little suspecting that one day soon he would come here to work, thanks to his godfather's good offices but also to the hook he carried in his knapsack, which was to prove useful for heaving carcasses, draining tripe, and tearing away layers of fat. Apart from the blood, the slaughterhouse was a clean establishment with white tiles on the walls, and unless the butcher cheated on the scales, there was no other danger of being cheated, for in terms of quality and protein there is nothing to compare with meat.

The building that looms in the distance is the Royal Palace. The Palace is there but not the King, for he has gone off to hunt at Azeitão with the Infante Dom Francisco and his other brothers, accompanied by the footmen of the royal household and two Jesuit fathers, the Reverend João Seco and the Reverend Luis Gonzaga, who certainly were not in the party simply to eat and to pray, perhaps the King wished to brush up his knowledge of mathematics or Latin and Greek, subjects the good fathers had taught him when he was a young prince. His Majesty also carried a new rifle made for him by João de Lara, master of arms in the royal arsenal, a work of art embellished with gold and silver, which were it to be lost en route, would soon be returned to its rightful owner, for along the barrel of the rifle, in bold lettering and written in Latin, as on the pediment of the Basilica of St Peter's in Rome, are inscribed the words, I BELONG TO THE MONARCH, MAY GOD PROTECT DOM JOÃO V, yet some people continue to insist that rifles can speak only through the mouth of the barrel and solely in the language of gunpowder and lead. That is certainly true of ordinary rifles, such as the one used by Baltasar Mateus, alias Sete-Sóis, who at this very minute is unarmed and standing quite still in the middle of the Palace Square as he watches the world go by, a constant procession of litters and friars, ruffians and merchants, and watching bales and chests being weighed, he feels a sudden nostalgia for the war, and if he did not know that he is not wanted any more, he would return to Alentejo without a moment's hesitation, even if it meant certain death.

Baltasar took the broad avenue leading to the Rossio, after attending Holy Mass in the Church of Our Lady of Oliveira, where he engaged in mild flirtation with an unaccompanied woman who obviously fancied him, a fairly common pastime, for since the women are on one side of the church and the men on the other, they soon start to exchange billets-doux, make signs with their hands and handkerchiefs, twitching their lips and giving knowing winks, but when the woman took a close look at Baltasar, who was worn out after his long journey and had no money to spend on trifles and silk ribbons, she decided not to pursue the flirtation, and leaving the church, she took the broad avenue in the direction of the Rossio. This seemed to be a day for women, he thought, as a dozen or so emerged from a narrow side street, surrounded by black street-urchins who jostled them with sticks, nearly all of the women fair, with eyes that were pale blue, green, or grey, Who are these women, Sete-Sóis inquired, and by the time a man standing nearby told him, Baltasar had already surmised that they were probably the English whores being taken back to the ship from which they had been disembarked by the wily captain, and there was no other solution but to send them to the island of Barbados, rather than allow them to wander this fair land of Portugal, so greatly favoured by foreign whores, for here is a profession that defies the confusion of Babel, and you can enter these workshops as silent as a deaf-mute, so long as your money has spoken first. Yet the ferryman had said that there were some fifty whores in all, but here there were no more than twelve, What happened to the others, and the man explained, Most have already been recaptured, but some found means of hiding, and no doubt have by now discovered the difference between English and Portuguese men. Baltasar continued on his way, promising St Benedict a heart fashioned from wax if he would grant him the favour of

being able to sample, at least once in his lifetime, a fair English wench, preferably tall and slender with green eyes, for if on the Feast of St Benedict the faithful knock at the church doors and pray that they might never go without bread, and women who are anxious to find a good husband have Masses celebrated every Friday in the Saint's honour, why should a soldier not pray to St Benedict for the favours of an English whore, just once, before he meets his Maker, rather than die in ignorance.

Baltasar Sete-Sóis wandered around the city's quarters and squares all afternoon. He drank a bowl of soup at the gates of the Convent of St Francis of the City, asked which of the guilds were most generous in distributing alms and made a careful note of three of them for further investigation, the Guild of Our Lady of Oliveira, the patron saint of pastry-cooks, which he had already tried, the Guild of St Eloi, the patron saint of silversmiths, and the Guild of the Lost Child, which aptly described his own situation, although he could scarcely recall ever having been a child, lost yes, if they will ever find him.

Dusk fell, and Sete-Sóis went off to find a place to sleep. He had already struck up a friendship with another former soldier, older and more experienced, João Elvas who now made his living as a pimp, a profession he pursued by night, and now that the weather was warmer, he made good use of some abandoned sheds against the walls of the Convent of Hope, near the olive grove. Occasionally Baltasar visited João Elvas, with whom you could always be certain of meeting a new face or of finding someone to talk to but rather than take any risks, Baltasar, on the pretext that he wanted to give his right hand a rest after carrying his knapsack all day, attached the spike to his stump, anxious not to alarm João Elvas and the other rogues for it is a deadly weapon as we well know. There were six of them huddled under the shed, but no one tried to do him any harm and he had no intention of harming them.

To while away the hours before falling asleep, they reminisced about crimes that had been committed. Not their own, the crimes of their leaders, which nearly always went unpunished, even when the guilty parties could easily be identified, the powerful had no fear of being discovered and brought to justice. But the common thieves, bullies, or petty criminals, since there was no danger of anyone betraying the leaders, soon found themselves in Limoeiro prison, where they could be sure of a bowl of soup, not to mention the excrement and urine fouling the cells. Recently they released a hundred and fifty petty criminals from Limoeiro, who were joined by more than five hundred men, who had been recruited for India and then dismissed because they were no longer required, and there were so many of them, and so much hunger, that a plague broke out, threatening to kill all of us, so that the recruits were disbanded, and I was one of them. Another man said, This country is a hotbed of crime, more people are murdered in this city than are killed in war, as anyone who has ever fought will tell you, What do you say, Sete-Sóis, whereupon Baltasar replied, I can tell you how men die in war, but I don't know how men die in Lisbon, so I can't make any comparison, ask João Elvas, for he knows as much about military strongholds as he does about city slums, but João Elvas,

merely shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

The conversation turned back to the previous topic, and they listened to the story of the gilder who stabbed a widow whom he wanted to marry but she refused to satisfy his desire, so he murdered her and sought sanctuary in the Convent of the Holy Trinity, and then there was the tale of the unfortunate woman who rebuked her philandering husband, whereupon he slashed her from head to foot with his sword, and that of the clergyman who, because of some amorous intrigue, was rewarded with three magnificent scars, all these misadventures occurring during Lent, a season of hot blood and dark passions. But August is not much better, as we saw last year, when the dismembered body of a woman was discovered cut into fourteen or fifteen pieces, the precise number of pieces was never verified, but there was no doubt that she had been flogged with great violence about the vulnerable parts of her body, such as the buttocks and the calves, the flesh had been stripped from the bones and abandoned in Cotovia, one half of her limbs had been scattered near the fortifications of Conde de Tarouca and the rest down in Cardais, but scattered so blatantly that they were soon discovered, no attempt had been made to bury her remains or dump them at sea, so we can only conclude that they were deliberately left exposed to arouse public outrage.

Then João Elvas took up the story saying, It was a terrible slaughter, and the poor woman must have been dismembered while she was still alive, because no one could have treated a corpse so badly, the remains that were discovered came from some of the most sensitive parts of her body, and only a man whose soul was a thousand times cursed and damned could have committed such a crime, nothing like it has ever been seen in war, Sete-Sóis, although I can't vouch for what you may have seen on the battlefield, and the ruffian who had begun the story-took advantage of this pause and picked up the thread of his narration, Not until much later were the woman's missing limbs discovered, why, only the other day her head and one of her hands were found in Junqueira, and then a foot at Boavista, and to judge from her hand, foot, and head, she was an attractive, well-bred woman, not much older than eighteen or twenty, and in the sack where her head was discovered, there were also her intestines and her breasts, which had been peeled like oranges, and the body of a child some three or four months old, which had been strangled with a silken cord, even in a city like Lisbon, where so many crimes have been committed, nothing quite like this has ever been witnessed.

João Elvas added some final details about the episode, The King ordered notices to be posted promising a thousand cruzados to anyone who finds the culprit, but almost a year has passed and the culprit, alas, has not been found, people soon realised that the search was hopeless, the murderer was no ordinary shoemaker or tailor, for they only cut holes in your pocket, and the lacerations on this woman's body had been made with expert knowledge, her flesh and bones were carved with professional skill, and the surgeons ordered to inspect the evidence agreed that the crime was the work of a man professionally trained in anatomy, without daring to confess that they themselves could not have done such a skilful job. From behind the convent wall, the nuns could be heard

intoning their hymns, little do they know what they are spared, to conceive a child is something that has to be paid for at great cost, then Baltasar asked, Did anyone ever discover the identity of the murdered woman, No, neither that of the woman nor of her assassins, they hung her head from the door of the Alms house to see if anyone might recognise her, but to no avail and one of the ruffians there, whose beard was more white than black and who had said nothing so far, interrupted, They must have been strangers, for had they been from these parts, a missing wife would soon have caused people to gossip, it could have been a father who decided to kill his daughter because of some dishonour and who ordered the body to be cut into pieces and concealed in a mule pack or litter and then scattered throughout the city, and, no doubt, near his home he has buried the carcass of a pig so he can pretend that it is the murdered girl, and has informed his neighbours that his daughter died of smallpox or from some virulent disease, rather than have to open up the shroud, for some people are capable of anything.

The men fell silent, unable to conceal their indignation, from the nuns over the wall not even a whimper could be heard, and Sete-Sóis exclaimed, In war you find greater charity, War is still a child, João Elvas said suspiciously. And since there was nothing more to be said, they all settled down to sleep.

DONA MARIA ANA will not attend the auto-da-fé which is to be held today. She has gone into mourning upon receiving the news of the death of her brother Joseph, the Emperor of Austria who, stricken by virulent smallpox, died within days at the relatively young age of thirty-three, but this is not the Queen's only reason for remaining in her apartments, it will be a sad day for nations if a queen allows a family bereavement to interfere with her royal duties, when she has been brought up to face much greater misfortunes. Although now in her fifth month of pregnancy, she still suffers from morning sickness, but even this would scarcely excuse her from fulfilling her obligations and from participating in the solemn ceremonies with her faculties of sight, touch, and smell, besides the auto-da-fé is spiritually elevating and constitutes an act of faith, with its stately procession, the solemn declaration of the sentences, the dejected appearance of those who have been condemned, the plaintive voices, and the smell of charred flesh as their bodies are engulfed by the flames and whatever little fat remains after months of imprisonment starts to drip on to the embers. Dona Maria Ana will not attend the auto-da-fé because, despite her pregnancy, the physicians have bled her three times and left her feeling extremely weak, in addition to all the other humiliating symptoms of pregnancy that have troubled her for months. The physicians delayed the blood-lettings, just as they delayed giving her the news of her brother's death, because they were anxious to take every precaution at this early stage of pregnancy. To be frank, the atmosphere in the Palace is not at all healthy, the foul air has just provoked a resounding belch from the King, for which he has begged everyone's pardon, and this has been readily granted, because it always does the soul so much good, but he must have been imagining things for once they purged him he felt fine and had simply been suffering from constipation. The Palace seems even gloomier than usual now that the King has decreed court mourning and stipulated that it be observed by all the palace dignitaries and officials, after eight days of strict seclusion, there is to be a further six months of formal mourning, long black cloaks are to be worn for three months, followed by short black cloaks for the following three months, as a token of the King's deep sorrow upon receiving the news of the death of his brother-in-law, the Emperor.

Today, however, there is an air of general rejoicing, although that might not be the right expression, because the happiness stems from a much deeper source, perhaps from the soul itself, as the inhabitants of Lisbon emerge from their homes and pour into the city's streets and squares, crowds descend from the upper quarters of the city and gather in the Rossio to watch Jews and lapsed converts, heretics, and sorcerers being tortured, along with criminals who are less easily classified, such as those found guilty of sodomy, blasphemy, rape and prostitution, and various other misdeeds that warrant exile or the stake. One hundred and four condemned men and women are to be put to death today, most of them from Brazil, a land rich in diamonds and vices, fifty-one men and fifty-three women in all. Two of the women will be handed over naked to the civil authorities by the Inquisition after being found guilty of obdurate heresy, of having steadfastly refused to comply with the law, and of persistently upholding errors they accept as truths, although denounced in this time and place. And since almost two years have passed since anyone

was burned at the stake in Lisbon, the Rossio is crowded with spectators, a double celebration, for today is Sunday and there is to be an auto-da-fé, and we shall never know what the inhabitants of Lisbon enjoyed more, autos-da-fé or bullfights, even though only the bullfights have survived. Women cram the windows looking on to the square, dressed in their Sunday best, their hair groomed in the German fashion as a compliment to the Queen, their faces and necks are rouged, and they pout their lips to make their mouths look dainty, so many different faces and expressions trained on the square below as each lady wonders if her make-up is all right, that beauty spot at the corner of her mouth, the powder concealing that pimple, while her eye observes the infatuated admirer below, while her confirmed or aspiring suitor paces up and down clutching a handkerchief and swirling his cape. The heat is unbearable and the spectators refresh themselves with the customary glass of lemonade, cup of water, or slice of water-melon, for there is no reason why they should suffer from exhaustion just because the condemned are about to die. And should they feel in need of something more substantial, there is a wide choice of nuts and seeds, cheeses and dates. The King, with his inseparable Infantes and Infantas, will dine at the Inquisitor's Palace as soon as the auto-da-fé has ended, and once free of the wretched business, he will join the Chief Inquisitor for a sumptuous feast at tables laden with bowls of chicken broth, partridges, breasts of veal, pâtés and meat savouries flavoured with cinnamon and sugar, a stew in the Castilian manner with all the appropriate ingredients and saffron rice, blancmanges, pastries, and fruits in season. But the King is so abstinent that he refuses to drink any wine, and since the best lesson of all is a good example, everyone accepts it, the example, that is, not the abstinence.

Another example, which no doubt will be of greater profit to the soul since the body is so grossly over-fed, is to be given here today. The procession has commenced, the Dominicans in the vanguard carrying the banner of St Dominic, followed by the Inquisitors walking in a long file until the condemned appear, one hundred and four of them, as we have already stated, all carrying candles and with attendants at their sides, their prayers and mutterings rending the air, by the different hoods and sanbenitos you can tell who is to die and who will be sent into exile, although there is another sign, which never lies, namely that crucifix held on high with its back turned on the women who are to be burned at the stake and the gentle, suffering face of Christ turned toward those who will be spared, symbolic means of revealing to the condemned the fate that awaits them, should they have failed to understand the significance of the robes they are wearing, for these, too, are an unmistakable sign, the yellow sanbenito with the red cross of St Andrew is worn by those whose crimes do not warrant death, the one with the flames pointing downward, known as the upturned fire, is worn by those who have confessed their sins and may therefore be spared, while the dismal grey cassock bearing the image of a sinner encircled by demons and flames has become synonymous with damnation, and is worn by the two women who are to be burned at the stake. The sermon has been preached by Friar John of the Martyrs, the Franciscan provincial, and certainly no one could be more deserving of the task, considering that it was also a Franciscan friar whose virtue God rewarded by granting that the Queen should become pregnant, so profit from

this sermon for the salvation of souls, just as the Portuguese dynasty and the Franciscan Order will profit from the assured succession and the promised convent.

The rabble hurls furious insults at the condemned, the women scream abuse as they lean from their window-sills, and the friars prattle amongst themselves, the procession is an enormous snake that cannot be accommodated in the Rossio in a straight line and is therefore forced to coil round and round, as if determined to reach everywhere and offer an edifying spectacle to the entire city, that fellow over there is Simeão de Oliveira, a man without profession or benefice, who claimed to be registered as a secular priest with the Holy Office of the Inquisition and therefore entitled to celebrate Mass and hear confessions and preach, yet who at the same time declared himself to be a heretic and a Jew, rarely has there been such a muddle and to make matters worse, he sometimes called himself Padre Teodoro Pereira de Sousa or Friar Manuel of the Holy Conception, at other times Belchior Carneiro or Manuel Lencastre, and who knows what other names he might have assumed, because every man ought to have the right to choose his own name and be able to change it a hundred times daily, for there is nothing in a name, and that fellow over there is Domingo Afonso Lagareiro, a native and an inhabitant of Portel who claimed to have visions in order to be revered as a saint and practised miraculous cures with blessings, invocations, signs of the cross, and other superstitions, and you can imagine how many impostors there have been before him, and that is Padre António Teixeira de Sousa from the Island of St George, who has been found guilty of soliciting women, a canonical phrase meaning that he fondled and sexually assaulted them, almost certainly by seducing them with words in the confessional, only to end up having furtive intercourse in the sacristy until he was caught, he will be exiled to Angola for life, and this is me, Sebastiana Maria de Jesus, one-quarter converted Jewess, and I have visions and revelations that the Tribunal has dismissed as fraudulent, I hear heavenly voices, but the judges insist they are the devil's work, I believe that I might well be a saint just like all the other saints, or even better, for I can see no difference between them and me, but the judges rebuked me, accusing me of intolerable presumption, of monstrous pride, and of offending God, they told me that I am guilty of blasphemy, heresy, and evil pride, they have gagged me to silence my assertions, heresies, sacrileges, and they will punish me with a public flogging and eight years of exile in Angola, and having listened to the sentences they have passed on me and on others in the procession, I've heard no mention of my daughter, Blimunda, Where can she be, Where are you, Blimunda, if you were not arrested after me, you must have come here looking for your mother, and I shall see you if you are anywhere in the crowd, for only to see you do I want these eyes of mine, they have covered my mouth but not my eyes, ah, heart of mine, leap in my breast if Blimunda is out there, among that crowd that spits on me and throws melon skins and garbage, how they are deceived, I alone know that all may become saints if they so desire, but I am forbidden to cry out and tell them so, at last my heart has given me a sign, my heart has given a deep sigh, I am about to see Blimunda, I am about to see her, ah, there she is, Blimunda, Blimunda, Blimunda, my child, and she has seen me but cannot speak, she must pretend that she does not recognise me, or even pretend to

despise me, a mother who is bewitched and excommunicated, although no more than a quarter Jewess and converted, she has seen me, and at her side is Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, do not speak, Blimunda, just look at me with those eyes of yours, which have the power to see everything, but who can that tall stranger be who stands beside Blimunda and she does not know, alas, she does not know who he can be or where he comes from, whatever will become of them, why do my powers fail me, judging from his tattered clothes, that harrowed expression, that missing hand, he must be a soldier, farewell, Blimunda, for I shall see you no more, and Blimunda said to the priest, There is my mother, then, turning to the tall man standing beside her, she asked, What is your name, and the man spontaneously told her, thus acknowledging that this woman had a right to question him, Baltasar Mateus, otherwise known as Sete-Sóis.

Sebastiana Maria de Jesus had already passed, along with all the others who were sentenced and the procession came full circle, they whipped those who had been sentenced to a public flogging, and burnt the two women, one having been garrotted first, after she declared that she wanted to die in the Christian faith, while the other was roasted alive for refusing to recant even at the hour of death, in front of the bonfires men and women began to dance, the King withdrew, he saw, ate, and left, accompanied by the Infantes, and returned to the Palace in his coach drawn by six horses and escorted by the royal guard, evening is closing rapidly, but the heat is still oppressive, the heat of the sun is fierce, and the great walls of the Carmelite Convent cast their shadows over the Rossio, the corpses of the two women have fallen among the embers, where their remains will finally disintegrate and at nightfall their ashes will be scattered, not even on the Day of Final Judgment will they be resuscitated, the crowds begin to disperse and return to their homes, having had their faith renewed, and carrying gummed to the soles of their shoes some of the ashes and charred flesh, perhaps even clots of blood, unless the blood evaporated over the embers. Sunday is the Lord's day, a trite observation since every day belongs to the Lord, and the days go on consuming us unless in the name of the same Lord the flames have consumed us more quickly, a double outrage, when with my own reason and will, I refused the aforesaid Lord my flesh and bones and the spirit that sustains my body, son of mine and of me, direct union with myself, the world descending over my hidden face, no different from my hooded face, therefore unknown. Yet we must die.

To anyone present, the words uttered by Blimunda must have sounded callous, There goes my mother, she said, without as much as a sigh, a tear, or any sign of pity, for people are still capable of expressing pity, despite all the hatred, mocking, and jeering, yet this woman who is a daughter and who was much loved, as could be seen from the way her mother gazed upon her, had nothing to say other than, There she is, before turning to a man she had never seen before and asking him, What is your name, as if that were more important than the flogging inflicted on her own mother after months of torture and imprisonment, for no name could save Sebastiana Maria de Jesus once she was sentenced to exile in Angola, where she would remain for the rest of her

life, perhaps consoled in spirit and in body by Padre António Teixeira de Sousa, who had acquired a great deal of experience in such matters while still in Portugal, and just as well since the world is not such an unhappy place, even when one is condemned. Once she is back in her own home, however, tears flow from Blimunda's eyes as if they were two fountains, if she should ever see her mother again, it will be at the point of embarkation, but from a distance, much easier for an English captain to release prostitutes than for a condemned mother to kiss her own daughter, for a mother and daughter to bring their faces cheek to cheek, Blimunda's smooth complexion against her mother's furrowed skin, so close and yet so far, Where are we, Who are we, and Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço replies, We are as nothing when compared with the designs of the Lord, if He knows who we are, then resign yourself, Blimunda, let us leave the terrain of God to God, let us not trespass His frontiers, and let us adore Him from this side of eternity, and let us make our own terrain, the terrain of men, for once it has been made, God will surely wish to visit us, and only then will the world be created. Baltasar Mateus, alias Sete-Sóis, makes no attempt to speak but gazes upon Blimunda, each time she returns his gaze, he feels a knot in his stomach, because eyes such as hers have never been seen before, their colouring uncertain, grey, green, or blue, according to the outer light or the inner thought, sometimes they even turn as black as night or a brilliant white, like a splinter of anthracite. Baltasar had come to this house not because they told him he should come, but because Blimunda had asked him his name and he had replied and no further justification seemed necessary. Once the auto-da-fé was over, and the debris cleared away, Blimunda withdrew accompanied by the priest, and when she arrived home she left the door open so that Baltasar might enter. He came in behind them and sat down, the priest closed the door and lit the oil-lamp by the last rays of light coming through a chink in the wall, the reddish light of sunset, which reaches this altitude when the low-lying parts of the city are already enshrouded in darkness, soldiers can be heard shouting on the castle ramparts, in other circumstances Sete-Sóis would be reminiscing about the war, but for the moment he has eyes only for Blimunda, or, rather, for her body, which is tall and slender, like that of the English wench he visualised the very day he disembarked in Lisbon.

Blimunda got up from her stool and lit a fire in the hearth and put a pot of soup on the trivet, and when it began to boil she ladled the soup into two large bowls, which she then served to the two men in silence, for she had not spoken since asking Baltasar some hours before, What is your name, and although the priest was the first to finish eating, she waited until Baltasar had finished, so that she could use his spoon, it was as if in silence she were answering another question, Do your lips accept the spoon that has touched the lips of this man, thus making his what was yours, now making yours what was his, until the meaning of yours and mine was lost, and since Blimunda had answered yes before being asked, I therefore declare you man and wife. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço waited until Blimunda had finished eating the rest of the soup from the pot, then extended his blessing over her person, over the food and the spoon, over the stool and the fire in the hearth, over the oil lamp and the mat on the floor, and over Baltasar's

amputated wrist. Then he left.

Baltasar and Blimunda sat in silence for a whole hour. Baltasar got up only once, to put some wood on the dying fire, and Blimunda stirred once, to trim the wick in the oil lamp, which was consuming the flame, and now that there was light in the room, Baltasar felt able to ask, Why did you ask me my name, whereupon Blimunda replied, Because my mother wanted to know and she was anxious that I should know, How can you tell, when you were unable to speak to her, I can tell, even though I can't explain why I can tell, don't ask me questions I cannot answer, behave as you did before, when you followed me home without asking any questions, and if you've no place to go, why not remain here, I must go to Mafra, there I have my family, my parents, a sister, Stay here until you have to leave, there will always be time for you to return to Mafra, Why do you want me to remain here, Because it is necessary, I'm not convinced, If you don't wish to remain, then go, I cannot force you to stay here, I cannot find the strength to go away from this place, you have bewitched me, I have bewitched no one, I have uttered no words, I have not touched you, You looked into my soul, I swear I will never look into your soul, You swear you will never do it, yet you have done so already, You don't know what you're saying, I've never once looked inside you, If I stay here, where do I sleep, You sleep with me.

They lay down together. Blimunda was a virgin. What age are you, Baltasar asked her and Blimunda replied, Nineteen, but even as she spoke, she became older. Some drops of blood trickled on to the mat. Dipping the tips of her middle and index fingers into the blood, Blimunda made the sign of the cross and marked a cross on Baltasar's chest, near his heart. They were both naked. From a nearby street they heard the angry shouts of a quarrel, the clashing of swords and scurrying of feet. Then silence. The bleeding had stopped.

When Baltasar woke next morning, he saw Blimunda lying at his side, eating bread, but with her eyes firmly closed. She only opened them when she had finished eating, at that moment they looked grey, and she told him, I shall never look into your soul.

TO RAISE THIS bread to one's mouth requires little effort, an excellent thing to do when hunger demands it, eating bread nourishes the body and benefits the farmer, some farmers more than others, who from the moment the wheat is cut until the bread is eaten know how to turn their labours to profit, and that is the rule. In Portugal there is never enough wheat to satisfy the perpetual hunger of the Portuguese for bread, and they give the impression of being unable to eat anything else, and that explains why the foreigners who live here, in their anxiety to satisfy our needs, which germinate more abundantly than pumpkin seeds, have dispatched from their own and other lands fleets of a hundred ships laden with grain, like the fleets that have just sailed up the Tagus, firing their salute at the Torre de Belem and presenting the customary documents to the Governor and this time there are more than thirty thousand sacks of grain imported from Ireland, and such abundant supplies have transformed the shortage into a temporary surfeit, so that the granaries and private storehouses are so full of grain that the dealers are desperate to hire storage at any price, posting notices on doorways throughout the city for the attention of anyone with space to rent, the importers find themselves in serious difficulties and are obliged to lower prices because of the sudden glut, and to make matters worse, there is talk of the imminent arrival of a Dutch fleet carrying much the same cargo, but subsequently news arrives that the Dutch fleet has been attacked by a French squadron almost at the approach to the straits, causing the price that was about to be lowered to stay where it is and whenever it proves necessary, several granaries are burned to the ground and a shortage is immediately declared because of the grain lost in the blaze, although it is widely known that there is more than enough grain for everyone. These are the mysteries of commerce as taught by foreign merchants and learned by those who live here, though our own merchants are on the whole cretins and leave it to foreigners to arrange the import of merchandise from other lands and are quite content to buy the grain from foreigners who take advantage of our ingenuousness and get rich at our expense, by buying at prices we do not know and selling at prices we do know to be excessive, while we repay them with malicious tongues and eventually with our lives.

However, since laughter is so close to tears, reassurance so close to anxiety, relief so close to panic, and the lives of individuals and nations hover between these extremes, João Elvas describes for Baltasar Sete-Sóis the splendid martial display the navy of Lisbon marshalled from Belem to Xabregas for two days and two nights, while the infantry and cavalry took up defence positions on land, because a rumour had spread that a French fleet was about to invade, a hypothesis which would transform any nobleman or commoner into another Duarte Pacheco Pereira, and convert Lisbon into another Fortress of Diu, but the invading armada turned out to be a fishing fleet with a consignment of cod, obviously in short supply, judging from the greed with which it was devoured. The ministers received the news with a withered smile, soldiers, arms, and horses were disbanded with a jaundiced smile, and the guffaws of the populace were loud and strident when they found themselves avenged of so many vexations. In short, it would have been much more shameful to have expected a consignment of cod only to find a French invasion than to have expected a French invasion only to be confronted with crates of

cod.

Sete-Sóis agrees, But put yourself in the shoes of any soldiers prepared for battle, you know how a man's heart beats furiously at such moments as he thinks to himself, What will become of me, will I come out of this alive, a soldier tenses up when he faces possible death, and imagine his disappointment when he is told they are simply unloading supplies of cod at Ribeira Nova, if the French were to discover our mistake, they would be even more amused at our stupidity. Baltasar is about to become nostalgic again for the war when suddenly he remembers Blimunda and longs to contemplate the colour of her eyes, a battle he wages with his own memory, which remembers one colour much like any other, his own eyes unable to distinguish the colour of her eyes even when he looks straight into them. These thoughts soon dispel any nostalgia he was about to indulge in, and he remarks to João Elvas, There should be some means of discovering who is arriving and what brings them here, the seagulls know these things when they perch on the ship's mast, while we, for whom it is much more important, know nothing, and the old soldier rejoined, The seagulls have wings, the angels, too, but the seagulls do not speak, and angels I have never seen.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço was crossing the Palace Square, coming from the Palace, where he had gone at the insistence of Sete-Sóis, who was anxious to find out whether he was entitled to a war pension, if the simple loss of a left hand warranted as much and when João Elvas, who did not know everything about Baltasar's life, saw the priest approach, he continued the conversation and informed Baltasar, That priest who is now approaching is Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, whom they call the Flying Man, but his wings have not grown sufficiently, so we shall not be able to go and spy out the fleets hoping to enter port or to discover what merchandise they bring or why they have come here. Sete-Sóis was unable to offer any comment, because the priest, pausing at a distance, was beckoning him to approach, and João Elvas was much bemused that his friend should enjoy the protection of Church and State, and began to ask himself if there could be some advantage here for a vagrant soldier like himself. But, busying himself in the meantime, he stretched out his hand for alms, first to a fine gentleman, who readily obliged, then distractedly to a mendicant friar, who passed by bearing a sacred relic that he extended to the faithful so they might kiss it with reverence, with the result that João Elvas finished up by parting with the alms he had collected, Well I'll be damned, it may be a sin but there is nothing like a good curse for giving vent to one's feelings.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço assured Sete-Sóis, I've discussed these matters with the judges, they have promised to consider your petition, and when they have reached their decision they will inform me, and when are you likely to know, Father, Baltasar asked with the innocent curiosity of someone who has just arrived at court and is still unfamiliar with its ways, I cannot tell you, but should things delay, perhaps I shall have a word with His Majesty, who honours me with his esteem and protection, You can speak to the King, Baltasar asked in astonishment, while thinking to himself, He can speak to the King, yet he knew Blimunda's mother, who was condemned by the Inquisition, what kind of priest

can he be, and this final question, which Sete-Sóis was careful not to voice aloud, left him feeling troubled. Padre Bartolomeu made no attempt to reply but looked him straight in the eye, and there they stood confronting each other, the priest somewhat shorter and more youthful in appearance even though they are both the same age, twenty-six years old, the age we have already established for Baltasar, yet their lives could scarcely be more different, that of Sete-Sóis destined to labour and war and although the war is now over the labour is about to commence, Bartolomeu Lourenço, on the other hand, was born in Brazil and arrived in Portugal for the first time as a young lad endowed with a good mind and an excellent memory, so that by the time he was fifteen his enormous potential was already being fulfilled, he could recite Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Quintus Curtius, Suetonius, Maecenas, and Seneca from beginning to end and back again, or from any passage you cared to quote, and he could also interpret all the fables that had ever been written and explain why they had been invented in the first place by the Greeks and Romans, identify the authors of all the books and verse, both ancient and modern, right back to the year twelve hundred, and if someone were to suggest a theme for a poem, he would improvise some ten verses then and there without a moment's hesitation, he could also expound and defend every philosophical system and discuss the most complicated details, elucidate all the discourses of Aristotle, unravel their intricacies, terms, and middle terms, and clear up all the controversial issues in the Holy Scriptures, whether from the Old or the New Testament, he could recite from memory, in their entirety or in snatches, all the Gospels of the four Evangelists in any order, likewise the Epistles of St Paul and St Jerome, he knew by heart the sequence and dates of every prophet and holy king, and could quote from any passage and in any order from the Book of Psalms, Song of Songs, Book of Exodus, and all the Books of Kings, as well as from the somewhat less canonical Books of Esdras, which, confidentially speaking, do not give the impression of being all that orthodox, this sublime genius, this prodigious intellect and memory, was the product of a land from which the Portuguese have only exacted gold and diamonds, tobacco and sugar, the riches of the jungle, and everything else that may still be waiting to be discovered there, the land of another world, the land of tomorrow and for centuries to come, not to mention the evangelisation of the Tapuyan Indians, which in itself would gain us eternity.

My friend João Elvas has just told me that you are known as the Flying Man, tell me, Father, why have they given you such a nickname, Baltasar asked him. Bartolomeu Lourenço started to move away, but the soldier pursued him and, walking two paces apart, they proceeded alongside the Arsenal de Ribeira das Naus and past the Royal Palace, and further on, when they reached Remolares, where the square opens up towards the river, the priest rested on a boulder and invited Sete-Sóis to join him and finally answered his question as if it had just been asked, They call me the Flying Man because I have flown, Baltasar was puzzled and, begging pardon for his boldness, pointed out that only birds and angels can fly, and men when they are dreaming, although there is nothing very stable about dreams, You haven't been living in Lisbon very long, at least I don't recall ever having seen you before, No, I was away in the war for four years, and

my home is in Mafra, Well, it was two years ago that I flew, the first time I constructed a balloon it went up in flames, then I made a second balloon which landed on the palace roof, and finally I made a third balloon, which went out through a window of the Casa da India, never to be seen again, But did you fly in person or was it only the balloons that flew, Only the balloons but it was just as if I myself had flown, Surely a balloon flying is not the same thing as a man flying, A man stumbles at first, then walks, then runs, and eventually flies, Bartolomeu Lourenço replied, but suddenly he fell to his knees, because the Blessed Sacrament was being taken to some invalid of rank and importance, the priest carrying the pyx containing the Host walked under a canopy supported by six acolytes, trumpets to the fore, and members of a confraternity behind, wearing red cloaks and bearing candles in one hand as well as the religious objects required for administering the Holy Sacrament, some soul was impatient for flight and only waiting to be released from its anchorage, to be set before the wind blowing in from the high seas, from the depth of the universe, or the ultimate confines of the horizon. Sete-Sóis also knelt, resting his iron hook on the ground as he made the sign of the cross with his right hand.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço was already on his feet and heading slowly towards the edge of the river, with Baltasar at his heels, and there on one side, a barge was unloading straw in great bales that youths balanced on their shoulders as they ran down the gangway, on the other side, two black slave women were coming to empty their masters' chamber pots, the urine and faeces of the day or week, amidst the natural odours of straw and excrement, the priest confided, I have been the laughing-stock of the court and its poets, one of them, Tomás Pinto Brandão, dubbed my invention a wind machine and declared it would soon perish, and had it not been for the King's support, I don't know what would have become of me, but the King, had faith in my invention and consented that I continue with my experiments on the estate of the Duke of Aveiro at São Sebastião da Pedreira, which finally silenced the gossips and scandalmongers who were maliciously hoping that I would break my legs when I took off from the castle ramparts, although I had never promised any such thing, and that my art had more to do with the jurisdiction of the Holy Office of the Inquisition than with the laws of geometry, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, this is something I don't understand, I started life as a simple peasant, and my career as a soldier was short-lived, I do not believe that anyone can fly unless he has grown wings, and those who claim otherwise know as much about flying as they do about olive presses, Nevertheless, you yourself did not invent that hook you are wearing, someone had to discover the need for such an implement and hit on the idea of combining iron and leather in order to make it practical, and the same is true for those ships on the river, at one time sails had not been invented, and before that there were no oars, and before that no helm, and just as man, who inhabits the earth, found it necessary to become a sailor, so he will find it necessary to become a flier, Anyone who puts sails on a boat is in the water, and in the water he remains, to fly is to soar above the earth up into the sky, where there is no ground to support our feet, We must imitate the birds, who spend as much time in the sky as they do settled on land, So it was

because you wanted to fly that you came to know Blimunda's mother, possessed as she was of hidden powers, I heard it rumoured that she had visions of people flying with cloth wings and there are many people who claim to have experienced visions, but what I learned about her sounded so convincing that I secretly went to visit her one day, and we became close friends, And did you discover what you wanted, No, I did not, I soon realised that her insights, if they were genuine, were of another order, and that I should have to go on struggling to overcome my own ignorance without help, and I hope I'm not deceiving myself, It strikes me that those who claim that flying has more to do with the Holy Office of the Inquisition than with the laws of geometry are right and if I were in your shoes I would be twice as cautious, don't forget that prison, exile, and the stake are often the price to be paid for such excesses, but a priest ought to know more about these matters than a common soldier, I'm cautious and I'm not without friends who can protect me, the day will come.

They retraced their steps and passed through Remolares once more. SeteSóis made as if to speak, then held back, and the priest, sensing his hesitation, asked, Is there something worrying you, I'm anxious to know, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, why Blimunda always eats bread before opening her eyes in the morning, So you have been sleeping with her, We live under the same roof, Take heed that you're committing adultery and you'd do better to marry her, She doesn't want to marry me, and I'm not certain that I want to marry her and if I go back to my native Mafra one day and she prefers to remain in Lisbon, there's little point in our marrying, but to come back to my question, Why does Blimunda eat bread before opening her eyes in the morning, Yes, if you ever do find out, it will be from her, not me, So you know the answer, That's right, But you won't tell me, All I will tell you is that it's something of a mystery, flying is simple when compared with Blimunda.

Walking and chatting together, they arrived at the stables of a horse trader at the Gate of Corpo Santo. The priest hired a mule and climbed on to the saddle, I'm on my way to São Sebastião da Pedreira to inspect my machine, if you would like to come with me, the mule can carry both of us, Yes I'll come, but on foot, for that's the route followed by the infantry, You're just an ordinary man without either the hooves of a mule or the wings of the Passarola, Is that what you call your flying machine, Baltasar asked, and the priest replied, That's what others have called it to show their contempt.

They climbed up to the Church of St Roch and then, skirting the hills around Taipas, descended through the Praça da Alegria as far as Valverde. Sete-Sóis kept abreast of the mule without any difficulty, and only when they were on flat ground did he fall behind a little, to catch up again on the next slope, whether going up or coming down. Although not a single drop of rain had fallen since April, and that was four months ago, all the fields were green and luxuriant above Valverde, because of the large number of perennial springs, whose waters were exploited for the cultivation of the vegetables that grew in abundance on the outskirts of the city. Having passed the Convent of St Martha and, farther along, that of Princess Joan the Saint, they came upon vast stretches of olive

groves, here, too, vegetables were cultivated, but, in the absence of any natural springs to irrigate the land, the problem was solved by the well sweeps which drew water in buckets tied to a long pole and by donkeys turning water wheels, with their eyes blinkered so that they might imagine themselves to be moving in a straight line like their masters ignoring the fact that if they were really going in a straight line, they would eventually finish up in the same place. For the world itself is like a water wheel, and it is men who by treading it pull it and make it go, and even though Sebastiana Maria de Jesus is no longer here to assist us with her revelations, it is easy to see that if there are no men, the world comes to a standstill.

When they arrived at the gates of the estate, there was no sign of the Duke of Aveiro or of his footmen, for his property was confiscated by the crown, and lawsuits are still in progress to have the estate restored to the House of Aveiro, such lawsuits being painfully slow, and only when the dispute has been resolved will the Duke return from Spain, where he now lives and where he is known as the Duke of Baños, when they arrived, as we were saying, the priest dismounted, took a key from his pocket, and opened the gates as if he were entering his own property. He led the mule into the shade, where he tethered it and slipped a basket of hay and broad beans over its muzzle, and there he left it, relieved of its burden and shaking off with its bushy tail the gnats and horseflies buzzing around the provisions newly arrived from the city.

All the doors and windows of the villa were shuttered, and the estate was abandoned and uncultivated. On one side of the spacious square was a granary, stable, or wine-cellar and now that it was empty it was difficult to say which it had been, for there was no sign of any storage bins, there were no metal rings on the walls, not a single barrel in sight. There was one door with a padlock that could be opened with an ornate key fashioned in the shape of Arabic script. The priest removed the crossbar and pushed the door open, the main building was not empty after all, inside there were canvas cloths, joists, coils of copper wire, iron plates, bundles of willow, all laid out neatly according to the type of material, and in the clear space in the middle stood what looked like an enormous shell, with wires sticking out all over, like a half-finished basket with its structural frame exposed.

Filled with curiosity, Baltasar followed the priest inside, and he could scarcely believe his own eyes, perhaps he had been expecting a balloon, giant sparrow wings, or a sack of feathers, but he never expected anything as strange as this, So, this is your invention, and Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço replied, This is it, and opening a chest, he took out a parchment, which he unrolled, it turned out to be a drawing of a large bird, it had to be the Passarola, this much Baltasar could perceive, and because the design was clearly that of a bird, he was prepared to believe that once all those materials had been assembled the machine would be capable of flying. More for his own reassurance than for that of Sete-Sóis, who saw nothing other than a bird in the design, which was good enough for him, the priest began to explain the details, at first calmly, and then in tones of great excitement, What you see here are the sails, which cleave the wind and move as

required, this is the rudder, which steers the machine, not at random but under the skilled control of the pilot, this is the main body of the machine, which assumes the shape of a seashell from prow to stern, with bellows attached just in case the wind should drop, as frequently occurs at sea, and these are the wings, which are essential for balancing the machine in flight, I shall say nothing about these globes, for they are my secret, I need only tell you that without their contents the machine would not be capable of flying, but this is a detail that still causes me some uncertainty, and from the wires forming the roof we shall suspend amber balls, because amber reacts favourably to the heat of the sun's rays, and this should achieve the desired effect, and here is the compass, without which you cannot travel anywhere, and here are the pulleys, used to raise and lower the sails, just as on ships at sea. He fell silent for several minutes, then continued, When everything is assembled and in good working order, I shall be ready to fly. Baltasar found the design most impressive and felt no need for explanations, for since no one can see what is inside a bird, no one really knows what makes it fly, yet it flies nonetheless, a bird is shaped like a bird, and nothing could be simpler, When will you fly, Baltasar inquired, I don't know yet, the priest replied, I need someone to help me, I can't do everything on my own, and there are certain jobs for which I have not enough strength. He fell silent once more, and then asked, Would you like to come and help me. Baltasar drew back, feeling somewhat bewildered, I don't know anything about flying, I'm a simple peasant, apart from tilling the soil, all they ever taught me was how to kill, and as you can see, I've only one hand, With that hand and that hook you can manage anything, and there are certain jobs that a hook can do better than a human hand, a hook feels no pain when it grips a piece of wire or metal, it doesn't get cut or burned, I assure you that Almighty God himself is one-handed, yet He made the world.

Baltasar recoiled in alarm, he made a rapid sign of the cross, in order not to give the devil time to commit any mischief, What are you saying, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, where is it written that God is one-handed, No one ever said so, nor has it ever been written, only I say that God's left hand is missing, because it is on His right, at His right hand, that the chosen sit, nor do you find any reference to God's left hand either in the Holy Scriptures or in the writings of the holy doctors of the Church, no one sits at God's left hand, for it is a void, a nothingness, an absence, therefore God is one-handed. The priest gave a deep sigh and concluded, He has no left hand.

Sete-Sóis had been listening attentively. He looked at the design and the materials spread out on the floor, the shell still waiting to take shape, he smiled and, raising his arms slightly, said, If God has only one hand and He made the universe, then this man with only one hand is capable of fastening a sail and tightening the wires to make the machine fly.

THERE IS A time for everything. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço finds that he does not have enough money to buy the magnets that he believes are essential to make his machine fly and, besides, the magnets have to be imported from abroad, and so, for the present, Sete-Sóis is employed, through the priest's good offices, in the slaughterhouse on the Palace Square where he fetches and carries on his back great carcasses of meat of every kind, rumps of beef, suckling pigs by the dozen, lambs strung together in pairs, passed from hook to hook, causing the sacking with which they are covered to ooze blood. It is a filthy job, although recompensed now and then with leftovers, a pig's foot or a piece of tripe and, when God is willing and the butcher is in the right mood, even with the odd flank of mutton or a slice of rump, wrapped in a crisp cabbage leaf, so that Baltasar and Blimunda are able to eat somewhat better than usual, by dividing and sharing out, and although Baltasar has no say in the sharing, the trade offers some advantages.

Dona Maria Ana's pregnancy is almost over. Her stomach simply could not bear to grow any larger, however much her skin might stretch, her belly is enormous, a cargo-laden ship from India or a fleet from Brazil, from time to time the King inquires how the navigation of the Infante is progressing, if it can be sighted from a distance, if it is being borne by fair winds or has suffered any assaults, such as those inflicted recently on our squadrons off the islands, when the French captured six of our cargo ships and one man-of-war, for all this and worse one might expect from our leaders and the inadequate convoys we provide, and now it seems that the same French are preparing to ambush the rest of our fleet at the entrance to Pernambuco and Bahia, if they are not already lying in wait for our ships, which must have set sail already from Rio de Janeiro. We Portuguese made so many discoveries when there were still discoveries to be made, and now other nations treat us like tame bulls who are incapable of charging, unless by accident. Dona Maria Ana, too, has been informed of these worrying reports about events that had taken place some months earlier, when the Infante in her womb was a mere jelly, a little tadpole, a thingumajig with a large head, extraordinary how a man or a woman are formed, regardless, there inside the ovary, and protected from the outside world, even though it is this very same world that they will have to confront, as king or soldier, as friar or assassin, as an English whore in Barbados or a condemned woman in the Rossio, always as something, never as everything, and never as nothing. For, after all, we can escape from everything, but not from ourselves.

The Portuguese navigations, however, are not always so disastrous. Several days ago a long-awaited ship from Macao finally arrived, having set sail some twenty months earlier, just as Sete-Sóis was leaving to fight in the war, and the ship had made a good voyage despite the time it took, for Macao is situated well beyond Goa, in China, that much-favoured land that excels all other nations in riches and treasures, and merchandise as cheap as one could wish for, besides having the most agreeable and healthy of climates, infirmities and diseases are virtually unknown, which eliminates any need for doctors or surgeons, and the Chinese die only from old age or when they find themselves abandoned by nature, which cannot be expected to protect us forever. The ship took on a

load of precious cargo in China, then sailed to Brazil to do some trading and to fill the hold with sugar and tobacco and an abundant supply of gold, activities which detained it for two and a half months in Rio and Bahia, and the return journey from Brazil to Portugal took another fifty-six days, and it was nothing short of miraculous that not a single man fell ill or died during this long and hazardous voyage, the Mass celebrated here every day in honour of Our Lady of Compassion for the Wounded clearly secured the ship's safe return, and helped it to stay on course, notwithstanding allegations that the pilot did not know the route, if such a thing is possible, hence the popular saying that there is nothing so profitable as trade with China. Since things are never quite perfect, however, news soon arrived that civil war had broken out between the settlers in Pernambuco and those in Recife, clashes break out in the region daily, some of them extremely violent, and there have been reports that certain factions are threatening to set fire to plantations and destroy crops of sugar and tobacco, which mean heavy losses for the Portuguese crown.

Whenever it seems opportune, these and other items of news are given to Dona Maria Ana, but she is already floating, indifferent to all around her in the torpor of pregnancy, so it makes little difference whether they give her those reports or decide to suppress them, even that initial moment of glory when she discovered she was pregnant has become a faded memory, the tiniest breeze in the wake of the tornado of pride that gripped her during the first weeks of pregnancy, when she felt like one of those figureheads erected on the ship's prow, though incapable of seeing into the distant horizon, therefore there has to be a telescope and lookout for they can see further. A pregnant woman, no matter whether queen or commoner, enjoys a moment in life when she feels herself to be the oracle of all wisdom, even of that which cannot be translated into words, then, as she watches her stomach swell out of all proportion and begins to experience the other discomforts that accompany pregnancy, her thoughts, not all of them happy, turn to the day when she will finally give birth, and the Queen's mind is constantly beset by disturbing omens, but here the Franciscan Order will come to her assistance, rather than lose the convent they have been promised. All the Franciscan communities of the province take up the challenge by celebrating Masses, making novenas, and encouraging prayers for intentions at once general and particular, both explicit and implicit, so that the Infante may be delivered safely and at a propitious hour, without any defects either visible or invisible, and that the child be male, which would compensate for any minor blemishes unless they were to be regarded as an auspicious sign ordained by divine providence. Most important, a male heir would give the King enormous satisfaction.

Dom João V, alas, will have to be satisfied with a little girl. One cannot have everything, and often when you ask for one thing you receive another, this is the mysterious thing about prayer, we address them to heaven with some private intention, but they choose their own path, sometimes they delay, allowing other prayers to overtake them, frequently they overlap and become hybrid prayers of dubious origin, which quarrel and argue among themselves. This explains why a little girl is born when

everyone had prayed for a boy, but, judging from her screams, she is a healthy child with a fine pair of lungs. The entire kingdom is blissfully happy not simply because there is an heir to the throne or on account of the three days of festive illuminations that have been decreed, but also because of the secondary effect achieved by prayers concerning natural forces, for no sooner had the prayers ended than the serious drought that had lasted for eight months was over, and there was rain at long last, only prayers could have brought about this change, the birth of the Infanta has been marked by favourable omens auguring prosperity for the nation, and now there is so much rain that it could only come from God, who is relieving Himself of the vexations we cause Him. The peasants are busy working the land, tilling their fields even when it is raining, the seed springs from the humid earth, just as children spring from wherever they originate, incapable of screaming like a child, the seed murmurs as it is raked by iron tools, and falls over on its side, glistening and offering itself to the rain, which continues to trickle very slowly, an almost intangible dust, the furrow undisturbed, the soil turned over to shelter the seedlings. This birth is very simple but it cannot come about without the things essential for any form of birth, namely, energy and seed. All men are kings, all women are queens, and the labours of all are princes.

We should not, however, lose sight of the numerous distinctions that exist. The Princess is taken to be baptized on the feast of Our Lady of O, a day that is contradictory par excellence, for the Queen has already shed her plumpness, and it is easy to see that not all princes are equal after all, the differences clearly demonstrated by the pomp and ceremony with which the name and sacrament are bestowed on this infante or on that infanta, with the entire Palace and Royal Chapel bedecked with draperies and gold, and the court dressed up with so much finery that faces and shapes can scarcely be distinguished beneath all the frills and furbelows. The members of the Queen's household have left the chapel, passing through the Hall of the Tedeschi, and behind comes the Duke of Cadaval, with his train trailing behind him. He walks under a baldachin, the shafts supported by privileged nobles of the highest rank and the counsellors of state, and in his arms he carries none other than the newborn Infanta, swathed in fine linen robes that are gathered with bows and ribbons, and behind the baldachin comes the appointed governess, the dowager Condesa de Santa Cruz, and all the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, some pretty and some not so pretty, and finally a half-dozen marquises and the Duke's son, who carry the symbolic towel, the salt cellar, the holy oils, and all the other paraphernalia associated with the sacrament of baptism, so there is something for everyone to carry.

Seven bishops, who look like seven planets in gold and silver as they officiate on the steps of the high altar, baptise the Infanta Maria Xavier Francisca Leonor Bárbara, already referred to as Dona, even though she is only a tiny babe in arms and is given to drooling and who can tell what she will be doing when she grows up. The Infanta wears a cross set with precious gems, valued at five thousand cruzados, a gift from her godfather and uncle, the Infante Dom Francisco, and the same Dom Francisco presented her

mother, the Queen, with a decorative aigrette, no doubt out of gallantry, and a pair of exquisite diamond earrings valued at twenty-five thousand cruzados, truly magnificent but made in France.

For this special occasion, the King has momentarily laid aside his royal prerogatives and attends the ceremony in public instead of from behind a screen and in order to show his respect for the mother of his child, he joins the Queen on her dais, so the happy mother is seated beside the happy father, although on a lower chair, and in the evening there are fireworks. Sete-Sóis has come down with Blimunda from the castle above the city to see the lights and decorations, the palace festooned with banners, and the festive arches specially erected by the guilds. Sete-Sóis is feeling more weary than usual, probably as a result of having carried so much meat for the banquets being held to celebrate the birth and baptism of the Infanta. His left arm is hurting after so much pulling, dragging, and heaving. His hook rests inside the knapsack that he carries over one shoulder. Blimunda is holding his right hand.

Some months previously, Friar Antony of St Joseph died a holy death. Unless he should appear to the King in his dreams, he will no longer be able to remind him of his promise, but there is no cause for alarm, Neither lend to the poor, nor borrow from the rich, and make no promises to a friar, but Dom João V is a king who keeps his word. We shall have our convent.

BALTASAR HAS SLEPT on the right-hand side of the pallet ever since they spent their first night together, because his right arm and hand are intact and when he turns towards Blimunda he can hold her against him, run his fingers from the nape of her neck down to her waist, and even lower still if their sexual appetites have been roused in the heat of sleep, in the fantasy of some dream, or because they were already craving sex when they went to bed. Their union is illicit out of choice, and their marriage is unsanctified by Holy Mother Church, for they disregard the social conventions and proprieties, and if he feels like having sex, she will oblige, and if she craves it, he will gratify her. Perhaps some deeper and more mysterious sacrament sustains this union, the sign of the cross imprinted with the blood of breached virginity when, by the yellow light of the oil lamp, they lie on their backs resting, and their first breach of custom is to lie there as naked as the day they were born, Blimunda has wiped from between her legs a discharge of deep-red blood, and this was their communion, if it is not heresy to say so and even greater heresy to have done so. Many months have passed since that first night together, and we have already entered into a new year, the rain can be heard pattering down on the roof, there are strong currents of wind blowing across the river and the straits, and although dawn is approaching the sky is still in darkness. Anyone else might be deceived, but not Baltasar, who always awakens at the same hour, long before the sun rises, a habit he acquired during his restless days and nights as a soldier, and he remains alert as he lies watching the shadows recede to uncover objects and humans, his chest heaving with that enormous sense of relief as day breaks and the first, indistinct rays of greyish light filter through the chinks in the wall until Blimunda is awakened by a faint sound, and this provokes another, more persistent sound, which is unmistakable, the sound of Blimunda eating bread, and once she has finished she opens her eyes, turns toward Baltasar, and rests her head on his shoulder while placing her left hand where his is missing, arm touches arm, wrist touches wrist, life is amending death as best it can. But today things will be different. On several occasions Baltasar has asked Blimunda why she eats bread every morning before opening her eyes and has begged of Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço to explain all this secrecy she once told him that she had fallen into this habit as a child, the priest, however, confided that it was a great mystery, so great that flying was a mere trifle by comparison. Today we shall know.

When Blimunda awakens, she stretches out her hand to retrieve the little sack in which she keeps her bread, only to find that it is not in its usual place by her pillow. She runs her hand over the floor and the pallet and fumbles under the pillow and then she hears Baltasar say, Don't bother searching, for you will not find it and Blimunda, covering her eyes with clenched fists, implores him, Give me my bread, Baltasar, for pity's sake, give me my bread, First you must tell me what all this means, I cannot, she cried out, as she made a sudden effort to get up, but Sete-Sóis restrained her with his right hand and gripped her firmly by the waist, she put up a fierce struggle but he held her down with his right leg, and with his free hand he tried to pull her fists from her eyes, terrified, she started to cry out once more, Let me go, she screamed, making such a din that Baltasar released her, startled by her vehemence, he felt almost ashamed of having treated her so

roughly, I didn't mean to hurt you, I only wanted to clear up this mystery, Give me my bread and I shall tell you everything, On your oath, What use are oaths if a simple yes or no is not enough, There's your bread, eat, said Baltasar removing the small bag from the knapsack he was using as a pillow.

Shielding her face with her forearm, Blimunda finally ate the bread. She munched it slowly. When she had finished she gave a deep sigh and opened her eyes. The grey light pervading the room was tinged with blue on the far side, a thought that might have occurred to Baltasar had he learned to think in such poetic terms, but, rather than indulge in refinements better suited to the antechambers at court or the convent parlour, he was absorbed by the heat of his own blood as Blimunda turned to face him, her eyes growing dark with sudden flashes of green light, what did secrets matter now, much better to go back to learning what he already knew, Blimunda's body, her secret could be solved some other time, because once this woman has made a promise, she is certain to keep it, Do you remember the first time we slept together, she asks him, when you said I had looked inside you, I remember, You did not know what you were saying, nor did you know what you were hearing when I told you that I would never look inside you. Baltasar had no time to reply and he was still trying to comprehend the meaning of those words and of other incredible words heard in that room when she told him, I can look inside people.

Sete-Sóis raised himself on the pallet, feeling suspicious and uneasy, You're making fun of me, no one can look inside people, I can, I don't believe you, First you insisted on knowing and said you would not rest until you knew, now you know, and you say you don't believe me, perhaps it's just as well, but in future don't take away my bread, I will only believe you if you can tell me what I am feeling this very minute, I can't see anything unless I'm fasting, besides, I promised that I would never look inside you, I'm sure you're trying to make fun of me, And I'm telling you it's the truth, How can I trust you, Tomorrow I shan't eat anything when I awake, we'll go out together and then I will tell you what I can see, but I won't look at you, and you will avoid my eyes, Is that agreed, Agreed, Baltasar replied, but explain this mystery, how did you come by these powers, if you're not deceiving me, Tomorrow you will see that I am telling the truth, But aren't you afraid of the Inquisition, others have paid dearly for much less, My powers have nothing to do with heresy or witchcraft, my eyes are quite normal, Yet your mother was flogged and sentenced to exile for having spoken of visions and revelations, did you learn these things from her, It's not the same thing, I only see what is in the world, I cannot see what lies beyond it, whether it be heaven or hell, I practise neither enchantments nor hypnosis, I simply see things, Yet you signed yourself with your own blood, then made the sign of the cross on my chest with the same blood, surely that is witchcraft, The blood of virginity is the water of baptism, that much I discovered when you possessed me and as I felt you ejaculate inside me, I divined your gestures, What powers are these you possess, I see what exists inside bodies, and sometimes what lurks beneath the earth, I can see what lies below the skin, and sometimes even what is underneath people's clothing, but I only see these things when I am fasting, I lose my gift

when the quarter of the moon changes, but it is soon restored, and I only wish that I did not possess it, Why, Because what the skin conceals ought never to be seen, The soul as well, have you seen into someone's soul, No, never, Perhaps the soul does not reside in the body after all, I cannot tell you, for I have never seen a soul, Perhaps because the soul cannot be seen, Perhaps, but now let me go, take your leg away, I want to get up.

For the rest of that day, Baltasar wondered if he had really held such a conversation or if he had dreamed it or if he had simply been in Blimunda's dream. He looked at the enormous carcasses suspended from the iron hooks waiting to be quartered, he strained his eyes, yet all he could see was animal flesh, opaque, flayed, and livid, and as he looked at the lumps and slices of raw meat scattered over the wooden benches and being thrown on to the scales, he realised that Blimunda's powers were more of a curse than a benefit, the entrails of these animals were not exactly a pleasant sight, which was no doubt equally true of the entrails of people, who are also made of flesh and blood. Besides, he had learned on the battlefield what he was now confirming, namely, that to discover what is inside human beings, you always have to use a cleaver, a cannon ball, a hatchet, the blade of a sword, a knife, or a bullet, only in this way can you pierce the virginity of fragile skin, then the bones and entrails are exposed, and it is not worth blessing yourself with this blood because it is no longer the blood of life, but of death. Although Baltasar's mind is confused, these are the things he would say if he could order his thoughts and rid them of everything superfluous, it is not even worth asking him, What are you thinking about, Sete-Sóis, for he would only reply, believing himself to be telling the truth, I'm not thinking about anything, and yet he had thought of all these things and much more upon recalling the sight of his own bones, a deathly white in that torn flesh, when they carried him behind the lInês, and that severed hand, which he saw being kicked aside by the surgeon's foot, Bring in the next casualty, and the next to be carried in, wretched fellow, were he to have escaped with his life, would have been left without both legs. One would like to probe these mysteries, but to what purpose, when it ought to be enough for any man to wake up in the morning and feel lying beside him, asleep or awake, the woman who has appeared with time, the same time that will take her tomorrow, perhaps to some other bed, some humble pallet like the one here on the ground, or some luxurious four-poster with marquetry and gilded festoons, because fortunes change and it is madness or a temptation sent by Satan to ask her, Why are you eating your bread with your eyes closed, if you're blind when you don't eat, then don't eat it, Blimunda, and you won't see so much, for to see as much as you do is the greatest of sorrows, some sixth sense we humans cannot yet withstand, And you, Baltasar, what do you think about, Nothing, I think about nothing, nor can I say if I have ever thought about anything, Hey, Sete-Sóis, fetch that lump of salt pork over there.

He has not slept and she has not slept. Dawn has broken and they have stayed in bed, Baltasar got up only to eat some cold crackling and to drink a mug of wine, then went back, Blimunda remained still, her eyes firmly closed, prolonging her fast so that her powers of vision might be intensified, her eyes sharp and penetrating when they should

finally confront the light of day because this is a day for seeing, not just for looking, which may be all right for all those who possess eyes yet suffer from another form of blindness. The morning passed and it was time for dinner, the name given to the midday meal, let us not forget. Blimunda finally gets up, her eyelids barely open, and Baltasar has his second meal, Blimunda, in order to see, eats nothing, Baltasar, even fasting would still see nothing, and then they leave the house together. The day is so tranquil that it seems at variance with these events, Blimunda walks ahead, Baltasar close behind, so that though she does not see him, he will be able to listen when she tells him what she is seeing.

And she tells him, That woman who is seated on the doorstep is carrying a male infant in her womb, but the child has two strands of cord around its neck, so it could either live or die, I cannot be sure what will happen and this ground we are treading has a top surface of red clay and a layer of white sand underneath, below the sand is gravel, and farther down is granite, right at the bottom is a huge cavity full of water, with the skeleton of a fish bigger than me, that old man who is passing also has an empty stomach, and he's losing his sight, and the young man staring at me has his penis wasted away by venereal disease and it oozes pus like a tap dripping water, yet despite his infirmity he's always smiling, his male vanity makes him go on staring and smiling at women in the street, I hope that you suffer from no such vanity, Baltasar, and that you will avoid catching any disease, and there goes a friar who has a solitary worm in his bowels, which he has to nourish by eating enough for two, but he would gorge himself even if he had no such worm, and now observe those men and women kneeling before the Shrine of St Crispin, you see them make the sign of the cross, and strike their breasts and one another as an act of penance, but what I see there are sackfuls of excrement and worms and a tumour that will end up strangling the man, he doesn't know yet, but tomorrow he will know, and then, as now, it will be much too late, for the tumour is incurable, But how can I believe these things to be true, when I cannot see them with my own eyes, Baltasar asked her, whereupon Blimunda told him, Make a hole over there in the ground with your spike and you will unearth a silver coin, Baltasar obeyed, he made a hole in the ground and extracted a coin, You were wrong, Blimunda, the coin is made of gold, All the better for you, I should not have ventured to make any guesses, because I always confuse silver with gold, nevertheless, I did foretell that you would find a coin and that it would be precious, what more can you ask, when you have been told the truth and found something of value, and if the Queen passed by this very minute, I could tell you that she is pregnant again, but it is still too early to verify whether it will be a boy or a girl, my mother always used to say that the worst thing about the female womb is that, when it has swollen once, it has a tendency to go on swelling over and over again, I can also tell you that the quarter of the moon has started to change, because I can feel my eyes burning and there are yellow shadows passing before them like vermin crawling and extending their claws, gnawing at my eyes, for the love of God, Baltasar, I beg of you to take me home and give me something to eat, and then lie down beside me, walking ahead of you, I cannot see you, and I have no wish to see inside you, I only want to look

at you, at that swarthy, bearded face, those tired eyes, and that sad expression even when you lie at my side and make love to me, take me home, I shall walk behind you with my eyes lowered, for I have sworn never to look inside you, I shall keep that oath and deserve to be punished if I ever break my promise.

Let us now raise our eyes, for it is time to watch the Infante Dom Francisco firing shots from the window of his palace on the banks of the Tagus at the sailors perched on the yards of their ships to prove what a good shot he is, and when he hits, they fall on to the deck, all of them bleeding profusely, several of them dead and when he misses, they are left with broken limbs, the Infante claps his hands with irrepressible glee, while his footmen reload his gun, one of the footmen might even be the brother of that wounded sailor, but from this distance not even the voice of blood and kinship can be heard, there goes another blast, another shout, and another casualty, and the quartermaster does not dare to order the sailors to get down, for fear that he should annoy His Royal Highness, besides, no matter how many casualties, the manoeuvres have to be carried out, and the interpretation that the quartermaster does not dare annoy His Royal Highness is the ingenuous opinion of someone viewing events from afar and it is much more likely that no such humane considerations even enter his head, There goes that son of a bitch taking potshots at my sailors who are preparing to sail across the ocean to make fresh discoveries in India or Brazil and all he can do is order them to scrub the decks instead, and there we shall leave the matter rather than bore the reader with tiresome repetition, after all, if the sailors are ultimately fated to die beyond the straits from bullets fired by some French pirate, it is preferable that they be shot here, for, dead or wounded, at least they are in their own country, and speaking of French pirates, our gaze travels as far as Rio de Janeiro, where a French armada has invaded without firing a single shot, for the Portuguese officials, whether responsible for governing on land or sea, were having their siesta, the French were free to anchor at their convenience and disembarked without being challenged, they behaved as if they were on their own territory, and the Governor acceded to their demands by giving formal instructions that no one was to attempt to remove or conceal their possessions, he must have had his own good reasons, at least those induced by fear, and the French exploited the situation by looting and plundering everything they could find, anything they were unable to remove and transport back to their ships, they sold and auctioned in the public squares, and there was no lack of customers to purchase what the French had stolen from them within the last hour and they could scarcely have shown more contempt for the Portuguese authorities as they set fire to the Treasury Buildings, and some of the invaders marauded in the surrounding countryside, at the instigation of Jewish informers who put them on the trail of caches of gold and treasure belonging to certain high-ranking officials, outrages committed by some two or three thousand Frenchmen against our force often thousand, the Governor was clearly in collusion with the enemy, so no more need be said, there were also many traitors among the Portuguese forces, although appearances can be deceptive, for example, the soldiers from the regiments of Beira who, as we mentioned, went over to the enemy were not deserters, they simply went where they could be sure of finding

something to eat and others returned to their homes, which is only to be expected and scarcely an act of disloyalty, any nation that wants soldiers so that it may lead them to their death should at least try to feed and clothe them while they are still alive, and not leave them to rove barefoot and in tatters without any discipline or military manoeuvres, for these same men would derive greater satisfaction from putting their own captain in the line of fire than from wounding a Spaniard on the opposing side, and what could be more amusing than the sight of those thirty ships from France we mentioned earlier. Some claimed to have seen them from Peniche, others in the nearby Algarve, and as a precaution the watch-towers on the Tagus were garrisoned and the entire marine force put on the alert as far as Santa Apolónia, it is unlikely that the ships could have made their way downriver from Santarem or Tancos, but the French are capable of anything, and because the Portuguese had few ships at their disposal, they sought the assistance of some English and Dutch convoys that were at hand, combined forces were then positioned to confront the enemy, which was believed to be approaching in that imaginary zone and just as on the famous occasion when a fishing fleet landing cod was mistaken for an invading fleet, this time the supposed enemy turned out to be a consignment of wine from Porto, the ships assumed to be French men-of-war were in fact English trading vessels, and their crews had a jolly good laugh at our expense, foreigners find us an easy target for jokes, although it should be said that we are also quite good at making them about ourselves, We might as well be frank, our stupidity is clear for all to see, without recourse to Blimunda's visionary powers, and then there was the episode of the clergyman, who frequented prostitutes who did everything to please their client, and, better still, allowed their client to do everything he pleased, thus satisfying the appetites of the stomach while indulging those of the flesh, and this clergyman dutifully said his Masses but whenever he saw his chance would make off with any valuables in sight, until one day he was denounced by a prostitute from whom he had taken a great deal more than he had given, the bailiffs arrived to arrest him by order of the district magistrate at a house where he had moved in with other innocent women, they forced an entry but were so haphazard in carrying out their search that they failed to find him, the clergyman was hiding in one bed while they searched another, thus allowing him enough time to make his escape, stark naked, he scampered down the stairs, clearing his way with kicks and punches, the bailiffs' men took quite a beating and, muttering to themselves, chased after this lecherous clergyman, who knew how to use his fists, they pursued him down the Rua dos Espingardeiros at eight o'clock in the morning, just as people were getting out of bed, a fine start to the day, with howls of laughter coming from every door and window in the street as the naked clergyman ran like a hare, the bailiffs' men in hot pursuit, his mighty penis erect, and may God bless him, for a man so well endowed should not be servicing altars but women in bed, the sight of his penis gave quite a shock to the female residents, poor souls, taken unawares, just as the innocent women who were praying in the Church of Conceição Velha were taken unawares when they saw the clergyman rush down the aisle panting for breath, as naked as Adam but covered with sins, sounding bell clappers and rattles, he appeared at the stroke of one, hid at the stroke of two, and had disappeared forever at the stroke of three and the providential

intervention of the clergy played some part in this vanishing trick and after covering his nakedness, they helped him escape over the rooftops, an incident which need cause no great surprise for the Franciscan friars of Xabregas are notorious for hoisting women up into their cells and enjoying their favours, and at least this clergyman climbed on foot to the brothels, where the women longed to receive the sacrament, as usual, everything oscillates between sin and penance, for it is not only during the Holy Week processions that excited flagellants come out on the streets, how many wicked thoughts the women who live in the centre of Lisbon must have to confess, and those sanctimonious old maids of Conceição Velha, once they have feasted their eyes on that lustful clergyman with the bailiffs' men after him, Catch him, catch him, and how they wished they could catch him for something else I could mention, ten paternosters, ten salve reginas, and an offering of ten réis to our patron, St Antony, and to lie down for a whole hour, with arms crossed, on one's stomach, as prostration demands, or on one's back, which is a position of the most heavenly pleasure, but always lifting up one's thoughts and not one's skirts, for that is being reserved for the next sin.

Every man uses his eyes to see what he can or what his eyes will permit, or some little part of what he would like to see, unless it happens to be a coincidence, as in the case of Baltasar who, since he worked in the slaughterhouse, went with the youngest of the porters and apprentice butchers to the square to watch the arrival of Cardinal Nuno da Cunha, who is about to receive the red hat from the hands of the King, accompanied by the Papal Legate in a litter upholstered in crimson velvet and trimmed with gold braiding, the panels, too, are sumptuously decorated in gilt, with the Cardinal's coat of arms on either side. The Cardinal's procession includes a carriage that travels empty as a mark of personal esteem, and another carriage for the steward and private secretary, and the chaplain who carries the Cardinal's train when there is a train to be carried, two open carriages of Spanish origin carry the chaplains and pages, and in front of the litter are twelve footmen, who, together with all the coachmen and litter-bearers, add up to an impressive entourage, and we must not forget the liveried servant who heads the procession with the silver mace, it is indeed a happy populace that rejoices in such feasts and gathers in the streets to watch the nobility pass in procession as they accompany the Cardinal to the Royal Palace where Baltasar cannot enter to watch the ceremony, but, knowing the powers of Blimunda, let us imagine that she is there, we shall see the Cardinal moving forward between the guard of honour, and as he enters the last of the audience chambers, the King comes out to greet him and he gives him the holy water, and in the next chamber the King kneels on a velvet cushion and the Cardinal on another and farther back, in front of an ornate altar suitably decorated for the occasion, one of the palace chaplains celebrates High Mass with all due pomp and ceremony, and once the Mass is ended, the Papal Legate takes the papal brief of nomination and hands it to the King, who formally receives it before handing it back so that the Papal Legate may read it aloud, this, it should be said, to conform with protocol, not because the King is incapable of reading Latin, and once the reading is over, the King receives the Cardinal's biretta from the Papal Legate and places it on the Cardinal's head who is naturally overcome

with Christian humility, for these are onerous responsibilities for a poor man finding himself chosen to become one of God's intimates, but the courtesies and reverences are not quite finished, first the Cardinal goes off to change his vestments and when he reappears he is dressed all in red, as befits his rank and is summoned once more into the presence of the King, who stands beneath the ceremonial canopy, twice the Cardinal puts on and then removes his biretta, and the King goes through the same ritual with his hat, and then, repeating it a third time, he steps forward four paces to embrace the Cardinal, finally they both cover their heads and, seated, the one higher than the other, they say a few words, and their speeches made, it is time for them to take their leave, hats are raised and replaced, the Cardinal, however, still has to pay his respects to the Queen in her apartments, where he goes through the same ritual once more, step by step, until finally the Cardinal descends to the Royal Chapel, where a Te Deum is about to be sung, Praise be to God, who has to endure such ceremonies.

Upon arriving home, Baltasar tells Blimunda what he has seen, and since fireworks have been announced, they go down into the Rossio after supper and either there are few torches on this occasion, or the wind has blown them all out, but what matters is that the Cardinal has his biretta, it will hang at the top of his bed while he sleeps, and should he get up in the middle of the night to admire it unobserved, let us not censure this prince of the Church, for we are all susceptible to vanity, and unless a cardinal's biretta specially commissioned and sent from Rome is some mischievous plot designed to test the modesty of these great men, then their humility deserves our wholehearted confidence, they are truly humble if they are prepared to wash the feet of the poor, as this Cardinal has done and will do again, as the King and Queen have done and will do again, the soles of Baltasar's boots are now worn through and his feet are dirty, thus complying with the first condition whereby the Cardinal or King should kneel before him one day, with fine linen towels, silver basins, and rose-water, the second condition Baltasar is certain to satisfy, since he is poorer than ever, and the third condition is that he be chosen for being a virtuous man who cultivates virtue. There is still no sign of the pension he petitioned, and the entreaties of his patron, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, have been to no avail, he will soon lose his job at the slaughterhouse on some flimsy pretext, but there are still bowls of soup to be had at the convent gates and alms from the confraternities, it is difficult to die of hunger in Lisbon, and the Portuguese have learned to eke out a meagre existence. Meantime, the Infante Dom Pedro has been born, though as the second child, he only warranted four bishops at his baptism, he did gain some advantage, however, by having the Cardinal at the ceremony, who had still not been elected when his sister was baptized, and meantime, news arrived that in the siege of Campo Maior large numbers of the enemy had been killed and that few men died on our side, although by tomorrow they may be saying that large numbers of our men have died and few on the enemy side, or tit for tat, which is how things are likely to turn out when the world finally comes to an end and the dead are counted on all sides. Baltasar tells Blimunda of his experiences in the war, as she grips the hook protruding from his left arm as if she were holding a human hand and he can remember the feel of his own skin as it

touches Blimunda's hand.

The King has gone to Mafra to choose the site where the convent is to be built. It will stand on the hill known as the Alto da Vela from where one can look out to sea, and where there is no lack of fresh water for irrigating the convent's future orchards and kitchen gardens, the Franciscans have no intention of being outdone by the Cistercians at Alcobaça when it comes to cultivating the land, and although St Francis of Assisi was content with a wilderness, he was a saint and is now dead. Let us pray.

THERE IS NOW another piece of iron in the knapsack of Sete-Sóis, the key to the Duke of Aveiro's estate. Having obtained the aforesaid magnets but not the secret substances, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço was able to start assembling his flying machine and carry out the contract which named Baltasar as his right-hand man, since his left hand was unnecessary, just as God Himself has no left hand, according to the priest, and he has studied these highly sensitive matters and so should know. And since Costa do Castelo is some distance from Sebastião da Pedreira, and much too far to travel to and fro every day, Blimunda decided that she would abandon her home and follow Sete-Sóis wherever he might be. It was no great loss, the roof of the house and three of its walls were unsafe, the fourth wall on the other hand, could not have been safer, for it formed part of the castle wall, which had been standing there for many centuries, just so long as no one passes by and thinks to himself, Look, an empty house, and without further ado moves in, the house will crumble within the next twelve months, nothing but a few cracked bricks and rubble remaining of the house where Sebastiana Maria de Jesus lived and where Blimunda first opened her eyes to perceive the world, for she was born fasting.

One trip proved sufficient to transport their modest possessions, Blimunda carrying a bundle on her head and Baltasar another on his back, and that was all. They rested at intervals during the long journey, silent as they went, for they had nothing to say to each other, even a simple word becomes superfluous when our lives are changing, and even more so when we are changing, too. As for baggage, it should always be light when a man and a woman take their possessions with them, or those of the one to the other, so that they do not have to retrace their footsteps, for that is a great waste of precious time.

In a corner of the coach-house they unrolled their pallet and mat, and at the foot of the pallet they placed a bench in front of a chest, as if tracing an imaginary line to mark the boundaries of new territory, they then improvised partitions with cloths suspended from wires, to give the impression of a real house where they could be alone if they so desired. When, for example, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço comes, Blimunda, if she has no washing to keep her at the wash-tub or cooking to keep her at the stove, or if she is not helping Baltasar by passing the hammer and pincers, the wire and cane, will be able to withdraw into her own little domain, which even the most adventurous of women long for at times, even though the adventure may not be as exciting as the one about to unfold. Drawn curtains also serve for the confessional, the father confessor seated on the outside, the penitents, one after the other, kneeling on the inside, which is precisely where both constantly commit sins of lust, besides being cohabitants, if that word is not more grievous than the sin itself, a sin readily absolved, however, by Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, who has before his eyes an even greater sin, namely that of ambition and pride, for he plans to ascend into the heavens one day, where so far only Christ and the Virgin have made their ascent, along with a few chosen saints, these various parts scattered around which Baltasar is painstakingly assembling while Blimunda says from the other side of the partition, in a voice loud enough for Sete-Sóis to hear, I have no sins to confess.

To fulfil the obligation of attending Holy Mass, there is no lack of churches in the vicinity, such as that of the discalced Augustinians, which is closest of all, but if, as often happens, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço is occupied with his priestly duties or commitments at court which take up more time than usual even though he does not have to come here every day, if the good padre does not turn up to kindle the flame of Christian zeal that Baltasar and Blimunda undoubtedly possess, he with his irons, she with her fire and water, and both with the passion that drives them on to that pallet on the floor, then they often forget their obligation to attend the divine sacrifice and fail to confess their omission which leads us to question whether their presumed souls are all that Christian after all. Whether they remain in the coach house or go out to bask in the sunshine, they are surrounded by extensive lands in a state of neglect, fruit trees are returning to their natural wildness, brambles cover the pathways, and where there was once a kitchen garden, weeds and ivy have taken over, but Baltasar has already cleared the worst of the overgrowth with a scythe, and Blimunda has used a hoe to cut the roots and lay them out to dry in the sun and in the fullness of time, this land will produce something to compensate for their labours. But they also enjoy moments of leisure, and when Baltasar begins to feel his head itching, he rests it on Blimunda's lap and she picks off the lice, we should not be too surprised by the behaviour of these lovers and inventors of airships, if such a term existed in those days, just as one now talks about armistice instead of peace. Blimunda, alas, has no one to remove the lice from her head. Baltasar does his best, but though he has enough hands and fingers to catch lice, he has neither the fingers nor the hand to secure Blimunda's dark, honey-coloured hair, for no sooner does he succeed in separating the strands than they fall back into place, thus concealing the prey. Life provides for everyone.

Nor are things always easy at work. It is a mistake to believe that no one misses his left hand. If God can manage without it, that is because He is God but a man needs both hands, the one hand washes the other and they both wash the face, how often has Blimunda had to wash away the grime on the back of Baltasar's hand, something he found impossible to do, such are the misfortunes of war, and insignificant ones at that, for many a soldier has lost both arms or both legs or even his private parts, nor do they have a Blimunda to assist them, or, perhaps have lost her because of their wounds. The hook is perfect for gripping a sheet of metal or weaving cane, the spike is ideal for boring eyeholes in the canvas, but material objects are loath to obey without the contact of human flesh, they are afraid that if human beings, to whom they have become accustomed, should disappear, then the world will degenerate into chaos. That is why Blimunda always comes to Baltasar's assistance, for when she arrives the rebellion ends, Just as well you've come, Baltasar says to her, or could it be the objects responding.

Sometimes Blimunda rises early, and before eating her bread, she moves quietly along the wall, taking great care not to look at Baltasar, she draws back the curtain and examines the work that has been already completed, to see if there are any flaws in the canework or any air bubbles in the metal, then, having finished her inspection, she finally

starts to munch her daily ration of bread, and as she eats she gradually becomes just as blind as all those people who see only what is before their eyes. When she carried out this inspection for the first time, Baltasar commented to Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, This iron is no good, because it's fractured inside, How do you know, It was Blimunda who saw it, whereupon the priest turned to Blimunda, smiled, then looked from the one to the other, and said, You are Sete-Sóis or Seven-Suns, because you can see in the light of day, and you are Sete-Luas or Seven-Moons, because you can see in the darkness of night, and so Blimunda, who until that moment had only been called Blimunda de Jesus after her mother, became known as Sete-Luas and she was well baptised, for that name had been bestowed on her by a priest, and was not just a nickname given by a nodding acquaintance. That night the suns and moons slept together in each other's embraces while the stars circled slowly in the heavens, Moon, where are you, Sun, where are you going.

Whenever possible, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço comes to the estate to rehearse the sermons he has written, the walls here have an excellent echo, sufficient to make the words ring, yet without any of those loud reverberations that convey the sound but end up obliterating meaning. This is how the words of the prophets must have sounded in the desert or the public square, locations without walls, or at least without walls in the immediate vicinity, and therefore unaffected by the laws of acoustics, the eloquence of words depends on the instrument rather than on the ears that listen or the walls that cause them to reverberate. These holy sermons require the ambience of a graceful oratory with chubby angels and saints in ecstasy, with much swirling of robes, shapely arms, curvaceous thighs, ample bosoms, and much rolling of eyes, which proves that all roads lead not to Rome but to the gratification of the flesh. The priest takes enormous pains with his diction, especially since there is someone here to listen, but, either because of the inhibiting presence of the flying machine or because of the indifference of his audience, the phrases fail to soar or resound and the priest's words become muddled and one can scarcely believe that this is the same Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço whose fame as an orator has provoked comparisons with that of Padre António Vieira, whom may God watch over as he was once watched over by the Inquisition. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço was here to rehearse the sermon he was about to deliver at Salvaterra de Magos, where the King and his court were in residence, a sermon for the feast of the Nuptials of St Joseph, which he had been invited to deliver by the Dominican friars, therefore it is clearly no great disadvantage to be known as the Flying Man and to be regarded as being somewhat eccentric, if even the followers of St Dominic solicit your services, not to mention the King himself, who is still young and amuses himself playing with toys, this explains why the King protects Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço and why he has such an enjoyable time with the nuns in their convents as he gets them pregnant one after another, or several at a time, and when the King's story is finally told, historians will be able to list the scores of children he fathered in this way, pity the poor Queen, what would have become of her had it not been for her father confessor, Padre António Stieff of the Society of Jesus, who counselled resignation, and those dreams in which the

Infante Dom Francisco appeared with the corpses of sailors dangling from the pommels of his mules, and what would have become of Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço if the Dominicans who commissioned the sermon had arrived unexpectedly and discovered his flying machine, the maimed Baltasar, the clairvoyant Blimunda, and the preacher in full spate, chiselling fine phrases and perhaps concealing thoughts that Blimunda would not perceive even if she were to fast for a whole year.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço finishes his sermon but he is not interested in knowing whether he has edified his audience, and is content to inquire somewhat distractedly, Well, then, did you enjoy that, whereupon the others hasten to assure him, We most certainly did, however, they reply much too forcefully, and their hearts betray no signs of having understood what they have heard, and if their hearts have not understood, the words that come to their lips are an expression of bewilderment rather than of cunning. Baltasar went back to hammering his irons while Blimunda swept up the discarded fragments of cane in the yard, the diligence with which they worked giving the impression that their tasks were urgent, but the priest suddenly declared, like someone unable to suppress his anxiety any longer, At this rate I shall never fly my machine, his voice sounded tired, and he made a gesture of such profound despair that Baltasar suddenly realising the futility of his labours, laid down his hammer, but anxious to avoid giving any impression of giving up, he suggested, We must build a forge here and temper the irons, otherwise even the weight of the Passarola will cause them to bend, and the priest replied, I don't mind if they bend, the important thing is that my machine should fly, and it simply can't be done until we have obtained ether, What is ether, Blimunda asked, That's what keeps the stars in the sky, And how can it be brought down here, asked Baltasar, By means of alchemy, about which I know nothing, but you must not mention these things to anyone, whatever happens, Then what shall we do, I shall leave shortly for Holland, which is a nation of learned men, and there I shall study the art of extracting ether from the atmosphere in order to filter it into the globes, because without ether the machine will never be able to fly, What's the good of this ether, asked Blimunda, It's part of the general principle that attracts human beings and even inanimate objects to the sun once they're released from their earthly weight, Put that into simple words, Father, Well before the machine can rise into the air, it's essential that the sun should attract the amber that is attached to the wires on top, which in turn will attract the ether we'll have filtered into the globes, the ether will then attract the magnets below, which in turn will attract the metal plates that form the body of the ship. Only then can we rise into the air assisted by the wind, or by air fanned by the bellows should the wind drop, but, as I said before, without any ether, the other materials serve no purpose. Blimunda interrupted him, If the sun attracts the amber, and the amber attracts the ether, and the ether attracts the magnets, and the magnets attract the metal, the machine will be drawn toward the sun without being able to stop. She paused and thought aloud, I wonder what the sun is like inside. The priest explained, We won't have to go near the sun, to avoid any such collision there will be sails on top, which we can open and close as required, so that we can stop at the altitude we choose. He also paused before concluding, As for

knowing what the sun is like inside, let's get the machine airborne first and the rest will follow, so long as we're determined to succeed and God doesn't thwart our efforts.

Yet these are difficult times. The nuns of St Monica are about to rebel, in open defiance of the King's edict that they consort in the convent parlour only with their parents, children, brothers, sisters, and relatives to the second degree, a measure with which the King is resolved to put an end to the scandals provoked by noble and not-so-noble philanderers who have a penchant for the brides of Christ and make them pregnant in less time than it takes to recite the Ave Maria, if Dom João V, does it, it is to his credit, but not when it is any old João or José. The provincial superior at Graça was asked to intervene in order to calm the nuns down and try to persuade them to obey the King's orders under threat of excommunication, but to no avail, incensed and outraged, three hundred nuns overcome by sacred wrath at the idea of being cut off from secular life rebelled and defied the edict time and time again and, as if to prove how dainty feminine hands can force doors open, they took to the streets, dragging the prioress with them by force, holding the crucifix aloft, they marched in procession, until they were confronted by the friars from Graça, who begged of them in the name of Christ's five sacred wounds to end their mutiny, a holy colloquium ensuing then and there between friars and nuns, each side arguing their case, the crisis resulted in the magistrate's running to the King to ask whether or not he should suspend the Order, and between the comings and goings to discuss the matter, the morning soon passed for, anxious to make an early start, the rebellious nuns had been on their feet since dawn, and while they waited for the magistrate to come back and report there was much toing and froing and, after hours of standing the older nuns sat on the ground, while the excited novices remained on the alert, all of them rejoicing in the warmth of that summer day, which is always so spiritually uplifting, bemused at the sight of those who passed or stopped to stare, for these were pleasures nuns could not enjoy every day, and they chatted freely with whomsoever they pleased, using this opportunity to renew their association with the forbidden visitors who now rushed to the scene and between secret pacts, knowing gestures, quiet rendezvous, and coded signals with hands and handkerchiefs, the hours passed until noon, when the nuns began to get hungry and started to eat the sweetmeats they had brought in their knapsacks, for those who go to war must carry their own provisions, and the demonstration ended with a countermand from the Palace, whereby things became as lax as before, the nuns of St Monica were overjoyed when they received the news and sang hymns of praise and there was one further consolation, when the provincial sent them a formal pardon by messenger rather than come in person, just in case he might be the victim of a stray bullet, for revolts staged by nuns are the most dangerous of hostilities. These women are often condemned against their will to perpetual seclusion in some convent in order to protect the family fortunes in favour of the male heir, where they are trapped for life so that even the simple pleasure of holding hands through the grilles, or having some amorous encounter or sweet embrace is bliss, even if it should lead to hell and damnation. For, after all, if the sun attracts the amber and the world attracts the flesh, someone must gain something, even if it is only to take

advantage of what has been left behind by those who were born to possess everything.

Another predictable vexation is the auto-da-fé, not for the Church, which regards it as a means of strengthening the faith, along with its other advantages, and not for the King, who, having hauled a number of Brazilian plantation owners before the Inquisition, wastes no time in expropriating their lands, but for those who are flogged in public, sent into exile, or burned at the stake and just as well that there was only one woman sentenced to death for immorality on this occasion, for it will not take long to paint her portrait and hang it in the Church of St Dominic, alongside all those other portraits of women whose depraved bodies have been roasted alive and whose ashes have been dispersed, yet, surprisingly enough, the torture and agony of so many does not appear to deter others, so one can only assume that human beings like to suffer or have greater esteem for their spiritual convictions than for the preservation of their bodies, God clearly did not know what He was doing when He created Adam and Eve. What is one to make of cases such as that of the professed nun who turned out to be Jewish and was sentenced to life imprisonment and solitary confinement, or the recent case of the woman from Angola who arrived here from Rio de Janeiro and was accused of being Jewish, or that merchant from the Algarve who asserted that every man is saved according to the faith he upholds, for all faiths are equal, and Christ is worth as much as Mohammed, the Gospel as much as the Cabala, the sweet as much as the bitter, sin as much as virtue, or that strapping mulatto of dubious origin from Caparica whose name is Manuel Mateus, no relation to Sete-Sóis, but is known to his friends as Saramago and whose notoriety as a sorcerer led to his being tortured and condemned with three young women who were found guilty of similar offences, what is one to make of these heretics and the other one hundred and thirty who have been brought before the Inquisition, many of whom will soon be keeping Blimunda's mother company if she is still alive.

Sete-Sóis and Sete-Luas, two such lovely names that it seems a pity not to use them, did not come from São Sebastião da Pedreira to the Rossio to watch the auto-da-fé, but nearly everyone else flocked to watch the spectacle, and from eye-witness accounts and the official records that always survive despite the numerous earthquakes and fires, we know what and whom they saw being sentenced to torture, to the stake or exile, the black woman from Angola, the mulatto from Caparica, the Jewish nun, those impostors masquerading as priests who said Mass, confessed, and preached without any authority to do so, the judge from Arraiolos who had Jewish blood on both his father's and his mother's side of the family, some one hundred and thirty-seven miscreants altogether, for the Holy Office of the Inquisition tries to cast its nets as widely as possible, in order to ensure that they will be full, thus obeying Christ's mandate when He told Saint Peter that He wanted him to be a fisher of men.

The great sorrow shared by Baltasar and Blimunda is that they do not possess a net capable of dragging down those stars along with the ether which keeps them suspended in mid-air, according to Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, who is about to leave them and cannot say when he will return. The Passarola, which had started out looking like a castle

under construction, is now like a tower in ruins, a Babel rudely interrupted without warning, and cords, canvas, wires, and irons are all in disarray and they no longer even have the consolation of opening the chest and studying the design, for the priest is carrying it in his luggage, he departs tomorrow, is travelling by sea, and with no greater risk than one might expect from the hazards of a sea journey, for peace with France has finally been declared, the signing of the peace treaty warranting a solemn procession of judges, magistrates, and bailiffs on horseback, followed by the trumpeters and buglers, then the palace footmen bearing silver maces on their shoulders, and behind them seven kings-at-arms wearing sumptuous robes, and the last of them carrying in one hand the parchment that formally declared peace, the treaty was read first of all in the Palace Square below the King's apartments, from where the royal family could look down on the crowds who filled the courtyard, the palace guards standing in formation and after the treaty was read out in the King's presence, it was read out once more in the Praça de Sé, and a third time in the hospital grounds adjoining the Rossio and now that a peace treaty has been signed with France, treaties with other nations will follow, But who will give me back the hand I've lost, Baltasar muses sadly, Don't worry, between us we have three hands, Blimunda reassures him.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço gave his blessing to the soldier and the clairvoyant and they kissed his hand, but at the last moment all three embraced, for friendship was stronger than reverence, and the priest said, Farewell, Blimunda, farewell, Baltasar, Look after each other and take care of the Passarola, for I shall return one day with the secret substance I mean to obtain, it will be neither gold nor diamonds, but the very air God Himself breathes, guard the key I gave you safely, and when you leave for Mafra, remember to pass by here from time to time to inspect my machine, you may enter and leave without permission, for the King has entrusted me with the estate and he knows what is stored here, and with these words the priest mounted his mule and departed.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço must already be on the open sea, so how should we amuse ourselves now, until we can fly, let's go to a bullfight, they can be very entertaining, In Mafra there are no bullfights, Baltasar explains, and since we don't have enough money to attend the entire four-day event, because the Palace has demanded an exorbitant fee for leasing the Palace Square this year, let's go on the last day for the grand finale, with tiered stands erected all around the square, even on the side where the river is, which makes it difficult to see anything except the upper decks of the ships anchored beyond, Sete-Sóis and Blimunda have found themselves good seats, not because they arrived earlier than anyone else but simply because an iron hook stuck to the end of an arm clears one's path just as quickly as the cannon that came from India and is preserved in the Tower of St Julian, someone feels a tap on the shoulder and turns around to find he might just as well be looking into the mouth of a cannon. The square is surrounded by masts that have tiny flags on top and are covered with streamers trailing all the way down to the ground and fluttering in the breeze, at the entrance to the arena is a wooden portico painted in simulated marble, and the columns are painted to look like

stone from Arrábida with gilded cornices and friezes. The main pillar is supported by four enormous figures painted in a variety of colours and with a lavish display of gold leaf, the flag, made of tin plate, depicts on both sides the glorious St Antony standing on fields of silver, and the fittings are also gilt, the enormous crest of multicoloured plumes is so skilfully painted that the plumes look real, they give a nice finishing touch to the flagpole. The stands and terraces are swarming with people, spectators of rank and influence are seated in specially reserved seats, while the Royal Family watches from the palace windows, stewards are still watering the square, some eighty men dressed in the Moorish style with the arms of the Senate of Lisbon embroidered on their capes, the crowd is growing impatient as it eagerly waits for the bulls to appear, the preparations are now over, and the stewards withdraw from the arena, the square is as clean as a pin, and a fresh smell comes from the moistened ground, it is as if the world had been created anew, the spectators eagerly await the onslaught, soon that same ground will be covered with the blood, excrement, and urine of the bulls, or the droppings of the horses, and if some spectator should wet himself with excitement, let us hope that his breeches will protect him from the shame of making a fool of himself in the presence of all the inhabitants of Lisbon and of His Majesty Dom João V.

The first bull entered the arena, then the second, and then the third, then the eighteen bullfighters on foot whom the Senate had contracted in Castela at vast expense, then the picadors cantered into the arena and stabbed with their pikes, while those on foot embedded darts festooned with coloured papers in the necks of the bulls, one of the picadors showed his anger at a bull that had pulled his cape to the ground by charging at the animal and wounding it with his lance, which is one way of avenging tarnished honour. The fourth bull charges in, then the fifth, and the sixth, and on and on up to ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty bulls, until the square is like a blood-bath, the women laugh, screech with joy, and clap their hands, the palace windows look like branches in full blossom, while down below the bulls expire one after another, their corpses being removed on low wagons drawn by six horses, the same number as are used for members of the Royal Family and the titled aristocracy, and if the six horses are not a sign of the majesty and dignity attributed to the bulls, they do show how much the bulls weigh, just ask those horses groomed and resplendent, their embroidered trappings in crimson velvet and their saddles and caparisons trimmed with silvered fringes while the poor bulls are riddled with darts and pierced with lance wounds and their entrails dragging along the ground, in their frenzy, the men grope the frenzied women, who brazenly snuggle up against them, including Blimunda, who clings to Baltasar, and why not, he can feel all that blood being shed in the arena rush to his head, those rivulets on the flanks of the bulls pour out the blood of living death and make his head spin, but the image that imprints itself on his mind and brings tears to his eyes is the bull's drooping head, its gaping mouth, its great tongue hanging out, a tongue that will never again taste pastures, except those mythical pastures in the other world of bulls, whether it be paradise or hell.

If there is any justice, it will be paradise, for there could scarcely be a greater hell than what they have already experienced, for instance, those mantles of fire, which consist of various types of fireworks tied to the bulls and lit from both ends, and as the mantle of fire starts to burn, the fireworks go on exploding for a considerable time, lighting up the entire arena, it is as if the bull were being roasted alive, maddened and enraged, the wretched creature races to and fro across the arena, rearing and bellowing, while Dom João V and his subjects applaud its miserable death, and the bull is given no opportunity to defend itself or to kill while being slaughtered. The place smells of burned flesh, but this odour gives no offence to nostrils accustomed to the great barbecue of the auto-da-fé, besides, the bull ends up on somebody's plate and is put to good use in the end, whereas all that remains of a Jew burned at the stake is whatever property he may have left behind.

The stewards now carry in some gaudily painted figures in terracotta, larger than life-size, with arms raised to heaven, and put them in the centre of the arena, What kind of show is this, ask those who have never seen it before, perhaps the spectators are giving their eyes a rest after so much carnage, for if the figures are made of terra-cotta, the worst that one is likely to see is a pile of rubble which can easily be swept up, The feast has been ruined, the sceptical and violent will protest, Bring on another mantle of fire so we can laugh with the King, there are not all that many occasions when we can enjoy a good laugh together, and now two bulls emerge from their pen and are startled to find the arena deserted except for those terracotta figures with raised arms and no legs, with bulging paunches and sinister pockmarks. The bulls decide to avenge all the wrongs they have suffered and they charge, shattering the figures with a dull explosion that sends dozens upon dozens of rabbits scampering frantically in all directions, only to be pursued and clubbed to death by the bullfighters and spectators who dart into the arena, one eye on the rabbit they are pursuing, the other on the bull that might start to pursue them, the crowds hoot with laughter, hysterical mob that they are, and suddenly the uproar assumes another pitch, from two of the exploding terracotta figures emerge flocks of pigeons flapping their wings, disoriented by the shock and dazzled by the harsh light, some of them losing all control fail to gain altitude and end up crashing into the upper stands, where they are seized by avid hands, not so much interested in having a tasty meal of stuffed pigeon, as in reading the quatrains written on the pieces of paper attached to the birds' necks, like the following, Freed from captivity, I should welcome falling into certain hands, In fear and trembling, I await my fate for those who soar highest suffer the greatest fall, Tranquil in the face of death, I watch my assassins die in my pursuit for when bulls charge, pigeons also try to run, but not all of them, for some circle skywards thus escaping the vortex of hands and cries, and soaring ever higher, they capture the sunlight and shimmering like birds of gold, they disappear over the rooftops.

Early next morning, before sunrise, Baltasar and Blimunda, taking no more luggage than a bundle of clothes and some food in their knapsack, left Lisbon and headed for Mafra.

THE PRODIGAL SON has returned and brought his wife, and if he does not come empty-handed, it is because he left one of them on the battlefield and the other is clasped in Blimunda's hand, whether he comes richer or poorer is a question one does not ask, for every man knows what he possesses without knowing what it is worth. When Baltasar pushed the door open and appeared before his mother, Marta Maria, she embraced him with a vehemence that seemed almost virile, such was the strength of her emotion. Baltasar was wearing his hook, and it was painful and moving to see a crooked iron resting on the old woman's shoulder instead of that human cradle of fingers which follows protectingly the contours of the person it embraces. His father was not at home, for he was labouring in the fields and Baltasar's only sister is married and already has two children, her husband is named Álvaro Pedreiro, a name chosen to match his trade as a bricklayer, a fairly common practice in those days, and there must have been some good reason for calling certain people Sete-Sóis, even if it was only a nickname. Blimunda stayed at the door waiting for her turn, and the old woman could not see her because she was hidden behind the much taller Baltasar and besides, it was dark inside the house. Baltasar stepped aside to introduce Blimunda, that was his intention, at least, but Marta Maria was distracted by something she had not noticed at first, perhaps forewarned by the sense of something cold and empty resting on her shoulder, an iron hook instead of a human hand, nevertheless, she could now perceive a face in the doorway, poor woman, her emotions torn between sorrow at the sight of her son's maimed limb and disquiet at the sudden appearance of this other woman while Blimunda stood aside, allowing things to take their course, and from the entrance she could hear the old woman's tears and questions, My dear son, how did it happen, who did this to you, and it was already growing dark when Baltasar finally came to the door and called to Blimunda, Enter, an oil lamp had been lit, Marta Maria was still sobbing quietly, Mother, this is my wife, and her name is Blimunda of Jesus.

It ought to be sufficient to state what someone is called and then wait for the rest of your life to find out who he or she is, if you can ever know, but the custom is otherwise, Who were your parents, where were you born, what is your trade, and once you know these facts, you think you have learnt everything about the person. As dark began to fall, Baltasar's father arrived home, he was named João Francisco, the son of Manuel and Jacinta, and was born here in Mafra, where he had always lived in this same house, in the shadow of the Church of St Andrew and the Viscounts' Palace, and to fill in a few more details, João Francisco is as tall as his son, although now somewhat bent by age as well as by the weight of the bundle of wood he has carried home. Baltasar helped him to unload the bundle, and the old man looked at him and exclaimed, Ah, my son, noticing at once that Baltasar's left hand was missing but simply saying, We must resign ourselves, after all, you've been fighting a war, then he saw Blimunda and, aware that she was his son's wife, allowed her to kiss his hand, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law were soon preparing supper, while Baltasar spoke of the battle in which he had lost his hand and of the years spent away from home, but said nothing of the two years he had passed in Lisbon without sending them any news of his whereabouts, when the first and only word

they had received from him had been some weeks previously, a letter written by Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço at the request of Sete-Sóis, informing his parents that he was alive and well and about to return home, ah, how cruel children can be when they are alive and well and transform their silence into death. He had still not told them whether he had married Blimunda while he was in the army or after the war had ended, or explained what kind of marriage he had contracted or in what circumstances, but either the old couple did not remember to ask him or they preferred not to know, for they were perplexed by the girl's strange appearance, that sand-coloured hair of hers, a somewhat unkind description, for it was honey-coloured, and those pale eyes that could have been green, grey, or blue when she looked into the light, only to become suddenly very dark, the colour of earth, of murky waters, even black as coals, if so much as tinged by shadows, so they all sat there in silence when it would have been opportune for them to speak, I never knew my father, I think he was already dead when I was born, my mother has been exiled to Angola for eight years, only two of those years have passed and I don't know if she is still alive, for there has been no news, Blimunda and I intend to stay here in Mafra, Baltasar declared, and I hope to find a house, There's no need to look for a house, this one is big enough for four people, and it has sheltered many more in the past, his father said, then asked, Why was Blimunda's mother sent into exile, Because, Father, they denounced her to the Holy Office of the Inquisition, Blimunda is neither Jewish nor converted, and this trouble with the Holy Office of the Inquisition and her sentence to imprisonment and exile came about because of certain visions and revelations, Blimunda's mother claimed to have had, and voices she had heard, There isn't a woman alive who hasn't had visions and revelations, or who doesn't hear voices, we women hear mysterious voices all day long, and one doesn't have to be a sorceress to hear them, My mother was no more a sorceress than I am, Do you have visions, too, Only those visions that all women experience, Mother, You will be as a daughter to me, Yes, Mother, Swear, then, that you are neither Jewish nor converted, Baltasar's father intervened, I swear it, Father, Welcome, then, to the home of Sete-Sóis, Blimunda is also known as Sete-Luas, Who gave you that name, The priest who married us, Any priest with so much imagination is scarcely a product of the sacristy, and at these words they all laughed heartily, some knowingly, the others less so. Blimunda and Baltasar exchanged glances and perceived the same thoughts in each other's eyes, the Passarola lying in pieces on the floor, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço mounted on his mule as he disappeared through the gates of the estate on the start of his journey to Holland. Hovering in the air was the falsehood that Blimunda had no trace of Jewish blood, if it can be called a falsehood, for we know that this couple tended to disregard such matters, in order to safeguard greater truths, one often resorts to deception.

Baltasar's father informed him, I sold the plot we had on the Alto da Vela, I sold it for the reasonable sum of thirty-five hundred réis, but we shall miss that land, Then why did you sell it, Because the King wanted it, my land as well as everybody else's, And why should the King want to buy those lands. He's going to build a convent for the Franciscan friars, haven't you heard it discussed in Lisbon, No, Father, I've heard nothing, The local

parish priest explained that the convent had been promised to the Franciscans by the King if an heir to the throne should be born, the person who is likely to earn good money now is your brother-in-law, for there will be plenty of work for stone-masons. They had supped on cabbage and beans, the women on their feet and keeping out of the way, and João Francisco Sete-Sóis went to the salting-box and took out a lump of pork, which he cut into four pieces, he then put each piece on a slice of bread and parcelled them out. He watched Blimunda attentively as she took her portion and tranquilly began to eat, She's no Jewess, her father-in-law thought to himself. Marta Maria had also been watching the girl anxiously, and she gave her husband a severe look, as if to rebuke him for his mistrust. Blimunda finished eating and smiled, and it did not occur to João Francisco that even if she were Jewish she would have eaten the salt pork, for Blimunda has another truth to safeguard.

Baltasar said, I must look for work, and Blimunda, too, must find employment, we must earn a living somehow, For Blimunda there's no hurry, I want to keep her at home with me for a while, so that I can become better acquainted with my new daughter, That's fine, Mother, but I must look for a job without delay, With only one hand, what job are you likely to find, I have my hook, Father, which is a great help once you get used to it, That's all very well, but you cannot dig, you cannot wield a scythe, and you cannot chop firewood, I could look after animals, Yes, I suppose you could, I could also be a drover, the hook is good enough to hold the rope, and my right hand will manage the rest, I'm pleased you've come back home, my son, I should have returned sooner, Father.

That night Baltasar dreamt that he went out to plough the entire Alto da Vela with a yoke of oxen, Blimunda walking behind and sticking bird feathers into the ground and these began to flutter as if they were about to become airborne and take the soil with them, then Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço appeared from nowhere, carrying his design and pointing out the mistake they had made, We must start again, he said when suddenly the land waiting to be ploughed reappeared, and Blimunda, who was sitting on the ground, beckoned to Baltasar, Come and lie down beside me, for I have finished eating my bread. It was still the dead of night when he woke up and drew Blimunda's sleeping body close to him, with its moist, enigmatic warmth, she murmured his name and he whispered hers, as they lay there on the kitchen floor on an improvised bed of folded blankets and, taking great care not to make any noise in case they roused his parents, they made love.

Next day Baltasar's sister, Inês Antónia, and her husband, Álvaro Diogo, came to welcome Baltasar home and make the acquaintance of their new sister-in-law. They brought their two children, one four years old, the other two, only the older will survive, for the younger child will be stricken by smallpox and die within the next three months. But God, or whoever in heaven determines the span of human lives, is very scrupulous when it comes to maintaining some balance between rich and poor, whenever it proves necessary, He will even cast His eye on those of noble birth to find some counterweight to put on the scales, and to balance the death of the child of Inês Antónia and Álvaro Diogo, the Infante Dom Pedro will die at the same age, for when God so wills, death may

be caused by the most unlikely causes, the heir to the Portuguese throne, for example, will die once he is denied his mother's milk, and only a child as delicate as a royal infante could perish in such circumstances, for Inés Antónia's child was already eating bread and all the rest when it fell ill and died. Once He has levelled the score, God shows no interest in their funerals, and so, when that little angel was buried in Mafra, as so often happens, the event went unnoticed, but the Infante's burial in Lisbon was quite another matter, mourning was observed with all due solemnity, the corpse was borne from the royal apartments in a tiny casket by the counsellors of state, who were escorted by all the nobility, the King himself presiding with his brother, and if the King grieved as a father, he grieved most of all at the loss of his first son and natural heir to the throne, and in accordance with court protocol, the funeral cortège went down into the chapel courtyard, all the men wearing their hats, but when the coffin was placed on the bier that was to carry the corpse to its final resting place, the King and father of the dead Infante removed and replaced his hat twice before returning to the Palace, such are the inhumanities of official protocol. The Infante made his lonely journey to São Vicente de Fora, with a magnificent entourage but without father or mother, the Cardinal headed the procession, followed by the mace-bearers on horseback, then the officials and dignitaries of the royal household, behind them came the clergy and altar boys attached to the Royal Chapel, with the exception of the canons who had gone to await the arrival of the corpse at São Vicente, this last contingent carried lighted torches, and behind them came the palace guards, led by lieutenants, in double file, and finally the funeral bier itself, bearing the coffin, which was covered with a magnificent red drape like that which covers the royal coach, and behind the bier came the elderly Duke of Cadaval, in his capacity as the veteran major-domo of the Queen's household, and the Queen, if she has a mother's heart, must surely be mourning the death of her child, also present is the Marquis of Minas, the Queen's chief steward, whose devotion can be judged from his tears rather than from his titles, as is the ancient custom, the aforesaid drapes, along with the harnesses and trappings of the mules, will be given to the friars of São Vicente, and the hostlers of the mules, which also belong to the friars, will receive twelve thousand réis, a form of hiring like any other, and we should not be surprised, for human beings are not mules, yet they, too, are frequently hired, and thus united, they form the solemn procession wending its way through the streets, with soldiers and friars among the crowds lining the pavements, there are friars from all the religious orders as well as the mendicant friars who are the trustees of the sanctuary that will receive the Infante, who died after being deprived of his mother's milk, a privilege the friars richly deserve, just as they deserve the convent that will soon be built in the town of Mafra, where within the last year a little boy has been buried whose identity has never been established but who also had a funeral cortège, which included his parents, his grandparents, his uncles and aunts, and other relatives, and when the Infante Dom Pedro arrives in heaven and learns of this discrimination, he will be most upset.

Eventually, since the Queen was so well disposed towards maternity, the King gave her another child who would certainly become king and give rise to more celebrations and

upheavals, and lest anyone should be curious to know how God will balance this royal birth with that of a commoner, He will balance it, all right, but not by means of anonymous men and women, Inês Antônia will show no desire to see any more of her children die, and as for Blimunda, she suspects that she has mysterious powers at her disposal to avoid giving birth to any children. Let us, therefore, concentrate on the adults, on the endless stories Sete-Sóis will tell of his military exploits, of the modest contribution he made to the nation's history, of how he came to be wounded and how they amputated his hand, showing them his iron implements as they listen once more to the same old lamentations, These are the misfortunes that befall the poor, he tells them, but not so, for generals and captains also died in the war or have been left crippled for life, and God provides in the same measure as He takes away, but after an hour everyone has got used to this novelty except for the children who sit there staring in utter fascination and tremble with fear when their uncle playfully lifts them off the ground with his hook, he is doing what he can to keep them amused, the younger child shows the greatest interest of all in this singular game, let the poor child enjoy himself, let him enjoy himself while there is still time, for he has only three months left in which to play.

During those first days back in Mafra, Baltasar helps his father on the land he has rented from a neighbour, he has to learn everything anew, he has not forgotten any of his farming skills, but they are now difficult to apply. As proof that there is no substance in dreams, he now realises that, although he was capable of ploughing the Alto da Vela in his dream, without his left hand he can do little with a plough in the light of day. There is no more blissful occupation than that of a drover, but since one cannot be a drover without a cart and a yoke of oxen, Baltasar will have to borrow his father's in the meantime, Now it's my turn, now it's yours, One day you will have your own, And if I die soon, perhaps you will be able to save some of the money you inherit to buy the cart and oxen, Father, don't even mention such things. Baltasar also finds some work on the site where his brother-in-law is employed, a new wall is being built around the estates of the Viscounts of Vila Nova da Cerveira. Baltasar will find it difficult to lay a single stone on the wall, it would almost have been preferable to have lost a leg, after all, a man can support himself just as firmly on a stilt as on a leg, it is the first time Baltasar has given this any thought, but then he thinks how awkward it would be when lying down beside Blimunda and on top of her, and decides, No, thank you, much better to have lost a hand, and what a stroke of good fortune that it should have been his left hand at that. Álvaro Diogo comes down from the scaffold and, taking refuge behind a hedge, eats the midday meal brought to him by Inês Antônia, whom he assures there will be no lack of work for stonemasons once they start to build the convent, and it will no longer be necessary to leave one's own town in order to find work in surrounding districts, which means spending week after week away from home, for no matter how restless a fellow might be, his own home, if he has a wife he respects and children he loves, has the same satisfying taste as bread, a man's home is not for all hours, but he soon begins to miss it if he does not go back there every day.

Baltasar strolled all the way up to the Alto da Vela, from which one can see the entire town of Mafra nestling in the hollow of the valley. This is where he used to play when he was the same age as his eldest nephew, and for several more years before he had to start labouring in the fields. The sea lies at some considerable distance yet appears to be close, it shimmers like the blade of a sword catching the light of the sun, which the sun will gradually sheathe once it starts to go down and disappear beyond the horizon. These are similes invented by someone who is writing on behalf of a soldier who fought in the war, Baltasar did not invent them, but, for some reason best known to himself, he suddenly remembers the sword he hid safely away in his parents' house, which he has never again unsheathed, probably covered with rust by now, but one of these days he will oil it, for one never knows when the need might arise.

Formerly these were cultivated lands, but now they are abandoned. Though the boundaries are barely visible, the hedgerows, ditches, and fences no longer divide the land. All these fields now belong to the same landowner, His Majesty the King, who has not yet paid for it but will no doubt pay, for, to do him justice, his credit is good. João Francisco Sete-Sóis is awaiting compensation for his part of the land, what a pity the entire sum does not come to him, otherwise he would be a very rich man indeed, so far the deeds of sale amount to three hundred and fifty-eight thousand, five hundred réis, and with the passage of time that sum will go on increasing until it exceeds fifteen million réis, an inconceivable amount of money for the minds of weak mortals, so to make things easier we shall convert it into fifteen contos and almost one hundred thousand réis, a tidy sum. Whether it is a good or a bad deal depends, for money does not always keep its value, unlike mankind, whose value is always the same, everything and nothing. And will the convent be a large affair, Baltasar inquired of his brother-in-law, to which he replied, To begin with, a community of thirteen friars was mentioned, then the figure went up to forty, now the Franciscans in charge of the hospice and the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament are saying that there will be as many as eighty, It will be the most powerful place on earth, said Baltasar. This was their topic of conversation when Inês Antónia withdrew, leaving Álvaro Diogo free to speak with Baltasar man to man. The friars come here to fornicate with women, and the Franciscans are the worst of all, if I catch any of them taking liberties with my wife, I'll give him such a thrashing that I'll break every bone in his body, and, as he spoke, the stone-mason struck the boulder where Inês Antónia had been sitting with his hammer and smashed it into smithereens. The sun has now set and down in the valley Mafra is as dark as the interior of a well. Baltasar starts to descend the slope, he looks at the boundaries traced out with stones, which divide off the land on the far side, the whitest of stone as yet untouched by the first frosts, stone that has never known excessive heat, stone still astonished by the light of day. These stones are the initial foundations of the convent, the King has ordered that they be cut from Portuguese stones fashioned by Portuguese hands, for the Garvos, the family contracted to supervise the final stages of the building, have not yet arrived from Milan to take charge of the bricklayers and stonemasons. When Baltasar enters the house he hears whispers and murmurings coming from the kitchen, he recognises his mother's voice, then

that of Blimunda, as they converse in turn, they scarcely know each other yet have so many things to confide, it is the prolonged and interminable conversation of women, men think such conversations frivolous without perceiving that they keep the world in orbit, if women did not converse with one another, men would long ago have lost all sense of home and of the world at large, Give me your blessing, dear Mother, May God bless you, my son, Blimunda remained silent, and Baltasar did not greet her, they simply looked at each other, finding refuge in each other's eyes.

There are various ways of bringing a man and a woman together, but since this is neither a guide nor a handbook for the marriage-broker, only two ways will be recorded here, the first of which is when he and she are standing close to each other, two complete strangers watching an auto-da-fé, from the sidelines, of course, as the penitents go past, and the woman suddenly turns to the man and asks him, What is your name, prompted neither by divine inspiration nor by her own free will, it was a mandate instilled by her own mother, that mother who walked in the procession, and who had experienced visions and revelations, and if, as the Holy Office of the Inquisition insists, she had shammed, she was not shamming then, not at all, for she truly saw the maimed soldier, the man destined to wed her daughter, and by these means she brought them together. Another way is for the man and the woman to be distant from each other and oblivious of each other's existence, both installed in their own court, his in Lisbon, hers in Vienna, he nineteen years of age, she twenty-five years of age, married by proxy negotiated by their respective ambassadors, and the betrothed had their first glimpse of each other from portraits that were suitably flattering, he cutting a fine figure with his dark good looks, she plump and fair, as befitted an Austrian princess, and whatever their private inclinations, they were persuaded they were perfect for each other and that their marriage had been sealed in heaven, he will succeed in recouping his losses, she, poor thing, being an honest woman and incapable of raising her eyes so much as to look at another man, will resign herself to her fate, what happens in her dreams does not count.

In the war of Dom João, Baltasar lost his hand, in the War of the Holy Inquisition, Blimunda lost her mother, João gained nothing, for once peace had been declared things reverted to normal, the Inquisition gained nothing, because with every sorceress burned at the stake another ten appeared, not to mention the sorcerers of whom there were also many. Each man has his own system of accounts, his own ledger and day-book, the names of the dead are entered on one side of the page, the living on the other, there are also different ways of paying and imposing taxes, with the money of blood and with the blood of money, but there are those who favour prayers, such as the Queen, a natural and dedicated mother who came into the world solely to bear children, she will give birth to six children altogether, but her prayers should be calculated in millions, she is constantly making pilgrimages to the Jesuit Novitiate or the Parish Church of St Paul, or making a novena at the Shrine of St Francis Xavier, then she visits the shrine of Our Lady, Consoler of the Afflicted, then she goes to the Monastery of St Benedict run by the friars of St John the Evangelist, then she visits the Parish Church of the Incarnation, then the

Convent of the Holy Conception at Marvila, then the Convent of St Benedict the Healer, then the Shrine of Our Lady of Light, then the Church of Corpus Christi, then the Church of Our Lady of All Graces, then she goes to the Church of St Rock, then to the Sanctuary of the Holy Trinity, then to the Royal Convent of the Mother of God, then she visits the Shrine of Our Lady of Remembrance, then the Churches of St Peter of Alcântara and Our Lady of Loreto, and the Convent of Good Counsel, and the moment she is about to leave the Palace to fulfil her religious devotions, there is a drum roll and the shrill sound of flutes, not emanating from her, good heavens, as if a queen would play a drum or a flute, and the halberdiers line up, and since the roads are perpetually filthy, despite numerous warnings and edicts demanding that they be cleaned up, porters run ahead of the Queen carrying wooden planks on their shoulders, when she steps from her carriage, the planks are set on the ground, there is quite a stir, no sooner does the Queen step over the planks than the porters move them forward, so that while she remains clean they are forever walking in the mire, our mistress, the Queen, is like our Lord Jesus Christ when He walked over the waters, and in this miraculous fashion she proceeds to the Convents of the Trinitarians, of the Cistercian Nuns, of the Sacred Heart and of St Albert, the Church of Our Lady of Mercy, whose mercy we implore, to the Church of St Catherine, to the Convent of the Sisters of St Paul, and that of the Holy Hour, which is looked after by the discalced Augustinians, and to that of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, to the Church of Our Lady of Martyrs, for we are all martyrs in our own way, to the Convent of Princess Joan the Saint, to the Convent of Christ the Saviour, to the Convent of the Sisters of St Monica, to the Royal Convent of Holy Redress, and to that of the Beneficiaries, but we know where she dare not go, to the Convent of Odivelas, and we can all guess why, a sad and deceived queen who is undeceived only by praying every hour of each day, sometimes for a good cause, at other times for no apparent reason, sometimes for her wayward husband, for her family so far away, for this country which is not hers and the children who are only partly hers, and perhaps not even that, as the Infante Dom Pedro swears in heaven, for the Portuguese Empire, for deliverance from imminent plague, for the war that has just finished and that which is about to break out, for the Infantas and Infantes, for her royal in-laws, and for Dom Francisco, too, and to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph for the trials of the flesh, for the delights glimpsed or visualised between a man's legs, for arduous salvation, for the hell that covets her soul, for the torture of being a queen, for the sorrow of being a woman, and for those two inseparable woes, transient life and approaching death.

Dona Maria Ana will now have other, more urgent motives for praying. The King is far from well these days and is subject to sudden bouts of flatulence, a debility from which he has long suffered but is rapidly worsening, the fainting fits now last much longer than usual, and it teaches one humility to see such a mighty king reduced to a state of unconsciousness, what good does it do him to be Lord of India, Africa, and Brazil when we are nothing in this world and must leave all our possessions behind. Custom and caution dictate that the last rites should be administered without delay, His Majesty must not die unconfessed like any common soldier on the battlefield where chaplains are not to

be seen and have no desire to be seen, yet from time to time certain problems arise, such as when the King is in Setubal watching a bullfight from the windows of his apartments and suddenly, without any warning, goes into a deep swoon, a doctor is hastily summoned, who checks the King's pulse and summons a blood-letter, the father confessor comes with the holy oils, but no one can tell what sins Dom João V may have committed since he made his last confession, and that was only yesterday, how many evil thoughts could he have had, how many wicked acts could he have committed within the past twenty-four hours, and on top of everything, this awkward situation whereby bulls are dying in the arena while the King, his eyes staring upwards, may or may not be close to death, and if he should die it will not be from some wound, like those being inflicted on the animals below, who nevertheless succeed now and then in taking their revenge on the enemy, which is precisely what happened a moment ago to Dom Henrique de Almeida, he was tossed into the air with his horse and is being carried away on a stretcher with two fractured ribs. The King has finally opened his eyes, and he has escaped death after all, but his legs are still wobbly, his hands tremble, and his face is deathly pale, he no longer resembles that gallant gentleman who conquers nuns at a glance and for nuns substitute another word, as recently as last year, a French girl gave birth to a child he had fathered, and if those women of his, whether locked up or on the loose, were to see him now, they would not recognise this shrivelled, pathetic little man as the royal and indefatigable seducer they once knew. Dom João V makes the journey to Azeitão to see if a cure and good country air will rid him of this illness, which the doctors have diagnosed as melancholy, in all probability, His Royal Highness is suffering from a disturbance of the humours, which often results in bouts of flatulence and bilious attacks, infirmities that stem from black melancholy, for that is the King's real problem, so let us hope that he is not suffering from any diseases in his private parts, despite his amorous excesses and those traces of gallic acid, which are treated with extracts of comfrey, an excellent remedy for mouth ulcers and any infection of the testicles and upper appendages.

Dona Maria Ana has remained in Lisbon to pray and then gone on to continue her prayers at Belem. It is rumoured that she is peeved because Dom João V refuses to entrust her with governing the kingdom and it really is wrong for a husband to be so mistrustful of his wife's capacity to govern, he will soon relent, and eventually the Queen will be appointed regent while the King pursues his cure amidst the rural delights of Azeitão, where he is nursed by the Franciscan friars from Arrábida and the lapping of the waves, the colour of the sea, the tang in the air remain unchanged, the magic spell is the same, and nature exudes the same intoxicating odours as before while the Infante Dom Francisco remains alone in Lisbon, wooing the Queen, and the plot starts to thicken and events to unfold, calculating the death of his brother and his own life, If no remedy should be found for the melancholy that cruelly torments His Royal Highness, and if God were to decide to end his mortal life prematurely so that he might embark upon eternal life all the sooner, then it would be possible for me as next in line, as a close member of the Royal Family, as Your Majesty's brother-in-law, and a deeply devoted admirer of your

beauty and virtue, to presume to suggest that I might succeed to the throne and to your bed on the way, by wedding you in holy matrimony, and when it comes to manly attributes I can assure you that I am not inferior to my brother, Good heavens, such an unseemly conversation between a brother- and sister-in-law, the King is still alive, and should God hear my prayers, His Majesty's life will be saved for the greater glory of the kingdom and, most of all, for the sake of those six children I am destined to bear him, for there are three more still to come, Yet I know that Your Majesty dreams about me nearly every night, I cannot deny that I have such dreams, these are weaknesses of womanhood, which I conceal in my heart and do not even discuss with my father confessor, although others may clearly surmise our dreams by looking into our eyes, Well, then, when my brother dies let us wed, If such a union were to bring prosperity to the realm, give no offence to God, and safeguard my honour, then I should consent, How I wish my brother would die, for I want to be king and to sleep with Your Majesty, I'm tired of being simply the Infante, And I'm tired of being queen, but I cannot aspire to anything else, so I resign myself and pray that my husband will live, lest I find myself saddled with an even worse fate, Is Your Majesty suggesting, then, that I would be worse than my brother, All men are evil in their own way, and on this astute and cynical note their conversation in the Palace ends, the first of many such conversations with Dom Francisco, who would importune the Queen on every possible occasion, in Belem, where she is in residence at present, in Belas, where she will journey at her leisure, and in Lisbon when she finally becomes regent, at court and in the country, until Dona Maria Ana's dreams are no longer as enjoyable as before, so uplifting for the spirit if distressing for the body, for now the Infante only appears in her dreams to tell her that he wants to become king, and much good may it do him, he is wasting his time, say I who am queen. The King became so gravely ill that Dona Maria Ana's dream vanished, but the King will eventually recover his health while the Queen's dreams will never be revived.

BESIDES THE CONVERSATION of women, it is dreams that keep the world in orbit. But dreams also form a diadem of moons, therefore the sky is that splendour inside a man's head, if his head is not, in fact, his own unique sky. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço has returned from Holland, whether he succeeded or failed to solve the mystery of ether we shall know later, it is even possible that the secret cannot be resolved with the alchemy of ancient times, perhaps a mere word will suffice to fill the globes of the flying machine, Almighty God, after all, did nothing more than speak and yet He succeeded in creating everything with such little effort, that is what the priest had been taught in the Seminary of Belem in Bahia, and it was further confirmed by learned debates and advanced studies in the Faculty of Theology at Coimbra, long before he ever launched his first balloon into the air, and now that he has come back from the Netherlands, he intends to return to Coimbra, a man might be a great flier, but he would be well advised to study for his master's degree and doctorate, and then, even if he should never fly, he will be deemed worthy of respect.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço went to the estate at São Sebastião da Pedreira, three whole years had passed since he had been there, he found the coach house abandoned, the materials were lying scattered around the floor, which nobody had seen fit to tidy up, since nobody knew what was going on there. Inside the large building sparrows flitted to and fro having found their way in through a hole in the roof where two tiles had cracked, the sparrows were unremarkable creatures, and it was unlikely that they would ever soar higher than the tallest of the ash trees on the estate, the sparrow belongs to the soil and the loam, the dungheap and the cornfield, to observe a dead sparrow is to realise that it was never intended to scale great heights, its wings are so fragile, its bones so minute, in comparison, my Passarola will soar as high as the eye can reach, just look at the solid frame of this shell that will carry me through the air, with time, the irons have rusted, a bad sign, suggesting that Baltasar has not been looking after things as I asked, but surely these footprints made with bare feet must be his, yet he does not appear to have brought Blimunda with him, perhaps something has befallen her, Baltasar has obviously slept on the pallet, for the blanket is drawn back as if he just got out of bed, I shall lie down on this same pallet and cover myself with this same blanket, I, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, newly returned from Holland, where I went to confirm whether people in other parts of Europe know how to fly with wings, and whether they are more advanced in the science of flying than I am, coming as I do from a land of mariners, and in Zwolle, Ede, and Nijkerk, I studied with highly respected alchemists and scientists, learned men who are capable of creating suns in retorts, and yet they die from mysterious causes, withering up until they become as hollow as a sheaf of broken straw and burn just as easily, for this is what all of them ask at the hour of death, that they leave nothing but ashes as they set themselves alight, and here, awaiting my return, was this flying machine, which still cannot fly, and these are the globes I must fill with celestial ether, for people should know what they are saying when they look up at the sky and exclaim, Celestial ether, of course I know what it is, it's as straightforward as God's saying, Let there be light, it's a manner of speaking, meanwhile, night has fallen, I am lighting this oil lamp Blimunda left

behind, I extinguish this tiny sun, and it depends on me whether it is to be lit up or extinguished, I refer to the oil lamp, not to Blimunda, no human being can achieve all he or she desires in this life except in dreams, so good night all.

After some weeks, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, armed with all the necessary contracts, licences, and other legal documents, leaves for Coimbra, a city so renowned as a seat of learning that, had there been any alchemists there, the journey to Zwolle would have been quite superfluous, the Flying Man sets off on this stage of his journey riding a tranquil mule he has hired, a suitable mount for a priest of modest means who has little experience of riding, upon reaching his destination, he will share a horse with another gentleman, who has probably already completed his doctorate, although for anyone of doctoral status a sedan chair intended for long distances would be much more fitting, it is like tossing on the ocean waves, if only the fellow riding in front were not quite so incontinent when it comes to letting off wind. The journey as far as Mafra passes without incident, there is nothing to relate about the trip, only about the people who inhabit these regions, we clearly cannot stop en route and ask, Who are you, what are you doing, where is the pain, and if Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço made several stops, they were but brief, and lasted no longer than it took to give his blessing to those who requested it, although many of them were ready to digress at length in order to insinuate themselves into our story, they see a simple encounter with a priest as a sign, for travelling to Coimbra, he would not have passed this way unless he had to stop off at Mafra in order to locate Baltasar Sete-Sóis and Blimunda Sete-Luas. It is not true that tomorrow belongs only to God, that men must wait to see what each day brings, that death alone is certain but not the hour when it will strike, these are the maxims of those who are incapable of understanding the signs pointing to our future, such as the sudden appearance of this priest on the road from Lisbon, who has given his blessing upon request, and who proceeds in the direction of Mafra, and this means that the person blessed must also go to Mafra and help to build the Royal Convent, and there he will meet his death by falling from a scaffold, or be struck down by plague or a stab wound, or be crushed beneath the statue of St Bruno.

It is still a little early for such mishaps. When Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço rounded the final bend on the road and began to descend into the valley, he came across a multitude of people, multitude is perhaps an exaggeration, for they were no more than several hundred, and at first he could not see what was happening, because the crowd was running to one side, a trumpet sounded, some festivity perhaps, or even war, then suddenly came an explosion of gunfire, and rubble and gravel were hurled through the air, there were twenty shots in all before the trumpet sounded once more, but this time on a different note, labourers advanced toward the scene of the blasting with hand-carts and spades, filling in here on the hill, and clearing yonder on the slope facing Mafra, others, with their hoes slung over their shoulders, disappeared down into the excavations, while still others lowered baskets and then hauled them up filled with soil, which they then emptied out some distance away, where another group of workers were

shovelling earth into carts, to be scattered over the embankment, there is no difference whatsoever between a hundred men and a hundred ants, the soil is transported from here to there because a man has not enough strength to do any more, then another man carries the load to the next ant, until, as usual, everything finishes up in the hole, for ants a place of life, for men a place of death, so, as you can see, there is no difference whatsoever.

Prodding with his heels, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço spurred his mule forward, it was a seasoned animal, inured to the sound of gunfire, that is the advantage of not being a thoroughbred, hybrid creatures have been through so much, and as a result of their crossbreeding they are not easily alarmed, which is the best way for beasts and men to survive in this world. Along the road bogged down in mud, a sign that the springs in the earth were lost in that disturbance and were welling up to no advantage, or dividing into many little veins until the atoms of water completely separated and the hill remained dry, along this road, gently spurring on his mule, Padre Bartolomeu descended into the town, where he called on the parish priest to inquire about the family of Sete-Sóis. This particular parish priest had made a handsome profit from the sale of some land he had owned on the Alto da Vela, either because the land was considered to be worth a great deal or the owner himself was, it was valued at one hundred and forty thousand réis, a much higher sum than the thirteen thousand five hundred réis paid to João Francisco. The parish priest feels very pleased at the thought of the impressive convent that is about to enhance his parish with its community of eighty friars, such a convent here on his very doorstep will undoubtedly increase the number of baptisms, marriages, and deaths in the town, each sacrament will bestow material and spiritual benefits by reinforcing the church's coffers and the hope of salvation in direct ratio to the various functions and stipends, Truly, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, it is a great honour to receive you here in my house, the Sete-Sóis live nearby, they owned some land adjacent to mine on the Alto da Vela, a smaller holding than mine, needless to say, now the old man and his family earn their living by farming rented land, their son, Baltasar, returned home four years ago, he came from the war maimed for life and turned up here with his wife, I don't believe that they're married in the eyes of Holy Mother Church, and the woman has a name that's certainly not Christian, Is she called Blimunda, interrupted Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, Then you know her, I married them, Ah, so they are married, I married them myself in Lisbon, whereupon the Flying Man, although not known in these parts by that name, expressed his gratitude to the parish priest, whose effusive welcome could be attributed to certain recommendations from the Palace, he then went off to call on the Sete-Sóis household, secretly pleased at having lied before God in the safe knowledge that God could not care less, for a man must know for himself when lies can be forgiven even as they are being told.

It was Blimunda who opened the door. Dusk was already falling, but she recognised the priest the moment he dismounted, after all, four years is not such a long time, she kissed his hand and were it not for the presence of some inquisitive neighbours, the

greeting might have been quite different, for these two, or three when Baltasar is present, are governed by their emotions, all three have shared the same dream, all will see the flying machine beat its wings, the sun explode into even greater splendour, the amber attract the ether, the ether attract the magnet, the magnet attract the iron, all things attract each other, the real problem being to know how to arrange them in the right sequence, Padre Bartolomeu, this is my mother-in-law, Marta Maria had approached, puzzled that she could hear no one speaking, yet convinced that she heard Blimunda go to open the door although no one had knocked, and now there was an unknown priest standing there and inquiring about Baltasar, this is not the manner in which visits were conducted in those days, but there were exceptions, just as there are exceptions in every age, so here was a priest who came from Lisbon to Mafra to speak to a crippled soldier and a clairvoyant of the worst possible kind, because she can see what exists, as Marta Maria has already discovered for herself, because when she confided her fears that she might have a tumour in her stomach, Blimunda dismissed the idea, but it was true and they both knew it, Eat your bread, Blimunda, eat your bread.

Padre Bartolomeo Lourenço was sitting by the fire, for the night was already becoming chilly, when Baltasar and his father finally arrived. They saw the mule tethered in front of the house under the olive tree and noticed that it was still harnessed, Whose could this be, João Francisco asked and Baltasar made no reply but suspected that it might be a priest, the mules used by the clergy betray a certain evangelical submissiveness, which is quite unlike the spirited rebelliousness you find among the horses ridden by laymen, if, as Baltasar imagined, the mule belonged to a priest and had travelled for some distance, and no one was expecting a papal legate or nuncio, then it must be Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, as indeed turned out to be the case. Anyone who expresses surprise that Baltasar Sete-Sóis should have observed all those details when it was already growing dark should know that the splendour of the saints is no vain illusion reflected by the anguished souls of mystics, or religious hocus-pocus propagated by effigies and oil paintings, for, after sharing Blimunda's bed for so long and enjoying sexual intercourse night after night, Baltasar was beginning to experience a spiritual light that bestowed dual vision, and though it did not provide for any deep probings, it did enable him to make such observations. João Francisco undid the mule's harness and came back into the house just as the priest was telling Baltasar and Blimunda that he had accepted an invitation to supper from the parish priest and accommodation for the night, first because there was not enough room in the Sete-Sóis household, and, second, because it would cause people in Mafra to gossip if a priest who had travelled a considerable distance should decide to lodge in a house that was little better than the stable at Bethlehem rather than avail himself of the comforts at the parochial residence or at the Viscounts' Palace, where hospitality would not be denied to a future doctor of canon law, Marta Maria told him, Had we known Your Reverence was coming, we would at least have killed a cockerel, for we've nothing in the larder worth offering an important guest, I should be happy to accept whatever you have to offer me, but it will cause everyone less inconvenience if I do not stay here for supper, as for the cockerel, Senhora Marta Maria,

let it crow as much as it likes now that it has been saved from the pot, hearing it crowing is certain to give much greater pleasure, besides, it wouldn't be fair to the hens. João Francisco laughed heartily at this witty little speech, but Marta Maria could not even muster a smile as she tried to suppress a sharp twinge of pain in her stomach, Baltasar and Blimunda smiled politely, feeling that no more was expected of them, for they knew only too well that the priest's sayings always deviated from the words one expected and this was simply further proof, Tomorrow, one hour before sunrise, bring the mule already harnessed to the presbytery, both of you come, because we must have a chat together before I leave for Coimbra, and now, Senhor João Francisco and Senhora Marta Maria, receive my blessing, should it serve any purpose in the eyes of God, for it is a great presumption to imagine that we priests can judge the effectiveness of our own blessings, don't forget, one hour before sunrise, and with these words he departed, Baltasar accompanied him, carrying an oil lamp that gave scarcely any light, it was as if the lamp were saying to the night, I am a light and during the short walk, they did not exchange a single word, Baltasar made his way back in pitch darkness, his feet knew where they were treading, and when he entered the kitchen Blimunda asked, Well, then, did Padre Bartolomeu say what he wanted, He said nothing, tomorrow we shall find out, and João Francisco, remembering the priest's words, burst out laughing, That was a good story about the cock. As for Marta Maria, she was pondering some enigma, Now let's have supper, the two men sat at the table while the women ate apart, as was the custom.

They all slept as best they could, each with his own secret dreams, for dreams are like human beings, bearing some resemblance to one another but never quite identical, it would be as inaccurate to say, I saw a man, as to say, Today I dreamt about flowing water, for this is not enough to tell us who the man was or which water was flowing, the water that flowed in the dream belongs only to the dreamer, we shall never know what the flowing water signifies if we know nothing about the dreamer, and so we move to and fro, from the dreamer to the dreamt and from the dreamt to the dreamer, in search of an answer, Future generations will take pity on us, Padre Francisco Gonçalves, because they will know us so little and so badly, these were Padre Bartolomeu's words before retiring to his room, and Padre Francisco Gonçalves dutifully replied, All knowledge resides in God, That is true, the Flying Man replied, but God's knowledge is like a river coursing towards the sea, God is the source and men are the ocean, it would scarcely have been worth His while to have created so much universe if things should have turned out otherwise, and it seems incredible to us that anyone should be able to sleep after having said or heard such things.

At dawn, Baltasar and Blimunda arrived, leading the mule by its halter, but Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço did not need to be called, he opened the door the moment he heard the sound of the mule's hoofs striking the cobblestones and came out at once, he had already taken his leave of the parish priest of Mafra and left him with something to ponder, if God were the source and men the ocean, then how much did he still have to discover, for the parish priest of Mafra had forgotten almost everything he had ever

learned, except, thanks to continuous practice, the Latin of the Mass and the sacraments, and the road that led between the legs of his housekeeper, who had slept in a cupboard under the stairs last night because there was a guest in the house. Baltasar held the mule by the reins while Blimunda stood a few paces away, her eyes lowered and her hood pulled forward, Good morning, they greeted him, Good morning, the priest replied before asking Blimunda if she had broken her fast, and from the shadows cast by her hood, she replied, I have not yet eaten, Tell Blimunda not to eat, Padre Bartolomeu had said to Baltasar, and those words were passed on to her, whispered into her ear as she and Baltasar lay together, so that the old couple would not hear, and their secret should remain safe.

Through the dark street they made their way up to the Alto da Vela, not the road to the village of Paz, which the priest should have taken if he was heading north, however, they seemed to feel obliged to avoid inhabited places, though there might be men sleeping or waking up in the huts they were passing, ramshackle buildings where you would find no one apart from roadworkers, men of brute strength and few graces, and should we chance to pass along these roads in a few months, or, better still, within the next few years, then we shall see a large city built from wood, bigger than Mafra, those who survive will see this and more, for the present, these primitive dwellings provide a refuge where men who are worn out from hours of digging and shovelling soil may rest their weary bones, soon there will even be a military fanfare, for the regiment has also arrived, but not to die in battle this time, now their only task is to keep a watchful eye over the hordes of workers and to lend a hand from time to time without disgracing the uniform, and frankly, one can scarcely distinguish the guards from those whom they are guarding, for if the latter are in tatters, the former are in rags. The sky has turned a pearly grey towards the sea, while over the hills a patch of colour like diluted blood gradually becomes more and more vivid, dawn will break soon, a medley of blue and gold, for the weather is perfect at this time of the year. Blimunda, however, sees nothing, her eyes are lowered, in her pocket nestles a piece of bread, which she must not eat just yet, What are they about to ask of me.

It is the priest who wants something, not Baltasar, who is as much in the dark as Blimunda. Below you can scarcely make out the outlines of the excavations, black forms against shadows, that must be the basilica down there. Labourers begin to crowd the site, they start to light bonfires and heat up some food, yesterday's leftovers, before the day's work begins, soon they will be enjoying broth from their porringers, which they soak up with chunks of rough-grained bread. Blimunda will have to bide her time. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço says, In this world I have you, Blimunda, and you, Baltasar, my parents are in Brazil, my brothers in Portugal, so I have both parents and brothers, but for this enterprise I need neither parents nor brothers but friends, so listen carefully, I discovered everything there is to know about ether in Holland, it is not what most people believe and teach, and it cannot be obtained by means of alchemy, in order to go up into the sky and fetch it, we would have to be able to fly, and that is something we are still

unable to do, but, mark my words, before it rises into the atmosphere to keep the stars aloft and become the air that God breathes, ether is to be found inside men and women, Then it must be the soul, Baltasar concluded, No, it is not the soul, at first I, too, thought that it might be the soul, I also thought that the ether might be formed by souls when death releases them from bodies and before they are finally judged, but ether is not constituted from the souls of the dead, it is constituted, note carefully, from the wills of living souls.

Down below, the men were starting to descend into the excavations, which were still enshrouded in darkness. The priest said, Inside us there is a will and a soul, the soul departs with death and goes where souls await judgment, no one knows for certain, but the will either detaches itself from man while he is still alive, or it is separated from the soul at death, and that will is ether, therefore it is the human will that sustains the stars, it is the human will that God breathes, And what must I do, Blimunda asked, but she guessed the reply, You will see the will inside people, I have never seen their will, just as I have never seen their soul, You do not see their soul because the soul cannot be seen, you have not seen their will because you were not looking for it, What does will look like, It's like a dark cloud, What does a dark cloud look like, You will recognise it when you see it, try it out with Baltasar, for that is why we have come here, I cannot, for I have promised that I'd never look inside him, Then try it with me.

Blimunda lifted her head, looked at the priest, and saw what she had always seen, that people are more alike inside than outside, and only differ when they are ailing, she took another look and insisted, I cannot see anything. The priest smiled, Perhaps I no longer have any will, but take a closer look, Yes, now I can see, I can see a dark cloud over the cavity of your stomach. The priest made the sign of the cross, Thanks be to God, now I shall fly. He took from his knapsack a glass phial with a flat piece of yellow amber stuck inside the bottom, This amber, which is also known as electron, attracts the ether, carry it with you wherever you are likely to meet people, for example, in processions, at autos-da-fé, or here on the site where the convent is being built, and the moment you perceive that a cloud is about to emerge from anyone, which invariably happens, hold out the open phial and allow the will to filter inside, And when the phial is full, It needs only a single will to make the phial full, but this is the impenetrable mystery of wills, where one can be stored, millions can be stored, one is equal to an infinite number, And what shall we do in the meantime, I'm off to Coimbra, from there, at the right moment, I shall send a message, then you will both travel to Lisbon, you will build the machine, and you, Blimunda, will collect wills, we three shall meet when the day finally comes for us to fly, I embrace you, Blimunda, and beg of you not to look at me so closely, I embrace you, Baltasar, and bid you farewell until we meet again. He mounted his mule and began to descend the slope. The sun had appeared over the crest of the hills. Eat your bread, Baltasar said, and Blimunda replied, Not yet, first I must go and see the wills of those men.

THEY HAVE RETURNED from Holy Mass and are seated under the roof of the oven. A light shower of rain falls gently amid the sunshine, Autumn is early this year, therefore Inês Antónia scolds her little boy, Come away from there or you'll get wet, but the child pretends not to hear, even in those days it was what one expected of children, although their acts of disobedience were less radical than they are today, and having warned him once, Inês Antónia does not insist, barely three months have passed since she buried his little brother, so why bother nagging this child, let him play in the rain if it makes him happy, splashing around barefoot in the puddles in the yard, May the Virgin Mother protect him from the smallpox that carried off his brother. Álvaro Diogo tells her, I've been promised work on the site of the Royal Convent, this was what they appeared to be talking about, but the mother is thinking about the child she has buried, their thoughts are divided, and just as well, for certain obsessions can become unbearable, just like this pain that troubles Marta Maria, a persistent stabbing that pierces her womb like the daggers piercing the heart of the Mother of God, why her heart, when it is in the womb that children are born, it is in the womb that the furnace of life is to be found, and how should one nourish life unless by labour, which explains why Álvaro Diogo is feeling so happy, the building of such a convent will take many, many years to complete, any stone-mason who knows his trade will earn a good living, three hundred réis for a day's work, five hundred réis when they can work longer hours, And what about you, Baltasar, have you decided to go back to Lisbon, you're making a big mistake, for there will be plenty of work here, They won't want disabled men with so many labourers around, With that hook of yours you can do almost as much as any able-bodied man, That's true, unless you are only trying to spare my feelings, but we must go back to Lisbon, is that not so, Blimunda, and Blimunda, who has remained silent, nods her head in agreement. Lost in thought, the elderly João Francisco is braiding a leather thong, he hears them converse but pays little attention to what they are saying, he knows that his son will leave home during the next few weeks, but he is displeased with him, to leave home once more after all those years of enforced separation because of the war, you would only have yourself to blame if you were to come back without your right hand next time, such is love that people harbour these thoughts. Blimunda rose to her feet, crossed the yard, and went out into the countryside, she walked under the olive trees skirting the road all the way up to the boundaries of the building site, her heavy clogs sinking into the soil, which had been softened by the rain, but even if she had been walking barefoot and stepping over rough stones she would have felt nothing, how could she feel so little pain, when her whole being is filled with horror at her rash behaviour that very morning, when she took communion while still fasting, she had pretended to eat her bread in bed, out of habit and obligation, but she had not eaten it, with lowered eyes and pretending to be contrite and submissive, she went into church, attended Holy Mass as if she were in the presence of Almighty God and listened to the sermon without raising her head, overwhelmed, or so it appeared, by all the threats of hell and damnation that rained from the pulpit, then she finally went up to the altar to receive the Sacred Host, and she saw. During all these years since she had first become aware of the gift she possessed, she had always taken communion in a state of sin, with food in her stomach, but today, without mentioning

anything to Baltasar, she had decided that she would take communion while fasting, not to receive God but to see Him, if He truly existed.

She sat on the protruding root of an olive tree, from where she could watch the sea merging with the horizon, it was almost certainly raining heavily out at sea, Blimunda's eyes filled with tears, her shoulders shaking as she began to sob, and Baltasar stroked her hair, she had not heard him approach, What did you see in the Sacred Host, so she had not deceived him after all, how could she possibly have deceived him, when they spend night after night in each other's embrace, well, perhaps not every night, but certainly for the last six years they have been living together as husband and wife, I saw a dark cloud, she replied. Baltasar sat on the ground, the plough had not reached this patch of land, and it was overgrown and dried up, though moistened recently by the rain, these countryfolk are used to roughing it and sit or lie down wherever they happen to be, better still if a man can rest his head on a woman's lap, I'll wager that this was man's last gesture before the great flood swamped the earth. Blimunda told him, I was hoping to see Christ crucified or resurrected in glory, but all I could see was a dark cloud, Forget what you saw, Forget it, how can I forget it, if what is inside the Sacred Host is what is inside men, which, after all, is religion, the person we need here is Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, perhaps he might be able to clear up the mystery, Perhaps, perhaps not, it's just possible that certain things cannot be explained, who knows, and no sooner were these words spoken than the rain began to fall with greater force, either as a sign of affirmation or denial, the sky is now overcast while a man and woman shelter beneath a tree, bereft of any children, after all, there is no guarantee that situations recur, locations differ as well as the times, and even the tree itself is different, but as for the rain, it has the same comforting touch on one's skin and on the soil, a life so excessive that it can kill, but this is something to which man has become accustomed since the beginning of creation, when the wind is gentle it mills the grain, when it is strong it tears the windmill's sails, Between life and death, said Blimunda, hovers a dark cloud.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço had written soon after settling in Coimbra, stating simply that he had reached his destination safely, but now a second letter arrived, asking them to proceed to Lisbon without delay, as soon as there was some respite from his studies, he would join them, besides, he had certain ecclesiastical duties to perform at court, and this would provide an opportunity to plan the next stage of their joint enterprise, And now tell me, how are your wills progressing, a seemingly innocent question, which gave the impression that he was inquiring about their wills rather than about the wills of others and about those who had lost them, but he raised the question without expecting any answer, just as in battle, when the captain gives orders or allows the bugle to give them on his behalf, Forward march, and the captain does not stand there waiting until the soldiers have consulted one another and reply, We'll go, we won't go, we're not going, either they start marching at once or find themselves up before a court-martial, We'll leave next week, Baltasar decided, but another two months were to pass, because in the meantime it was rumoured in Mafra, and confirmed by the parish priest in his sermon,

that the King was coming to lay the foundation stone of the future convent with his own royal hands. First it was announced that the inauguration ceremony would be on a date in October, but that would not have allowed enough time to dig the foundations to the right depth, despite the six hundred workers on the site and the constant blasting that rent the air morning, noon, and night, then it was to be in the middle of November, but further postponed because winter had arrived and the King would be in mud up to his garters. May His Majesty come soon, so that Mafra's age of glory may commence, so that the town's inhabitants may raise their hands to heaven and witness with their mortal eyes the achievements of this mighty king, thanks to whom we can enjoy a foretaste of heaven before entering those celestial gates, and better to enjoy such bliss while still alive than after death, We'll watch the festivities then leave for Lisbon, Baltasar decided.

Álvaro Diogo has already been contracted as a stonemason and for the time being he is cutting stone brought from Pêro Pinheiro, massive blocks transported on wagons drawn by ten or twenty yokes of oxen while other labourers are engaged in breaking up inferior stone for the foundations, which are to be almost six metres deep, metre being the modern term, although in those days everything was measured in spans, which are still the standard used by those who measure men both great and small, for example, Baltasar Sete-Sóis, who has never been king, is taller than Dom João V, and Álvaro Diogo, who is no weakling, is accustomed to tackling large-scale constructions, there he is hammering the stone and hacking away at its surface, but he will go on to do other jobs. Having helped to set one block on top of another, he will subsequently become a stone-cutter and carver, for it is a truly royal task to erect a straight wall with a plumb line, and it is quite unlike all that business with battens and nails which occupies the carpenters who are building the wooden church where the solemn act of benediction and inauguration will be held when the King finally arrives. Strong poles are laid out to mark the perimeter where the improvised church will eventually be replaced by the basilica itself, but for the moment the roof is made from sailcloth lined with durable cotton, and the form of a cross is observed to add a note of dignity to this provisional wooden construction, which will one day be rebuilt in stone, and in order to watch these preparations, the inhabitants of Mafra start to neglect their workshops and fields, they have become idle at the sight of this enormous project being erected on the Alto da Vela, although still in its initial stages. Some might be excused, such as Baltasar and Blimunda, who bring their nephew to see his father, and since it is already midday Inês Antónia also comes with a pot of cooked cabbage and a lump of cured pork, the entire family is here except for the grandparents, and if we did not know that this construction is the fulfilment of a sacred vow because an heir was born to the King, we might mistake the crowd for some mass pilgrimage, each and all honouring their pledges to Almighty God, But no one is going to give me back my son, Inês Antónia thinks to herself, and she almost feels hatred for this other son who goes off to play among the rocks.

A few days earlier a miracle had taken place in Mafra when a raging gale had swept in from the sea and dashed the wooden church to the ground, poles, planks, beams, and

joists collapsed in a tangle with the sails and canvas, just like the prodigious puffing of the mythical giant Adamastor when he puffed his way around the cape of his and our labours, and lest anyone be scandalised that an act of destruction should be described as a miracle, what other word could be used when the King, upon being informed of the incident, no sooner arrived in Mafra, then he began distributing gold coins with the same ease as we are telling this story, for the overseers had managed to rebuild the church within two days, and the coins were multiplied to reward their diligence, much better than simply multiplying loaves. The King is a prudent monarch who always carries coffers of gold wherever he travels, to cope with these and any other eventualities.

The day of the inauguration finally arrived, Dom João V had slept at the Viscounts' Palace, where the gates were guarded by the sergeant in command at Mafra with a contingent of auxiliary soldiers and Baltasar was anxious not to miss this opportunity to speak to the troops, but it was useless, because no one knew him or what he wanted, they were puzzled that anyone should want to discuss war at a time of peace, Look here, old fellow, these gates must be kept clear, for the King is expected to leave shortly, so a disheartened Baltasar, accompanied by Blimunda, went up to the Alto da Vela, where they were fortunate to find a place inside the improvised church, though many were turned away, and the interior presented an extraordinary sight, for the ceiling of the church was lined in taffeta in a subtle variety of contrasting reds and yellows, and the walls of the church were covered with opulent satin hangings that substituted for doors and windows, everything matched to perfection, and the red damask draperies were adorned with gold braiding and fringes. When the King arrives, the first thing he will confront will be three large imitation doors on the façade, with a painting overhead depicting St Peter and St John healing the beggar at the doors of the Temple in Jerusalem, an encouraging preliminary to all the other miracles that will be witnessed here, although none of them will be as resounding as the one already narrated about the gold coins, and above the aforesaid painting is another, depicting St Antony, to whom the basilica is to be dedicated because of a special pledge made by the King, if this has not already been mentioned, for so many things have happened within the last six years that something is bound to have been forgotten. Inside the church, as we started to narrate, there is the most magnificent spectacle, and it is difficult to believe that this is a wooden construction due for demolition. On the gospel side, that is, to the left of anyone facing the altar, which is not the main altar because it is the only one, and these observations are not meant to be offensive, what does he think we are, a bunch of ignoramuses, these details are given because after faith and its knowledge comes an age without faith and with other forms of knowledge, and who will read to us then, on the gospel side, there is a stool raised on a dais reached by six steps and adorned with precious white linen, with a hanging above and in front, and on the epistle side there is another stool on a dais with only three steps, instead of the six steps to which the other rises, an observation worth repeating so as to emphasise the difference, and here there is no canopy overhead, because it is clearly to be used by someone of less exalted rank. Here the vestments are laid out that will be worn by the Patriarch, Dom Tomás de Almeida, and there are silver

artefacts for the divine service, a display worthy of this supreme monarch who is about to make his entrance. No detail has been overlooked, to the left of the crucifix an enclosure has been erected for the musicians, draped with crimson damask, and complete with an organ that will be played at the appropriate moments, and there the canons of the diocese will also sit in specially reserved benches, and Dom João V will proceed, upon arrival, to the dais on the right, from where he will preside over the ceremony, with the nobility and other important personages seated on the benches below. The floor of the church has been covered with rushes and reeds, and green cloths have been spread over them, this penchant for green and red among the Portuguese dating from centuries ago, and these will subsequently become the national colours on the creation of a republic.

The cross was blessed on the first day, an enormous piece of wood some five metres high, comparable in size with Adamastor or any similar giant, and with the natural dimensions of God Himself, and the entire congregation prostrated itself before the cross, especially the King, who shed many devout tears, and when the veneration of the cross was over, four priests lifted the cross, one at each extremity, and erected it by inserting the stem into a hole in a boulder which had been prepared for this purpose, although not by Álvaro Diogo, for however divine a symbol, the cross cannot stand up unless supported, unlike men, who even without legs can manage to stand erect, it is clearly a question of will power. The organ was playing merrily, the musicians were blowing on their instruments, and the voices of the choir intoned hymns of praise, and out here, the people who had flocked from the town and surrounding districts only to find there was no more room inside the church consoled themselves with the echoes of the psalms and hymns, and so the first day of the official ceremonies ended.

The following day, a second gust of wind blowing in from the sea threatened to blow down the entire contraption once more, but it subsided without incident, the celebrations were revived and the solemnities continued with even greater pomp in the town square to mark the seventeenth of November of this year of grace, one thousand seven hundred and seventeen, and by seven in the morning, in the biting cold, the parish priests were assembled from all the surrounding districts, with their assistant chaplains and parishioners, hence the firm belief that the expression biting cold dates from this historical occasion, to be used for centuries thereafter. The King arrived at half past eight after drinking his morning cup of chocolate, which the Viscount himself served, the royal procession then set out, headed by sixty-four Franciscan friars followed by all the clergy of the region, then came the patriarchal cross, six attendants dressed in red capes, the musicians, the chaplains in their surplices, and representatives from every conceivable order, then there was a gap to prepare the crowd for what followed, the canons of the chapter wearing their cloaks, some in white linen, others embroidered, and each canon with his personal attendant, chosen from the nobility walking before him, and his train-bearer behind, then came the Patriarch, wearing sumptuous vestments and a priceless mitre encrusted with precious stones from Brazil, then the King with his court, the Attorney General with his counsellors, and a great following of more than three thousand

people, unless they were counted wrongly, and this extraordinary gathering had been assembled simply to lay a foundation stone, all the powers of the land were united here, with bugles and drums resounding through the air, above and below, there were cavalry and infantry troops as well as a German contingent of guards, and crowds upon crowds of spectators, the likes of which Mafra had never seen, but since it was impossible for all these people to fit into the church, entry was restricted to adults and the odd child who was smuggled in or managed to slip past the guards, earlier the soldiers had given the military salute and presented arms, it was still morning, and the strong wind had dropped at last, there was only the lightest breeze coming in from the sea, causing the flags to flutter and lifting the skirts of the women, a fresh little breeze in keeping with the season, but hearts burned with ardent faith, the souls of the faithful were exalted, and if some wills were flagging and anxious to take leave of their bodies, Blimunda arrived on the scene, and they were neither lost nor allowed to ascend to the stars.

The foundation stone was blessed, and then a second stone and a jasper urn, for all three were to be buried in the foundations, they were then carried in solemn procession in a litter, and inside the urn were placed coins of the day minted in gold, silver, and copper, some medals cast from gold, silver, and copper, and the parchment on which the solemn vow had been inscribed, the procession circled the entire square to give the crowd a good view, and people genuflected as the procession passed, only to find themselves constantly genuflecting for one reason or another, first the cross, then the Patriarch, then the King, and finally the friars and canons, so that many of them did not even bother to get up and remained on their knees. Finally the King, the Patriarch, and some acolytes proceeded to the chosen spot, where the foundation stone was to be laid, descending into the excavations by means of a broad wooden stairway two metres wide and comprising thirty steps, perhaps to commemorate the thirty pieces of silver given to Judas. The Patriarch carried the principal stone, assisted by the canons, while other canons followed carrying the second stone and the jasper urn, behind came the King and the Father General of the Sacred Order of St Bernard, who was almoner-in-chief and in that capacity he carried the money.

And so the King descended the thirty steps into the bowels of the earth, it looks as if he is departing this world, and that would mean a descent into hell were he not so well protected by blessings, scapulars, and novenas, and if these high walls inside the excavations should collapse, Your Royal Highness need have no fear, for we have propped them up with hardwood from Brazil to ensure greater strength, in the centre of the cavity stands a bench covered with crimson velvet, a colour frequently used in formal ceremonies of state, and the time will come when we shall see the same colour used for furnishing the interiors of theatres, on the bench is a silver bucket filled with holy water, and two small brushes made of green heather, their handles adorned with cords of silk and silver, and I as master of works pour a hod of lime and, Your Majesty, with this silver trowel will spread the lime, which has already been moistened with holy water sprinkled by the tiny brush, now lend a hand, we can lay the stone in position just as long as Your

Majesty is the last to touch it, ready now, one tap more for everyone to hear, Your Majesty can climb up now, be careful not to slip, we shall look after the rest and lay the other stones in position, each stone carefully slotted into its own groove, and let the nobles bring twelve more stones, a lucky number ever since the time of the apostles, and hods of lime inside silver baskets for the greater protection of the foundation stone, the local Viscount wishes to imitate the mason's apprentices by carrying a hod of lime on his head, thus showing greater devotion, since he did not make it in time to help Christ carry His cross, he pours out the lime that will dispose of him one day, and this would make a fine conceit, dear Sir, except that this lime is not quick but slaked, Just like the wills of human beings, as Blimumda would observe.

The following day, after the King had gone back to Lisbon, the church was dismantled without the assistance of the wind for there was nothing but the rain sent down by God, the planks and poles were set aside for less regal necessities, such as scaffolding, bunks, berths, tables, or clogs, the taffeta and damask silks, the sailcloths and canvas were folded and stored away, the silverware went to the treasury, the nobility and aristocracy back to their mansions, the organ to play other notes, the choir to sing other melodies, and the soldiers to parade elsewhere, only the friars remained, to keep a watchful eye, and those five metres of crucified wood, the cross, erected over the excavations. Men started to go back down into the waterlogged cavities, because the required depth had not been reached everywhere, His Majesty had not seen everything and only said, as he got into the carriage that would take him back to court, Let them get on with the job, it's more than six years since I made my pledge, and I don't want these Franciscans on my tail for much longer, let no expense be spared, as long as the work is completed soon. Back in Lisbon, the keeper of the privy purse informed the King, Your Royal Highness should be warned that the princely sum of two hundred thousand cruzados has been spent on the inauguration of the convent at Mafra and the King replied, Put it on the account, for the work is still in its initial stages, one day we shall need to total up our expenses, and we shall never know how much we have spent on the project unless we keep invoices, statements, receipts, and bulletins registering imports, we need not mention any deaths or fatalities for they come cheap.

When the weather cleared up, after a week, Baltasar Sete-Sóis and Blimunda left for Lisbon, in this life everyone has something to build, the labourers remain here to build walls so that once everything is assembled and ready we shall take off, for men are angels born without wings, nothing could be nicer than to be born without wings and to make them grow, this much we have achieved with our minds, and if we have succeeded in making our minds grow, we shall grow wings, too, So farewell, dear Father, farewell, dear Mother. They simply said farewell, nothing more, for Baltasar and Blimunda did not know how to compose pretty speeches, nor were the old couple capable of understanding them, but with the passage of time you will always find yourself imagining that you might have said this or that, even believing that you actually said those words, so that what one narrates often becomes more real than the actual events narrated, however difficult

it may be to put real events into words, such as when Marta Maria says, Farewell, I shall never see you again, and she never spoke truer words, for the walls of the basilica will not have risen one metre above the ground before Marta Maria is laid to rest in her grave. With her death, João Francisco will suddenly become twice as old, and take to sitting under the roof of the oven, his eyes devoid of expression, just as they are at this moment, as his son, Baltasar, and his daughter Blimunda, for daughter-in-law is a cheerless word, make their departure, however, he still has Marta Maria here beside him, even though she is alienated from life and has one foot in the grave already, her hands clasped over her womb, which begot life and is now begetting death. Her children emerged from the mine of her body, some to perish, though two survived, this one will not be born, for it is her own death, We cannot see them any more, let's go inside, says João Francisco.

It is December, and the days are short, heavy clouds hasten the encroaching darkness, so Baltasar and Blimunda decide to take refuge for the night in a hayloft at Morelena, they have explained they are travelling from Mafra to Lisbon, the farmer can see they are decent folk and loans them a blanket to cover themselves, such is his confidence. We already know how much these two love each other with their bodies, their souls, and their wills as they lie in each other's arms, their wills and souls witness their enraptured bodies, and possibly cling to them even more closely, in order to share their pleasure, difficult to know which part resides where, if the soul is losing or gaining when Blimunda lifts her skirts and Baltasar undoes his breeches, whether the soul is gaining or losing as they lie there sighing and moaning, or if the body conquers or is vanquished when Baltasar reposes inside Blimunda and she gives him repose, their bodies at rest. There is no more satisfying smell than that of turned hay, of bodies under a blanket, of oxen feeding at the trough, the scent of cold air filtering through the chinks in the hayloft, and perhaps the scent of the moon, for everyone knows that the night assumes a different smell when there is moonlight, and even a blind man, who is incapable of distinguishing night from day, will say, The moon is shining, St Lucy is believed to have worked this miracle, so it is really only a question of inhaling, Yes, my friends, what a splendid moon this evening.

In the morning, before sunrise, they got up, Blimunda had already eaten her bread. She folded the blanket, simply a woman respecting an ancient gesture, opening and closing her arms, securing the folded blanket under her chin, then lowering her hands to the centre of her own body, where she makes one final fold, no one looking at her would ever suspect that Blimunda has strange visionary powers, that if she could step outside her body this night, she would see herself lying underneath Baltasar, and it can truly be said of Blimunda that she can see her own eyes seeing. When the farmer comes to the hayloft he will find that the blanket has been folded as a sign of gratitude, and, being a mischievous fellow, he will cross-examine the oxen, Tell me, was Mass celebrated here last night, they will turn their heads with serene indifference, men always have something to say, and sometimes hit the nail on the head, for there was no difference

whatsoever between the ritual of those lovers and the sacrifice of Holy Mass, and if there were, the Mass would surely lose out.

Blimunda and Baltasar are already on their way to Lisbon, skirting the hills, where windmills suddenly loom up from nowhere, the sky is overcast, the sun momentarily appears, only to vanish from sight once more, a southerly wind brings the threat of heavy rain, and Baltasar thinks, If it begins to rain we shall have nowhere to shelter, He then looks up at the cloud-ridden sky, one great sombre plaque, the colour of slate, he tells her, If wills are dark clouds, perhaps they're trapped in these thick, black clouds shutting out the sun, and Blimunda replies, If only you could see the dark cloud inside you, Or inside you, Or inside me, but if only you could see it, then you would realise that a cloud in the sky is nothing compared with the cloud inside man, But you've never seen my cloud or yours, No one can see his own will, and I swore that I would never look inside you, my mother was not mistaken, Baltasar Sete-Sóis, for when you give me your hand, when you embrace me, I do not need to see inside you, If I should die before you, I beg of you to look inside me, When you die, your will takes leave of your body, Who knows.

There was no rain throughout the journey, just that grey, dark roof extending southwards and hovering over Lisbon, level with the hills on the horizon, and this gave the impression that by raising one hand you might touch its surface, at times nature is a perfect companion, a man is journeying, a woman is journeying, and the clouds say among themselves, Let's wait until they are safely home, then we can turn to rain. Baltasar and Blimunda arrived at the estate and entered the coach-house, and at last the rain began to fall, and because some of the tiles were cracked, the water trickled in discreetly, whispering softly, I'm here, now that you've arrived safely. And when Baltasar went up to the shell of the flying machine and touched it, the metal frame and wires creaked, but it is more difficult to know what they were trying to say.

THE WIRES AND irons have started to rust, the cloths have become covered in mildew, the dried out canes have started to untwine, a half-finished job does not need to grow old in order to disintegrate. Baltasar walked around the flying machine twice and was much put out by what he saw, with the hook on his left arm he tugged violently at the metallic skeleton, rubbing iron against iron to test its resistance, which he found to be poor, It strikes me that it would be better to dismantle the entire machine and start again, Dismantle it, by all means, but is it worth starting to rebuild it before Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço arrives, We could have remained in Mafra a little longer, If Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço said that we should come at once, then he is likely to arrive soon, who knows, perhaps he has already been here while we were waiting for the inauguration, there are no signs that he has been here, I hope you're right, So do I.

Within a week the machine was no longer a machine and bore no resemblance to its former self, what remained might have been mistaken for a thousand different things, men do not make use of all that many materials, and much depends on the way they are produced, arranged, and combined, just think of the hoe and the plane, a little metal and a little wood, and what the one implement does the other does not. Blimunda suggested, While we're waiting for Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço to arrive, let's build the forge, But how can we make the bellows, You must go to a blacksmith and see how it's done, if it doesn't work at first, try a second time, and if that doesn't work, try a third time, that's as much as anyone can expect of us, There's no need to take so much trouble, for Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço has left us enough money to buy the bellows, But someone is bound to ask why Baltasar Sete-Sóis needs bellows when he is neither a blacksmith nor an ironsmith, better to make them yourself, even if it means trying a hundred times.

Baltasar did not go alone. Though this expedition did not call for dual vision, Blimunda possessed the greater powers of observation, a more precise eye for linear detail, and a much keener perception of relative proportions when assessing a job. Dipping a finger into the murky oil of the lamp, she drew the various parts on the wall, the length of hide they required, the spout through which the air would be released, the fixed base, which would be made from wood, and the other section, which would be jointed, so that all they required now was a treadle for the bellows. In the far corner they built four walls with regular-shaped stones to the height of a man's waist, bracing them with wires inside and all around on the outside, then filling it in with soil and rubble. This operation robbed the Duke of Aveiro's estate of some of its walls, but although the estate does not strictly belong to the King like the convent at Mafra, it does have a royal licence, which has probably been long since ignored or forgotten, otherwise Dom João V might have sent someone to inquire whether Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço still hoped to fly one day or if this was simply a ruse to allow three people to live out their dreams when they could be more usefully employed, the priest in spreading the word of God, Blimunda in divining sources of water, and Baltasar in begging alms so that the gates of paradise might be opened to his benefactors, for when it comes to flying, it has been clearly shown that only the angels or the devil can fly, everyone knows that angels fly, and some have

even attested to this phenomenon, and as for the devil, it is confirmed by Holy Scripture that he can fly, for there it is written that the devil took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple, and he must have carried Him through the air, because they did not climb up a ladder, and he taunted Jesus, saying, Cast thyself down, and Jesus refused, because He had no desire to be the first man to fly, One day the sons of men will fly, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço said when he arrived to find the forge ready and also the trough for tempering the metal, All they needed now were the bellows, the wind will blow at the right moment, just as some mysterious spirit has blown through this place.

How many wills did you collect today, Blimunda, the priest asked during supper that same evening, No fewer than thirty, she replied, So few, have you collected more from men or from women, he went on to ask, Mostly from men, the wills of women seem less inclined to be separated from their bodies, for some strange reason. The priest did not react, but Baltasar said, Sometimes when my dark cloud covers your dark cloud they almost merge, Then you must have less will power than me, Blimunda replied, it is just as well that Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço is not offended by these frank exchanges, perhaps he, too, has had some experience of enfeebled wills during his travels through Holland or even here in Portugal, without its being brought to the attention of the Inquisition, or perhaps the Inquisition chooses to ignore the matter since this frailty is accompanied by much more grievous sins.

Let's turn to more serious matters now, said Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, I shall come here as often as possible, but the work can only make progress if you are both involved, you did well to build the forge, and I shall find some means of obtaining bellows, you mustn't tire yourselves out with this labour, but we must make certain that the bellows are large enough for the machine, I'll leave you a drawing, so that in the absence of any wind, the bellows will do the job, and we'll fly, and you, Blimunda, mustn't forget that we need at least two thousand wills desiring to be free of their unworthy bodies or souls, the thirty wills you have gathered there could not lift Pegasus off the ground, even though he was a horse with wings, just think how big the earth is that we tread, it pulls bodies downwards, and although the sun is even greater, it still cannot pull the earth towards it, now, if we are to succeed in flying through the air, we shall need the combined forces of sun, amber, magnets, and wills, but the wills are the most important of all, without them, the earth will not allow us to ascend, and if you want to collect wills, Blimunda, mingle with the crowds at the Corpus Christi procession, amidst such a large gathering of people, there are bound to be plenty of wills ready for collecting, for you ought to know that processions encourage bodies and souls to weaken to such an extent that they are no longer even capable of safeguarding their wills, this doesn't occur at bullfights or at autos-da-fé, where there is so much excitement that the darkest clouds grow even darker than souls, it's like being in war, universal darkness pervading the hearts of men.

Baltasar asked, How shall I set about rebuilding the flying machine. Just as before, the same large bird you see in my sketch, and these are the various sections of the

construction, I'm also leaving you this other drawing, with the measurements of the different parts, you must build the machine from the base upwards, just as if you were building a ship, you will entwine the cane and wire as if you were attaching feathers to bones, as I said before, I shall come whenever possible, to purchase the iron you should go to this place, the willows growing in the region will provide you with all the cane you need, and you can obtain hides from the slaughterhouse for the bellows, and I'll show you how to cure and cut them, Blimunda's sketches are all right for bellows to be used in a forge, but not for bellows capable of helping a machine to fly, and here is some money to buy a donkey, otherwise you'll find it impossible to transport all the necessary materials, you should also buy some large baskets, and stock up on grass and straw so that you can conceal what you carry in them, don't forget that this whole operation must be carried out in absolute secrecy, You should say nothing either to friends or relatives, there must be no other friends apart from our three selves, if anyone should come around snooping, you will say that you're looking after the estate by order of the King, to whom I, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão, am responsible. De what, Blimunda and Baltasar asked with one voice, De Gusmão, the surname I assumed to show my indebtedness to the priest who tutored me in Brazil, Bartolomeu Lourenço was name enough, Blimunda blurted out, for I shall never get used to adding on de Gusmão, That won't be necessary, for you and Baltasar I shall always be the same Bartolomeu Lourenço, but the court and the academies will be expected to address me as Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão because anyone who, like me, has a doctorate in canon law must have a name that accords with his status, Adam had no other name, Baltasar observed, And God has no name at all, the priest rejoined, for God cannot be named, and in paradise there was no other man from whom Adam had to be distinguished, And Eve was known only as Eve, Blimunda intervened, And Eve continues to be no one other than Eve, for I'm of the firm opinion that woman is but one in this world and multiple only in appearance, so she can dispense with any other name, and you are Blimunda, tell me, are you in need of Jesus, I am a Christian, Who denies it, Padre Bartolomeu reassured her before continuing, You understand my meaning, but anyone who claims to belong to Jesus, in conviction or name, is nothing but a hypocrite, so be yourself, Blimunda, and give no other reply when someone asks you your name.

The priest has returned to his studies in Coimbra, already in possession of bachelor's and master's degrees and soon he will also possess a doctorate, meanwhile, Baltasar takes the iron to the forge and tempers it in the well, and Blimunda scrapes the hides brought from the slaughterhouse, together they cut the willow cane and work at the anvil, she holding the sheet metal with pincers while he beats it with a hammer, both of them working to the same rhythm to ensure a steady pace, she holds out the smelted iron and he deals a cautious blow as they labour in perfect harmony without any need for words. And so the winter passed, and the spring, sometimes the priest came to Lisbon, and the moment he arrived, he would store in a chest the globes of yellow amber that he had brought with him, saying nothing of how he had obtained them, he would ask about the wills and inspect the machine from every angle which was rapidly taking shape and

already much larger than when Baltasar had dismantled it, he then advised them how to proceed and returned to Coimbra to his decrees and those who issue them, Padre Bartolomeu was no longer a student and already giving lectures, *Iuris ecclesiastici universi libri tre, Colectanea doctorum tam veteram quam recentiorum in ius pontificum universum, Reportorium iuris civilis et canonici, et coetera*, without coming across any passage where there was written, You will fly.

June arrives. The sad news rapidly spreads throughout Lisbon that this year the Corpus Christi procession will not parade the ancient effigies of the giants, or the hissing serpent, or the fiery dragon, and there will be no mock bullfights, no traditional dances typical of Lisbon, no marimbas or bagpipes, nor will King David appear dancing in front of the canopy. The people ask themselves what sort of a procession this will turn out to be if there are no jesters from Arruda to deafen the streets with their tambourines, and the women from Frielas are forbidden to dance their version of the chaconne, and if the sword-dance is not to be performed, nor are there to be any floats, bagpipes, or drums, no frolicking of satyrs and nymphs to cover up frolics of another kind, the dance of the bishop's crozier will be banned, and the ship of St Peter will not sail forth on sturdy male shoulders, so what kind of procession is this meant to be, what pleasure will it give the people, for even if they should decide to allow the float organised by the kitchen gardeners, we shall no longer hear the hissing serpent, dear cousin, which used to give me the shivers, when it went swishing past, I cannot tell you how it used to terrify me.

The people flock to the Palace Square to see the preparations for the feast, and it all looks very promising, yes, sir, with a colonnade of sixty-one columns and fourteen pillars at least eight metres high, and the entire arrangement is more than six hundred metres in length, there are no fewer than four façades with innumerable statues, medallions, pyramids, and other decorations. The crowds begin to admire this latest pageant, and there is much more to see if you look ahead at the streets covered in bunting, where the masts supporting the marquees are decorated with silver and gold, and the medallions suspended from each marquee are overlaid with gold, on one side they depict the Blessed Sacrament surrounded by rays of light, and on the other, the Patriarch's coat of arms, while both sides carry the coat of arms of the Senate Chamber, And what about the windows, just look at those windows, as someone rightly exclaimed, for eyes are bewitched by the magnificent spectacle of draperies and valances in crimson damask fringed and tasselled with gold, We've never seen anything like it, the populace is almost ready to voice its approval, they have been robbed of one feast only to gain another, and it is difficult to decide which is the better of the two, the one is probably as good as the other, for some reason or other, the goldsmiths have announced that they intend to pay for illuminations in all the streets, and perhaps for the same reason the hundred and forty-nine columns of the archways in the Rua Nova have been adorned with silk and damask, no doubt, shopkeepers are anxious to exploit this opportunity to do good business. The crowds stroll by, reach the end of the road, and turn back, without so much as stretching out their fingers to touch those magnificent draperies, they are content to

feast their eyes on these, as well as on the other silks and satins that enhance the display of merchandise under the archways, we appear to be living in the kingdom of trust, every shop, however, has its own black slave in the doorway, a club in one hand and a rapier in the other, any would-be pilferer is likely to receive a blow on the back, and the bailiffs are on hand to deal with more serious crimes, they carry neither helmet nor shield, but if the magistrate orders, Off with him to the Limoeiro, what is to be done except obey and miss the procession, and this might explain why there are so few thefts from the Body of Christ.

Nor will there be any stealing of wills. It is time for the new moon, for the moment, Blimunda's eyes are no different from those of other people, no matter whether she eats or fasts, and this makes her tranquil, content to allow wills to do as they please, to remain in the body or depart, hoping this will bring some rest, but suddenly she is troubled by a fleeting thought, What other dark cloud shall I perceive in the Body of Christ, in His carnal body, she whispered to Baltasar, and he replied in the same hushed tones, It must be that and that alone which would get the Passarola off the ground and into the skies, and Blimunda added, Who knows, perhaps all we really see is nothing but the dark cloud of God.

These are the words exchanged by a disabled man and a clairvoyant, one must forgive them their eccentricities and this conversation about transcendental things, while night has already fallen as they stroll through the streets between the Rossio and the Palace Square, amid the crowds who will not sleep this night and who, like them, tread the blood-red sand and the grass brought in by peasants to carpet the pavements, the city has never looked cleaner, this city that on most days has no equal in filth and squalor. Behind the windows the ladies are putting the finishing touches to their coiffures in elaborate rituals of pomp and artifice, soon they will be exhibiting themselves at their windows, none of these ladies wishes to be the first to appear, for while she is certain to attract the immediate attention of passers-by, no sooner does she start to enjoy this success than all is lost as the window opposite opens and another woman, her neighbour and rival, appears to divert the gaze of the admiring spectators, jealousy tortures me, especially when the other woman is so offensively ugly while I am divinely beautiful, her mouth is enormous, mine but a rosebud, and before my rival has time to speak, I call out, Away with you, flatterer. In these tournaments among the ladies, those who live on the lower floors enjoy certain advantages, without further ado the gallants beat out the metre and the rhyme of some conceit in their empty heads, while from the upper floors of the building descends another conceit, declaimed for all to hear, the first poet responds by reciting his lines while the others eye him coldly, betraying their rage and contempt that he should win the lady's favours, thus confirming their suspicions that this coupling of epigraph and gloss hints at coupling of another order. These suspicions remain unspoken, because they are all equally at fault.

The night is warm. People stroll to and fro, playing and singing, street urchins chase one another, this is a plague without remedy that has been with us since the world

began, the little wretches hide behind the women's skirts and receive a kick in the pants or cuff on the ear from the men accompanying the women, which merely sends them scampering off to make a nuisance of themselves elsewhere. They improvise mock bullfights with a simple little bull made out of two ram's horns, perhaps ill-matched, and the branch of an aloe tree fixed to a wooden board with a handle in front, held against the body like a shield, the urchin who plays the bull attacks with great panache and receives the wooden banderillas embedded in his shield with cries of feigned torment, but if the banderillero misses his aim and is butted by the bull, all nobility of caste is lost and another chase ensues, which soon gets out of hand, the tumult unsettles the poets, who ask to have the conceit repeated, calling up, What did you say, and grinning, the ladies reply, A thousand little birds bring me tokens of love, and so, with these intrigues, frolics, and scamperings, the crowd whiles away the night on the streets, and indoors there is revelry and cups of chocolate, as dawn breaks, the troops who will flank the procession start to assemble once more in ceremonial dress in honour of the Blessed Sacrament.

In Lisbon, no one has slept. The frolickings are over, the women have withdrawn from their windows to renew their smudged or faded cosmetics, they will be back at their windows shortly, once more resplendent with rouge and powder. The crowd of whites, blacks, and mulattos of every hue, these, those, and all the others line the streets in the hazy morning light, only the Palace Square, open to the river and the sky, reveals a blue patch amid the shadows, which unexpectedly turns to red in the direction of the Palace and patriarchal church as the sun breaks over the terrain beyond and dispels the mist with a luminous puff. The procession is about to begin. It is led by the Masters of the House of the Twenty-Four Guilds, first come the carpenters, carrying the banner of their patron, St Joseph, then come the other insignia, huge banners depicting the patron saint of each guild, made from damask brocade and trimmed with gold, are so enormous that it takes four men to support them, who alternate with four others so that they may rest in turn, fortunately, there is no wind, and as they proceed the silk cords and gilt tassels hanging from the tips of the poles sway to the rhythm of their gait. Next comes the statue of St George with all due solemnity, drummers on foot, buglers mounted, the former drumming, the latter blowing, rataplan tarara ta tara, Baltasar is not among the spectators in the Palace Square, but he hears the bugles in the distance, he breaks out in goose-pimples as if he were back on the battlefield, watching the enemy prepare to attack before our forces retaliate, and suddenly he feels a sharp pain in his stump, he has not felt such pain in a long time, perhaps it is because he has not attached his hook or spike, for the body registers these things, as well as other memories and illusions, Blimunda, were it not for you, whom would I have at my right-hand side to embrace with this arm, it is you I hold tight by the shoulder or waist with my good hand, something people find strange, unaccustomed as they are to seeing a man and a woman being so demonstrative in public. The flags have disappeared, the sounds of the bugles and drums fade into the distance, and now comes the standard-bearer of St George, the king-at-arms, the armoured knight, clad from head to foot in armour, with plumed helmet and lowered visor, the saint's adjutant in battle, who carries his flag and lance and precedes

him to ascertain whether the dragon is roused or asleep, an unnecessary precaution now, because the dragon is unlikely to appear or to be caught napping when he has been eliminated, alas, from the Corpus Christi procession, this is no way to treat dragons, serpents, and giants, and it is a sad world that allows itself to be deprived of such attractions, in the end, some will be preserved or will prove to be so attractive that those responsible for transforming the procession will be reluctant to retain them, in case people speak of nothing else, for horses either have to be kept in their stables or left like miserable lepers to pasture as best they can in the open fields, and here come forty-six black and grey horses with opulent saddle-cloths, so help me God if these animals are not better dressed than the spectators who watch them go past, this being the feast of Corpus Christi, everyone dresses up in his Sunday best, in clothes worthy to witness the Lord, who, having made us naked, only admits us to His presence when we are dressed, what is one to make of such a God, or the religion that represents Him, it is true that not many of us are beautiful to behold when we are naked, as you can tell from certain faces without cosmetics, let us imagine what St George, who is now looming into sight, would look like if we were to remove his silver armour and plumed helmet, a puppet on hinges, without a wisp of hair where men are hirsute, a man should be able to be a saint and still have what othermen possess, and there should be no conceivable sanctity that has not experienced a man's strength plus the weakness that is often inherent in that strength, how can one explain these things to St George, who comes mounted on a white horse, if such an animal can be called a horse, for it lives in the royal stables with its own groom to brush and exercise it, a horse kept solely for the saint to ride, never mounted by the devil or by man, a sad beast that will die without ever having lived, may God grant that once it is dead and flayed, its skin will be used for a drum and that whosoever plays that drum will rouse its savage heart, now aged and spent, everything in this world, however, is ultimately balanced and recompensed, as was seen with the death of the child in Mafra and that of the Infante Dom Pedro, and today that conviction is reaffirmed, St George's page is a young squire riding a black steed, with raised lance and plumed helmet, and how many mothers lining those streets, watching the procession over the shoulders of the soldiers, will dream this night that it is their own son who rides that horse, St George's page on earth and perhaps even in heaven, for such an honour it would be worth bearing a child, and once more St George approaches, this time depicted on a huge banner carried by the Confraternity of the Royal Church of the Royal Hospital, and to conclude this opening highlight come timpanists and trumpeters dressed in velvet with white plumes in their caps, and now there is the briefest pause as the confraternities exit from the Royal Chapel, thousands of men and women according to rank and sex, here Adams do not mingle with Eves, look, there goes António Maria, and Simão Nunes, and Manuel Caetano, and José Bernardo, and Ana da Conceição, and António de Beja, and the somewhat less important José dos Santos, and Brás Francisco, and Pedro Caim, and Maria Caldas, names as varied as the colours of their cloaks of red, blue, white, dark crimson, green, and black, just as some of the passing brethren are black, but sadly, this confraternity, even while participating in the procession, is unlikely to arrive at the steps of the altar of Our Lord Jesus Christ, unless one day God disguises Himself as a black man

and proclaims in every church throughout the land that a white man is worth half a black one, so it is up to you if you want to enter the gates of paradise, which explains why the beaches of this garden, planted, as it so happens, on the seashore, will one day become crowded with aspirants trying to darken their skin, an idea that would cause amusement, some do not even frequent the beaches, but stay at home and use various oils to darken their complexions, so that when they go out they are no longer recognised even by their neighbours, who comment, What's this fellow doing here, and this is the great difficulty faced by the coloured confraternities, meanwhile the following appear, more or less in this order, the confraternity of Our Lady of Holy Doctrine, that of Jesus and Mary, of the Holy Rosary, of St Benedict, a portly figure despite much abstinence, of Our Lady of All Graces, of St Crispin, of the Mother of God from São Sebastião of Pedreira, where Baltasar and Blimunda live, of the Via Sacra of St Peter and St Paul, another confraternity of the Via Sacra but this time from Alecrim, of Our Lady of Succour, of Jesus, of Our Lady of Remembrance, and of Our Lady of Good Health, for without her how will Rosa Maria keep her virginity, and what virtue can Severa hope to preserve, then comes the Confraternity of Our Lady da Oliveira, under whose shade Baltasar once ate, that of St Antony of the Franciscan Nuns of St Martha, of Our Lady of Repose of the Flemish Nuns from Alcântara, of the Holy Rosary, of Holy Christ, of St Antony, of Our Lady of the Penitentiary, and of St Mary the Egyptian, and if Baltasar were a soldier in the royal guard, he would be entitled to belong to this particular confraternity, and it is a great pity that there is no confraternity for the disabled, next comes the Brotherhood of Charity, which might be a suitable confraternity for Baltasar, and yet another Confraternity of Our Lady of the Penitentiary, but this time from the Carmelite Convent, for the previous one was that of the Tertiaries of St Francis, the procession appears to have run out of invocations, so the participants start repeating them, the Confraternity of Holy Christ reappears, this time from the Holy Trinity, whereas the previous one came from the Convent of St Paul, then the Brotherhood of Eternal Rest, then that of St Lucy, of Our Lady of a Good Death, if there is such a thing as a good death, and of Jesus of the Forgotten, then the Confraternity of the Souls of the Church of the Immaculate Conception, come rain or shine, that of Our Lady of the City, of the Souls of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, of Our Lady of Mercy, of St Joseph, Patron Saint of Carpenters, of Holy Succour, of Compassion, of St Catherine, of the Lost Child, some lost, others forgotten, neither found nor remembered, for not even remembrance does them any good, that of Our Lady of the Purification, another Confraternity of St Catherine, the previous one was for booksellers, this one is for road pavers, the Confraternity of St Anne, that of St Eloi, the rich little patron saint of the goldsmiths, that of St Michael and the Holy Souls, of St Martial, of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, of St Justa, of St Rufina, of the Souls of the Martyrs, of Wounds, of the Mother of God and St Francis of the City, that of Our Lady of Sorrows, as if we did not already have enough sorrows, and finally of the Holy Remedies, for remedies always come afterwards and nearly always when it is much too late, so any remaining hopes are placed in the Blessed Sacrament, which is now arriving, the image is depicted on a banner and preceded by the precursor St John the Baptist, who appears as a child, dressed in skins and accompanied by four angels who scatter flowers as they advance,

and it is difficult to believe that there could be another land where more angels roam the streets, you need only stretch out a finger to perceive at once that they are real, it is true they do not fly, but that goes to show that to be able to fly is not sufficient proof of the angelic state, if Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmão, or simply Lourenço, should start to fly one day, he will not suddenly find himself transformed into an angel, other qualities are essential, but it is much too soon to pursue these inquiries, for we still need to collect many more wills and we are only halfway through the procession, the heat becomes more intense as the morning advances on the eighth of June in the year seventeen hundred and nineteen, what comes next, the religious communities, but the crowd pays little attention, friars pass and are ignored, and no one seems interested in identifying the different orders, Blimunda was looking up at the sky and Baltasar was looking at Blimunda, she doubting whether there would be a new moon until she saw some sign above the Carmelite Convent, that first tapered crescent, a curved blade, a pointed scimitar capable of prising open all those bodies before her very eyes, just at that moment the first religious order passed, which one, I didn't notice, they were friars, tertiaries of St Francis of Jesus, Capuchins, monks from the Convent of St John of God, Franciscans, Carmelites, Dominicans, Cistercians, Jesuits from St Rock and St Antony, with so many colours and names that heads begin to spin and memories to wander, and now it is time to eat the food one has either provided or bought, and as we eat, we comment on the habits of the religious orders who have just passed, the gold crosses, the mutton sleeves, the white kerchiefs, the long cloaks, the high stockings, the buckled shoes, the puffs and gatherings, the full skirts, the colourful mantles, the lace collars and long jackets, only the lilies of the field do not know how to thread or weave and are therefore naked, and if God had wanted us to go around naked, He would have made men lilylike, fortunately, women do look like lilies, but with clothes on, Blimunda looks like one, with or without clothes, what thoughts are these, Baltasar, what sinful memories to be having when the cross from the Patriarchal Basilica is arriving, immediately behind the communities of the Congregation of Missions and the Oratory, and innumerable members of the clergy from the parishes, ah, dear friends, so many people anxious to save our souls, which still have to be found, do not imagine, Baltasar, because you are a soldier, even though disabled, that you belong to the confraternity now passing, one hundred and eighty-four men from the Military Order of St James of the Sword, one hundred and fifty from the Order of Aviz, and about the same number from the Order of Christ, the last of these is formed by monks who decide for themselves who can join their confraternity, although God has no wish to see defective animals on His, altars, especially if they are of the lower orders, so let Baltasar stay where he is, watching the procession go by, the pages, the choristers, the chamberlains, two lieutenants of the royal guard, one, two, in full dress uniform, which nowadays we would probably refer to as ceremonial dress, then the patriarchal cross, with blood-red whips hanging from one side, the chaplains carrying staffs crested with posies of carnations, ah, the sad destiny of flowers, for one day they will be attached to the barrels of rifles, then the choirboys of the Basilica of St Mary Major, which is both umbrella and basilica, with alternate sections in red and white, and in two or three hundred years people will start

referring to umbrellas as basilicas, and you will hear them say, My basilica has a broken rib, I've left my basilica on the bus, I've had a new handle made for my basilica, When will my basilica at Mafra be ready, the King muses as he walks behind, holding one of the poles supporting the canopy, but first comes the cathedral chapter, the deacons in their white dalmatics, then the priests wearing chasubles of the same colour, and finally the church dignitaries with amice, cope, and silver plaque, what are the masses likely to know about these names, when it comes to the mitre, they are familiar with both the word and the form, for mitre is the pope's nose you find in the chicken's arse and the hat stuck on the canon's head, each canon in the procession is assisted by three members of his household, one with a lighted torch, another carrying the canon's hat, and both in court dress, while his train-bearer is dressed in coat of mail, now the Patriarch's entourage appears, first come six relatives of noble birth carrying lighted torches, then his beneficed assistant with the crozier, accompanied by another chaplain with the incense boat, followed by the acolytes swinging thuribles in wrought silver, two masters of ceremonies, and twelve pages who also carry torches, ah, you sinners, you men and women who spend your ephemeral lives courting perdition by fornicating and eating and drinking in excess, neglecting the sacraments, omitting to pay tithes, and speaking of hell with contempt and bravado, you men who at the slightest opportunity fondle women's buttocks in church, you shameless women who do everything in church short of fondling men's private parts, look at what is passing, the canopy supported by eight poles and I, the Patriarch beneath it, holding up the sacred monstrance, kneel, kneel, you sinners, you should castrate yourselves at once and fornicate no more, you should gag your mouths at once rather than contaminate your souls with so much food and drink, you should empty your pockets at once, because you will have no use for escudos in paradise or in hell, and in purgatory debts are honoured with prayers, your escudos are needed here on earth to purchase gold for another monstrance, to keep all these church dignitaries in silver, the two canons who raise the corners of my cape and carry the mitres, the two subdeacons who raise the hem of my vestments in front, and the train-bearers behind, which explains why they grovel so, this intimate friend who has the rank of count and carries the train of my cape, the two esquires with the flabella, and the mace-bearers with their silver staffs, the first subdeacon carries the veil of the golden mitre, for it must not be touched by hand. Christ was foolish never to have worn a mitre on His head, He may have been the Son of God, but He was somewhat gauche, for it is common knowledge that no religion can prosper without the wearing of a mitre, tiara, or bowler hat, had Christ worn any one of these three, He would have been made a high priest and been appointed governor instead of Pontius Pilate, just think what I should have escaped, and what a better world this might have been, had it turned out otherwise and they had not made me Patriarch, render unto Caesar what belongs to God, and render unto God what belongs to Caesar, then we shall settle accounts and share the money, one piece of silver for me and one for you, truly I say unto you, as say I must, Behold how I, your sovereign King of Portugal, the Algarves and all the rest, walk devoutly in the procession holding one of these gilded poles, and how a sovereign strives to protect his homeland and people both temporally and spiritually, I could have just ordered a footman to take my place, or have appointed a

duke or marquis to take my place, but here I am in person and accompanied by the Infantes, my relatives and your masters, kneel, kneel, for the sacred monstrance is about to pass and I am passing, and Christ the King is inside the monstrance, and inside me is the grace of being king on earth, the king made of flesh, in order to feel, for you well know how nuns are regarded as the spouses of Christ, and that is the holy truth, for they receive me in their beds as they receive the Lord, and it is because I am their Lord that they sigh in ecstasy, clutching their rosary in one hand, mystical flesh, mingled and united, while the saints in the oratory strain their ears to hear the words of passion whispered under the canopy, a canopy stretched over heaven, for this is heaven and there is none better, and Christ crucified droops His head to one side, wretched fellow, perhaps overwhelmed by suffering, perhaps to get a better look at Paula as she removes her clothes, perhaps consumed with jealousy that He should be robbed of this spouse, a flower of the cloister perfumed by incense, adorable flesh, but that's that, I then depart, leaving her behind, and if she ends up pregnant the child is mine, no need to announce it a second time, there come the choristers behind, singing motets and hymns, and this gives me an idea, for kings are a veritable mine of ideas, how could they govern otherwise, so let the nuns of Odivelas come to sing the Benedictus in Paula's chamber as we lie in each other's arms, before, during, and after intercourse, amen.

Salvos rang out and rockets were fired from the ships, there was also a salute from the nearby fortress in the Palace Square, its echoes resounding far and wide, cannons were fired from garrisons and towers, the royal regiments from Peniche and Setubal presented arms, and formed ranks in the square. The Body of Christ is carried through the city of Lisbon, the sacrificial lamb, the Lord of all armies, unfathomable contradiction, golden sun, crystal, and monstrance that causes heads to bow, divinity devoured and digested until it becomes faeces, who will be astonished to see you hand in glove with these inhabitants, slaughtered sheep, devourers of their own devoured selves, which is why men and women drag themselves through the streets, strike themselves and others in the face, beat loudly on their breasts and thighs, stretch out their hands to touch the hems that pass, the brocades and lace, the velvets and ribbons, the embroidery and jewels, Pater noster qui non estis in coelis.

It is getting late. In the sky there is the faintest light, almost invisible, the first sign of the moon. Tomorrow Blimunda will have her eyes, today is a day for blindness.

PADRE BARTOLOMEU LOURENÇO has now returned from Coimbra with his doctorate in canon law, and de Gusmão has been officially added to his surname and signature, and who are we to accuse him of the sin of pride, better to forgive him his lack of humility for the reasons he himself gave, so that we might be forgiven our own sins, that of pride and all the others, for it would be much worse to change one's face or word than to change one's name. His face and word do not appear to have changed, nor has his name for Baltasar and Blimunda, and if the King has made him a chaplain of the royal household and an academician of the Royal Academy, these are faces and words that can be assumed and dropped, and together with his adopted name, they remain outside the gates of the Duke of Aveiro's estate and do not enter although one can imagine how these three would react if they were to confront the machine, the aristocrat would see them as mechanical inventions, the chaplain would exorcise the diabolical work there on display, and, because this was something destined for the future, the academician would withdraw and only return when it finally belonged to the past. However, this is today.

The priest lives in one of the houses overlooking the Palace Square, in apartments rented out by a woman who has been widowed for many years, and whose husband was a mace-bearer at the Palace until he was stabbed in a brawl during the reign of Dom Pedro II, an incident long since forgotten and only raised here because the woman happens to live in the same house as the priest and it would look bad not to give those few facts at least, even while withholding her name, which tells us nothing, as I have already explained. The priest lives close to the Palace, and just as well, because he goes there frequently, not so much because of his duties as a chaplain appointed to the royal household, for that title is honorary in the main, but because the King is fond of him and has not given up hope of seeing his enterprise completed, and since eleven years have already elapsed, the King inquires tactfully, Shall I see your machine fly one day, a question Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço cannot honestly answer except to say, Your Majesty may rest assured that my machine will fly one day, But will I be here to see it fly, May Your Majesty live almost as long as the ancient patriarchs of the Old Testament, and may you not only see the machine fly but fly it yourself. This answer borders on insolence, but the King does not appear to notice, or if he does, he chooses to be indulgent, or perhaps he is distracted as he remembers having promised to attend the harpsichord lesson about to be given to his daughter, the Infanta Dona Maria Bárbara, that must surely be the reason, he invites the priest to join his entourage, and not everyone can boast of such an honour.

The Infanta is seated at the harpsichord, and although she is barely nine years of age, heavy responsibilities already weigh on that little head, learning to place her stubby fingers on the right keys, to be aware, if she is aware, that a convent is being built in Mafra, for there is much truth in the saying that trivial events can spark off the most prodigious consequences, the birth of a child in Lisbon results in a convent being built, a gigantic edifice in stone, and Domenico Scarlatti being contracted to come all the way from London. Their Royal Majesties preside at the lesson with little ostentation, some

thirty people are present, if that, counting the footmen of the week attending upon the King and the Queen, the governesses, several ladies-in-waiting, as well as Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmão in the background along with several other clerics. The maestro corrects her fingering, fa la do, fa la do, the royal Infanta pouts and bites her lip, in this she is no different from any other child her age, whether born in a palace or anywhere else, her mother suppresses a certain impatience, her father is regal and severe, only women, with their tender hearts, allow themselves to be lulled by music and by a little girl, even when she plays so badly, and we need not be surprised to find Dona Maria Ana expecting miracles, even though the Infanta is still a beginner and Signor Scarlatti has been in Lisbon only a few months, and why must these foreigners complicate their names, when it takes so little to discover that his real name is Scarlet, and very suitable, too, for he is a fine figure of a man, with a long face, a broad, firm mouth, and eyes set wide apart, I do not know what it is about the Italians, especially this one, who comes from Naples and is thirty-five years old. It's the force of life, my dear.

Once the lesson was over, the gathering dispersed, the King went in one direction, the Queen in another, the Infanta went who knows where, everyone observing precedence and protocol, and making endless courtesies, the governesses with their rustling skirts and the footmen with their beribboned breeches withdrew last of all, and in the music room there remained only Domenico Scarlatti and Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmão. The Italian fingered the keyboard of the harpsichord, first at random, then as if searching for a motif or attempting to modify certain reverberations, and suddenly he appeared to be totally absorbed in the music he was playing, his hands running over the keyboard like a barge flowing on the current, arrested here and there by branches overhanging the riverbanks, then away at rapid speed before vacillating over the distended waters of a deep lake, the luminous bay of Naples, the mysterious and echoing canals of Venice, over the bright, shimmering light of the Tagus, there goes the King, the Queen has already retired to her apartments, the Infanta is bent over her embroidery frame, for an Infanta learns these things from childhood, and music is a profane rosary of sounds, Our Mother who art on earth. Signor Scarlatti, the priest said when the maestro had stopped improvising on the keyboard and all the reverberations ceased, Signor Scarlatti, I cannot claim to know anything about the art of music, but I'll wager that even an Indian peasant from my native Brazil who knows still less about music than I do would feel enraptured by these celestial harmonies, Perhaps not, the musician replied, for it is a well-known fact that the ear has to be educated if one wishes to appreciate musical sounds, just as the eyes must learn to distinguish the value of words and the way in which they are combined when one is reading a text, and the hearing must be trained for one to comprehend speech, These weighty words moderate my frivolous remarks, for it is a common failing among men to say what they believe others wish to hear them say, without sticking to the truth, however, for men to be able to stick to the truth, they must first acknowledge their errors, And commit them, That is a question I couldn't answer with a simple yes or no, but I do believe in the necessity of error.

Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmão rested his elbow on the lid of the harpsichord, watched Scarlatti at some length, and while they remain silent, let us say that this fluent conversation between a Portuguese priest and an Italian musician is probably not pure invention but an admissible transposition of phrases and compliments they undoubtedly exchanged during those years, both inside and outside the Palace, as we shall have occasion to see in subsequent chapters. And lest anyone should express surprise that Scarlatti was able to speak Portuguese within a few months, let us not forget that he was a musician, and that during the previous seven years he had grown familiar with the language in Rome, where he had been in the service of the Portuguese Ambassador, not to mention his missions throughout the world to royal and episcopal courts, and whatever he learned he never forgot. As for the erudite nature of his dialogue, and the pertinence and eloquence of his words, he must have had help from someone.

You're right, the priest said, but this means that man is not free to believe that he is embracing truth only to find himself clinging to error, Just as he is not free to assume he is clinging to error, only to find himself embracing truth, the musician replied, and then the priest said, Don't forget that when Pilate asked Jesus what the truth was, he expected no answer, nor did the Saviour give him one, Perhaps they both knew that there is no answer to such a question, Therefore Pilate becomes like Jesus, In the final analysis, yes, If music is such an excellent mistress of debate, I would rather be a musician than a preacher, Thank you for the compliment, Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmão, I dearly hope that one day my music will achieve the same pattern of exposition, counterpoint, and conclusion you find in sermons and orations, Yet, if one carefully considers what is said and how it is said, Signor Scarlatti, when something is expounded and counterpoised, it is nearly always nebulous and obscure and finishes up in a meaningless void. The musician offered no comment, and the priest concluded, Every honest preacher is aware of this as he descends from the pulpit. Shrugging his shoulders, the Italian said, There is silence after listening to music or a sermon, what does it matter if a sermon is praised or music applauded, perhaps only silence truly exists.

Scarlatti and Bartolomeu de Gusmão went down to the Palace Square, where they parted to go their separate ways, the musician to create music for the city until it was time to start rehearsing in the Royal Chapel, the priest to his veranda, from where he could view the Tagus and, across the river, the lowlands of Barreiro, the hills of Almada and Pragal, and, way beyond, the Cabeça Seca do Bugio, which was barely visible, what a glorious day, when God went forth to create the world, He did not simply say, Fiat, because one word and no more would have resulted in the creation of a world of total uniformity, God went forth and made things as He went, He made the sea and sailed thereon, then He made the earth in order to go ashore, in some places He tarried, others He passed through without pausing to look, and here He rested and, because there was no human being around to watch, bathed in the river, and to commemorate this event, great flocks of seagulls continue to gather near the river-bank, waiting for God to bathe once more in the waters of the Tagus, although these are no longer the same waters,

hoping to see Him just once in recompense for having been born seagulls. They are also anxious to know if God has aged much. The mace-bearer's widow came to tell the priest that the meal was served, below a detachment of halberdiers passed, escorting a carriage. Adrift from her sisters, a seagull hovered over the eaves of the roof, sustained there by the wind that swept inland, and the priest murmured, May God bless you, bird, and deep down he felt that he himself was made of the same flesh and blood, he shuddered as if he had suddenly discovered feathers growing on his back, and when the seagull vanished he found himself lost in a wilderness, This would make Pilate the same as Jesus, he suddenly thought as he returned to this world, numbed by the feeling that he was naked, as if he had shed his skin inside his mother's womb, and then he said in a loud voice, God is one.

All that day, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço remained closeted in his room, groaning and sighing, and it was already night when the mace-bearer's widow knocked on his door and announced that supper was ready, but the priest ate nothing, as if he were beginning a long fast and sharpening his powers of perception, although he could not imagine what more there was to perceive once he had proclaimed the unity of God to the seagulls of the Tagus, an act of great daring, for that God should be one in essence is something not even the heresiarchs deny, and although Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço had been taught that God, although one in essence, is triune in person, today the seagulls made him feel less certain about this. It is now darkest night, the city is asleep, or, if not asleep, silent as the tomb, all that can be heard are the cries of the sentries from time to time, intent upon dissuading any French pirates from attempting to land, and Domenico Scarlatti, after closing all the doors and windows, seats himself at the harpsichord, and the most subtle music wafts out into the Lisbon night through openings and chimneys, the Portuguese and German guards hear the music, the latter listening as appreciatively as the former, the sailors hear it in their dreams as they sleep on deck in the open air and on awakening they can recognise that music, the vagrants and tramps hear it as they take shelter at Ribeira, underneath the grounded boats, the friars and nuns of a thousand convents hear it and say, They are the angels of the Lord, for this is a land most fertile in miracles, hooded assassins hear it as they stalk the streets ready to kill, and when their victims hear that music they no longer plead to be confessed and die absolved, a prisoner of the Holy Office of the Inquisition who hears it from the depths of his dungeon grabs a guard by the throat and strangles him, but for this crime there will be no worse death, Baltasar and Blimunda hear it from a distance as they lie together, and they ask themselves, What music can this be, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço was the first to hear it, because he lived so close to the Palace, and, getting out of bed, he lit his oil lamp and opened the window to listen more attentively. Several mosquitoes also entered and settled immediately on the ceiling, where they remained, at first hesitant on their long legs, then immobile, as if that faint light were incapable of attracting them, or perhaps hypnotised by the grating sound of Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço's quill as he began to write, Et ego in illo, And I am in him, and as dawn broke, he was still writing his sermon about the Body of Christ, and the mosquitoes did not feast that night on the priest's body.

Several days later, when Bartolomeu de Gusmão was in the Royal Chapel, the Italian musician came to see him. Having exchanged the usual pleasantries, they left by one of the doors beneath the King and Queen's dais which led into the passageway that connected with the Palace, they strolled at a leisurely pace, pausing here and there to inspect the tapestries hanging from the walls, the Life of Alexander the Great, the Triumph of Faith, and the Exaltation of the Blessed Sacrament after drawings by Rubens, the Story of Iobias after drawings by Raphael, and the Conquest of Tunis, and if these tapestries were to catch fire one day, not a single thread of silk will be salvaged. In a tone of voice that clearly conveyed that this was not the important matter they were about to discuss, Domenico Scarlatti said to the priest, the King keeps on his dais a miniature replica of the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome, which he did me the honour of showing me yesterday, He has never conceded me any such favour, but I do not say this out of envy, for I am delighted to see Italy honoured through one of her sons, They tell me that the King is himself a great builder, and perhaps this explains his passion for building with his own hands this architectural monument of the Holy Church, even though on a reduced scale, How very different from the basilica being built at Mafra, which will be so enormous that it will become the wonder of ages, Just as the works men achieve with their hands manifest themselves in many different ways, mine are made from sound, Are you speaking about hands, No, I'm speaking about works, no sooner are they born than they perish, Are you speaking about works, No, I'm speaking about hands for what would become of them if they had no memory and I had no paper on which to write them, So you're speaking about hands, No, I'm speaking about works.

This appears to be nothing more than a witty play on words and their meanings, as was common in those times, without attaching too much importance to the sense, and sometimes even going so far as to obscure the meaning deliberately. It is like the preacher who assails the statue of St Antony in church with loud accusations of, Blackamoor, thief, drunkard, and after having scandalised the congregation with this barrage of insults, goes on to explain the point he is really trying to make, that he used the word blackamoor because of the Saint's dark skin, he called him a thief because he had robbed the divine child from the arms of the Virgin Mary, and a drunkard because St Antony was inebriated by divine grace, but I must warn you, Take heed, oh preacher, when you invert those conceits, for you are unwittingly betraying your secret leanings towards heresy that cause you to toss and turn in your sleep as you repeat, Cursed be the Father, cursed be the Son, cursed be the Holy Ghost, before adding, May the demons roar in hell, and in this way you think you will escape damnation, but He who sees everything, not this blind Tobias, but that other for whom there are no shadows or blindness, knows that you have uttered two profound truths, and He will choose one of the two, His own, for neither you nor I know which is God's truth, and even less whether God Himself is true.

This all appears to be a game of words, the works, the hands, the sound, the flight, But they told me, Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmão, that those very same hands raised a

machine from the ground and it flew through the air, They spoke the truth about what they were witnessing at that moment, but were blind to the truth that the first truth concealed, Tell me more, This happened twelve years ago, since then the truth has changed considerably, Do tell me more, Can't you see it's a secret, But I thought only music is aerial, Well, then, tomorrow we shall go and witness a secret. They have come to a standstill before the final tapestry of the series depicting the life of Tobias, and this is the famous episode where the bitter gall taken from the fish restores the blind man's sight, Bitterness is the gaze of clairvoyants, Signor Domenico Scarlatti, One day this will be transposed into music, Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmão.

Next day they mounted their mules and rode to São Sebastião da Pedreira. The patio separating the palace on one side and the granary and coach-house on the other appeared to have been recently swept. Water ran along a funnel, and a chain pump could be heard working. The nearby flower beds had been tended, and the fruit trees had been tidied and pruned, here there were no remaining signs of the wilderness Baltasar and Blimunda had encountered when they first arrived some ten years earlier. Farther ahead, however, the estate was still uncultivated, it would remain like this as long as there were only three hands to work the land, and these were occupied most of the time in doing jobs that had nothing to do with the land. Through the open door of the coach-house came sounds of activity. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço asked the priest to wait while he went inside. He found Baltasar alone, trimming a long joist with an adze. The priest said, Good afternoon, Baltasar, I've brought a visitor with me to see the machine, Who is it, Someone from the Palace, Surely not the King, No, not on this occasion, but one day soon, for only a few days ago he drew me aside to ask me when he could hope to see the machine flying, no, it is someone else who has come, But surely he'll discover our secret and that was not what we agreed, otherwise we'd not have kept it to ourselves all these years, Since the Passarola is my invention, I'll decide these matters, But we're doing the work and we are under no obligation to stay here, Baltasar, I don't know how to explain, but I'm confident that the person I've brought here is someone we can trust, someone for whom I'd be prepared to put my hand in the fire or pledge my soul, Is it a woman, It's a man, an Italian who has been at court only a few months, a musician who gives the Infanta lessons on the harpsichord and is also music-master of the Royal Chapel, and his name is Domenico Scarlatti, Did you say, Scarlet, Not quite, but there is so little difference that you might as well call him that as so many others do because they cannot pronounce his name. The priest made for the door, but paused to inquire, Where is Blimunda, She's somewhere in the kitchen garden, replied Baltasar.

The Italian had taken shelter in the cool shade of a sprawling plane tree. He did not seem to be curious about his surroundings, but looked impassively at the shuttered windows of the palace, at the coping where weeds were sprouting, the gutters where swallows flitted in search of insects. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço approached, carrying a cloth in one hand, You must approach the secret blindfolded, he said playfully, and the musician replied in much the same tone, Yet how often one comes away from a secret

still blindfolded, I hope this won't be the case, Signor Scarlatti, mind the doorstep and the large stone, now, before you remove the cloth I should tell you a couple lives here, a man named Baltasar Sete-Sóis and a woman named Blimunda, whom I have nicknamed Sete-Luas because she lives with Sete-Sóis, they are building the invention I am about to show you, I tell them what they have to do and they carry out my instructions, now you may remove your blindfold, Signor Scarlatti. Without haste, as if still calmly watching those swallows chasing insects, the Italian slowly untied the blindfold.

He was confronted by an enormous bird with outspread wings, a fan-shaped tail, an elongated neck, the head still unfinished, which made it difficult to tell whether it would eventually turn out to be a falcon or a swallow, Is this your secret, he asked, Yes, this is our secret, which until this moment has been shared by only three people, now we are four, this is Baltasar Sete-Sóis, and Blimunda should be back shortly from the kitchen garden. The Italian gave a slight nod in the direction of Baltasar, who gave a much deeper if somewhat clumsy nod in acknowledgment, after all, he was just a poor mechanic who looked very scruffy and was covered with grime from the forge, and the only thing about him that shone brightly was the hook, polished by constant labour. Domenico Scarlatti went up to the machine, which was balanced on supports at each side, placed his hand on one of the wings as if it were a keyboard, and to his astonishment the entire structure vibrated, despite the enormous weight of the wooden frame, metal plates, and entwined canes, and if there were forces capable of lifting this machine off the ground, then nothing was impossible for man, Are these wings fixed, That's right, But no bird can fly without flapping its wings, Baltasar would tell you that it's sufficient to have the form of a bird to be able to fly, but I can assure you that the secret of flying has nothing to do with wings, Won't you let me into the secret, All I can do is to show you what is here, And for that much I am grateful, but if this bird is to fly, how is it going to get through the door.

Baltasar and Padre Bartolomeu looked at each other in bewilderment, and then looked towards the open door. Blimunda was standing there with a basket filled with cherries, and she replied, There is a time for building and a time for destroying, certain hands tiled this roof, others will demolish it, and all the walls if necessary. This is Blimunda, said the priest, Sete-Luas, the musician added. She had cherries dangling from her ears and had come to show Baltasar and going up to him, she smiled and held out her basket, Venus and Vulcan, the musician reflected, and let us forgive him this rather obvious allusion to classical mythology, for how can he know what Blimunda's body is like underneath the rough garments she is wearing, or that Baltasar is not so scruffy or grimy as he looks at this moment, nor lame like Vulcan, one-handed perhaps, certainly, then, so is God. Not to mention that all the cockerels in the world would sing to Venus if the goddess had Blimunda's eyes, for then Venus would have the power to look into loving hearts, but simple mortals must have some advantages over divinities. Even Baltasar scores a point over Vulcan, for though the god lost his goddess, Baltasar will not lose his Blimunda.

They all sat down to eat, helping themselves from the basket without standing on ceremony, but took care not to reach out all at once, first Baltasar's stump, rough as the bark of an olive tree, then the soft ecclesiastic hand of Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, then the fastidious hand of Scarlatti, and finally that of Blimunda, cautious and bruised and with the dirty nails of someone who has just come from the kitchen garden, where she had been weeding the soil before gathering cherries. They all throw the stones on the ground, and if the King were here he would do the same, and it is little things like these that make us realise that all men are equal. The cherries are big and juicy, some have already been pecked at by the birds, and what cherry orchard may there be in the sky where this other bird might feed when the time comes, it is still without a head, but whether it turns out to be that of a swallow or a falcon, the angels and saints feel reassured that they will eat their cherries intact, for, as everyone knows, these birds do not feed on plants.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço said, I shall not reveal the ultimate secret about flying, but, as I stated in my petition and memorandum, the whole machine will move by means of a force of attraction opposed to the laws of gravity, if I throw this cherry stone, it falls to the ground, now, the problem is to discover what will make it go up, Has anyone succeeded, I myself discovered the secret but the business of finding, collecting, and assembling the necessary materials has been the work of all three, It is an earthly trinity, the father, the son, and the holy ghost. Baltasar and I are the same age, we are both thirty-five years old, so we could not possibly be father and son according to nature, more likely brothers and that would make us twins, but he was born in Mafra and I in Brazil, and we bear no resemblance to each other, And what about the holy ghost, That would be Blimunda, perhaps she is closest to being part of a trinity that is not terrestrial, I am also thirty-five years old, but I was born in Naples, so we couldn't form a trinity of twins, and how old is Blimunda, I'm twenty-eight, and I have neither brothers nor sisters, and as she spoke, Blimunda raised her eyes, which turned almost white in the semi-darkness of the coach-house, and Domenico Scarlatti heard the deepest chord of a harp resounding within his soul. Ostensively, Baltasar lifted the almost empty basket and said, We've eaten, let's get back to work.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço rested a ladder against the Passarola, Signor Scarlatti, perhaps you'd like to have a look inside the flying machine. They both climbed up, the priest carrying his design, and, once inside, as they walked over what resembled a ship's deck, he explained the location and function of the different components, the wires with the amber, the globes, the metal plates, while emphasising that everything would work by a process of mutual attraction, but he made no reference to the sun or to the mysterious substance the globes would contain, the musician, however, inquired, What will attract the amber, whereupon the priest replied, Perhaps God Himself, in whom all force resides, But what will the amber attract, The substance inside the globes, Is that the secret, Yes, that's the secret, Is it animal, vegetable, or mineral, It is neither vegetable, nor mineral nor animal, Everything is animal, vegetable, or mineral, Not

everything, take music, for example, Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmão, surely you're not trying to tell me that these globes are going to contain music, No, but it's just possible that music could also lift the machine off the ground, I must give this some thought, after all, I myself am almost transported into the air when I hear the harpsichord being played, Is that meant to be a joke, Much less of a joke than you imagine, Signor Scarlatti.

It was getting late when the Italian finally departed. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço had decided to spend the night there, and take advantage of his visit to prepare his sermon, since the Feast of Corpus Christi would take place within the next few days. As he bade the musician farewell, the priest reminded him, Don't forget, Signor Scarlatti, whenever you get bored at the Palace, you can always come here, I'll certainly bear it in mind, and unless it would disturb Baltasar and Blimunda when they're working, I'd like to bring my harpsichord along and play for them and for the Passarola, perhaps my music will succeed in harmonising with that mysterious substance inside the globes, Signor Scarlet, said Baltasar, hastily interrupting, come whenever you like, if Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço gives his permission, but, Why but, Because instead of a left hand I have this hook, or instead of a hook I have this spike, and over my heart a cross in blood, My blood, Blimunda added, I'm the brother of all men, said Scarlatti, if they will accept me. Baltasar escorted the musician to the gates and helped him to mount his mule, If you need any help to transport your harpsichord here, Signor Scarlet, I'm at your service.

That night Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço shared a meal with Sete-Sóis and Sete-Luas of salted sardines, an omelette, a jug of water, and some hard, coarse bread. The coach-house was poorly lit by two oil lamps. In the corners the darkness appeared to spiral, advancing and retreating in unison with the vacillations of those tiny, pallid lights. The shadow of the Passarola flickered over the white wall. The night was warm. Through the open door, above the roof of the distant Palace, stars shone in the concave sky. The priest went out on to the patio and breathed in the night air, then contemplated the Milky Way, which stretched across the celestial dome from one end to the other, the road to Santiago, unless those stars were the eyes of pilgrims who gazed so intently into the sky that they left their light there, God is one in essence and in person, Bartolomeu de Lourenço suddenly exclaimed. Blimunda and Baltasar came to the door to hear what he was saying, they were no longer surprised at the priest's declamations, but this was the first time they had heard him making wild speeches out in the open air. There was a lull, during which the crickets went on screeching, and then the priest's voice cried out once more, God is one in essence and triune in person. His speech had fallen on stony ground the first time, and nothing happened now. Bartolomeu Lourenço returned to the coach-house and said to the others, who had followed him, I have made two contradictory statements, Tell me which you believe to be true, I really don't know, Baltasar said, Nor do I, said Blimunda. And the priest repeated, God is one in essence and in person, God is one in essence and triune in person, which is true, and which is false, We simply don't know, Blimunda replied, and we cannot grasp your meaning, But you do believe in the Holy Trinity, in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, I'm referring to the teachings of

Holy Mother Church, not to what the Italian said, Yes, I do believe in the Holy Trinity, So God for you is triune in person, I suppose so, And if I were now to tell you that God is only one person and that He was alone when He created the world and mankind, would you believe me, If you say so, I believe you, I'm telling you to believe in things that I myself do not know, so don't repeat my words to anyone, and you, Baltasar, what's your opinion, Ever since I started building the machine, I have stopped thinking about these things, perhaps God is one, perhaps He is three, He might even be four, and one doesn't notice the difference, God is probably the only surviving soldier out of an army of a hundred thousand men, that's why He is at one and the same time soldier, captain, and general, and also one-handed, as you once explained to me and I've come to believe, Pilate asked Jesus what the truth was and Jesus did not reply, Perhaps it is still too soon to know, Blimunda suggested, and she went to sit beside Baltasar on a boulder near the door, that same boulder on which they often sat to delouse each other's hair, and now she was untying the straps that secured his hook and resting his stump on her bosom, to ease that great and incurable pain.

Et ego in illo, said Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço inside the coach-house, thus announcing the theme of his sermon, but today he was not striving for vocal effects, for the tremulous vibrato that would stir his audience, the urgent note in his exhortations, the persuasive pauses. He spoke the words that he had written, and others that suddenly came to mind, the latter negating the former, calling them into doubt, or putting some new slant on their meaning, Et ego in illo, yes, and I am in him, I, God, in him, man, in me, who am man, are you, who is God, God resides in man, but how can God reside in man if God is immense and man such a tiny part of God's creation, the answer is that God resides in man through the sacrament, that is clear and could not be clearer, but because He resides in man through the sacrament, it is essential that man should receive the sacrament, God, therefore, does not reside in man whensoever He wishes, but only when man wishes to receive Him, therefore one could say that to some extent the Creator has made Himself the creature of man, so a great injustice was done to Adam when God did not reside in him, for there was still no sacrament, and Adam might well argue that because of a single transgression God denied him the tree of life forevermore and the gates of paradise were closed to him for all eternity, whereas his descendants, who have committed many more sins and of a much more serious nature, have God inside them, and are allowed to eat freely from the tree of life, if Adam was punished for wishing to resemble God, how do men come to have God inside them without being punished, and even when they do not wish to receive Him they go unpunished, for to have and not to wish to have God inside oneself amounts to the same absurdity, and the same impossible situation, yet the words Et ego in illo imply that God is inside me or God is not inside me, how did I come to find myself in this labyrinth of yes and no, of no that means yes, of yes that means no, opposed affinities, allied contradictions, how shall I pass safely over the edge of the razor, well, summing up, before Christ became man, God was outside man and could not reside in him, then, through the Blessed Sacrament, He came to be inside man, so man is virtually God, or will ultimately become God, yes, of course, if God resides

in me, I am God, I am God not in triune or quadruple, but one, one with God, He is I, I am He, Durus est hie sermo, et quis potest eum audire.

The night grew chilly. Blimunda had fallen asleep, her head resting on Baltasar's shoulder. Later he accompanied her indoors and they went to sleep. The priest went out on to the patio, and remained standing there all night, watching the sky and murmuring in temptation.

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER, a friar consulted by the Holy Office of the Inquisition wrote, in his critical assessment of the sermon, that the author of such a text was more worthy of applause than dismay, more deserving of admiration than scepticism. The friar in question, Friar Manuel Guilherme, must have felt some sense of foreboding even while recommending admiration and applause, some imperceptible trace of heresy must have passed to his pituitary gland as he struggled to silence the fears and doubts that must have assailed the compassionate censor as he listened to that sermon being delivered. And when it is the turn of another venerable scholar, Dom António Caetano de Sousa, to read and censure, he confirms that the text he has just examined contains nothing contrary to holy faith and Christian morals, he does not dwell on the doubts and fears that appear to have provoked some disquiet in the first instance, and urging in his closing comments that Dr Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão be held in the same high esteem as that shown him by the Court, thus using the influence of the Palace to whiten doctrinal obscurities that probably warrant closer investigation. However, the final statement will be made by Padre Boaventura of St Julian, the royal censor, who concludes his eulogies and effusions by declaring that only silence could adequately express his sentiments of wonder and reverence. Those of us who are closer to the truth felt obliged to ask ourselves what other thundering voices or more terrible silences would respond to the words the stars heard on the Duke of Aveiro's estate while an exhausted Baltasar and Blimunda slept soundly, and the Passarola in the darkness of the coach-house strained its metallic frame in order to catch what its inventor out on the open patio was declaiming to the skies.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço has three, if not four, separate existences, and only when he is asleep, for even when dreaming differently, once awake, he cannot tell whether in his dream he was the priest who ascends the altar to celebrate Mass canonically, the scholar who is so highly esteemed that the King goes incognito to the Royal Chapel and listens to his sermons from behind a curtain, the inventor of the flying machine and the various mechanisms for draining ships that have sprung a leak, and this other, composite man, riddled with fears and doubts, who is a preacher in church, scholar in the academy, courtier in the Palace, and visionary and comrade of ordinary working-class people in São Sebastião da Pedreira, and he turns anxiously to his dream in an attempt to reconstruct the fragile and precarious unity that is shattered the moment he opens his eyes, nor does he need to fast like Blimunda. He has abandoned the familiar readings of the doctors of the Church, of scholars versed in canon law, of the various scholastic theories about essence and being, as if his soul had grown weary of words, but since man is the only animal who can be taught to speak and write long before achieving any social or intellectual standing, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço makes a detailed study of the Old Testament, especially the first five books, the so-called Pentateuch, which is known as the Torah among the Jews, and as the Koran among the followers of Mohammed. Inside any of our bodies, Blimunda would have the power to see our organs and our wills, but she cannot read our thoughts, nor would she understand them, to see a man thinking as in a single thought, such opposed and conflicting truths, yet without

losing one's mind, she were she to see it, he for having such thoughts.

Music is something else. Domenico Scarlatti brought a harpsichord to the coach-house, he did not carry it himself, but hired two porters who, with poles, ropes, and a pad filled with horsehair, and much perspiration on their brows, brought it all the way from the Rua Nova dos Mercadores, where it was purchased, to São Sebastião da Pedreira, where it would be played, Baltasar accompanied them to show the way, but they required no other assistance from him, for this method of transportation depends on skill and experience, on knowing how to distribute the weight and combine forces like the pyramid in the traditional dance known as the Bica, knowing how to use the ropes and poles in order to set up a steady pace, these, after all, are the secrets of the porter's trade and are as valid as any other, for a tradesman worthy of the name tries to acquire as many secret skills as he can. The Galician porters put the harpsichord down outside the gate, for no one wanted them to discover the existence of the flying machine, so Baltasar and Blimunda had to carry it into the coach-house themselves, a hazardous job, not so much because of its weight as because they did not know how to go about it, not to mention that the vibration of the chords were like anguished cries tugging at their heart-strings, which were also seized by alarm and dismay in the face of such extreme fragility. That same afternoon Domenico Scarlatti arrived, sat himself down and began to tune the harpsichord, while Baltasar wove willow canes and Blimunda sewed the sails, jobs they could carry out in silence without disturbing the music. Once he had finished tuning the instrument, adjusting the jacks, which had been disturbed in transit, and checking the duck quills one by one, Scarlatti began to play, starting off by letting his fingers glide over the keys, as if he were releasing notes that had been imprisoned, then organising the sounds in tiny sections, as if choosing between the right and the wrong notes, between harmony and discord, between phrasing and pauses, in short, as if giving new expression to what had previously seemed fragmentary and dissonant. Baltasar and Blimunda knew very little about music apart from the plain-chant sung by the friars, on rare occasions the operatic swell of the Te Deum, popular airs from the city and countryside, some familiar to Blimunda, others to Baltasar, but nothing that could even remotely be compared to the sounds the Italian drew from the harpsichord, which seemed as much a childish game as some fulminating oath, as much a divertissement for angels as the wrath of God.

After an hour, Scarlatti got up from the harpsichord, covered it with a canvas cloth, and then said to Baltasar and Blimunda, who had interrupted their work, If Padre Bartolomeu's Passarola were ever to fly, I should dearly love to travel in it and play my harpsichord up in the sky, and Blimunda rejoined, Once the machine starts to fly, the heavens will be filled with music, and Baltasar, remembering the war, interjected, Unless the heavens turn out to be hell. This couple can neither write nor read, yet they can say things that seem most unlikely at such a time and in such a place, but since everything has an explanation, we must look for one, and if nothing comes to mind just at present, we shall find it one day. Scarlatti returned many times to the estate of the Duke of

Aveiro, he did not always play the harpsichord, but when he did, he sometimes urged them not to interrupt their labours, the forge roaring in the background, the hammer clanging on the anvil, the water boiling in the vat, so that the harpsichord could scarcely be heard above the terrible din in the coach-house, and meanwhile, the musician tranquilly composed his music as if he were surrounded by the vast silence of the space where he hoped to play one day.

Every man follows his own path in search of grace, whatever that grace may be, a simple landscape with the sky overhead, a certain hour of the day or night, two trees, three if they are painted by Rembrandt, a sigh, without our knowing whether this closes or finally opens the path or where the path may lead us, whether to some other landscape, hour, tree, or sigh, behold this priest who is about to cast out one God and replace him with another, without knowing whether this new allegiance will do him any good in the end, behold this musician who would find it impossible to compose any other kind of music and who will no longer be alive a hundred years from now to hear that first symphony, which is mistakenly referred to as the Ninth, behold this one-handed soldier who has ironically become a manufacturer of wings, although he has never risen to being more than a common foot soldier, man rarely knows what to expect from life, and this man least of all, behold this woman with those extraordinary eyes, who was born to perceive wills, her revelations about a tumour, a strangled foetus, and a silver coin were mere child's play when compared with the wonders she is destined to achieve when Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço returns to the estate of São Sebastião da Pedreira and tells her, Blimunda, Lisbon is stricken by a horrendous plague, people are dying everywhere, and it has just occurred to me that this is an excellent opportunity to collect wills from the dying, if they still have any, but I must warn you that you will be taking a great risk, don't go unless you really want to, for I shall not put you under any obligation, even if it were within my power to do so, What is this plague, It is rumoured that the plague was carried here by passengers aboard a ship from Brazil and that it first broke out in Ericeira. That's close to my home, said Baltasar, whereupon the priest reassured him, No deaths have been reported in Maфра, judging from the symptoms, the disease is believed to be the black plague or yellow fever, the name scarcely matters, the fact is that people are dying like flies, you must decide, Blimunda. She got up from her stool, raised the lid of the chest, and brought out a glass phial, How many wills were in there, she wondered, about a hundred, perhaps, but certainly nothing like the number they needed, and even this amount had required a lengthy and arduous search and a great deal of fasting, often to find oneself lost as in a labyrinth, Where is that will, for all I can see are entrails and bones, an agonising maze of nerves, a sea of blood, viscous food lodged in the stomach before finally turning to excrement, Will you go, the priest asked her, I'll go, she replied, But not on your own, Baltasar added.

Early the next day there were signs of rain when Blimunda and Baltasar left the estate, she still fasting, he carrying their provisions in his knapsack until such time as sheer physical exhaustion or the desire to linger a while would permit or force Blimunda

to eat some food. For many hours that day Baltasar was not to see Blimunda's face, because she always walked in front, warning him to look away whenever she turned her head, this game of theirs is a strange business, the one has no wish to see, the other has no wish to be seen, it looks easy to play, but only they know how difficult it is to avoid looking at each other. As the day draws to a close, Blimunda, who has eaten, finds that her eyes have been restored to normal, and Baltasar begins to emerge from his state of torpor, exhausted not so much by the journey as by not being looked at.

Blimunda has lost no time in visiting the dying. Wherever she goes she is greeted with acclaim and gratitude, no one inquires whether she is a relative or a friend, whether she lives on that very street or in some other district, and because this country is so accustomed to works of mercy, sometimes her presence goes unnoticed, the patient's bedroom is crammed with visitors, the corridor is blocked, the staircase swarms with people coming up and going down, the traffic is endless, the priest who has administered or is about to administer the last rites, the doctor if they thought it was worth summoning him and had the money to pay him, and the blood-letter who travels from house to house sharpening his knives, no one pays any attention when a woman intent upon theft enters and leaves concealing a glass phial with yellow amber inside, to which the stolen wills stick like birds to lime. Between São Sebastião da Pedreira and Ribeira, Blimunda entered some thirty-two houses and collected twenty-four dark clouds, six of the patients no longer had a will, which might well have been lost many years previously, and in the remaining two patients they were so firmly stuck to their bodies that only death was likely to remove them. In five other houses she visited, she found neither wills nor souls, only corpses, a few tears, and much lamentation.

Everywhere rosemary was being burned to ward off the epidemic, in the streets, in the doorways of houses, and above all in the bedrooms of the sick, there were traces of a bluish haze giving off an unmistakable fragrance, and the city bore no resemblance to that fetid pigsty of healthier times. There was much searching for tongues from St Paul, pebbles in the shape of a bird's tongue, which are to be found on the beaches that stretch all the way from São Paulo to Santos, whether because of the sanctity of these places or because of the sanctification bestowed by the names, it is well known that such pebbles, and several others that are round in shape and the size of chick-peas, are extremely effective in curing malignant fevers, made of the finest dust, these pebbles can mitigate excessive heat, alleviate gallstones, and sometimes cause perspiration. When ground to a powder, the pebbles are a decisive antidote to poison, whatever it may be and however it may have been administered, especially in the case of a poisonous bite inflicted by some animal or insect, you need only place the tongue from St Paul or the chick-pea over the wound and the poison is sucked out immediately. That explains why these pebbles are also known as snake eyes.

It seems inconceivable that so many people should still have been dying when there were so many remedies and precautions, Lisbon must have committed some irreparable crime in the eyes of God for four thousand people to die from the epidemic within three

months, which means that more than forty corpses had to be buried daily. The beaches were stripped of pebbles and the tongues of the diseased were silenced, thus preventing them from complaining that such a cure had proved futile. To deny it would have betrayed their lack of repentance, for no one should be surprised that pebbles ground to a fine powder and dissolved in some beverage or broth can cure malignant fevers, when it is widely known what happened to Mother Teresa of the Annunciation when making sweetmeats and running out of sugar, she sent a messenger to borrow some from a nun in another convent who replied that she could not oblige because her own sugar was of an inferior quality, which greatly distressed Mother Teresa, who thought to herself, What am I going to do with my life, I know, I'll make some toffee, although it's a much less refined confection, let us be clear, she did not make toffee with her own life, but with the inferior sugar, but when it reached the setting point, it had become so greatly reduced and yellow that it looked more like resin than an appetising delicacy, ah, how upsetting and with no one else to turn to, Mother Teresa protested to the Lord, reminding Him of His responsibilities, an invariably effective strategy, as we saw in the case of St Antony and the silver lamps, You know perfectly well that I have no more sugar and have no means of finding any, these labours are Yours rather than mine, tell me how I am supposed to serve You, for it is You who provides the wherewithal, not I, and just in case this admonition might not be enough, she cut a tiny piece off the cord that the Lord wears around His waist and put it into the saucepan, and, lo and behold, the mixture began to gain volume and become much lighter in colour, and there was toffee the likes of which had never been tasted since monasteries and convents started producing such delicacies. If no such miracles are worked today in monastic kitchens, it is because the cord Our Lord once wore around His waist no longer exists, having been cut up in tiny pieces and distributed among all the congregations where nuns devoted themselves to making sweetmeats, such times are gone forever.

Exhausted after all that walking and going up and down stairs, Blimunda and Baltasar returned to the estate, seven pale suns and seven waning moons, Blimunda suffering from the most unbearable nausea, as if she were returning from a battlefield after witnessing a thousand bodies being blown to pieces by artillery, and if Baltasar wanted to divine what Blimunda was witnessing, all he had to do was merge into a single recollection his experiences of war and those in the slaughterhouse. They lay together without any desire to make love, not so much because of their fatigue, which, as we know, can often be a wise counsellor of the senses, but because of their acute awareness of their internal organs, as if these were protruding through their skin, perhaps a difficult thing to explain, but it is by means of the skin that bodies come to recognise, know, and accept one another, and if certain deep penetrations, certain intimate contacts occur between the mucus and the skin, the difference is barely perceptible, it is as if one had sought and found a more remote skin. They are both asleep covered by an old blanket and still wearing their clothes, and it is cause for wonder to see such a mighty enterprise entrusted to two vagabonds, who look worse now that the bloom of youth has vanished, like foundation stones soiled by the earth they reinforce and perhaps, like them,

overwhelmed by the weight they will have to bear. The moon was slow in appearing that night, they slept and did not see it, but the moonlight filtered through the chinks and slowly pervaded the entire coach-house, the flying machine and, in passing, lit up the glass phial and clearly exposed the dark clouds inside, perhaps because no one was watching or because moonlight is capable of revealing the invisible.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço was satisfied with the day's collection, it was only the first day, and they had been out at random into the heart of a city afflicted by disease and mourning, there were twenty-four wills to be added to the list. After a month, they calculated that they had stored a thousand wills in the phial, a force of elevation that the priest considered sufficient for one globe, so Blimunda was given a second phial. In Lisbon, rumours were rife about this strange couple who roved the city from one end to another, without fear of succumbing to the epidemic, he walking behind, she in front, never breaking their silence as they passed through the streets and entered houses, where they did not tarry, and she lowered her eyes when she had to pass him, and if this daily ritual did not provoke greater suspicion and wonder, it was because of the rumour that they were both doing penance, a ruse invented by Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço when people started to gossip. Had he been a little more imaginative, he would have passed off the mysterious couple as two envoys sent from heaven to assist the dying and to reinforce the effects of extreme unction, which might have weakened from overuse. It takes little or nothing to undo reputations, the merest trifle makes and remakes them, it is simply a question of finding the best means of engaging the confidence or interest of those who are to become one's unsuspecting echoes or accomplices.

When the epidemic finally began to pass and deaths from the plague became much rarer than deaths from other causes, two thousand wills all told had been collected in the phials. Then Blimunda was taken ill. There was no pain or fever, but she was desperately thin and a deep pallor made her skin look transparent. She lay on the pallet, her eyes closed day and night, yet she did not appear to be sleeping or resting, with those tensed eyelids and that agonised expression on her face. Baltasar never left her side except to prepare some food or to relieve himself, for it did not seem right to do it there. Looking sombre, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço sat on the stool, remaining there for hours. At times he seemed to be praying, but no one could make out those mutterings or to whom they were addressed. The priest no longer heard their confessions, Baltasar raised the subject twice, since he felt obliged to mention that when sins are accumulated they are easily forgotten, whereupon the priest replied that God sees into the hearts of men and needs no one to give absolution in His name, and if a man's sins were so serious that they should not go unpunished, God would see to it that he was judged and dealt with in the proper place on the Day of Judgment, unless in the meantime his good deeds compensated for his evil ones, although it may also come to pass that everything will end with a general amnesty or universal punishment, all that remains to be known is who will pardon or punish God. But, watching Blimunda waste away and withdraw from this world, the priest bit his nails and felt remorse that he had exposed her so relentlessly to

encroaching death, so that her own life was now in danger, for one could see that she was facing that other temptation of leaving life painlessly, like someone who has stopped holding on to the margins of this world and allows herself to go under.

Each night, returning to the city by obscure paths and narrow byways that descended towards Santa Maria and Valverde, the priest began to wish in his semi-delirium that he would be ambushed by bandits, perhaps even by Baltasar himself with his rusty sword and deadly spike, to avenge Blimunda and so end his torment. But Sete-Sóis was already in bed at this hour, he covered Sete-Luas with his good arm and murmured, Blimunda, and that name traversed a vast, dark wilderness full of shadows, took a long time to reach its destination, and just as long to return, the shadows slowly dispersing, her lips moving with difficulty, Baltasar, and outside, there was the sound of rustling trees, from time to time the cry of some nocturnal bird, blessed be the night, which conceals and protects things fair and foul with the same indifferent mantle, come, time-honoured and unchanging night. The rhythm of Blimunda's breathing altered, a sign that she had fallen asleep, and Baltasar, prostrate with anxiety, could sleep at last and there rediscover Blimunda's smile, and what would become of us if we were not to dream.

During her illness, if it was an illness and not merely a protracted regression of her own will into the inaccessible confines of her body, Domenico Scarlatti called frequently, first he came to visit Blimunda and find out if there was any improvement, then he would linger to converse with Sete-Sóis, and one day he removed the canvas cloth from the harpsichord, sat down, and began to play with such sweetness and delicacy that it was as if the music could scarcely bring itself to part from those gentle chords, subtle vibrations as of a winged insect hovering in mid-air, before suddenly moving from one to another, up and down, and all of this independent of the movements of his fingers over the keyboard, as if the vibrations were choosing the notes, music does not come from the movements of the fingers, how could it, when the keyboard has a first and last key, whereas music has no beginning or end, it comes from yonder to my left, and goes to that other remote point, on my right, but at least music has two hands, unlike certain gods. Perhaps this was the medicine that Blimunda was awaiting, or that thing inside her which was still awaiting something, for each of us consciously expects only what we know or find familiar or what we have been told is useful in each case, blood-letting, were the body not so weak, a tongue from St Paul if the epidemic had not left the beaches bare, some berries from the alkegengi plant, some foxglove leaves, a root of creeping thistle, the Frenchman's elixir, unless this is just a harmless mixture whose only merit is that of not causing any further harm. Blimunda could not have known that upon hearing that music her breast would swell in this way, and give out a deep sigh like that of someone about to die or be born, Baltasar leaned over her, fearful that she might expire just as she was reviving. That night Domenico Scarlatti remained on the estate, playing for hours on end, until daybreak, Blimunda's eyes were now open, and the tears streamed slowly down her face, had there been a doctor present, he would have diagnosed that she was expelling the humours of a damaged optic nerve, perhaps he would be right, perhaps

tears are nothing other than the assuagement of some wound.

Every day for a whole week, braving the wind and the rain along the flooded roads to São Sebastião da Pedreira, the musician went to play for two or three hours, until Blimunda found the strength to get up, she sat at the foot of the harpsichord, still looking pale, engulfed by the music as if she were plunged into a deep sea, which we can confidently say she never sailed, for her shipwreck was figurative only. Her health now began to improve rapidly, if it had ever really deteriorated. And when the musician returned no more, either out of discretion or because he was too busy with his duties as music-master of the Royal Chapel, which he had probably neglected, or giving lessons to the Infanta, who was certainly not complaining about his frequent absences, Baltasar and Blimunda realised that Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço had not been back for some time, and they began to worry. One morning when the weather began to brighten up, they went down to the city, this time side by side, and as they walked and chatted, Blimunda could look at Baltasar and see nothing but him, to their mutual relief. The people they encountered on the way were like sealed chests or locked coffers, and if their expression was forbidding and unfriendly, no matter, for those looking did not need to know any more about the persons they were looking at than those being looked at needed to know about them. That was why Lisbon seemed so quiet, despite the cries of the street vendors, the hubbub of the women, the various bells that rang out, the prayers being said aloud at sanctuaries along the route, the blare of a distant trumpet, a drum roll, the gun salutes of ships leaving or arriving in the Tagus, the litanies and the altar bells of the mendicant friars. Let those who possess a will cherish and use it, let those who have no will resign themselves to their loss, Blimunda wishes to hear no more about counting wills, back there on the estate she has her own account, and only she knows how much it has cost her.

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço was not at home, perhaps he has gone to the Palace, the mace-bearer's widow suggested, or to the academy, Would you care to leave a message, but Baltasar said no, they would call again later or wait for him in the courtyard. Finally, around noon, the priest turned up, he had lost weight, whether from illness or visions, and to their surprise looked quite dishevelled, as if he had slept in his clothes. When he spotted them sitting on a bench near the entrance to his home, he covered his face with his hands, then quickly removed them, and it appeared to them that he had just escaped some great danger, but not the one he confided with his opening words, I've been expecting Baltasar to come and murder me, we might be tempted to think that he feared for his life, but we would be wrong. No greater punishment could have been inflicted upon me, Blimunda, if you had died, But Signor Scarlet knew that I had got over my illness, I have been avoiding him, and when he tried to visit me I made excuses to put him off, and awaited my destiny, One's destiny always arrives, said Baltasar, the fact that Blimunda did not die was my, our, good fortune, and what shall we do now that the plague is almost at an end, the wills have been collected, and the machine is ready, if there are no more irons to be beaten, no more sails to sew

and tar, no more willow canes to be woven, if we have enough yellow amber to make as many globes as there are crossed wires on the roof, and the bird's head is finished, it's not a seagull after all, even if it looks like one, so, if the work is finished, what is to become of it and of us, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço. The priest turned even paler, looked all around him as if afraid that someone might be listening, then replied, I shall need to inform the King that the machine is ready, but we must try it out beforehand, I have no desire to be ridiculed at court, as happened fifteen years ago, go back to the estate now and I shall join you shortly.

They withdrew several paces, then Blimunda paused, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço you're ill, you're as white as a ghost, your eyes are discoloured, and you weren't even pleased to hear our news, I was pleased, Blimunda, truly I was, but news of one's destiny is never the whole truth, what happens tomorrow is what really counts, today means little or nothing, Give us your blessing, Father, I cannot, for I no longer know in which God's name I should bless you, be content to bless each other, that is all the blessing you need, and how I wish that all blessings were so.

PEOPLE SAY THAT the kingdom is badly governed, that there is no justice, unaware that this is how she has to be, with a blindfold over her eyes, her scales and sword, what more would we wish for, surely not to be the weavers of the bandage, the inspectors of the weights, and the armourers of the sword, constantly patching the holes, making up losses, and sharpening the blade of the sword, and then asking the defendant if he is satisfied with the sentence passed on him once he has won or lost his case. We are not referring here to sentences passed by the Holy Office of the Inquisition, which is very astute and prefers an olive branch to scales and a keen blade to one that is jagged and blunt. Some mistake the olive branch for a gesture of peace when it is all too clear that it is kindling wood for the funeral pyre, either I stab you or I burn you, therefore, in the absence of any law, it is preferable to stab a woman suspected of infidelity than to honour the faithful who have passed on, it is a question of having protectors who are likely to forgive homicide, and a thousand cruzados to put on the scales, which is why Justice holds it in her hand. Let blacks and hoodlums be punished so that good example may be upheld, but let people of rank and wealth be honoured, without demanding that they pay their debts, renounce their vengeance or mitigate their hatred, and while the lawsuits are being fought, since certain little irregularities cannot be totally avoided, let there be chicanery, swindling, appeals, formalities, and evasions, so that those likely to gain a just decision will not gain it too readily, and those likely to lose their appeal will not lose it too soon. In the meantime, teats are milked for that delicious milk, money, those rich curds, prime cheese, and a tasty morsel for the bailiff and the solicitor, for the witness and the judge, and if there is anyone missing from the list, Padre António Vieira is to blame, because he has forgotten.

These are the visible forms of justice. As for the invisible forms, they are at best blind and disastrous, as was clearly shown when the King's brothers, the Infante Dom Francisco and the Infante Dom Miguel, were shipwrecked as they crossed to the other side of the river Tagus on a hunting expedition, for without any warning their boat capsized in a gust of wind, and Dom Miguel drowned while Dom Francisco was rescued, when any honourable justice would have decreed that it be the other way around, for the wicked ways of the surviving Infante are common knowledge now that he has tried to lead the Queen astray and usurp the King's throne, and takes potshots at innocent sailors, whereas no misdeeds have ever been attributed to the dead Infante, or if they have, they have not been of a serious nature. We must not, however, be rash in passing judgment, it is possible that Dom Francisco has already repented, and Dom Miguel may have lost his life for having cuckolded the ship's master or for having deceived his daughter, for the annals of these royal dynasties are full of similar scandals.

What happened in the end was that the King or, rather, the crown lost the lawsuit he had been contesting against the Duke of Aveiro since the year sixteen hundred and forty, because the House of Aveiro and the crown had been in litigation for some eighty years. It was no laughing matter, not merely a question of territorial rights on land and sea. Two hundred thousand cruzados in rents were at stake, just imagine, three times the

amount of taxes the King charges for the black slaves who are shipped off to the Brazilian mines. Ultimately there is always justice in this world, and because of that justice the King is now obliged to restore to the Duke of Aveiro all his possessions, which do not greatly concern us, including the estate of São Sebastião da Pedreira, the keys, the well, the orchard, and the palace, none of which greatly concerns Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, except the loss of the coach-house. But every cloud has a silver lining, the court's verdict has arrived at an opportune moment, for the flying machine is ready at last, the King can now be informed, after waiting for so many years without losing his royal patience, ever affable and solicitous in manner, although the priest now finds himself in that familiar situation of the inventor who cannot bear to be parted from his invention, of the dreamer who is about to lose his dream, Once the machine is flying, what is there left for me to do, he certainly has plenty of ideas for new inventions, such as coal made from mud and wattle, and a new system for grinding sugar cane, but the Passarola is his supreme invention, there will never be wings like them, except those that are never put to the test of flying, for they are the most powerful wings of all.

In São Sebastião da Pedreira, Baltasar and Blimunda are anxious to know what the future holds for them, the retainers of the Duke of Aveiro have wasted no time in taking charge of the estate, Perhaps we should go back to Mafra. But the priest disagrees, he promises to speak to the King within the next few days, the flying machine will be launched soon, and if all goes according to plan, the three of them will reap glory and profit, news of the Portuguese achievement will spread throughout the universe, and fame will bring them wealth, Any profits I may accrue will be shared by the three of us, for without your eyes, Blimunda, and without your right hand and patience, Baltasar, there would be no Passarola. Yet the priest feels uneasy, one might almost say that he has little confidence in what he is saying, or that what he is saying has so little value that it cannot quell his other anxieties, therefore Blimunda asks in a low voice, It is night, the forge has been extinguished, the machine is still there yet seems absent, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, what are you afraid of, and this direct question causes him to tremble, he rises nervously to his feet, goes to the door, and peers outside before replying in a whisper, Of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Baltasar and Blimunda look at each other and Baltasar says, Surely it is not a sin or heresy to want to fly, fifteen years ago a balloon flew over the Palace and no evil came of it, a balloon is harmless, the priest tells him, If the machine were to fly now, the Holy Office might decide that there is some Satanic power behind this flight, and if they were to investigate which parts of the invention cause the machine to fly, I should find it impossible to reveal that there are human wills inside the globes, in the eyes of the Inquisition there are no wills, only souls, they will accuse us of imprisoning Christian souls and of preventing them from going up to paradise, you are well aware that if the Holy Office of the Inquisition so decrees, all good reasons become bad ones, and all bad ones become good, and in the absence of both good and bad reasons they use the torments of stake, rack, and pulley to invent reasons at their own discretion, But since the King is our ally, surely the Inquisition will not act contrary to the wishes and desires of His Majesty, Confronted with such a dilemma, the

King will only do what the Holy Office of the Inquisition tells him to do.

Blimunda questioned him further, What do you fear most, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, what will happen, or what is happening, What are you trying to say, That the Inquisition might be already hounding us, just as it hounded my mother, I know the signs all too well, it's like an aura that encircles those who attract the attention of the Inquisitors, they have no idea what accusations are about to be made, yet they already behave as if they were guilty, I know what I shall be accused of when my hour comes, they will say that I have been converted from Judaism, and it's true, they will say that I devote myself to sorcery, and that's also true, if this Passarola is sorcery and all those other arts I am forever studying, and with these confidences I put myself in your hands, and I shall be lost if you denounce me. Baltasar says, May I lose my other hand were I to do such a thing. Blimunda says, Were I to do such a thing, may I never again be able to close my eyes, and may they always see as if I were constantly fasting.

Confined to the estate, Baltasar and Blimunda watch the days go by. August is over, September is well under way, the spiders are already weaving their webs over the Passarola, raising their own sails, adding wings, Signor Scarlet's harpsichord stands in silence with no one to play it, and there can be no sadder place in the wide world than São Sebastião da Pedreira. The weather has become much cooler, the sun hides for hours on end, How can the machine possibly be tried out with the sky so overcast, perhaps Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço has forgotten that without sunshine the machine will not rise from the ground, and if he should turn up with the King, it will be so embarrassing that I shall turn crimson with shame. But the King did not come, nor did the priest appear, the sky cleared again, the sun shone, and Blimunda and Baltasar returned to the same anxious waiting. Then the priest arrived. They heard the mule's hoofs stamping impatiently outside the gate, a strange event, since the mule is an animal that rarely loses its temper, there must be news, perhaps the King is coming after all to witness the maiden flight of the Passarola, but incognito, without any warning or advance party of footmen from the Palace to inspect the place, set up tents, and ensure that His Majesty will be comfortable, no, this must be something else. It was something else. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço came rushing into the coach-house looking pale, livid, ashen, like someone resuscitated from the grave whose body was already rotting away, We must escape, the Holy Office of the Inquisition has issued a warrant for my arrest, they want to imprison me, where are the phials. Blimunda opened the chest and removed some cloths, They are in here, and Baltasar asked, What shall we do. The priest was shaking from head to foot and could scarcely stand up, Blimunda went to his assistance, What shall we do, Baltasar insisted, and the priest cried out, Let's escape in the machine, then suddenly, as if gripped by some new terror, he murmured almost inaudibly, pointing at the Passarola, Let's escape, But where, I don't know, but we must get away from here. Baltasar and Blimunda looked at each other, It was ordained, he said, Let's go, she said.

It is two o'clock in the afternoon and there is much work to be done and not a minute to be lost, the tiles have to be removed, the battens and joists, which cannot be pulled

down by hand, have to be sawn, but first of all the amber balls have to be suspended where the wires cross, and the larger sails have to be opened so that the sun does not shine on the machine, two thousand wills have to be transferred into the globes, one thousand on this side and one thousand on the other, so that there is an even pull on both sides and no danger of the machine's capsizing in mid-air, and if such an accident should occur, let it be due to unforeseen circumstances. There is still so much work and so little time. Baltasar is already on the roof, removing the tiles, which he throws to the ground, and all round the coach-house there is the sound of shattering tiles, and Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço has recovered sufficiently to give them a little help by dismantling the thinner battens, but the joints require more strength than he can muster, so they must wait, while Blimunda behaves as if she had been flying all her life, with the utmost calm she examines the sails to make certain that the pitch is spread evenly and reinforces some of the hemming.

And now, Guardian Angel, what will you do, your presence has never been so necessary since you were first entrusted with this role, here you have three people who will shortly go up into the sky, where man has never ventured, and they need your protection, they have done as much as they can on their own, they have collected the necessary materials and wills, they have combined the solid with the evanescent, they have linked everything to their own audaciousness, and they are ready, all that remains to be done now is to demolish the rest of the roof, close the sails and expose the machine to the sun, and farewell, we're off, but if you, Guardian Angel, don't give us at least a little help, you are neither an angel nor anything else, there are of course lots of saints whom one can invoke, but none is as numerate as you, you know the thirteen words, can count from one to thirteen without making a mistake, and since this is a task requiring a sound grasp of all the geometries and mathematics ever devised, you can begin with the first word, which is the House of jerusalem, where Jesus Christ died for all of us we are told, and now the two words, which are the Tables of Moses, where, we are told, Jesus Christ placed His feet, and now the three words, which are the three persons of the Holy Trinity, we are told, and now the four words, which are the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we are told, and now the five words, which are the five wounds of jesus Christ, we are told, and now the six words, which are the six blessed candles Jesus Christ received at birth, we are told, and now the seven words which are the seven sacraments, we are told, and now the eight words, which are the eight Beatitudes, we are told, and now the nine words, which are the nine months when the Virgin Mary carried her beloved Son in her most pure womb, we are told, and now the ten words, which are the Ten Commandments of God's Holy Law, we are told, and now the eleven words, which are the eleven thousand virgins, we are told, and now the twelve words, which are the twelve apostles, we are told, and now the thirteen words, which are the thirteen rays of the moon, and this most certainly does not need to be told, because at least we have Sete-Luas here with us, that woman who is holding the glass phial, protect her, Guardian Angel, for if the phial should break, there will be no journey, and that priest, who is behaving so strangely, will not be able to make his escape, also

protect the man working on the roof, his left hand is missing, and you are to blame, for you were inattentive out there on the battlefield when he was wounded, perhaps you still had not mastered your multiplication table.

It is four o'clock in the afternoon, only the walls of the coach-house are left standing, the place looks enormous with the flying machine in the middle, the tiny forge dissected by a band of shadows, and in the far corner the pallet where Baltasar and Blimunda have slept together for the past six years. The chest is no longer there, they have loaded it into the Passarola, what else do we need, the knapsacks, some food, and the harpsichord, what is to be done to the harpsichord, let it stay here, these are selfish thoughts, which one must try to comprehend and forgive, such is their anxiety that all three of them fail to reflect that if the harpsichord is left behind, the ecclesiastical and secular authorities are likely to become even more suspicious, why and for what purpose is a harpsichord in a coach-house, and if it was a hurricane that demolished the roof and scattered the tiles and beams, how did the harpsichord escape destruction, an instrument so delicate that even being transported on the shoulders of porters was enough to put the keys out of tune, Will Signor Scarlet not be playing for us in the sky, Blimunda asked.

Now they are ready to leave. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço contemplates the clear blue expanse above, cloudless and with a sun as brilliant as a glittering monstrosity, then he looks at Baltasar, who is holding the rope with which they will close the sails, and then at Blimunda, and he dearly wishes that she could divine what the future holds for them, Let us commend ourselves to God, if there is a God, he murmured to himself, and then in strangled tones he said, Pull, Baltasar, but Baltasar did not react at once, for his hand was trembling, besides, this was like saying Fiat, no sooner said than done, one pull and we end up who knows where. Blimunda drew near and placed her two hands over that of Baltasar and, with a concerted gesture, as if this were the only way it could be done, both of them pulled the rope. The sail veered to one side, allowing the sun to shine directly on the amber balls, and now what will happen to us. The machine shuddered, then swayed as if trying to regain its balance, there was a loud creaking from the metal plates and the entwined canes, and suddenly, as if it were being sucked in by a luminous vortex, it went up making two complete turns, and no sooner had it risen above the walls of the coach-house than it recovered its balance, raised its head like a seagull, and soared like an arrow straight up into the sky. Shaken by those rapid spins, Baltasar and Blimunda found themselves lying on the wooden deck of the machine, but Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço had grabbed one of the plummets that supported the sails, which allowed him to see the earth shrink at the most incredible speed, the estate was now barely visible, then lost amid the hills, and what's that yonder in the distance, Lisbon, of course, and the river, ah, the sea, that sea which I, Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão, sailed twice from Brazil, that sea which I sailed to Holland, to how many more continents on land and in the air will you transport me, Passarola, the wind roars in my ears, and no bird ever soared so high, if only the King could see me now, if only that Tomás Pinto Brandão who mocked me in verse could see me now, if only the Holy Office of the Inquisition could see me now, they

would all recognise that I am the chosen son of God, yes, I, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, who am soaring through the skies aided by my genius, aided, too, by Blimunda's eyes, if there are such eyes in heaven, and also assisted by Baltasar's right hand, Here I bring you God, one who also has a left hand missing, Blimunda, Baltasar, come and look, get up from there, don't be afraid.

They were not afraid, they were simply astounded at their own daring. The priest laughed and shouted. He had already abandoned the safety of the handrail and was running back and forth across the deck of the machine in order to catch a glimpse of the land below, north, south, east, and west, the earth looked so vast, now that they were so far away from it, Baltasar and Blimunda finally scrambled to their feet, nervously holding on to the cords, then to the handrail, dazed by the light and the wind, suddenly no longer frightened, Ah, and Baltasar shouted, We've done it, he embraced Blimunda and burst into tears, he was like a lost child, this soldier who had been to war, who had killed a man in Pegões with his spike, and was now weeping for joy as he clung to Blimunda, who kissed his dirty face. The priest came up to them and joined in their embrace, suddenly perturbed by the analogy the Italian had drawn when he had suggested that the priest himself was God, Baltasar his son, and Blimunda the holy ghost, and now all three of them were up there in the skies together, There is only one God, he shouted, but the wind snatched the words from his mouth. Then Blimunda said, Unless we open the sail, we shall go on climbing, and we might even collide with the sun.

We never ask ourselves whether there might not be some wisdom in madness, even while recognising that we are all a little mad. These are ways of keeping firmly on this side of madness, and just imagine, what would happen if madmen demanded to be treated as if they were equals with the sane, who are only a little mad, on the pretext that they themselves still possess a little wisdom, so as to safeguard, for example, their own existence like Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, If we were to open the sail abruptly, we should fall to the ground like a stone, and it is he who is manoeuvring the rope and adjusting the slack so that the sail opens gradually, casting its shadow on the balls of amber and causing the machine to slow down, who would ever have thought that it would be so easy to fly, now we can go in search of new Indies. The machine has stopped climbing and hovers in the sky, its wings extended, its beak pointing northward, and it has every appearance of being motionless. The priest opens the sail a little more, three-quarters of the amber balls are already covered in shadow, and the machine starts to descend gently, it is like sailing across a tranquil lake in a small boat, a tiny adjustment to the rudder, a stroke with one oar, those little touches that only mankind is capable of inventing. Slowly, land begins to appear, Lisbon looms into sight, the uneven rectangle of the Palace Square, the labyrinth of streets and alleyways, the frieze of the veranda where the priest lives and where even now the officers of the Holy Office of the Inquisition are forcing an entry to arrest him, they have come too late, officers who are so scrupulous in the affairs of heaven, yet who forget to look up at the blue sky, where they would see the machine, a tiny dot in the remote distance, but how could they raise

their eyes when they are confronted, to their horror, with a Bible whose pages have been torn out at the Pentateuch, when they are confronted by the Koran reduced to indecipherable fragments, they leave at once and head for the Rossio and the headquarters of the Holy Office of the Inquisition to report that the priest they had gone to arrest has already escaped, and it never occurs to them that he has taken refuge in the great celestial dome, which they will never know, because it is quite true that God has a weakness for madmen, the disabled, and eccentrics, but most certainly not for officers of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. The Passarola descends a little further, until the estate of the Duke of Aveiro comes into sight, and these three fliers are clearly beginners, they lack the experience that would enable them to distinguish important landmarks at a glance, rivers and streams, lakes, villages sprinkled like stars on earth, dense forests, they can see the four walls of the coach-house, the airport from which they launched their flight, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço suddenly remembers that he has a spyglass in the chest, he fetches it at once and trains it downwards, ah, how wonderful to be able to live and invent things, he can now distinguish the pallet in the corner, and the forge, but the harpsichord has disappeared, what has become of the harpsichord, we know, and are able to reveal, that Domenico Scarlatti called at the estate just in time to see the machine rising into the sky with a great shuddering of wings, and just think what would happen if those wings could flap, and once inside the coach-house, the musician found the debris of their departure, broken tiles scattered all over the floor, battens and joists sawn off or broken away, there is nothing sadder than an empty space, the machine is already on its way and gaining altitude, only to leave behind the most acute melancholy, and this sends Domenico Scarlatti to the harpsichord where he starts to play a bagatelle, barely skimming his fingers over the keys, as if stroking someone on the face when all words have been spoken or when words fail, he knows full well that it is dangerous to leave the harpsichord there, so he drags it outside, over the rough ground, awkwardly bumping it as he goes, it emits jarring chords, and this time the jacks really will be dislodged beyond repair, Scarlatti eases the harpsichord to the mouth of the well, which fortunately is set low, and, heaving it off the ground with one mighty push, he drops it down, the frame knocks against the inside walls twice and it emits woeful chords as it finally sinks into the water, who can tell what destiny awaits it, a harpsichord that played so beautifully and now sinks like a drowning man gurgling ominously until it settles in the mud. The musician has disappeared from sight, he is already beating a hasty retreat along narrow lanes away from the main road, perhaps if he were to raise his eyes he would see the Passarola once more, he waves with his hat, just once, better to dissemble and pretend that he knows nothing, this explains why they did not spot him from the airship, and who knows if they will ever meet him again.

There is a southerly wind, a breeze that scarcely ruffles Blimunda's hair, with this wind they will not be going anywhere, it would be like trying to swim across the ocean, so Baltasar asks, Shall I use the bellows, every coin has two sides, first the priest proclaimed, There is only one God, now Baltasar wants to know, Shall I use the bellows, from the sublime to the ridiculous, when God refuses to blow, man has to make an effort.

But Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço seems to have been struck dumb, he neither speaks nor moves, simply stares at the vast circumference of the earth, part river and sea, part mountain and plain, if that is not spray he perceives in the distance, it could be the white sails of a ship, unless it is a trail of mist, it could be smoke from some chimney, yet one cannot help feeling that the world has come to an end, and mankind as well, the silence is distressing, the wind has fallen, not a single hair on Blimunda's head is disturbed, Use the bellows, Baltasar, the priest commands.

It is like the pedals of an organ with treadles for inserting one's feet, they come up to a man's chest and are fixed to the frame of the machine, there is also a rail on which to rest one's arms, this time it is not another of Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço's inventions, but a design he copied from the organ in the cathedral, the main difference being that no music comes from the bellows but only the throbbing of the Passarola's wings and tail as it starts to move slowly, so slowly that one feels exhausted just watching, and the machine has scarcely flown the distance of an arrow shot from a crossbow, now it is Baltasar who is feeling tired, and at this rate we shall go nowhere. Looking cross, the priest appraises the efforts of Sete-Sóis, realising that his great invention has one serious flaw, travelling through the skies is not like sailing on waters, where one can have recourse to rowing when there is no wind, Stop, he orders Baltasar, Don't use the bellows anymore, and a weary Baltasar flops down on the deck.

The alarm and subsequent rejoicing have passed, all that remains is despondency, for they now know that by going up in the air and coming down again they are no different from the man who can get up or lie down but not walk. The sun is setting on the distant horizon, and shadows are already extending over the earth. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço feels apprehensive for no apparent reason, but he is suddenly distracted by clouds of smoke coming from some forest fire in the distance and gradually moving northwards, and this would suggest that the wind is blowing lower down. He manoeuvres the sail, stretches it a little more so that the shade might cover another row of amber balls, and the machine descends abruptly, but not enough to catch the wind. One more row is sheltered from the sunlight, they descend so quickly that their hearts miss a beat, and now the wind seizes the machine with a powerful and invisible hand and hurls it forward with such force that Lisbon is suddenly far behind them, its outline blurred by the haze on the horizon, it is as if they had finally abandoned the port and its moorings in order to go off in pursuit of secret routes, who knows what dangers await them, what Adamastors they will encounter, what St Elmo's fires they will see rise from the sea, what columns of water will suck in the air only to expel it once it has been salted. Then Blimunda asks, Where are we going, and the priest replies, Where the arm of the Inquisition cannot reach us, if such a place exists.

This nation, which expects so much from heaven, scarcely ever looks up where heaven is said to be. Farmers go out to work the land, villagers enter and leave their homes, go out into the yard, to the fountain, or to squat behind a pine tree, only a woman who is lying on her back in a clearing with a man on top of her pays any attention

to this strange apparition moving across the sky overhead, but she treats it as if it were a vision provoked by the ecstasies she is enjoying. Only the birds are curious as they circle avidly around the machine and ask themselves, Whatever can this be, Whatever can this be, perhaps it is the Messiah of birds, for the eagle by comparison is just any old St John the Baptist, After me comes He who is more powerful than I, and the history of flying does not end here. For some time they flew accompanied by a hawk that frightened off all the other birds, so that there were only two left, the hawk, beating and flapping its wings so that it is seen to be flying, and the Passarola whose wings do not stir, and if we did not know that it is made of sun, amber, dark clouds, magnets, and metal plates, we should find it difficult to believe our own eyes, nor could we offer the excuse of the woman lying in the clearing, who is no longer there now that she has taken her pleasure, and from here the spot cannot even be seen.

The wind is now southeasterly and blowing fiercely, the earth below sweeps past like the mobile surface of a river that carries with it fields, woodlands, villages, a medley of green, yellow, ochre, and brown, and white walls, the sails of windmills, and threads of water over water, what forces would be capable of separating these waters, this great river that passes and carries everything in its wake, the tiny currents that seek a path therein, unaware that they are water within water.

The three fliers are at the bow of the machine, which is heading west, and once more Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço is gripped by mounting disquiet, close to panic, he cannot suppress a cry of despair, when the sun sets, the machine will irremediably descend, perhaps crash, perhaps shatter into pieces, and they will all be killed, That is Mafra yonder, Baltasar calls out in excitement like the lookout shouting from the crow's nest, Land, never was there a more apt comparison, for this is Baltasar's land, he recognises it without ever having seen it from the sky, perhaps this is because we each possess our own innate perception of mountains, which instinctively leads us back to the place where we were born, my concave in your convex, my convex in your concave, like man and woman, woman and man, we are each on earth, hence Baltasar's cry, That's my land, he recognises it as if it were a body. They pass rapidly over the site where the convent is being built, but this time they are seen from below, people flee in terror, some fall to their knees and raise their hands in a plea for mercy, others throw stones, and thousands of people are caught up in the tumult, he who did not see, doubts, he who saw, swears it is true and asks his neighbour to testify on his behalf, no one can really prove anything, because the machine has already flown away, heading towards the sun, and is now invisible against that glowing disk, perhaps it was nothing but a hallucination, the sceptics are already gloating over the bewilderment of those who believed.

Within a few minutes, the machine reaches the seashore, the sun appears to be drawing it to the other side of the world. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço realises that they are about to drop into the ocean, so he gives the cord a sharp tug, the sail moves to one side and suddenly folds up, their ascent is now so rapid that the earth below retreats once more and the sun emerges far above the horizon. But it is too late. In the east,

shadows are already encroaching, inevitable night descends. The machine gradually begins to drift in a northeasterly direction and pursues a straight line, slanting towards the earth, subject to the twin attraction of the light, which is fast waning but still has sufficient strength to support the machine in mid-air, and of nocturnal darkness, which already enshrouds the remote valleys. The very wind is swallowed up in the powerful current of air produced by their descent, by the shrill hissing that pervades the entire machine as it suddenly begins to lurch. Over the distant sea, the sun rests like an orange in the palm of one's hand, it is a metallic disk drawn from the forge and left to cool, its fiery glare no longer wounds the eyes, white, then cerise, red, then crimson, it continues to glow but is now subdued, it is about to take its leave, farewell until tomorrow, if there should be a tomorrow for these flying seafarers who topple like a bird struck by death, awkwardly balanced on stunted wings, wearing its diadem of amber and spiralling down in concentric circles, in a fall that seems infinite yet will soon reach its end. A shadowy form looms up before them, the Adamastor, perhaps, of their voyage, and mountainous curves rise from the ground crested with streaks of crimson light. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço has the appearance of someone who is indifferent to all around him and is removed from this world, resigned, he awaits the end that is fast approaching. Suddenly Blimunda detaches herself from Baltasar, whom she frantically embraced when the machine began its precipitous descent, and puts her arm around one of the globes containing the dark clouds, there are two thousand wills inside, but they are not enough, she covers them with her body as if trying to absorb them or merge with them. The machine gives a sudden jolt, it rears its head, a horse checked by the bridle, it remains suspended there for an instant, vacillates, then starts to come down again, but less rapidly this time. Blimunda calls out, Baltasar, Baltasar, there was no need to call a third time, for he had already embraced the other globe, holding it close to his body, Sete-Luas and Sete-Sóis supporting the machine with their enclosed clouds as it slowly descended, so slowly that the willow canes barely creaked as it touched the ground and swayed to one side, there were no supports there to ensure a comfortable landing, but one cannot have everything. Feeling limp and weary, the three voyagers staggered out, losing their grip on the rail, they rolled over and found themselves stretched out on the ground, without so much as a scratch, miracles were clearly still being worked, and this was one of the better ones, they did not even have to invoke St Christopher, he was there directing the traffic and realising that the airship was out of control, he put out his mighty hand, and averted a disaster, and considering that this was his first miracle in the matter of flying, it was not so bad.

The light of day has almost disappeared and night is fast approaching, the first stars twinkle in the sky, and even though they had been so close, they had not succeeded in touching them, after all, this was a mere flea-hop, we rose into the sky above Lisbon, we flew over the town of Mafra and the site where the convent was being built, and we almost crashed into the sea, And now where are we, asked Blimunda, as she let out a groan because of the terrible pain in the pit of her stomach, there was no strength left in her arms, and Baltasar felt just as bad as he struggled to his feet and tried to straighten

up, tottering like a bull before collapsing in a heap with its skull pierced by a stake, but lucky Baltasar, unlike the ox, is passing from near-death to life, the shake-up will do him no real harm and will help to make him realise just how satisfying it is to put his feet firmly on the ground, I've no idea where we are, the place is unfamiliar but looks like some kind of sierra, perhaps Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço can tell us. The priest was getting to his feet, neither his limbs nor his stomach were giving him any pain, only his head, which felt as if a dagger had perforated his temples, We're in as much danger now as we were before leaving the estate, if the Inquisition didn't find us yesterday, they will certainly capture us tomorrow, But where are we, what is this place called, Every place on earth is the antechamber of hell, sometimes you arrive there dead, sometimes you arrive alive only to die soon after, For the moment, we are still alive, Tomorrow we shall be dead.

Blimunda went to the priest and tried to comfort him, We were in serious danger when our machine came down, if we have managed to survive that, we shall survive the rest, tell us where we should go, I don't know where we are, In the daylight we shall see better, we'll climb one of these mountains, and from there, by following the sun, find our way, and Baltasar added, We shall get the machine back into the air, we already know how to manoeuvre it, and unless the wind fails us, we should be able to travel a fair distance and escape the clutches of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço did not reply. He buried his head in his hands and gesticulated as if he were having a conversation with some invisible presence, and his face became ever more indistinct in the darkness. The machine had landed on a patch of scrub, but some thirty paces away, on either side, high thickets stood outlined against the sky. There appeared to be no sign of life in the immediate vicinity. The night was chilly, and little wonder, for September was almost over and the days were no longer warm. Sheltered by the machine, Baltasar lit a small fire, more for its comforting glow than in the hope of getting warm, for they were careful to avoid a great bonfire, which might be spotted at a distance. He and Blimunda settled down to eat the food they had brought in their knapsacks, they invited the priest to join them, but he neither responded nor drew near, they could see him standing there in silence, perhaps watching the stars, the deep valley, or those extended plains where not a single light flickered, it was as if the world had suddenly been abandoned by its inhabitants, perhaps here, there was no lack of flying machines capable of travelling in any weather, even at night, everyone had left, leaving our trio with this stupid bird that loses its way once it is deprived of sunlight.

When they finished eating, Baltasar and Blimunda lay down under the machine, covered with Baltasar's cloak and a canvas cloth that they removed from the chest, and Blimunda whispered, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço is ill, he no longer seems to be the same man, He hasn't been the same man for a long time, but what can we do, How can we help him, I don't know, perhaps tomorrow he will reach some decision. They heard the priest move away, dragging his feet through the undergrowth, muttering to himself, and they felt more relieved, the most trying thing of all was the silence, and despite the

cold and discomfort, they dozed off. They both dreamt that they were flying through the air, Blimunda in a carriage drawn by winged horses, Baltasar riding a bull that wore a mantle of fire, suddenly the horses lost their wings and the fuse ignited, causing fireworks to explode, and in the midst of these nightmares they woke up, having slept very little, the sky lit up as if the world were on fire and they saw the priest with a flaming branch in one hand setting the machine alight, and the cane framework was crackling as it caught fire, Baltasar jumped to his feet, ran to the priest, grabbed him by the waist, and pulled him away, but the priest put up a struggle, forcing Baltasar to tighten his grip and throw him to the ground before stamping out the firebrand, while Blimunda used the canvas cover to beat out the flames, which had started to spread from shrub to shrub, and gradually the fire was extinguished. Overwhelmed and resigned, the priest rose to his feet. Baltasar covered the embers with soil. They could scarcely see each other amid the shadows. Blimunda asked him in a low, neutral voice, as if anticipating his reply, "Why should you want to destroy our machine, and Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço replied in the same indifferent tone, as if he had been expecting the question, If I have to be burnt in a fire, let it at least be this one. He withdrew into the shrubbery on the side of the slope, they saw him descend rapidly, and when they looked a second time, he had disappeared, some urgent call of nature, perhaps, if a man who has tried to set fire to his dream still experiences such things. Time passed and the priest did not reappear. Baltasar went to look for him. He was nowhere to be seen. He called out his name, but there was no reply. The moon appeared and masked everything with hallucinations and shadows, Baltasar felt the hairs on his head and body stand on end. He thought of werewolves and ghosts, of phantoms in every guise and form, of wandering souls, he was convinced that the priest had been carried off by Satan himself, and before Satan could carry him off, too, to writhe in hell, he said a paternoster to St Giles, the saintly auxiliary and advocate in moments and situations inducing panic, epilepsy, madness, and nightmares. Could the saint have heard his plea, for so far, the devil had not come to fetch Baltasar, but his fears did not subside, and suddenly the whole earth began to murmur, or so it seemed, unless it was the influence of the moon, Seven-Moons is the best saint for me, he thought to himself as he turned to her, still trembling with fright, The priest has disappeared he told her, and Blimunda said, He has gone away and we shall see him no more.

That night they slept badly. Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço did not return. When day breaks, the sun will rise yonder, Blimunda warned Baltasar, If you don't extend the sail, and firmly stopper the amber balls, the machine will travel on its own, without any manual assistance, perhaps it would be best to release it, so that it might find itself reunited with Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço somewhere on earth or in the sky, and Baltasar added vehemently, Or in hell, the machine stays right here, and he set about extending the tarred sail and shading the amber globes, but he was not satisfied, fearing that the sail might get torn or be blown away by the wind. Using his knife, he lopped off branches from some of the taller shrubs and arranged them over the machine and, after an hour, in the clear light of day anyone looking from afar in that direction would have seen nothing other than a mound of greenery in the centre of that patch of scrub, not that this is

anything unusual and it will look much worse when everything starts to wither. Baltasar ate some of the leftovers from their meal of the previous evening, after Blimunda had eaten something, for, as you will recall, she is always the first to eat, with her eyes closed, today she even buried her head under Baltasar's cloak. There's nothing more to be done here. What do we do now, one of them asked, and the other replied, We can do nothing more here, Let's go, then, We can go down past the place where Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço disappeared, and perhaps we can still find some trace of him. Throughout the morning they searched that side of the mountain, as they made their descent, they wondered what these great, round, silent mountains were called, and they found no trace of the priest, not even so much as a footprint or a shred of his black cassock that might have been caught on some thorn, the priest appeared to have vanished into thin air, Where could he be, What now, it was Blimunda who posed the question. We travel on, the sun is over there, the sea lies on our right, and when we reach some inhabited place, we shall find out where we are and what this sierra is called, so that later we can retrace our steps, this is the Serra do Barregudo, a shepherd told him a league ahead, and that high mountain is Monte Junto.

It took them two days to reach Mafra, after a lengthy detour in order to give the impression that they had come from Lisbon. On the road, they met a procession, everyone giving thanks to heaven for the miracle ordained by God, when the Holy Ghost flew over the site of the future basilica.

WE ARE LIVING in an age where a nun, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, is likely to encounter the Child Jesus in the cloister, or an angel playing the harp in the choir, and should she be locked away in her cell, where, in private, the manifestations are of a more corporeal nature, she is tormented by demons who shake her bed and wriggle her body, first the upper part, so that her breasts quiver, then the lower part, where her orifice trembles and perspires, that vista of hell or gate to heaven, the latter when enjoying an orgasm, the former when the orgasm has passed, and one believes in all of this, therefore, Baltasar Mateus, alias Sete-Sóis, cannot go around saying, I've flown from Lisbon to Monte Junto, or he will be taken for a madman, which might be just as well, if he wants to avoid the attention of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, for there are plenty of raving lunatics in this land beset by madness. So far, Baltasar and Blimunda have managed to survive with the money Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço had given them, and on a modest diet of cabbage and beans gathered from the kitchen garden, the odd piece of meat, and some salted sardines when there were no fresh ones, and whatever they spent or ate was not so much in order to nourish their own bodies as to ensure the well-being of the flying machine, if they cherished any hope of seeing it fly again.

The machine, if that is what one believes it to be, has flown, and its body demands nourishment, that explains why their dreams soar to such heights, Sete-Sóis cannot even ply his trade as a drover, the oxen have been sold, the cart is broken, and if God were not so inconsiderate, the chattels of the poor would be eternal. If he had his own yoke of oxen and cart, Baltasar would be able to offer his services to the Inspectorate General, and despite his disability they would employ him. But with only one hand, they would seriously question his ability to handle animals for the King, the nobles, or any other wealthy landowners who had lent them to ingratiate themselves with the crown. So, what work can I hope to find, Baltasar asked his brother-in-law, Álvaro Diogo, after supper that same night, for they were all now living in the paternal home, but first Baltasar and Blimunda were given a detailed account by Inês Antónia of the Holy Ghost's remarkable flight over Mafra, With these very eyes, which the earth will consume one day, I saw the Holy Ghost, my dear Blimunda, and Álvaro Diogo saw the apparition, too, as he was working on the site, Is that not true, husband, whereupon Álvaro Diogo, blowing on a live ember, confirmed that something had passed over the site where they were building the convent, It was the Holy Ghost, Inês Antónia insisted, The friars said as much to all those who cared to listen, and people were so confident that it was the Holy Ghost that they organised a procession of thanksgiving, So it was the Holy Ghost, then, her husband conceded, and Baltasar, looking at a smiling Blimunda, said, There are things in the heavens that we cannot explain, and Blimunda fell in with those sentiments by adding, If we were able to explain them, things in the heavens would be known by other names. In the corner by the hearth, old João Francisco drowsed quietly, bereft of cart, yoke of oxen, land, and Marta Maria, he seemed estranged from their conversation, but muttered before dozing off once more, In this world there is only life and death, they waited for him to finish, and it is strange how the elderly fall silent when they ought to go on speaking, obliging the young to learn everything from scratch. There is someone else

here who is asleep and therefore silent, but even if he were awake, it is doubtful whether he would be allowed to say anything, for he is only twelve years old, truth may come out of the mouths of babes, but they have to grow up before they are allowed to speak, and by then they have usually started telling lies, this is the boy who has survived, and he arrives home at night worn out from his labours as a builder's apprentice and all that climbing up and down scaffolding all day long, and no sooner does he eat his supper than he is fast asleep, There is work for any man who wants it, Álvaro Diogo assured Baltasar, you can run errands or work as a porter with a handcart, your hook is all you need for holding the shaft, these are the misfortunes of life, a man goes to war, he comes back wounded, flies through the air by some mysterious power, and then, when he tries to earn a modest living, this is what he is offered, and he is fortunate, for in all probability there were not even hooks a thousand years ago to substitute for a missing hand, and who knows what will have been invented a thousand years from now.

Early next morning, Baltasar and Álvaro Diogo, accompanied by the latter's son, left for work, the Sete-Sóis house, as has already been mentioned, is by the Church of St Andrew and the Viscounts' Palace, here in the oldest part of the town where the ruins of the castle built by the Moors are still standing, they left early, meeting up with other men along the route, whom Baltasar recognised as neighbours also helping to build the convent, which might explain why the surrounding fields have been abandoned, the old folks and the women cannot cultivate the land on their own, and since Mafra lies at the bottom of the valley, the men have to climb improvised paths, for those of former times have been covered over with the rubble cleared from the Alto da Vela. Seen from below, the walls of the future convent scarcely suggest another Tower of Babel, and as one reaches the bottom of the slope, the walls completely disappear, the work has now been in progress for some seven years, and at this rate it will not be ready before the Day of Judgment and will therefore turn out to be futile, It's a big job, Álvaro assures Baltasar, as you will see for yourself when we get nearer, and Baltasar, who feels a certain contempt for stone-masons and bricklayers, is astounded, not so much by the work that has been completed as by the hordes of workers swarming the place, an ant-hill of men rushing about in all directions, If all these people have come here to work, then I must eat my words. The boy has left them and gone off to start his day's work carrying hods of lime, while the two men cross the site to the left on their way to the Inspectorate General's office, Álvaro Diogo will explain, This is my brother-in-law, who lives in Mafra, and although he has spent many years in Lisbon, has now returned to his father's house and needs a job, not that personal recommendations necessarily do much good, but Álvaro Diogo has been here from the outset and is known to be a reliable worker and a word in the right ear always helps. Baltasar gapes in astonishment, he has come from a village and is now entering a city, and Lisbon, of course, is an impressive sight, as the capital of a great kingdom that incorporates the Algarve, which is small and nearby, but also other territories, such as Brazil, Africa, and India, not to mention the Portuguese domains scattered throughout the world, it is only natural, I say, that Lisbon should be so overwhelming and chaotic, but who would expect to find this vast conglomeration of

rooftops of every conceivable shape and size so close to Mafra, it has to be seen to be believed, when Sete-Sóis flew over this place three days ago, he was in such an anxious state that he thought his eyes were deceiving him as he looked down on this conglomeration of houses and streets and thought the future basilica was no bigger than a chapel. If God Himself has the same difficulty in seeing things from up above, then He might do well to tread the earth on His own divine feet, and dispense with intermediaries and envoys who are never trustworthy, and He might start by correcting the optical illusion whereby what looks small from a distance turns out to be large when seen up close, unless God uses a spyglass, like Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço and is looking at me this very minute as I wait to see whether they will offer me a job or turn me away.

Álvaro Diogo has already gone off to start laying stones, one on top of another, had he delayed any longer, it would have meant forfeiting a quarter of the day's wage, which would have been a serious loss, now Baltasar has to convince the recruiting officer that an iron hook is as good as a hand made of flesh and blood. The clerk seems doubtful about his chances and, rather than accept the responsibility, goes inside to make some inquiries, a pity that Baltasar cannot produce any documents certifying that he is a builder of airships, or at least that he has fought in the war, if this were to do him some good, for the nation has been at peace for the last fourteen years, and who wants to know about wars, once wars are over, it is as if they had never taken place. The clerk returns looking cheerful, What's your name, and he takes up his duck quill and dips it into the brown ink, so Álvaro Diogo's recommendation has helped after all, or the fact that he has some claim on this land, or that he is still in his prime, thirty-nine years of age despite those first grey hairs, or simply that God might be offended if a man in need of work should be turned away when He has favoured Mafra by allowing the Holy Ghost to fly over the town three days before, What's your name, Baltasar Mateus, nicknamed Sete-Sóis, You can start work next Monday as a porter. Baltasar dutifully thanks the recruiting clerk and leaves the Inspectorate General feeling neither happy nor sad, a man must earn his daily bread by some means somewhere, and if that bread fails to nourish his soul, at least his body will be nourished while his soul suffers.

Baltasar knew that this place was known as the Ilha da Madeira, the Island of Wood, and it was well named, because, apart from a few houses built in stone and mortar, all the others were timber constructions, but built to last. There were also blacksmiths working on the site, and Baltasar could have mentioned his experience at the forge, although he had already forgotten much of what he had learned, not to mention the other skills about which he knew nothing, subsequently there would be coopers, glaziers, painters, and many other craftsmen on the site. Many of the timber houses had upper storeys, on the ground floor were housed the livestock and oxen, and above lodged the personnel of greater and lesser rank, the masters of works, the clerks and other officers of the Inspectorate General, as well as the military officers in charge of the troops. At this hour of the morning, oxen and mules were being led out of the stables, others had been led out even earlier, and the ground was soaked with urine and littered with manure, and

as in Lisbon during the Corpus Christi procession, street urchins were running wild amid the crowds and cattle jostling and chasing one another, and one lad who was trying to escape from another slipped and fell under a yoke of oxen but escaped being trampled, because his guardian angel was watching over him, and he escaped without injury, apart from being covered with foul-smelling dung. Baltasar laughed along with the others and there was no doubt that the job had its moments of fun. It also had its own guard. Even now, some twenty foot soldiers were marching past as if on their way to war, they could be on manoeuvres or heading for Ericeira to resist a landing of French pirates, who will make so many attempts to land that they will finally succeed, and one day long after this Babel is over, Junot duc d'Abrantés will enter Mafra, where only some twenty aged friars will be left in the convent to fall off their stools with the shock, and Colonel or Captain Delagarde, his rank is of no importance, heading the vanguard, will try to enter the Palace and find the doors locked, whereupon the custodian, Friar Félix de Santa Maria da Arrâbida, will be summoned, but the poor fellow will not have the keys, because they will be with the Royal Family, which has fled, and then perfidious Delagarde, as one historian will dub him, will deal the poor custodian a mighty blow, who with evangelical humility and divine example will proffer the other cheek, but if Baltasar, when he lost his left hand in Jerez de los Caballeros, had offered his right hand as well, he would now find it impossible to hold the shaft of the hand-cart. And speaking of caballeros, some horsemen have also passed, armed just like the foot soldiers who are even now entering the square. It soon becomes clear that they are arriving for guard duty and there is nothing quite like working with guards standing over you.

The men sleep in large wooden dormitories, each accommodating no fewer than two hundred, and from where he is standing, Baltasar finds it impossible to count all the huts, but he gets up to fifty-seven before losing count, not to mention that his arithmetic has not improved over the years, the best thing would be to take a bucket of limewash and a brush and to paint a sign here and a sign there to avoid repeating the count, as if he were nailing crosses of St Lazarus to the doors to ward off some skin disease. Baltasar would find himself sleeping on a mat or bunk like these men were it not for his father's house in Mafra, and he has a wife to keep him company at night, while most of these poor wretches have come from afar and left their wives behind, they say a man is not made of wood, it is much worse and more difficult to bear when a man's penis is as hard as wood, for the widows of Mafra are certainly not going to satisfy all their demands. Baltasar left the sleeping quarters and went off to look at the military camp, there he felt a lump in his throat, all those pitched tents, it was as if he were stepping back in time for, however unlikely it may seem, there are moments when a former soldier feels nostalgia for war, and it is not the first time this has happened to Baltasar. Álvaro Diogo had already told him that there were many soldiers in Mafra, some having been drafted to help with the excavations and blasting operations, others to supervise the workers and deal with any disturbances and judging from the number of tents, the many soldiers to which Álvaro had referred ran into thousands. Sete-Sóis is dumbfounded, what new Mafra is this, there are some fifty houses down in the village itself, and some five hundred up

here on the site, not to mention other notable differences, such as this row of communal refectories, sheds almost as large as the dormitories, with extended tables and benches fixed to the floor and long trestles for serving the food, there is no one around at present, but by mid-morning cauldrons are suspended over the fires for the main meal, and when the mess bugle is sounded, there will be one great stampede to see who can get there first, the men come off the site dirty from work, and the uproar is deafening, friends call to friends, Sit here, Keep my place for me, but carpenters sit with carpenters, builders with builders, and the hordes of unskilled labourers sit at the bottom, each man with his own kind, thank goodness Baltasar can go home to eat, otherwise he would be at a loss for company, for he knows nothing about handcarts, just as he is the only person there who knows anything about flying machines.

Álvaro Diogo can say what he likes in his own defence and that of his fellow workers, but the project is clearly making little progress. Baltasar has examined everything with the scrupulous eye of someone inspecting a house he hopes to occupy, there go the men with handcarts, whilst others mount the scaffolding, some carrying the lime and sand, others in pairs, easing the stone slabs up gentle ramps with poles and ropes, and the master-masons supervise operations with truncheon in hand, while the overseers check the diligence of each labourer and the standard of his work. The height of the walls is no more than three times that of Baltasar, and they do not embrace the entire perimeter of the basilica, but they are as thick as those of any fortress, and thicker than those of the surviving walls of the castle at Mafra, but those were of another age, before artillery came into use, only the width of the stone walls of the future convent can justify the slowness with which they are being raised. Baltasar comes across a handcart lying on its side and decides to have a go at holding the shaft, it is not too difficult, and once he has cut out a semicircle in the lower part of the left-hand shaft, he is ready to compete with any pair of hands.

He then descends by the same path he came up. The building site and Ilha da Madeira are hidden behind the slope and were it not for the stones and gravel that are continually being tipped down the slope, one would not suspect there will ever be a basilica, convent, or royal palace on that site, simply Mafra as before, the same small place that has existed for centuries and has scarcely altered from the time of the Romans, who made decrees, and of the Moors, who came after them and planted vegetable gardens and orchards that have virtually disappeared, up to the present, when we became Christians by the will of whosoever ruled us, for if Christ walked on earth, He never visited these parts, otherwise the Alto da Vela would have been His Calvary, now they are building a convent there, which probably amounts to the same thing. Pondering these holy matters more deeply, if they really are Baltasar's thoughts, but what would be the point in asking him, he remembers Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, but not for the first time, because when he is alone with Blimunda, he scarcely speaks of anything else, he remembers him and is suddenly filled with remorse, he regrets having treated him so harshly and with such brutality in the sierra on that dreadful night, it was as if he had

mistreated his own brother when the fellow was ailing, I know very well that he is a priest and I am no longer even a soldier, nevertheless, we are both the same age, and we worked together on the same invention. Baltasar repeats to himself that one day he will return to the Serra do Barregudo and to Monte Junto, to find out if the machine is still there, the priest might have secretly made his way back to the spot, flown off on his own to lands more favourably disposed to inventions, to Holland, for example, a country much devoted to the wonders of flying, as would be confirmed by a certain Hans Pfaall, who, because he was not pardoned for a number of petty crimes, continues to live on the moon to this day. The last thing Baltasar needed to know were these future events and even more impressive ones such as that of two men ascending to the moon and being seen there by everyone, and if they found no trace of Hans Pfaall, that was probably because they did not look hard enough. For those paths are difficult to find.

Down here, they are much easier. From dawn until dusk, Baltasar, along with some seven hundred, one thousand, twelve hundred others, load their carts with earth and stones, in Baltasar's case, the hook secures the handle of the shovel, for during the last fifteen years, his right hand has trebled in strength and dexterity, and then an interminable procession of Corpus Homini in single file wends its way to dump the rubble down the embankment, covering not only the shrubs but also cultivated land. A kitchen garden from Moorish times is about to be wiped out after centuries of yielding cabbages, plump, tender lettuces bursting with freshness, oregano, parsley, mint, vegetables, and fruit in prime condition, and now farewell, water will no longer stream along these paths, the gardener will no longer turn over the soil to water this parched flower-bed while the adjacent one rejoices in the thirst that killed its neighbour. And just as the world goes around and around, the men who inhabit it revolve even more, perhaps that fellow up there who has just emptied a cartload of rubble, bringing down a torrent of stones and soil, with the heaviest of the stones descending first, was the man in charge of the vegetable garden, but it seems unlikely, for he does not even shed a tear.

The days pass, and the walls do not appear to be getting much higher. Cannon-fire blasts the solid rock that the soldiers are just about to storm, their efforts would be better rewarded if this type of rock could be used like other stones to fill in the walls, but, deeply embedded in the hillside, it can be quarried only with considerable difficulty, and once exposed to the atmosphere, it soon disintegrates and turns to dust unless loaded into the handcarts and dumped. Also used for transport are larger carts with wooden wheels and drawn by mules, some of them overloaded, and because of the heavy rain in recent days, the animals got trapped in the mud and had to be whipped to get them out, the poor beasts were given strokes of the lash on their rumps and, when God was not looking, on their heads, although all this labour is meant to serve and glorify the same God, and so one cannot be sure that He is not deliberately averting His gaze. The men pushing the handcarts have a lighter load to carry, and are in less danger of getting stuck, they can improvise cat-walks from wooden planks that were left scattered around when the scaffolding went up, but since there are never enough planks to go round, there

is a constant battle of hide-and-seek to see who can get there first and, should they arrive simultaneously, to see who can push the hardest, and you can be sure that punching and kicking soon follow and missiles fly through the air, until a military patrol arrives, a manoeuvre which is usually sufficient to cool tempers, otherwise they receive a couple of blows with the flat edge of a sword, two strokes of the lash on their rumps like the mules.

It starts raining, but not heavily enough to bring the work to a halt, except in the case of the stone-masons for the rain loosens the mortar and seeps into the broad surfaces on top of the walls, so the workers take refuge in the sheds until the weather clears up, while the stone-cutters, whose task is somewhat more refined, work at their marble under cover, no matter whether they are cutting or sculpting it, but no doubt they, too, would rather take a rest. For the latter it is all the same whether the walls go up quickly or slowly, their work goes on regardless, tracing out the grain of the marble and carving out flutes, acanthus leaves, festoons, pedestals, and garlands and the minute the job is finished, the porters transport the stone with poles and ropes to the shed where it is stored along with the rest, when the time comes they will fetch the various pieces in the same manner, unless they are so heavy that tackle and ramps are required. The stone-cutters are fortunate in having their work guaranteed, whatever the weather, constantly under shelter and covered in white marble dust, they look like gentlemen in powdered wigs as they tap-tap, tap-tap, with their chisels and hammers, a job that needs two hands. Today the rain has not been heavy enough to force the overseers to suspend operations, and even the men pushing the handcarts are allowed to go on working, less fortunate than the ants, which at the first sign of rain raise their heads to pick up the scent of the stars and then scurry to their ant-hills, unlike men, who go on working in the rain. Coming in from the sea, a dark sheet of rain soon spreads over the countryside, the men abandon their handcarts at random and, without waiting for orders, make for the sheds or huddle behind the walls, if they think it will do any good, for they could not be more soaked. The harnessed mules stand placidly under the downpour, accustomed to being covered with perspiration, they are now soaked by rain, the yoked oxen chew their cud with apparent indifference, when the rain is at its fiercest, the animals shake their heads, who can tell what they are feeling, what nerves are twitching in their bodies, or whether those shiny horns touch, as if to say, So you're there. When the rain goes away or has become bearable, the men return to the site and the work starts up again as they load and unload, heave and push, drag and lift, there is no blasting today because of the general humidity, and so much the better for the soldiers, who can relax in the sheds in the company of the sentries, who are also sheltering from the rain, this is the happiness of peace. And since the rain is back again, pouring down from a glowering sky, and it looks as if it will continue for some time, orders are given for the men to put down their tools, only the stone-cutters go on chiselling at the stone, tap-tap, tap-tap, the sheds are spacious, nor will the splatterings of rain blown in by the wind mark the grain of the marble.

Baltasar went down into the town by a slippery path, a man going down ahead of him fell in the mud and everyone laughed whilst another fell down laughing, these are welcome distractions, for in Mafra there are no outdoor theatres, no singers or actors, opera is performed only in Lisbon, nor will there be any cinemas for another two hundred years, and by then flying machines will have engines, time is slow in passing until one finds happiness at last, Hello there. His brother-in-law and nephew must have arrived home already, lucky for them, for there is nothing like a good fire when a man is chilled to the marrow, to be able to warm your hands before those tall flames and toast the hard skin on the soles of your feet right up against the hot embers, the chill slowly thawing out your bones like dew melting in the sun. Better still if you find a woman in your bed, and if she is the woman you love, you need only catch sight of her, as we now see Blimunda, she has come to share the same cold and rain, and she is bringing one of her skirts to cover Baltasar's head, and the very scent of this woman brings tears to his eyes, Are you tired, she asks him, and these words are all he needs to make existence tolerable, the hem of her skirt is drawn over their two heads, and heaven could never match such bliss, if only God were to enjoy such harmony with our angels.

News reached Mafra sporadically that Lisbon was suffering the tremors of an earthquake, there is no real damage apart from the odd roof and chimney collapsing and cracks appearing in the walls of old buildings, but since somebody always benefits from misfortune, the chandlers did a roaring trade, the churches were crammed with lighted candles, especially before the altar of St Christopher, a saint noted for warding off plague and epidemics, lightning and fire, tempest and flood, as well as shipwreck and earthquake, in competition with St Barbara and St Eustace, who are also extremely reliable in providing such forms of protection. But the saints are like these workers building the convent, and when we refer to these workers, we mean all those others, too, who are employed elsewhere on buildings and demolitions, saints tire easily and value their rest, for they alone know how difficult it is to control the forces of nature, if they were the forces of God, things would be much easier, it would suffice to ask God, Look here, call off that tempest, earthquake, fire, flood, don't unleash that plague or allow that villain on to the highway, and only if He were an evil God would He ignore their pleas, but because these are the forces of nature and the saints get distracted, no sooner do we sigh with relief that we have escaped the worst than suddenly a storm breaks out, the likes of which has never been experienced in living memory, without rain or hail, but these might have been preferable and helped to break the strong wind, which tosses the anchored ships as if they were empty nutshells and goes tugging, stretching, and breaking the chains and yanking up the anchors from the depths of the sea, and once the ships are dragged from their moorings, they collide with one another and their sides are cracked open, causing them to sink as the sailors cry out, they alone know whom to ask for help, or they run aground where the relentless waves finally smash them to pieces. All the quays upriver collapse, the wind and waves dislodge the stones from their foundations and hurl them to the ground, doors and windows are shattered as if struck by cannon, what enemy can this be that wreaks havoc without sword or fire. Convinced that

this upheaval must be the work of the devil, every woman and nursemaid, servant, and female slave, is on her knees praying, Most Holy Mary, Virgin and Mother of God, the men, meanwhile, looking deathly pale, and with neither Moor nor Indian on whom to inflict revenge, recite the rosary aloud, Pater Noster, Ave Maria, that we should invoke them with such insistence suggests that what we really need is a father and a mother. The waves break with such force on the shore of Boavista that the spray inundates the walls of the Convent of the Cistercian Nuns and the Monastery of St Benedict, which lies even farther inland. If the world were a boat and sailing a mighty ocean, it would sink this time, gathering waters upon waters in a flood that would be universal and save neither Noah nor the dove. From Fundição to Belém, which is almost a league and a half away, there was nothing but debris littered along the shores, splintered timber and cargo that had not been sufficiently heavy to sink and was swept ashore, which meant serious losses for the vessels' owners as well as for the King. The masts on some of the ships were sawn off to prevent them from capsizing, yet even with this precaution three men-of-war were driven ashore and would certainly have perished if they had not been rescued immediately. Countless skiffs, fishing boats, and barges finished up in fragments along the beaches, some one hundred and twenty large vessels used for cargo were grounded or lost at sea, and it would be futile to try to calculate the numbers of those drowned or killed, for many of the corpses were swept out beyond the straits or dragged to the bottom of the sea, but on the beaches alone, one hundred and sixty corpses were accounted for, the scattered beads of a rosary over which the widows and orphans weep, Ah, my beloved father, few women were drowned, some man will sigh, Ah, my beloved wife, for we are all beloved once we are dead. There were so many corpses that they had to be buried in haste, some could not be identified, nor their relatives located, and many who came to mourn the dead failed to arrive in time, but serious misfortunes call for serious measures, had the previous earthquake been more severe and the number of dead greater, the same measures would have been taken to bury the dead, and take care of the living, a sound piece of advice should any such calamity ever happen again, but spare us, oh Lord.

More than two months have gone by since Baltasar and Blimunda came to live in Mafra. A public holiday to mark a feast day meant that the work was suspended on the site, so Baltasar decided to make the trip to Monte Junto to see the flying machine. He found it in the same place, in exactly the same position, tilted to one side and resting on one wing beneath its camouflage of withered foliage. The mainsail, which had been left tarred and fully extended, cast shadows over the amber balls, and because of the angle of the hull, rainwater had not collected inside the sail, thus averting any danger of rot. Tall weeds sprouted everywhere from the stony ground, even brambles in certain places, and this was a curious phenomenon because neither the time nor the place was propitious, the Passarola seemed to be defending itself with its own mysterious powers, but, then, one can expect anything from such a machine. Somewhat hesitant, Baltasar added to the camouflage by cutting branches from the nearby bushes, as he had done before, but with less effort this time, because he had brought a pruning hook, and once

the work was finished, he walked all around this other basilica and was pleased with the result. Then he clambered into the machine and, with the tip of his spike, which he had not had occasion to use recently, he scratched out a sun and a moon on one of the planks of the deck, so that if Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço should ever return here, he would see this sign and know at once that it was a message from his friends. Baltasar set out on the road, he had left Mafra at dawn, and it was already night when he returned after a ten leagues walk there and back, and although people say that those who walk for pleasure do not feel tired, Baltasar was exhausted by the time he reached home, yet no one had obliged him to go, so he must have captured the nymph mentioned by Camoens, and had a good time.

One day in mid-September, Baltasar was walking home from work when he saw Blimunda waiting for him on the road as she so often did, but somehow this time she looked anxious and distressed, which was most unlike her, for anyone who knew Blimunda could see that she went through the world as if she had gathered knowledge and experience from previous lives, and on reaching her, he asked, Is Father worse, No, she replied, and then in whispered tones confided, Signor Scarlet is with the Viscount, what can he be doing here, Are you sure, have you seen him, With these very eyes, It could be someone who looks like him, It's him, all right, I only have to see a person once to remember him, and I've seen Signor Scarlet lots of times. They went into the house and joined the others for supper, then everyone settled down for the night, each couple on their own pallet, and old João Francisco with his grandson, the boy is a restless sleeper and tosses and turns all night, but his grandfather does not mind, it is always company for the old man, who finds it difficult to sleep. This explains why he was the only person to hear, very late that same night, that is to say, late for someone who goes to bed early, gentle strains of music penetrating the cracks in the door and the roof of the house, there must have been a deep silence in Mafra that night, if music played on the harpsichord in the Viscounts' palace when the doors and windows were shuttered on account of the cold, and even when it was not cold, for the sake of decorum, was heard by an old man growing deaf with age, had Blimunda and Baltasar heard it, one might well have expected them to comment, It's Signor Scarlet who is playing, for it is quite true to say that the giant is recognised by his finger, this we would not argue with, since the proverb exists and is altogether apt. Next morning, as dawn broke, the old man sat down by the hearth and told them, I heard music last night, neither Inês Antónia nor Álvaro Diogo nor his grandson paid any heed, for old people are always hearing something or other, but Baltasar and Blimunda felt envious to the point of sadness, if anyone there had the right to hear that music, it was them, no one else. When Baltasar went off to work, Blimunda spent the morning prowling around the palace.

Domenico Scarlatti had requested the King's permission to go and inspect the future convent. He was offered hospitality by the Viscount, not because the latter was particularly fond of music, but, since the Italian was music-master of the Royal Chapel and tutor to the Infanta Dona Maria Bárbara, he was regarded by the Viscount as a

corporeal emanation from the palace itself. One can never tell when hospitality might be generously rewarded, the residence of the Viscount is no lodging-house, so just as well to choose one's guests with care. Domenico Scarlatti played the Vicount's harpsichord, which was sadly out of tune, the Viscountess listened to him playing in the evening with her three-year-old daughter, Manuela Xavier, on her lap and of all those present in the room, the child was the most attentive, she kept moving her little fingers in imitation of Scarlatti until she exhausted her mother's patience and was entrusted to her governess. There would not be much music in the child's life, tonight she would be asleep while Scarlatti played, and ten years from now she would die and be buried in the Church of St Andrew, where she still lies, if there is any place for such wonders on this earth, perhaps she will hear the music played by the water on the harpsichord that was thrown into the well of São Sebastião da Pedreira, if the well is still there, for sources of water are destined to become exhausted and filled in.

The musician made his way to the site of the convent and caught sight of Blimunda but they pretended not to know each other, for it would have aroused surprise and suspicion in Mafra if the wife of Sete-Sóis were to be seen socialising with the musician who is staying as a guest at the Viscount's residence, What can he be doing here, perhaps he's come to inspect the building, but why, if he is neither a mason nor an architect, and there is no organ as yet for any organist to play, no, there must be some other reason. I've come to tell you and Baltasar that Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmão has died in Toledo which is in Spain, to where he had escaped, and according to some, he was mad, and since no one mentioned you or Baltasar, I decided to come to Mafra to find out if you were still alive. Blimunda joined her hands, not as if she were praying, but like someone about to strangle her own fingers, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço is dead, This is the news that reached Lisbon, On the night when the machine crashed into the sierra, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço ran off and left us and returned no more, And the machine, It's still there, what shall we do with it, Guard and protect it, perhaps one day it will fly again, When did Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço die, They say it was on the nineteenth of November, and his death was marked in Lisbon that day by a great tempest, if Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmão were a saint, it could be a sign from heaven, What is it to be a saint, Signor Scarlet, You tell me, Blimunda.

The next day, Domenico Scarlatti departed for Lisbon. At a bend in the road outside town, Blimunda and Baltasar were waiting for him, the latter had forfeited a quarter of his daily wage to be able to bid the musician farewell. They went up to his carriage like beggars about to ask for alms, Scarlatti ordered the driver to stop and stretched out his hands to them, Farewell, farewell. In the distance, cannon fire could be heard, as if some feast were being celebrated, the Italian looks sad, and that is not surprising if he is coming away from the feast, but the others, too, look sad, and why should this be since they are going back to the feast.

SITTING ON HIS throne amid the radiance of the stars, with his mantle of night and solitude, and with the new sea and dead eras at his feet, is the only emperor who truly holds the globe of the universe in his hand, these are the words with which the Infante Dom Henrique will be acclaimed one day by a poet who is not yet born, everyone has his own preferences, but if we are speaking of the globe of the universe and of the empire and of the riches that empires yield, then Dom Henrique is a feeble monarch when compared with Dom João, the fifth sovereign with that name on the roster of kings, sitting in a chair with arms made from *lignum vitae*, where he can rest with greater comfort and pay closer attention to the accountant who is drawing up an inventory of the realm's possessions and riches, silks, fabrics, porcelain, lacquered goods, tea, pepper, copper, ambergris, and gold from Macao, unpolished diamonds, rubies, pearls, cinnamon, bales of cotton, and saltpetre from Goa, rugs, furniture upholstered in damask, and embroidered bedspreads from Diu, ivory from Melinde, slaves and gold from Mozambique, from Angola more black slaves but not so sturdy as those from Mozambique, and the best ivory to be found in Western Africa, timber, manioc flour, bananas, yams, poultry, sheep, goats, indigo, and sugar from São Tomé, some black slaves, wax, hides, ivory, for not all ivory comes from elephant tusks, from Cabo Verde, woven materials, wheat, liqueurs, dry wines, spirits, crystallised lemon peel, and fruits from the Azores and Madeira, and, from the various regions of Brazil, sugar, tobacco, copal, indigo, wood, cotton, cacao, diamonds, emeralds, silver, and gold, which alone gives the realm twelve to fifteen million cruzados annually in the form of gold dust or minted coins, not to mention the bullion lost at sea or stolen by pirates, and though it is true that not all of this represents income for the crown, which is rich but not all that rich, more than sixteen million cruzados all told go into the royal coffers, the tax alone, which is levied for navigating the rivers that lead to Minas Gérais, yields thirty thousand cruzados, the Good Lord worked so hard to open up channels where waters might flow, and along comes a Portuguese king to impose a profitable toll.

Dom João V ponders how he will spend these enormous sums of money and such excessive wealth, he ponders the matter today just as he pondered it yesterday, only to come to the same conclusion, that the soul must be his primary consideration, we must preserve our soul by all possible means, especially when it can also be consoled by material comforts on this earth. Let the friar and nun have what is necessary, even what is superfluous, because the friar remembers to put me first when he prays, and the nun arranges the folds of my sheet and provides other little comforts, and if we pay Rome handsomely for the upkeep of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, she is paid even more for less cruel services, in exchange for ambassadorships and gifts, and if from this impoverished land of illiterates, rustics, and unskilled craftsmen one cannot expect refined arts and crafts, let them be brought from Europe for my convent at Mafra, and let all the other necessary adornments and embellishments be bought with the gold from my mines and revenues from my estates, whereby, as one friar will record for posterity, artisans abroad will get rich while we shall be admired for the splendours of our realm. From Portugal all that is required are the stone, tiles, and wood for burning, and men of brute force and empty hands. If the architect is German, the master-carpenters, master-

builders, and master-masons are all Italian, and if the traders and other rogues from whom we buy everything are English, French, and Dutch, then you can be quite certain that they import from Rome, Venice, Milan, Genoa, Liège, France, and Holland the bells and carillons, the oil lamps and chandeliers, the candlesticks, the bronze torch-holders, the chalices and the silver-gilt monstrances, the tabernacles and statues of saints to whom the King is particularly devoted, the adornments for the altars, the altar fronts, the dalmatics, the chasubles, the copes, the cords and tassels, the canopies, the baldachins, the albs, the lace cloths, and three thousand walnut panels for the sacristy cupboards and choir stalls, a wood much esteemed by St Charles Borromeo for this purpose, and from the countries of Northern Europe come whole shiploads of timber for the scaffolding, sheds, and lodging huts, and ropes and hawsers for the winches and pulleys, from Brazil, innumerable planks of angelin wood for the doors and windows of the convent, for the flooring of the cells, dormitories, refectory, and other outbuildings, including the steps of the delousing booths, because it is a wood that does not perish, unlike this splintering Portuguese pine, which is only good for heating saucepans and for people to sit on who do not weigh much and have nothing in their pockets. Eight years have now gone by since the first stone was laid for the basilica in the town of Mafra, this one, thank God, came from Pêro Pinheiro, the rest of Europe should remember us with gratitude for the large sums of money they received in advance, not to mention what they charged in instalments as the work progressed and what they received when the project was finally completed, for they provided the silversmiths and goldsmiths, the bell founders, the sculptors responsible for the statues and bas-reliefs, the weavers, lace-makers, and needlewomen, the clock-makers, the engravers and painters, the rope-makers, the sawyers and carpenters, the embroiderers, the tanners, the carpet-weavers, the bell-makers, and the ship-riggers, if the cow that so placidly allows itself to be milked dry cannot be ours, or as long as it cannot be ours, at least let it remain with the Portuguese, for soon they will be buying a pint of milk from us on credit to make milk puddings and meringue desserts, If Your Majesty would care for another helping, Mother Paula solicitously reminds him, you need only ask.

The ants swarm around the honey, around the sugar spilled on the floor and the manna that has fallen from heaven, all of them moving in the same direction, like certain maritime birds that gather in their hundreds on the shores to worship the sun, no matter if the wind is behind them, ruffling their feathers, their concern is to follow the travelling eye of the sky, and with short runs they pass in front of one another, until the beach abruptly terminates or the sun disappears, tomorrow we shall come back to this same spot, and if we do not come our children will. The twenty thousand people gathered on the site are nearly all men, the few women who are present remain on the periphery, not so much because of the custom of segregating the sexes at Mass, but because of the risks they might run in the thick of that gathering, for though they might emerge alive, they would in all probability be violated, to adopt a modern expression, Do not tempi the Lord thy God, and if you do, then don't go complaining that you've become pregnant.

As we have explained, Mass is being celebrated. Between the site and the Ilha da Madeira there is a vast space trampled by the comings and goings of the workers and furrowed by the wheels of the carts that travel back and forth, fortunately, the ground is quite dry at present, this is the virtue of spring just as she is about to fall into the arms of summer, soon the men will be able to kneel on the ground without worrying about getting their trousers wet, although these people are not greatly bothered about cleanliness and they wash in their own sweat. On an elevation at the far end a wooden chapel has been erected, and if those who have come to attend Mass imagine that they will all fit in by some miraculous means, then they are greatly mistaken, it would be easier to multiply the loaves and the fishes, or to put two thousand wills into a glass phial, this is no miracle, but the most natural thing in the world when one so desires it. The winches creak and the noise is enough to open the gates of heaven and hell, each with its own distinctive appearance, those of the House of God are made of crystal, while those of Satan are made of bronze, and even the resounding echoes are different, here, however, the din is coming from the friction of the wood, the front of the chapel is lifted slowly, until the wall is transformed into a porch and at the same time the sides are drawn back, it is as if invisible hands were opening up a tabernacle, and the first time this happened, there were not all that many workers on the site, but one could always be sure of a congregation of some five thousand faithful who would gasp in admiration, Ah, in every age there is always some new wonder to astound mankind until they grow accustomed to it and lose interest, the chapel is finally opened wide, to reveal the celebrant and the altar within, can this be a Mass like any other, it seems impossible that this is an ordinary Mass, but all these people have already forgotten that the Holy Ghost once flew over Mafra, Masses preceding military campaigns are different, who knows, when the dead are counted and buried, whether I shall not be among them, so let us profit from the Holy Sacrifice, unless the enemy attack first, either because they have been to an earlier Mass or because they adhere to a religion that dispenses with any such observance.

From his wooden cage, the celebrant preached to the sea of faces, and had it been a sea of fishes, what a lovely sermon he might have repeated here, with its clear, wholesome doctrine, but in the absence of any fishes his sermon was that deserved by men and heard only by those who were standing near the altar, however, if it is true that the habit does not make the monk, faith undoubtedly does, anyone in that congregation, upon hearing the word heathen, knows that it was heaven, that eternal was infernal, that Zeus was Deus, and when he hears no other word or echo, it is because the sermon has ended and we can now disperse. It is frightening to think that Mass is over and that they have not ended up dead on the ground or been struck down when the sun shone straight on to the monstrance, causing it to sparkle, times are much changed, for once when the Bethshemeshites were cutting their wheat in the fields, they happened to lift their eyes to heaven and saw the Ark of the Covenant from the land of the Philistines, which sufficed to make fifty thousand and seventy of them fall flat on their faces, now there were twenty thousand watching, Were you there, I didn't see you. This is a religion that can grow very

lax, especially when the congregation is so large that it becomes impossible to hear confessions and give holy communion to everyone, so they will remain here, come what may, if anything comes at all, staring, quarrelling, having their way with women up against fences and in more secluded places, until tomorrow, when they go back to work.

Baltasar crosses the square, some men are playing innocent games of quoits, others are playing games the King has prohibited, such as heads or tails, if the magistrate should come on his rounds, they will be put into the stocks. Blimunda and Inês Antónia are waiting for Baltasar at the agreed place, and there they will be joined shortly, if they have not already been, by Álvaro Diogo and his son. They all go down into the valley together, waiting for them to arrive home is old João Francisco, who can scarcely move his legs, he has to be content with the simple Mass celebrated by the parish priest in the church of St Andrew which is attended by all the members of the Viscount's household, and perhaps this explains why his sermons are less intimidating, with the one disadvantage, however, that they have to listen to the entire sermon, and João Francisco's attention wanders, which is only natural, for he is old and weary. They have had their dinner, Álvaro Diogo takes his siesta, the boy goes off to chase sparrows with his playmates, the women knit and darn on the sly, for this is a day of holy observance, when God does not wish the faithful to work, but unless this rip is patched today, the hole will be much bigger tomorrow, and if it is true that God punishes without stick or stone, it is no less true that one should darn only with a needle and thread, although I am not much good at mending, nor is this surprising, for when Adam and Eve were created, the one knew as much as the other, and when they were expelled from paradise, there is no evidence that the Archangel gave them separate lists of jobs suitable for men and women, Eve was simply told, You will suffer pain when giving birth, but even that will no longer be necessary one day. Baltasar leaves his spike and hook at home, he goes with his stump exposed, anxious to see if he can revive those consoling pains in his hand, which are now ever less frequent, that itch on the inside of his thumb and that sensual feeling as he scratches it with the nail of his index finger, no point in telling him that he is imagining it, he will retort that there are no fingers inside his head, others may say, But, Baltasar, you've lost your left hand, Who can be so sure, but there is no point in arguing with people who are even capable of denying their own existence.

It is a well-known fact that Baltasar likes a drink, though without getting drunk. He has been drinking since he first heard the sad news of the death of Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, it came as a terrible blow, as if he had been struck by one of those deep earth tremors that touch the very roots while on the surface the walls remain standing upright. Baltasar drinks because he cannot shut out the memory of the Passarola, there in the Serra do Barregudo on the slopes of Monte Junto, perhaps its presence has already been discovered by smugglers or shepherds, and just to think about such things causes him to suffer as if the rack were being tightened. But when he drinks there always comes a point when he feels Blimunda's hand rest on his shoulder, and that is all he needs, Blimunda's tranquil presence in the house is enough to restrain him, Baltasar reaches out for the

tankard filled with wine, which he intends to drink as he also drank all the others, but a hand touches his shoulder, a voice says, Baltasar, and the tankard is returned to the table untouched and his friends know that he will drink no more that day. Baltasar will remain silent, doing nothing except listen, until the torpor induced by the wine passes and the words of the others begin to make sense even as they exchange the same old stories, My name is Francisco Marques, I was born in Cheleiros, which is close to Mafra, some two leagues away, and I have a wife and three small children, all my life I've worked for a daily wage, and since there seemed to be no escape from poverty, I decided to come help build the convent, even the friar who secured the King's pledge was born in my home town, according to what I've been told, for I was only a child then, about the same age as your nephew, but I really mustn't complain, for Cheleiros is not all that far away, from time to time I stretch my legs on the road, the two legs that walk and the one in the middle that means my wife is pregnant once again, whatever money I save I leave there, but poor people like ourselves have to pay for everything we receive, there are no profits for us from trade with India or Brazil, nor do we enjoy appointments or benefices from the Palace, what can I do with a daily wage of two hundred réis when I have to pay for my ration of food and wine, the only people who make any money here are those who provide us with our daily needs, and if it is true that many of them were forced to come here from Lisbon, I live here out of need, and needy I remain, My name is José Pequeno, I have neither father nor mother, nor woman to call my own, I do not even know whether this is really my name or if I had some other name in the past, what is certain is that I was born in a village at the foot of Torres Vedras, and the parish priest baptized me, José is the name I was given at my christening, and Pequeno, which of course means small, was added later because I suddenly stopped growing, with this hump on my back, no woman was keen to marry me, but they all ask for more once I get the chance to mount them, that's my only consolation in life, Come over here, now off with you, and once I grow old, I won't even be fit for that, I came to Mafra because I like working with oxen, oxen are for hire in this world, just like me, My name is joaquim da Rocha, I was born in the region of Pombal, and there I've left a wife, I had four children, but all of them died before they were ten years old, two of the black plague, the others from malnutrition and anaemia, I rented a plot of land but it did not yield enough to provide us with food, so I told my wife, I'm off to Mafra, there work is guaranteed and for many years to come, and so far so good, six months have passed since I last went home and I shall probably never go back, there's no lack of women here, and anyhow mine must have been of dubious stock to have given birth to four children and allowed all of them to die, My name is Manuel Milho, I come from the countryside near Santarem, one day the magistrate's men arrived to announce that a good wage and good food could be earned on the building site at Mafra, I was hired with a few others, but the two men who came with me were killed in a landslide last year, I don't care for these parts, not because two of my countrymen perished here, after all, no one can decide where he will die unless he arranges his own death, but because I miss the river of my native land, I know there is plenty of water in the sea, as one can tell even from here, but what does a man want with all that water, with all those waves that beat incessantly against the rocks and sands, the river back

home flows between two banks like a procession of penitents, it slowly wends its way as we stand there watching like the ash trees and poplars, and when a man wants to examine his face and to see how much he has aged, the water becomes his mirror, passing, yet at a standstill, and we who appear to be at a standstill are the ones who are really passing, what I cannot explain is why such things come into my head, My name is João Anes, I come from Oporto and I am a cooper, and coopers are also needed when a convent is being built, for who else could be relied upon to mend the vats, the pipes, and the buckets, if a bricklayer is on the scaffolding and they pass him a hod of mortar, he has to wet the stones with a brush so that they make firm contact as he lays one on top of another, that explains why he carries a bucket, and what do animals drink from, they drink from a trough, and who made the troughs, why, the cooper, of course, without wishing to brag, there's no better trade than mine, even God was a cooper, just look at that great vat known as the sea, if the work were not perfect and the staves not so well adjusted, its waters would cover the earth and there would be a second great flood, I have little to say about myself, I left my family behind in Oporto, they know how to look after themselves, I haven't seen my wife for two years, sometimes I dream that I'm lying by her side, but if it's me lying there, I don't see my face, next day my work always turns out badly, I would rather see all of myself in my dream, instead of that face without mouth, eyes or nose, I cannot imagine what face my wife sees there at such moments, but I hope it is mine, My name is Juliao Mau-Tempo, I'm a native of Alentejo, and I came to work here in Mafra because of the famine that scourges my province, I don't know how anyone has survived there, for if we hadn't grown accustomed to eating grass and acorns, I'll bet everyone would be dead by now, it's distressing to travel over that vast territory, as anyone will tell you who has been there, only to find that there is nothing but barren land, there are few signs of habitation or growth, and the rest is wilderness and solitude, it's a region blighted by warfare, with Spaniards invading and departing as if they were on their own soil, at the moment there is peace, but who knows for how long, when they're not making us run and exposing us to the risk of being killed, our monarchs and nobles themselves do the running and killing as they go hunting, yet God help the wretched fellow who's caught with a rabbit in his knapsack, even though he might have found it already dead from some disease or old age, the least he can expect is a dozen lashes on his back to teach him that when God made rabbits it was for the pleasure and stewpot of gentlemen, but those whippings would be worthwhile if we were allowed to keep the animals we poached, I came to Mafra because my parish priest assured us from the pulpit that anyone who came here would soon be a servant of the King, not exactly his servant, but something like that, he also assured us that no one in the King's service goes hungry, that they are given more meat than one sees in paradise and are well dressed, for if it is true that Adam, having no one to squabble with over food, ate to his heart's content, he did not have much in the way of clothing, well, I soon discovered that I had been misinformed, I can't vouch for paradise, because I wasn't around at the time of Adam, but I can speak for Mafra, and if I haven't died from hunger, it's because I spend everything I earn on food, I'm as shabbily dressed as I ever was, as for becoming one of the King's servants, I live in hope of seeing my sovereign's face before I finally pine away after all

these years of separation from my family, when a man has children, he is often nourished just by looking at their faces, how reassuring it would be if our children could be nourished just by looking at our faces, we're fated to consume our lives looking at one another, Who are you, What are you doing here, Who I am and what I am doing here is a question I've often asked myself without receiving any answer, no, none of my children has blue eyes, yet I'm certain that they're all my children, this matter of blue eyes is something that appears from time to time in families, my mother's mother had eyes this colour, My name is Baltasar Mateus, but everyone calls me Sete-Sóis, José Pequeno knows why he got his name, but I cannot say when and why they put seven suns in our house as if we were seven times more ancient than the only sun that shines on us, so we should be the kings of the world, this is the wild conversation of someone who has been too close to the sun and has had too much to drink, if you hear me talk nonsense, it's either because of the sun I caught or because of the wine that caught me, what is certain is that I was born here forty years ago, if I have added them up correctly, my mother, who is now dead and buried, was named Marta Maria, my old father can scarcely walk, I'm convinced that roots are growing from his feet, or that his heart is searching out the earth in order to rest, we once had a plot of ground like Joaquim da Rocha, but with all this disturbance of the soil we lost our land, I've even transported some of the soil from that plot in my handcart, who's going to tell my grandfather that a grandson of his has dumped earth that was once tilled and sown, now they're building a turret on top, These are the changes in life's fortunes, and my life has seen many changes, in my youth I dug the soil and sowed the fields for the farmers, our family plot was so small that my father worked it all the year round and still had time to cultivate other smallholdings here and there that he rented, real hunger we never experienced, but we were never well off and had barely enough to live on, then I joined the King's army and lost my left hand, it was only much later that I discovered that with one hand missing I had become God's equal, and since I could no longer fight in the war, I returned to Mafra, then I spent some years in Lisbon, and that's my life in a nutshell, What did you do in Lisbon, João Anes asked him as the only man in the group who could claim to be a skilled worker, I worked in the slaughterhouse in the Palace Square, but only as a porter, And when was it that you got close to the sun. Manuel Milho was anxious to know, since he was probably the only one there who was accustomed to watching the river flow past, That was when I once climbed a very high sierra, so high that by stretching out my hand I could touch the sun, What sierra could that be, for there are no sierras in Mafra high enough to reach the sun, just as there are no sierras in Alentejo, which is a region well known to me, Julião Mau-Tempo asked him, Perhaps it was a sierra that was high on that particular day and is now low, If it takes so much gunpowder to blast a hill like this, surely it would take all the gunpowder in the world to raze a sierra, observed Francisco Marques, who had been the first to comment, but Manuel Milho insisted, You could only have got close to the sun by flying like the birds, there in the marshes you often see hawks soaring up and up in circles until they finally disappear and they become so tiny that they can no longer be seen as they head for the sun, but we humans don't know the path or doorway that leads there, and you are a man and have no wings, Unless you're a sorcerer, José Pequeno

suggested, like a woman from the region where I was found, who rubbed herself with ointments, straddled a broom, and flew by night from one place to another, at least that's what people said although I never saw her with my own eyes, I'm not a sorcerer, and if you start to spread such rumours the Holy Office of the Inquisition will arrest me, nor did I say to anyone here that I have ever flown, But you did say that you had been close to the sun, and you also said that you had become God's equal when you lost your left hand, if such heresies reach the ears of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, nothing will save you, We should all be saved if we were to become God's equals, said João Anes, If we were to become God's equals, we should be able to rebuke Him for not having granted us equality from the outset, said Manuel Milho, and Baltasar, who was feeling relieved that they had got off the subject of flying, explained, God has no left hand because the chosen sit at His right and, once the damned are sentenced to hell, no souls remain at His left, now, if no one sits there, why should God need a left hand, and if He doesn't need a left hand, that means it doesn't exist, my left hand is no use because it doesn't exist, and that's the only difference, Perhaps on God's left there is another God, perhaps God has been elected by another God, perhaps we are all enthroned Gods, I can't imagine how these things come into my head, Manuel Milho quipped, and Baltasar rejoined, Then I must be the last one in the row, because no one can sit at my left, and with me the world comes to an end, Who knows why such thoughts should occur to these simpletons, for they are all illiterate except João Anes, who has had some education.

The bells of the Church of St Andrew down in the valley rang out the Angelus. Above the Ilha da Madeira, in the streets and squares, in the taverns and hostels, there is a continuous drone of conversation, like the sound of the sea in the distance. It could be the sound of twenty thousand men reciting the Angelus or telling one another the story of their lives. Go and see for yourselves.

LOOSE SOIL, GRAVEL, and pebbles that the gunpowder or the pick had prised from the stony ground were loaded on to the handcarts and dumped in the valley, which is rapidly being filled with the rubble blasted from the mountain and dug up from the new excavations. Heavier loads are transported on the larger carts, which are reinforced with iron plates and drawn by mules and oxen that pause only to load and unload. By means of firmly braced wooden ramps, men mount the scaffolding with the stone slabs suspended from yokes that rest on their necks and shoulders, forever be praised whoever invented the pad that lessens the pain. These labours, as we have already said, can be described more easily because they require brute force, however, by constantly coming back to them we are less likely to forget things that are so common, and call for so little skill, that they tend to be overlooked, it is rather like distractedly watching our own fingers write, so that in one sense or another the agent of the doing remains concealed beneath the thing which is being done. We would see much more, and much farther, if we were to look from above, for example, and hover in the flying machine over this place called Mafra, the much-trodden mountain, the familiar valley, the Ilha da Madeira, which the seasons have darkened with rain and sunshine, and where some of the planking is already rotting, on the felling of trees in the pine forest of Leiria, and on the boundaries of Torres Vedras and Lisbon, on the smoke fumes that rise day and night from the hundreds of furnaces of bricks and lime between Mafra and Cascais, the ships that carry different bricks from the Algarve and from Entre-Douro-e-Minho to be unloaded in the Tagus, through a branching canal at the docks of Santo António do Tojal, on the carts that transport these and other materials through Monte Achique and Pinheiro de Loures to His Majesty's convent, and on those other carts, which carry the stones from Péro Pinheiro, there is no finer lookout than the one where we are now standing, and we should have had no idea of the magnitude of the project at Mafra if Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço had not invented his Passarola, what supports us in mid-air are the wills that Blimunda gathered into the metal globes, down below, other wills move around, stuck to the globe of the earth by the laws of gravity and necessity, if we were able to count the carts that travel back and forth along these routes, from near and afar we would count up to twenty-five hundred, seen from up here, they appear to be motionless, such is the weight of their load. But the men would have to be much closer before we could see them.

For many months Baltasar pulled and pushed hand-carts, until one day he decided that he was tired of being a beast of burden, of constantly being sent back and forth, and having given ample evidence of his diligence in the presence of his masters, he was allowed to handle one of the many yokes of oxen the King had purchased. José Pequeno was a great help in securing this promotion, for the estate manager found the little hunchback's appearance so amusing that he could not resist observing that the drover's face only came up to the muzzles of his oxen, and this was almost true, but if he thought the remark would offend José Pequeno he was much mistaken, for the little hunchback suddenly became aware of the pleasure it gave him to look with his human eyes straight into those large gentle eyes of the oxen, where he saw his own head and torso reflected, until his legs disappeared on the lower fringe of the immense eyelids, when a man can fit

his entire being into the eyes of an ox, he is finally convinced that the world is well made. José Pequeno was a great help, because he remonstrated with the estate manager that Baltasar Sete-Sóis should be promoted to drover, and if there was already one disabled man in charge of the oxen, there might as well be two, and they could keep each other company, and if the fellow doesn't know anything about the job, no harm will be done, for he can always go back to pushing a cart, after all, it only takes one day to judge a man's capabilities. Baltasar knew a great deal about oxen, even though he had not handled them for many years, and it needed only two trips to prove that his hook was no real drawback and that his right hand had not forgotten any of the know-how of goading oxen. When he arrived home that night, he was as happy as the day he discovered an egg in a bird's nest for the first time, when he possessed a woman for the first time, and when he first heard a bugle call as a young recruit, and as dawn broke, he dreamed about his oxen and his left hand, he wanted for nothing, even Blimunda was mounted on one of the animals, and anyone who knows anything about dreams will understand.

Baltasar had not been long in his new job when he was told that he was being sent to Pêro Pinheiro to collect an enormous stone that was intended for the portico of the church, the stone was so huge that it was estimated to require some two hundred yoke of oxen to transport it, as well as hordes of men to assist with the job. In Pêro Pinheiro a special cart had been constructed to carry the stone, a kind of man-of-war on wheels, as described by someone who had seen it nearing completion, and who had presumably also set eyes on the vessel with which he was drawing comparison. Obviously he was exaggerating, much better that we should judge it with our own eyes, along with all the men who get up in the middle of the night and set off for Pêro Pinheiro, accompanying the four hundred oxen and more than twenty carts with the necessary equipment to transport the stone, namely, ropes and hawsers, wedges, brakes, spare wheels made to the same measurement as the existing ones, spare axles in case some should crack under the weight, braces of various sizes, hammers, pincers, metal plates, scythes for cutting hay to feed the animals, and provisions for the men, to be supplemented with fresh produce en route, so many things weigh down the carts that any man who imagined he would be riding down to Pêro Pinheiro in comfort soon finds he has to walk, but it is not any great distance, three leagues there and three leagues back, although, admittedly, the roads are not good, but the oxen and men have made this journey so many times with other transports that they only have to put down their hooves or the soles of their feet to know that they are treading familiar territory, however difficult it might be to climb, or dangerous to descend. From the men we got to know the other day, José Pequeno and Baltasar have been chosen for the trip, and each leads his own yoke of oxen, and among the labourers who have been hired for their strength is the fellow who has left a wife and children back in Cheleiros and whose name is Francisco Marques, as well as Manuel Milho, who gets the strangest ideas and cannot imagine where they come from. There are other fellows, too, named José, Francisco, and Manuel, very few named Baltasar, but many named João, Álvaro, António, and Joaquim, and perhaps even the odd Bartolomeu though never the one who disappeared, as well as Pedro, Vicente, Bento,

Bernardo, and Caetano, every possible name for a man is to be found here and every possible kind of existence, too, especially if marked by tribulation and, above all, by poverty, we cannot go into the details of the lives of all of them, they are too numerous, but at least we can leave their names on record, that is our obligation and our only reason for writing them down, so that they may become immortal and endure if it should depend on us, names such as Alcino, Brás, Cristóvão, Daniel, Egas, Firmino, Geraldo, Horácio, Isidoro, Juvino, Luís, Marcolino, Nicanor, Onofre, Paulo, Quitério, Rufino, Sebastião, Tadeu, Ubaldo, Valério, Xavier, Zacarias, each representing a letter of our alphabet, perhaps not all of these names are fitting for the time and place, much less for the men concerned, but as long as there are those who labour there will be no end to labours, and some of these labours will in the future belong to those who are waiting for someone to come along and assume their name and trade. From among the men who are represented in this sample alphabet and are going to Péro Pinheiro, we should have liked to say more about Brás, who is red-haired and has no sight in his right eye, it will not be long before people start getting the impression that this is a land of disabled men, some with a hump, some with only one hand or one eye, and to accuse us of exaggerating, when all believe that heroes should be handsome and dashing, lithe and sound of limb, that is certainly how we should have preferred them, but there is no avoiding the truth, and the reader should be grateful that we have not wasted any time counting up all those who are blubber-lipped stutterers, lame, heavy-jowled, bow-legged, epileptic, big-eared, half-witted, albinos, and dolts, or suffering from scabies, sores, ringworm, and scurvy, then you would certainly see a long procession of hunchbacks and lepers wending its way out of Mafra in the early hours of the morning, just as well that by night every cat looks black and every man a shadow, if Blimunda had seen those men off while still fasting, what would she have seen in each of them, other than the will to be someone else.

The sun had no sooner risen than the day became hot, as one might well expect, since it is the month of July. Three leagues is no great distance for this race of wanderers, especially since most of them adjust their gait to that of the oxen, and the oxen can find no good reason for hurrying. Detached from the carts and simply yoked in pairs, the animals are suspicious of such largesse, and almost feel envious of their fellow oxen who are drawing carts with all the equipment, and they feel like the fattened calf before the slaughter. The men, as we already mentioned, proceed slowly, some in silence, others conversing, each man seeking out his own kind, but one of them has been feeling positively lustful since the convoy left Mafra, he breaks into a brisk trot as if he were racing to Cheleiros to save his father from the gallows, it is Francisco Marques, who is taking this opportunity of going to push himself between his wife's legs, which are waiting to receive him, or perhaps this is not what he has in mind, perhaps he simply wishes to be with his children and pay his respects to his wife without fornicating, for any sexual intercourse would have to be hasty, because his workmates are catching up with him, and he must reach Péro Pinheiro at the same time as they do, they're already passing our door, After all, we've always slept together, the baby is asleep and won't

hear a thing, we can send the others out to see if it is raining, and they'll understand their father wishes to be with their mother, just think what would become of us if the King had ordered the convent to be built in the Algarve, and when she asks, Are you leaving so soon, he replies, I've got to go now, but on the way back, if we set up camp nearby, I'll come and spend the whole night with you.

When Francisco Marques arrived at Pêro Pinheiro, worn out and weak on his legs, the camp had already been set up, there were no huts or tents and the only soldiers to be seen were on guard, it looked more like a country fair, with more than four hundred head of cattle and the men dispersed among the cattle, shooing them to one side, some of the animals took fright and began to toss their heads wildly, though without malice, before settling down to eat the hay as it was unloaded from the carts, they had a long wait ahead, the men who wielded the spades and hoes were eating quickly, for they were needed up front. It was already mid-morning and the sun beat fiercely on the hard, parched ground covered with marble chips and splinters, on both sides of the deep quarry, massive blocks of stone were waiting to be transported to Mafra. Their departure was assured, but not today.

Some men had gathered in the middle of the road, while those behind them tried to look over their heads or force their way through, when Francisco Marques arrived and compensated for his lateness by eagerly inquiring, What's going on, it might have been the red-haired fellow who replied, It's the stone, and another added, I've never seen anything like it in my whole life, shaking his head in amazement. At this point the soldiers approached and broke up the gathering with force and shouted, Get back there, men are as inquisitive as street urchins, and the officer from the Inspectorate who was in charge of the expedition came in person to warn them, Break it up, clear the way, whereupon the men withdrew, tripping over one another, and then it appeared, The stone, just as the red-haired, one-eyed Brás had described it.

The slab was enormous and rectangular in shape, a massive block of unpolished marble set on two trunks of pine, drawing closer we would undoubtedly hear the sap groaning, just as we hear, at this very moment, the groan of fear escaping from the men's lips, as the colossal dimensions of the stone came into full view. The officer from the Inspectorate General comes up and places his hand on it, as if he were taking possession of the stone in His Majesty's name, but if all these men and oxen are unable to provide the necessary strength, all the King's power will be as wind, dust, and little else. However, they will do their best. This is why they have come, this is why they have abandoned their fields and labours, labours that also called for strength on lands that drained their energy, and the inspector may rest assured that no one here will let him down.

The men from the quarry come forward, they are about to finish cutting the small elevation to which the stone was towed, in order to form a vertical wall on the narrower side of the slab. This is where the man-of-war will rest, but first the men who have come

from Mafra will open a broad track for the cart to go down, a ramp with a gentle incline sloping down on to the road, and only then can the journey get under way. Armed with picks and shovels, the men from Mafra advanced, the officer had already traced out a diagram of the excavation, and Manuel Milho, who was standing beside the fellow from Cheleiros, measured himself up against the stone, which was now within reach, and said, It's the mother of all stones, he did not say the father, but the mother of all stones, perhaps because it had come from the bowels of the earth still covered in primeval mud, a gigantic mother capable of supporting or crushing countless men, for the slab is thirty-five spans long, fifteen spans wide, and four spans deep, and to complete our report, once it has been carved and polished in Mafra, it will be only fractionally smaller, thirty-two by fourteen by three in the same order of dimensions, and one day, when measurements will no longer be taken in spans but in metres, others will describe the stone as being seven metres long, three metres wide, and sixty-four centimetres high, take note, and since the old system of weights has disappeared in much the same ways as the old system of measurements, instead of two thousand, one hundred and twelve arrobas, we shall give the weight of the stone forming the balcony of the house that will be known as Benedictione as thirty-one thousand and twenty-one kilos, or as thirty-one tons in round figures, ladies and gentlemen, and now let us pass to the next room, for we still have some way to go.

Meanwhile, the men spent the entire day digging. The drovers came to give a hand, and Baltasar Sete-Sóis returned to his hand-cart without dishonour, for no one should forget what it means to do hard labour, no man knows when he might have to go back to it, and if one day we were suddenly to lose the notion of leverage there would be no other solution except to use our arms and shoulders, until such time as Archimedes could be resuscitated and say, Give me a fulcrum so that you may move the world. When the sun set, the track had been opened to an expanse of one hundred paces right up to the paved road, which they had travelled at a much more leisurely pace that morning. The men ate their supper and went off to get some sleep, they scattered throughout the nearby fields, sheltering under trees or blocks of stone that were white as could be and glistened when the moon appeared. The night was warm. If bonfires could be seen burning, they were simply for gathering around, for the sake of company. The oxen chewed their cud, saliva trickling down and replenishing with its own juices that earth to which everything returns, even the stones that are being hoisted with such difficulty, the men who hoist them, the levers that prise them up, the wedges that support them, you have no idea just how much work there is involved in building this convent.

It was still dark when the bugle sounded. The men got to their feet and rolled up their cloaks, the drovers went off to yoke the oxen, the inspector came down to the quarry from the house where he had lodged for the night, accompanied by his aides and foremen so that the latter could be told what orders they were to give and for what purpose. The ropes and hawsers were unloaded from the carts and the yokes of oxen were lined up along the road in two rows. But the man-of-war still had to arrive.

Consisting of a platform made from sturdy wooden planks resting on six massive wheels with rigid axles, it was marginally bigger than the slab itself. The platform had to be pushed manually amid the din and confusion as men struggled to move it and others shouted commands, one man, in a moment of distraction, lost his foot under one of the wheels, he let out a yell, the scream of someone in terrible pain, a bad start to the journey. Baltasar, standing nearby with his oxen, saw the blood spurt from the man's foot and suddenly imagined himself back in Jerez de los Caballeros, some fifteen years before, how time flies. With time, pain passes, but it will take some considerable time for a pain like this to pass, the man's agonised cries can still be heard as he is carried off on an improvised stretcher to Morelana where there is an infirmary, perhaps he will escape with a minor amputation to his leg, damn it. Baltasar also spent the night in Morelana, where he slept with Blimunda, and so the world unites, in one and the same place, the greatest joy and the greatest affliction, the consoling smell of wholesome humours and the foul stench of a gangrenous wound, in order to invent heaven and hell, a man would need to know nothing except the human body. There are no longer any signs of blood on the ground, the wheels of the cart have passed over the spot, the men have trampled the ground without forgetting the broad hooves of the oxen, and the earth has sucked in and absorbed the rest, only a pebble tossed to one side still bears the stains of the man's blood.

The platform was lowered very slowly, held on the slope by men who cautiously loosened the ropes in easy stages, until it finally made contact with the wall of earth that the masons had smoothed out. Now knowledge and skill would be put to the test. All the wheels of the cart were wedged with great boulders so that it would not move from the wall when the slab was heaved from the pine trunks and gently lowered and eased on to the platform. Its entire surface had been covered with mud to reduce the friction of the stone against the wood, and then the ropes were passed along and tied around the slab lengthwise, one on each side and clear of the trunks, while another was tied around the width of the slab, thus forming six ends, which were joined at the front of the cart and tied to a solid beam reinforced with iron plates, from these emerged two thicker hawsers, which acted as the main straps of the harness, to which thinner ropes were successively added for the oxen to pull. This operation took considerably longer to achieve than to explain, and the sun had already risen way above those mountains we can see over there, as the last knots were being tied, water was sprinkled on to the mud that had dried in the meantime, but the first priority was to spread out the yokes of oxen along the road and make certain that all the ropes were sufficiently taut, so that their drawing power would not be lost through any discordance, I pull, you pull, so much so that in the end there was not enough room for the two hundred yokes of oxen, and the traction had to be exerted to the right, the front, and above, It's a hellish job, said José Pequeno, who was the first man on the hawser to the left, if Baltasar expressed any opinion, it could not be heard, because he was too far away. Up there on the top, the master of works was about to raise his voice, his shout began in a drawl and ended hoarsely, like a blast of gunpowder, without echoes, Heave, if the oxen pull too much in one direction, we are in

serious trouble, Heave, the order rang out clearly this time, and two hundred oxen jostled, first they pulled with one great tug, then with continued force, then stopped because some of the animals slipped while others turned inward or outward, everything depended upon the drovers' skill, the ropes chafed the animals' rumps until, amid shouts, insults, and incitements, the traction was just right for a few seconds and the slab moved forward one span, crushing the pine trunks underneath. The first pull was perfect, the second misfired, the third had to balance out the other two, now only these men were pulling, while the others took the strain, at last the slab began to move forward on the platform, still resting on the pine trunks, until it slipped and landed brusquely on the cart, a tombstone, its rough edge cutting into the wood, and there it lay motionless, to have covered or not covered the cart with mud would have come to the same thing if other solutions to the problem had not been devised. Men clambered on to the platform and with long, powerful levers began to lift the stone, which was still quite unstable, while others inserted wedges underneath with a metal base that slid easily over the mud, now it will be much easier, Heave, Heave, Heave, everybody pushed with enthusiasm, men and oxen alike, and what a pity Dom João V was not standing up there on the mountain, for no nation toils as willingly as this one. The hawsers on each side had already been removed and all the traction was now concentrated on the rope tied lengthwise around the slab, that is all it required, and the slab looks almost lightweight as it slides readily over the platform, only when it finally comes down can one hear the resounding thud of its weight, and the whole cart creaks, had it not been for the natural paving on that road, with stones upon stones, the wheels would have sunk right up to their hubs. The great blocks of marble that served as wedges were removed, since there was no further danger of the cart escaping. Now the carpenters came forward with their mallets, boring tools, and chisels, and at regular intervals cut rectangular holes in the thick platform on a level with the slab, into which they hammered quoins, which were then secured with thick nails, the job took considerable time. Meanwhile, the other workers rested in the shade of the trees nearby, the oxen chewed their cud and shook off the gadflies, and the heat was oppressive. The mess bugle summoned the men to dinner just as the carpenters were finishing the job, and the inspector gave instructions that the slab should be tied to the cart, an operation entrusted to the soldiers, perhaps because of the discipline and responsibility involved, perhaps because they were accustomed to handling artillery, within half an hour, the slab was securely tied with ropes and yet more ropes, as if it were part of the platform, so that wherever the one might go the other would have to follow. There were no further adjustments to be made, and the job was finished. Viewed sideways, the cart becomes an animal with a carapace, a squat turtle on short legs, and because it is covered with mud, it looks as if it has just come out of the soil, as if it formed part of the earth itself and were extending the elevation against which it is propped. The men and oxen are eating their dinner, and afterwards they will have their siesta, if life did not offer certain pleasures such as eating and resting, there would be little joy in building a convent.

The saying goes that no misfortune lasts forever, although judging by the weariness

misfortune brings in its train, one is sometimes tempted to believe otherwise, what is certain is that good fortune does not last forever. A man is enjoying the most delightful slumber as he listens to the cicadas, and if the meal was not exactly lavish, a stomach accustomed to hunger is satisfied with very little, besides, the sunshine is also nourishing, when his peace is rudely interrupted by the blare of a trumpet, were we in the Valley of Jehoshaphat we should awaken the dead, but here there is no alternative other than for the living to rouse themselves. The various tools are checked and loaded onto the carts, for everything has to be accounted for in the inventory, the knots are checked, the cables are attached to the cart, and with another cry of Heave, the restless oxen start to pull unevenly, their hooves getting stuck on the irregular surface of the quarry, the ox-goads sting their necks, and the cart moves forward slowly, as if it were being drawn from the furnace of the earth, its wheels grind the marble splinters scattered on the ground, no stone as large as the one we are transporting today has ever been excavated from this quarry. The inspector and some of his qualified assistants have already mounted the mules, while others will make the journey on foot, in keeping with their rank as subalterns, although all of them can boast of some expertise and authority, the expertise because of their authority, the authority because of their expertise, but the same cannot be said of this encampment of men and oxen, who are simply under orders, the former as much as the latter, and any status they enjoy depends on the strength they can muster. Some additional skills, however, are expected of these men, for example, not to pull in the wrong direction, to put the wedge under the wheel in good time, to master the expressions that help encourage the animals, to know how to join strength to strength and multiply both, which, after all, is no mean feat. The cart has already progressed halfway up the track, some fifty paces at most, and it continues to sway awkwardly on the stones, for this is no royal coach or episcopal litter that is sprung as God intended. Here the axles are rigid, the wheels like weights, there are no brightly polished harnesses to admire on the backs of the oxen, or smart uniforms worn by the men as they go about their duties, this is a rabble, which one would never associate with a triumphal march or be likely to find taking part in the Corpus Christi procession. It is one thing to transport the stone for the balcony from where the Patriarch will give all of us his blessing in a few years' time, but it would be something else, and infinitely preferable, if we were both the blessing and the giver of that blessing, like sowing bread and eating it.

It is going to be a fine journey. From here to Mafra, even though the King has ordered the pavements to be repaired, the road is awkward, an endless climbing and descending, a constant skirting of valleys, scaling of heights, and plunging into depths, if there was any error in the counting of those four hundred oxen and six hundred men, it was to have underestimated their numbers, not that they are in any way superfluous. The inhabitants of Pêro Pinheiro went down to the road to admire the procession, they had never seen so many oxen assembled since the work first started, or heard such a commotion, some, however, felt a tinge of sadness as they watched the departure of that magnificent stone, which had been extracted from the earth here in Pêro Pinheiro, may it reach its destination in one piece, otherwise it would have been preferable to leave it

undisturbed beneath the soil. The inspector was already heading the convoy like a general marching into battle with his captains, adjutants, and orderlies, they are about to reconnoitre the terrain, to measure the curve in the road, assess the slope, and choose a site for the encampment. Then they go back to meet the cart, to establish how far it has progressed, if it has left Pêro Pinheiro or is still there. By the end of the first day, it had only advanced some five hundred paces. The road was narrow, the yokes of oxen kept jostling each other, with a rope on each side, little room for manoeuvre, and half of the force of traction was lost because they were pulling in disarray and orders could scarcely be heard. And there was the incredible weight of the stone. Whenever the cart had to pause, either because a wheel got stuck in a hole in the road, or because the oxen were straining as they tried to tackle some slope, it looked as if the stone would move no further. When it did finally advance, all the planking creaked as if it were about to free itself from the iron plates and clamps. But there would be even greater difficulties ahead.

That night the oxen were unyoked and left to rove freely, without being confined to a pen. When the moon finally appeared, many of the men were already asleep, their heads resting on their boots, if they were fortunate enough to possess boots. Some were drawn by that ghostly phosphorescence and saw the figure, clearly reflected in the moon, of the man who had gathered brambles on a Sunday and whom the Lord had punished by sentencing him to carry that bundle for all eternity, so that, condemned to lunar exile, his image became a visible symbol of divine justice and a warning to those guilty of irreverence. Baltasar went in search of José Pequeno, and they both came across Francisco Marques and several others who were gathered around a bonfire, for the night had become cool. They were later joined by Manuel Milho, who began to tell them a story. There was once a queen who lived with her royal consort in a palace along with their children, an infante and an infanta who stood this high, and the King is said to have enjoyed being king, but the Queen could not make up her mind whether or not she was satisfied with being queen, since she had never been prepared for any other role, therefore she found it difficult to decide whether she could honestly say, I prefer to be queen, even though her situation was no different from that of the King, who enjoyed being what he was, since he, too, had been prepared for nothing else, but the Queen felt differently, had she felt the same as the King, there would be no story to tell, now, it so happened that in their kingdom there was a hermit who had lived an adventurous life, and after many, many years spent in pursuit of adventures, he had withdrawn into a cave on the mountainside, if I haven't already mentioned that, but he was not one of those hermits devoted to prayers and penance, he was known as a hermit simply because he lived in isolation, he ate whatever food he managed to find, and though he never refused anything he was offered, he never begged for alms, now one day the Queen passed nearby with her retinue, and she confided in the oldest of her ladies-in-waiting that she wished to speak to the hermit and ask him a question, and the lady-in-waiting warned her, Your Majesty should know that this hermit is not a holy man, but a man just like any other, the only difference being that he lives alone in a cave, this is what the lady-in-waiting told her, as we already know, and the Queen replied, The question I wish to ask

him has nothing to do with religion, and so they walked on, and when they reached the entrance to the cave, a page called inside and the hermit appeared, he was a man already advanced in years but strongly built, like some sacred tree at the crossroads, and as he appeared he asked, Who is calling me, and the page said, Her Majesty, your Queen, and that's enough for today, so let's try to get some sleep. The others protested, because they wanted to know the rest of the story about the Queen and the hermit, but Manuel Milho could not be persuaded, tomorrow was another day, so they had to resign themselves, each man went off to find himself a place to sleep, and each man's thoughts about the story reflected his own inclinations, José Pequeno mused that the King probably no longer made love to the Queen, and if the hermit was an old man, how could he, Baltasar imagined that the Queen was Blimunda and he himself the hermit, and why not, if this was a story about a man and a woman, despite some notable differences, Francisco Marques decided, I know how this story is going to end, and when I get to Cheleiros I'll explain everything. The moon is already travelling over there, not that a bundle of brambles weighs much, worst of all are the thorns, and Christ seems determined to avenge the crown of thorns that was placed on His head.

The following day was one of much anxiety. The road widened a little, allowing the yokes of oxen to manoeuvre more freely without serious collisions, but the cart took the bends with the utmost difficulty because of the rigidity of its axles and the enormous weight it was supporting, this meant it had to be dragged sideways, first in front, then from the back, the wheels resisted and got stuck on stones, which had to be broken up with a pick, but even so the men voiced no complaints as long as there was enough space to uncouple, and then couple once more, sufficient oxen to dislodge the cart in order to get it back on the road. Provided there were no curves, the slopes could be overcome with brute force, with one great heave as the oxen strained their necks forward till their snouts almost touched the buttocks of the oxen in front, occasionally to find themselves slipping in the excrement and urine that formed puddles along the furrows being gradually opened up by the treading of hooves and the pressure of the wheels. One man was in charge of each two yokes of oxen, and their heads and ox-goats could be seen from afar, rising amid the horns of the animals and above their tawny backs, only José Pequeno was hidden from view, and little wonder, for he was probably conversing with his oxen, which were as tall as he was, Heave, little oxen, heave.

But the anxiety soon turned to torment whenever there was a downward slope on the road. At any moment the cart could slip away and wedges had to be applied immediately, and nearly all the yokes of oxen had to be unleashed, three or four pairs were put on each side to move the stone, but then the men had to grab the ropes at the back of the platform, hundreds of men, like ants, their feet planted firmly on the ground, their bodies leaning backward, their muscles strained, as they sustained the weight of the cart, which threatened to drag them towards the valley and to propel them beyond the curve as if on the end of a whiplash. The oxen farther up and farther down the road chewed their cud placidly, watching the commotion, the men running back and forth

giving orders, the inspector sitting astride the mule, the faces of the men flushed and bathed in perspiration, while the oxen stood there quietly awaiting their turn, so tranquil that not even the ox-goads resting against the yokes would stir. Someone suggested harnessing the oxen to the rear of the platform, but the idea had to be abandoned, because the ox does not comprehend the sum of exertion that results from two paces forward and three back. The ox either conquers the ramp and carries up what should go down, or is dragged without resistance and finishes up crushed to death where it should have been able to rest.

From dawn until dusk that day, they advanced fifteen hundred paces, less than half the league we use to measure nowadays, or, if we wish to draw an apt comparison, the equivalent of two hundred times the length of the slab. So many hours of effort for so little progress, so much sweat, so much fear, and that monster of a stone, slipping when it should be at a standstill, stationary when it ought to be moving, damn you, and damn whoever ordered that you be extracted from the earth and dragged through this wilderness. The men stretch out on the ground, drained of energy, they lie on their backs panting and looking up at the sky as it gradually darkens, initially as if day were about to break rather than draw to a close, then becoming transparent as the light begins to fade, until suddenly the translucence of crystal is obscured by shadows of dense velvet, it is night. The moon will be already waning when it makes its late appearance, and the entire encampment will be asleep, the light from the bonfires is fast disappearing and the earth is competing with the sky, for where there are stars above, here below there are fires, like those of yore where the men who hauled the stones to form the celestial dome probably gathered, perhaps they, too, had the same weary expressions, the same unshaven faces, the same thick-callused hands, the same nails black as mourning, to coin a phrase, and sweating just as profusely. Then Baltasar asked, Tell us, Manuel Milho, what did the Queen ask the hermit when he appeared at the entrance to the cave, and José Pequeno voiced his suspicions, She probably dismissed her ladies-in-waiting and pages, this José Pequeno is a malicious fellow, so let us leave him to the penance his father confessor will exact, should he ever confess his sins, which seems unlikely, and listen to what Manuel Milho has to say, When the hermit appeared at the entrance to the cave, the Queen advanced three paces and asked, If a woman is queen and a man is king, what must they do in order to feel like a woman and a man and not just like a queen and a king, this is what she asked him, and the hermit replied with another question, If a man is a hermit, what must he do to feel like a man and not simply like a hermit, and the Queen thought for a moment and said, The Queen will stop being queen, the King will cease to be king, and the hermit will abandon his cave, that is what they must do, but now I shall ask another question, What women and men can these be who are neither queen nor hermit but only women and men, and what does it mean to be man and woman if they are not hermit and queen, which is to be without being what one is, and the hermit replied, No one can be without being, men and women do not exist, all that exists is what they are and their rebellion against what they are, whereupon the Queen retorted, I rebel against what I am, now tell me if you rebel against what you are,

and he replied, To be a hermit is the opposite of being, according to those who live in the world, but it is still to be something, and she rejoined, So what is the solution, and he told her, If you want to be a woman, stop being a queen, and the rest you will discover later, and she asked him, If you wish to be a man, why do you go on being a hermit, and he answered, Because what one fears most is to be a man, and she said, Do you know what it is to be a man and a woman, to which he replied, No one knows that, and with this reply the Queen withdrew, followed by her whispering retinue, tomorrow I will tell you the rest. Manuel Milho did well in interrupting his story, because two of his listeners, José Pequeno and Francisco Marques, were already snoring as they lay rolled up in their cloaks. The bonfires were almost extinguished. Baltasar stared at Manuel Milho for some time, This story of yours has neither a beginning nor an end and bears no comparison to the stories one is accustomed to hearing, such as the tale about the Princess who kept ducks, the little girl who had a star on her forehead, the woodcutter who found a damsel in the forest, the story about the blue bull, or the devil from Alfusqueiro, or the animal with seven heads, whereupon Manuel Milho replied, If there were a giant in the world so big that he could reach to the sky, you would say that his feet were mountains and his head the morning star, for a man who claims to have flown and be equal to God, you are very sceptical. Thus rebuked, Baltasar had no more to say except good night, he turned his back on the fire and was soon fast asleep. Manuel Milho remained awake, thinking about the best way to finish the story he had started, whether the hermit should become king or the Queen become a hermitess, and one wonders why stories must always have such endings.

This had been such a long and trying day that they all agreed that tomorrow could not be worse, but they knew in their hearts that it would be a thousand times worse. They remembered the road that descended to the valley of Cheleiros, those narrow curves, those dreadful slopes, those steep cuttings that fell almost sheer to the road, How shall we ever get through, they murmured to themselves. It was the hottest day of the summer, the earth was like a furnace, the sun like a spur embedded in one's ribs. The water carriers ran the length of the convoy carrying pitchers of water on their shoulders, fetching the water from wells in the lower lying land, some nearby, others at a distance and they had to climb uphill by beaten paths to fill the casks, the galleys could not be worse than this. When it was almost time for supper, they reached an elevation from which they could see Cheleiros lying at the bottom of the valley. This is precisely what Francisco Marques had been hoping for, and whether they made it to the bottom or not, he was determined to spend the night with his wife. Accompanied by his aides, the inspector went down to the stream below, pointing out the most dangerous places as he went, points along the route where the cart would have to be propped up to give some respite to the men and animals and ensure greater safety in transporting the stone, and he finally decided that they should unharness the oxen and lead them to a clearing beyond the third curve, so that they would be far enough away not to impede the operation, yet sufficiently close to be brought back without delay should they be needed. The idea was to send the platform down the slope by its own force. There was no other

way. While the animals were being led away, the men dispersed around the top of the mountain in the fierce glare of the sun and looked down at the tranquil valley, with its vegetable gardens, those refreshing shadows, houses that looked almost unreal, so powerful was the sense of calm. Difficult to say what the men were thinking, perhaps they simply mused, If we ever get down there, it will seem untrue.

Let others testify who may know more than we do. Six hundred men desperately clinging to the twelve cables that had been fixed to the back of the platform, six hundred men who felt that with time and continuous effort they were gradually losing the stiffness in their limbs, six hundred men who were six hundred creatures terrified of being there, and now more than ever, for, compared with this, yesterday was child's play and Manuel Milho's story a fantasy, for that is all man really is, when he is only the strength he possesses, when he is nothing other than the fear that he might not be able to summon the strength to detain this monster that implacably drags him on, and all because of a stone that never had to be so huge, with some three or ten smaller stones the balcony could have been built just as easily, even though we would no longer have been able to tell His Majesty with pride, It is made from a single stone, or to tell visitors before they pass into the next room, It is made from a single stone, and by means of these and other foolish vanities, absurdities become rife, with all their national and individual characteristics, such as the following statement one reads in manuals and history books, The Convent of Mafra was built by Dom João V in fulfilment of a vow he made should God grant him an heir, here go six hundred men who did not make the Queen pregnant yet they are the ones who pay for that vow and carry the can, if you will pardon that old-fashioned expression.

Were the road to descend straight, everything would be reduced to a game of alternation, one could even say an amusing game of release and restraint, as the ropes are slackened to give this stone kite its freedom and then tightened once more, as it is allowed to slide freely as long as the acceleration does not get out of control before being secured again so that it does not plunge into the valley, crushing as it goes those men who do not get out of the way quickly enough, the men themselves being like kites that are held by these and other cords. But there is the nightmare of the bends in the road. As long as the road was flat, the oxen were utilised, as we explained, by being positioned some on each side in front of the cart, where they could pull it into line with the curve itself, however short or extended. It was simply a matter of patience and had to be carried out so often that it soon became routine, unharnessing and harnessing, the oxen suffered most of all, for the men did not have to exert themselves apart from shouting. Now they were shouting in desperation when confronted with the diabolical combination of curve and slope that they would be obliged to manoeuvre time and time again, but to shout in this situation is to lose one's breath, and they do not have much breath to spare. Better to decide how the job should be tackled first and to leave the shouting for later, when it will bring some relief. The cart starts moving towards the opening of the curve, keeping as close to the inside as possible, and the front wheel on that same side is

wedged, it is vital that the wedge should not be so firm as to secure the entire load on its own, nor so fragile that it is crushed by the weight of the cart, and anyone who imagines that this is easy should have carried that stone from Pêro Pinheiro to Mafra instead of simply watching the operation from a distance or viewing it in retrospect by reading this page. Wedged in this precarious fashion, the cart can sometimes come to a dead halt and capriciously refuse to move, as if its wheels were embedded in the ground. That is the most common setback. Only on those rare occasions when the circumstances are favourable and all the factors are taken into account, such as the incline of the curve towards the outside, the reduced friction on the ground, and the right gradient on the slope, will the platform yield without difficulty to lateral pressure applied from the rear, or, more miraculous still, turn independently on its own point of support up there in front. But the rule is that enormous pressure must be applied at focal points at the proper time, so that the momentum will not prove excessive and therefore fatal, or, thanks be to God for the lesser evil, insufficient, which calls for renewed pressure in the opposite direction. Crowbars are applied to the four wheels at the back, and an attempt is made to dislodge the cart, even though it may be only half a span towards the outer side of the curve, the men on the ropes lend a hand by pulling in the same direction, the scene is one of utter confusion, with those on the crowbars on the outside working amid a maze of hawsers, stretched and taut like metal wires, while the men on the ropes, who are working from various positions down the slope, find themselves slipping and rolling over from time to time, with no serious consequences for the present. The cart finally yields to pressure and is dislodged by several spans, but during this operation the outside wheel in front is successively blocked and released to prevent the platform from capsizing halfway through one of these manoeuvres at a point when the cart is poised to go forward and there are not enough men to secure it, for there is so much chaos that most of them have far too little space to work efficiently. Looking down on this activity, the devil marvels at his own innocence and compassion, for he could never have conceived such punishment to crown all those other punishments he metes out in hell.

One of the men working on the wedges is Francisco Marques. His expertise has already been put to the test, one bad curve, two very bad, three worse than the others, four only if we are mad, and for each of these curves some twenty manoeuvres are required, aware that he is doing a good job, perhaps he is no longer even thinking about his wife, everything in its own good time, besides, he must keep an attentive eye on that wheel, which is about to turn and has to be blocked, but not too quickly, in case he undoes the work carried out by his team-mates in the rear, and not too slowly, in case the cart starts to gather speed and break free from the wedge. And this is precisely what happened. Perhaps Francisco Marques was distracted or raised his arm to wipe the sweat from his forehead, or looked down on his native town of Cheleiros as he suddenly remembered his wife, but the wedge slipped from his hand at the same moment that the platform broke free, no one knew how but within seconds he was trapped under the cart and crushed to death, the first wheel passed over him, the stone alone, in case you have forgotten, weighs more than two thousand arrobas. They say that one calamity soon

brings others in its wake, and that is nearly always true, as any man here can testify, but this time, whoever dispatches these calamities must have felt that it was enough that one man should lose his life. The cart, which could easily have gone tumbling down the slope, came to a standstill a little way ahead, its wheels caught in a pothole on the road, salvation does not always come where it should.

They pulled Francisco Marques out from under the cart. The wheel had gone over his stomach, which had been pounded into a paste of entrails and bones, his legs had almost been severed from the trunk of his body, we are referring to his left leg and his right leg, for that other leg of his, the one in the middle, the lustful one, which had taken Francisco Marques on so many journeys, was nowhere to be seen, it has disappeared without sign or trace. The men brought a stretcher, on which they laid his corpse wrapped in a blanket that was almost immediately soaked in blood, two men grabbed the shafts, and another two went along to share the burden, and all four would tell his widow, We've brought your husband, they will announce his death to this woman, who is even now peeping out of her front door and gazing up at the mountain where her husband is working and saying to her children, Your father will be sleeping at home tonight.

When the stone arrived at the bottom of the valley, the yokes of oxen were harnessed once more. Perhaps whoever sends calamities was regretting his earlier restraint, for now the platform went over an outcrop of rock and trapped two animals against the sheer mountainside, breaking their legs. It was necessary to put them out of their misery with an axe, and when the news reached the inhabitants of Cheleiros, they came rushing to enjoy the spoils, the oxen were skinned and dismembered there and then, blood trickled down the road in rivulets, and the blows dealt by the soldiers trying to disperse the crowd were to no avail so long as there was flesh stuck to those bones, the cart was kept at a standstill. Meanwhile, night had fallen. The men set up camp, some still above the road, others scattered themselves along the banks of the stream. The inspector and some of his aides slept under shelter, but most of the men, as was their custom, huddled under their cloaks, worn out by this great descent to the centre of the earth, astonished to find themselves still alive, and all of them resisting sleep for fear that this might be death itself. Those who had been close friends of Francisco Marques went to pay their last respects, Baltasar, José Pequeno, Manuel Milho, and several of the others we spoke of, including Brás, Firmino, Isidro, Onofre, Sebastião, Tadeu, and another fellow, whom we have not mentioned so far, called Damião. They entered the house, looked at the corpse, and asked themselves how a man could die such a violent death and yet look so peaceful, more peaceful than if he were asleep, and released from all nightmares and worries, they murmured a prayer, that woman over there is a widow, whose name we do not know, nor would it add anything to our story if we were to ask her, just as nothing has been added by mentioning Damião and simply writing down his name. Tomorrow, before sunrise, the stone will recommence its journey, one man has been left behind in Cheleiros for burial, and the carcasses of two oxen for eating.

They are not missed. The cart travels as slowly up the slope as it came down, and if

God had any feeling for mankind, He would have made the world as flat as the palm of one's hand, so that stones could be transported more rapidly. This operation is now entering its fifth day, and although the road is better now that the slope has been overcome, the men are ill at ease, every muscle in their bodies aches, but who is complaining, since this is why they have been given muscles. The herd of cattle does not argue or protest, it simply resists, by pretending to pull without pulling, the remedy is to leave them to rest a while and feed them a handful of straw, soon they will start behaving as if they had been resting since yesterday, their buttocks swaying as they move up the road, and it is a pleasure to watch them. Until they arrive at another descent or upward slope. Then the forces gather and distribute their efforts, so many here, so many there, Pull there, heave, a voice cries out, Taratata ta, blares a trumpet, this is a veritable battlefield with its dead and wounded.

In the afternoon, there was a welcome downpour of rain. It rained again during the night, but no one cursed. It is wisest not to pay too much attention to what heaven sends, whether it be sunshine or rain, unless it becomes unbearable, and even then the Great Flood did not suffice to drown the whole of mankind, and drought is never so great that a blade of grass does not survive, or at least the hope of finding one. It rained like this for an hour or so, then the clouds lifted, for even clouds get peevish if they are ignored. The bonfires became bigger, and some of the men stripped to dry their clothes, so that it began to look like a pagan festival, although we know that this was the most Catholic of enterprises, to carry that stone to Mafra, to struggle forth and bring the faith to all who deserved it, a matter we might well have discussed forever if Manuel Milho had not been there to tell his story, there is one listener missing, only I, and you, and you, notice his absence, the others do not even know who Francisco Marques was, some may have seen his corpse, most of them not even that, and who could believe that six hundred men filed past that corpse in a final moving tribute, these are scenes one associates only with epics, so let us get back to our story, One day the Queen vanished from the palace where she lived with her husband the King and their children the infantes, and since there had been rumours that the words exchanged in the cave had been no more like the conversation one might expect between a queen and a hermit than a dance step or a peacock's tail, the King went into a jealous fury and set off for the cave, quite convinced that his honour had been offended, for kings are like that, they are endowed with a sense of honour that is superior to that of other men, as one can see immediately from the crowns on their heads, and when he arrived there, he saw neither hermit nor Queen, but this made him all the more furious, because he saw it as an unmistakable sign that they had fled together, so he sent his army to pursue the fugitives the length and breadth of the realm, and while the search is under way, let us try to get some sleep, for it is late. José Pequeno protested, No one has ever heard such a tale narrated bit by bit, and Manuel Milho reminded him, Each day is a little bit of history, and no one can narrate everything, and Baltasar thought to himself, Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço would surely have approved of this Manuel Milho.

The next day was Sunday, and there was Mass and a sermon. In order to be heard to great advantage, the friar preached from the top of the cart, as dignified as if he were in the pulpit, and the saucy fellow was not aware that he was committing the greatest blasphemy of all by planting his sandals on that altar stone where innocent blood had been sacrificed, the blood of the man from Cheleiros who had a wife and children, and of the man who lost his foot in Pêro Pinheiro before the convoy had even set off, and that of the oxen, let us not forget the oxen, because the local inhabitants who slaughtered them will not readily forget and on this very same Sunday they are having a somewhat better meal. The friar preached and said, as is the wont of all preachers, Beloved children, from heaven above Our Lady and her divine Son look down upon us, from heaven above our father St Antony also watches over us, he for whose love we are carrying this stone to the town of Mafra, it is certainly heavy, but your sins are heavier still, yet you walk with them in your hearts as if you felt no burden, so you must accept this hard labour as penance and also as a devout offering, a singular form of penance and a strange offering, for not only are you being paid a daily wage but you are also being recompensed with an indulgence from heaven, in truth, I say to you, this stone of Mafra is as holy a mission as those ancient crusades that set out for the Holy Places, and know that all who perished there have been rewarded with eternal life, and united with them in the contemplation of the Lord is that companion of yours who was killed the day before yesterday, it was most fortunate that he should have died on a Friday, and no doubt he died unconfessed, for there was no time to summon a confessor, but he was saved because he was struck down in this crusade, just as those who died in the infirmaries of Mafra were saved, or those who fell from the ramparts, except those sinners who were beyond redemption and were carried off by shameful diseases, and such is the mercy of heaven that the gates of paradise are opened even to those who have died from stab wounds in those brawls you all indulge in, never has there been a nation so staunch in its faith yet so disorderly, but never mind, the work goes on, God grant us patience, give you strength, and the King enough money to complete the enterprise, for this convent is much needed in order to strengthen the Franciscan Order and propagate the faith, Amen. The sermon ended, the friar got down from the cart, and since it was Sunday, a holy day of rest, there was nothing more to do, some went to confession, others to communion, but not everyone, and just as well, for there were not enough consecrated hosts to go around, unless some miracle should multiply them, and no such miracle has been witnessed. As the evening drew to a close, a commotion arose between five crusaders on this holy crusade, but we shall spare you the details because it came to nothing more serious than an exchange of punches and one or two bloody noses. Had they lost their lives they would have gone straight to heaven.

That night Manuel Milho concluded his story. Sete-Sóis asked him if the King's soldiers succeeded in capturing the Queen and the hermit, and he replied, No, they did not capture them, they scoured the kingdom from end to end and carried out a house-to-house search without finding any trace of their whereabouts, and with these words he fell silent. José Pequeno asked him, So this is the story it has taken you almost a week to

narrate, and Manuel Milho replied, The hermit ceased to be a hermit and the Queen stopped being a queen, but it was never discovered whether the hermit succeeded in becoming a man or the Queen succeeded in becoming a woman, in my opinion, had any such changes occurred, the effects would not have gone unobserved, and should anything like this ever come to pass, it will not happen without a clear sign, but there was no sign, and it all happened so many years ago that they must be long since dead, for all stories end in death. Baltasar tapped with his hook on a loose stone. José Pequeno rubbed his stubbly chin and asked, How does a drover become a man, whereupon Manuel Milho replied, I don't know. Sete-Sóis threw a pebble on the bonfire and said, Perhaps by flying.

They spent yet another night on the road. The journey from Péro Pinheiro to Mafra took eight whole days. When they arrived on the site, they looked like the survivors from some disastrous battle, dirty, ragged, and bereft of spoils. Everyone was astounded at the dimensions of the stone, It's so huge. But looking up at the basilica, Baltasar murmured, It's so small.

SINCE THE FLYING machine landed on Monte Junto, Baltasar Sete-Sóis has gone there some six, or was it seven, times to examine and repair as best he can the ravages caused by time and the elements despite the machine's protective covering of foliage and brambles. When he discovered that the iron plates had become rusty, he took along a pot of tallow and greased them thoroughly, repeating the process each time he went back. He had also got into the habit of carrying on his back a bundle of reeds that he collected on marshland he encountered along his route, and these he used to repair such cracks and rents in the cane framework as had been made by natural causes, such as when he found a lair with six fox cubs inside the shell of the Passarola. He killed them as if they were rabbits by striking them on the crown of the head with his hook, then tossed their lifeless bodies here and there in the vicinity. The parent foxes would discover their dead cubs, smell the blood, and almost certainly return there no more. During the night the foxes could be heard yelping. They had scented out the trail. When they found their dead cubs, the poor creatures made a great din, and since they did not know how to count, and were uncertain whether all the cubs were dead, they approached the hostile machine that had been their downfall, a machine capable of flying, although now grounded and motionless, they drew near cautiously, worried by the scent of a human presence, and sniffed once more the spilled blood of their offspring, then retreated, snarling and bristling as they went. They were never to return to that spot. But the story might have ended differently if, instead of being a tale about foxes, it had been a tale about wolves. This also crossed Baltasar's mind, so, from that day on, he carried his sword with him, the tip of the blade somewhat eroded by rust but still perfectly capable of beheading a wolf and its mate.

He always went alone, and he was planning to go back on his own, when Blimunda said to him for the first time in three years, I'm going too, and this caused him some surprise, and he warned her, It's a long journey and will tire you out, but she had made up her mind, I want to know the route in case I should ever have to go without you. This made good sense, although Baltasar had not forgotten the danger of encountering wolves in that wilderness, Come what may, you mustn't go there alone, the roads are bad, the place is deserted, as you may remember, and you could be attacked by wild beasts, whereupon Blimunda replied, You should never say, Come what may, for something unexpected might happen if you use that expression, Very well, but you sound just like Manuel Milho, Who is Manuel Milho, He worked with me on the building site, but he decided to go back home, he said that he would rather die in a flood, should the Tagus burst its banks, than be crushed to death under a stone at Mafra for, contrary to what people say, all deaths are not the same, what is the same is to be dead, and so he went back to his native province, where the stones are small and few and the water is soft.

Baltasar was reluctant to see Blimunda make the long journey on foot, so he hired a donkey, and after making their farewells, they set off, they had not answered when Inés Antónia and their brother-in-law inquired, Where are you going, and warned them, This journey will cost you two days' wages, and if any crisis should occur we won't know where to find you, the crisis to which Inês Antónia referred was probably the death of João

Francisco, for death was already prowling around the old man's door, it took one step forward as if about to enter, then relented, perhaps inhibited by João Francisco's silence, for how can anyone say to an old man, Come with me, if he neither speaks nor responds but only sits there staring, confronted with such a stare, even death loses its nerve. Inés Antónia does not know, Alvaro Diogo does not know, their son, who is at an age where he is interested only in himself, does not know that Baltasar has already confided in João Francisco, Father, I'm going with Blimunda to the Serra do Barregudo, to Monte Junto, to see how the machine is faring in which we flew from Lisbon that time when, you may remember, people claimed that the Holy Ghost had flown over the building site at Mafra, it wasn't the Holy Ghost, but us, together with Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, you remember the priest who came here to the house when Mother was still alive, and she wanted to kill a cockerel, but he wouldn't hear of it, saying that it was preferable to hear a cockerel crowing than to eat it for supper, besides, it would be unkind to hens to deprive them of their cockerel. João Francisco listened to these reminiscences, and the old man, who rarely spoke, assured him, Yes, I remember it well, now go in peace, for I'm not ready to die yet, and when the moment comes I shall be with you wherever you may be, But Father, do you believe me when I tell you that I have flown, When we get old, things that are destined to come about start to happen, and at last we're capable of believing those things we once doubted, and even when we find it difficult to believe that such things can happen, we believe that they will happen, I have flown, Father. My son, I believe you.

Giddy-up, giddy-up, giddy-up, pretty little donkey, no one could say that of this little donkey, which, unlike the donkey in the refrain, has sores underneath its saddle, but it trots along merrily, the load is light and is carried with ease wherever the ethereal, slender Blimunda goes, sixteen years have passed since first we set eyes on her, but an admirable vigour stems from this maturity, for there is nothing like a secret for preserving youth. No sooner did they reach the marshland than Baltasar set about gathering reeds, while Blimunda collected waterlilies, which she fashioned into a garland and arranged over the donkey's ears, it made a charming picture, and never had such a fuss been made of a humble donkey, it was like a pastoral scene from Arcadia, although this shepherd was disabled and his shepherdess the custodian of wills, donkeys rarely appear in such a setting, but this one had been specially hired by the shepherd, who did not wish his shepherdess to get tired, and anyone who imagines that this is any common hiring is clearly unaware just how often donkeys get irritated when some heavy load is dumped on their back to aggravate their sores and cause the tufts of hair to chafe. Once the willow canes had been bundled and tied, the load became heavier, but any load that is carried willingly is never tiring, and matters improved when Blimunda decided to dismount from the donkey and proceed on foot, they were like a trio out for a stroll, one bearing flowers, the other two providing companionship.

Spring is here and the countryside is covered with white daisies and mallows, where they cover the path the travellers cut through them, and the firm heads of the flowers are

crushed beneath the bare feet of Baltasar and Blimunda, who both have shoes or boots but prefer to carry them in their knapsacks until the road becomes stony, and a pungent odour rises from the ground, it is the sap of the daisies, the perfume of the world on the day of its inception, before God invented the rose. It is a perfect day for their trip to inspect the flying machine, great white clouds pass overhead, and they muse how pleasant it would be to fly just once more in the Passarola, to soar into the sky and circle those castles suspended in mid-air, to venture where birds do not venture, by jubilantly penetrating those clouds trembling with fear and cold, before emerging once more into the blue and heading towards the sun, to contemplate the earth in all its beauty and exclaim, Earth, how beautiful Blimunda looks. But this route is dull, Blimunda looks less beautiful, and even the donkey has shed the lilies, which have become parched and withered, let us sit down here to eat the world's stale bread, let us eat and then travel on without delay, for there is still a long way to go. Blimunda commits the itinerary to memory as they go along, carefully noting that mountain, that thicket, four boulders standing in a row, six hills forming a semicircle, and the villages, now then, what are they called, Ah yes, Codeçal and Gradil, Cadriceira and Furadouro, Merceana and Pena Firme, and on and on we go until we reach Monte Junto and the Passarola.

As in tales of yore, a secret word was uttered and before a magic grotto there suddenly arose a forest of oak trees that could be penetrated only by those who knew the other magic word, the one that would replace the forest with a river and set thereon a barge with oars. Here, too, words were uttered, If I must die on a bonfire, let it at least be this one, the demented Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço had once exclaimed, perhaps these bramble thickets are the forest of oak trees, this woodland in flower the oars and the river, and the distressed bird the barge, what word will be spoken that will give meaning to all of this. The donkey was relieved of its saddle and hobbled to prevent it from straying too far, and it began to eat whatever it could reach and fancied, if one may speak of choice within the simple confines of the possible, and meanwhile, Baltasar went off to clear a path through the brambles that would lead them to the machine, which was carefully hidden from sight, this is a task that, no matter how many times Baltasar does it, no sooner does he turn his back than the shoots sprout up again, a maze of entangled foliage that makes it almost impossible to clear a passage, to burrow through the brambles, but unless a path is cleared, there will be no hope of restoring the entwined canes, of protecting the wings that time has eroded, of raising the Passarola's drooping head, of supporting her tail, and of getting the rudders back into working order, it is true that we and the machine are grounded, but we are prepared. Baltasar worked for hours, hurting his hands on the thorns, and once he had cleared a path he called Blimunda, who found that she still had to crawl on all fours until she finally arrived, they were immersed in a green shadow that looked translucent, perhaps because of the fresh shoots that criss-crossed the blackened sail without entirely concealing it, because of the tender leaves that allowed the light to filter through, and above this cupola there was another one of silence, and above the silence, a vault of blue light, glimpsed in fragments, patches, and secret revelations. Climbing up the wing that was resting on the ground,

they arrived on the deck of the machine. There, carved on a plank, were the sun and the moon, no other sign united them, and it was as if no other human being existed in this world. In certain places the floor had rotted, once again Baltasar would have to bring some planking from the building site, battens that were rejected when the scaffolding went up, for it would be futile to repair the metal plates and external casing if the timber itself was crumbling away. The amber balls glimmered dimly under the shadow cast by the sail, like eyes refusing to close or resisting sleep in order not to miss the hour of departure. But the entire scene has an air of desolation, withered leaves darkening in a puddle of water which continues to resist the first days of hot weather and were it not for Baltasar's perseverance, this would be a derelict ruin, the decomposed skeleton of a dead bird.

Only the globes, with their mysterious amalgam, continue to shine as on the first day, opaque but luminous, their ribbing clearly defined, their grooves precisely outlined, and who would believe they have been here for four long years. Blimunda touched one of the globes and discovered that it was neither hot nor cold, it was just as if she had clasped her hands to find them neither hot nor cold but simply alive, The wills inside here are still alive, they certainly haven't escaped, I can see the globes have suffered no damage and the metal is well preserved, poor wills, imprisoned all this time and waiting for what. Baltasar, who was working below deck, heard part of Blimunda's question or divined it, If the wills escape from the globes, the machine will be useless, and it will have been a waste of time returning here, but Blimunda reassured him, Tomorrow I'll be able to tell you.

They both toiled until sunset. Blimunda made a broom with some branches from the nearby hedges and swept up the leaves and the debris, then helped Baltasar replace the broken canes and smear the metal plates with grease. She sewed the sail, which had become torn in two places, like any dutiful wife, just as Baltasar, like any good soldier, had gone about his duties on numerous occasions and even now was engaged in finishing the task of covering the restored surface with tar. Dusk fell. Baltasar went off to unshackle the donkey, so that the poor creature would be more comfortable, he tied it to the machine, where it would warn them if any animal should approach. He had inspected the interior of the Passarola beforehand, by descending through a hatch in the deck, the hatch of this aerial barge or airship, a term that will easily be coined one day when it becomes necessary. There were no signs of life, not so much as a snake, not so much as a simple lizard that tends to dart wherever there is darkness and concealment, not even a spider's web, or there would be flies around. The cavity below deck was like the inside of an egg, the same inner shell and silence. They lay there on a bed of foliage and used the clothes they had taken off as a pallet and covering. Fumbling in total darkness, they reached out to each other, naked, he penetrated her with desire and she received him eagerly, and they exchanged eagerness and desire until their bodies were locked in embrace, their movements in harmony, her voice rising from the depth of her being, his totally submerged, the cry that is born, prolonged, truncated, that muffled sob, that

unexpected tear, and the machine trembles and shudders, probably no longer even on the ground but, having rent the screen of brambles and undergrowth, is now hovering at dead of night amid the clouds, Blimunda, Baltasar, his body weighing on hers, and both weighing on the earth, for at last they are here, having gone and returned.

When the first light of day began to filter through the reeds, Blimunda, avoiding Baltasar's eyes, slipped quietly out of bed and, without attempting to dress, went up through the hatch. She shivered in the chilly morning air, she was probably chilled even more by the now almost forgotten vision of a world created from successive transparencies behind the bulwark of the machine, the net of brambles and creepers, the unreal presence of the donkey, by thickets and trees that appeared to float, and, beyond, the dense solidity of the nearby mountain, which made it impossible to perceive the creatures in the distant sea. Blimunda went up to one of the globes and peered in. A shadow moved inside like a whirlwind seen from afar. In the other globe was a similar shadow. Blimunda climbed down through the hatch once more. She plunged into the penumbra of that egg and searched among the clothes for her piece of bread, Baltasar had not awakened, his left arm was half-hidden by the foliage, so that no one would have suspected that his hand was missing. Blimunda went back to sleep. It was already day when she felt herself awakened by the instant contact of Baltasar's body. Before opening her eyes she said, You may come to me, for I have already eaten my bread. Whereupon Baltasar penetrated her without fear, for she had promised that she would never penetrate him. When they finally emerged fully dressed from the machine, Baltasar asked her, Have you been to see the wills, I've been, she replied, and they are still there, They are, Sometimes I feel that we should open the globes and set them free, If we set them free, it will be as if nothing had happened, as if we had never been born, neither you nor I, nor Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, They still look like dark clouds, They are dark clouds.

Halfway through the morning, they finished the work. The fact that a man and a woman had taken care of its restoration was more significant than the fact that there were two of them, the machine looked as good as new and as spick and span as the day it made its maiden flight. Plucking and entwining branches of bramble, Baltasar closed off the entrance. After all, this is a fairy tale. Before the grotto there stands a forest of oak trees, unless what we are seeing is a river without barge or oars. Only from on high could one discern the singular black roof of the grotto, only a large bird passing overhead, but the only large bird that exists in this world lies here grounded, while ordinary birds, those made or ordained by God, pass and pass once more, look and look once more, and fail to understand. Even the donkey does not know why it has been led here. A beast on hire, it goes where it is taken and carries whatever is loaded on its back, one journey is much the same as any other for the poor donkey, but if only they could all be journeys like this one, the donkey has been free of baggage for most of the way and has worn a garland of lilies around his ears, so perhaps the springtime of donkeys will soon be here.

They went down into the sierra and cautiously decided to return by a different route, through Lapaduços and Vale Benfeito, which wended in continuous descent, and because

they felt they would be less conspicuous if they kept close to inhabited areas, they skirted Torres Vedras, then headed south along the Ribeira de Pedrulhos, and if only there were no gloom or misery, if streams flowed over pebbles everywhere, and birds were singing, then life would be simply to sit on the grass, holding a daisy without stripping off the petals, either because one already knew the answers or because they were so unimportant that to discover them would not be worth a flower's life. There are other simple, rustic pleasures, such as when Baltasar and Blimunda bathe their feet in the stream, she hoisting up her skirts above her knees, and better that she should lower them, because for every nymph who bathes there is a faun spying nearby, and this one is dangerously close and about to pounce. Blimunda escapes from the stream laughing merrily, Baltasar grabs her by the waist and they both fall, one on top of the other, and they no longer appear to belong to this century. The donkey raises its head, pricking up its large ears, but it does not see what we are seeing, only a stirring of shadows, ash-coloured trees, for every creature's world is perceived through its own eyes. Baltasar lifts Blimunda into his arms and seats her on the saddle, Come on, little donkey, giddy-up, giddy-up. It is late afternoon, there is neither wind nor breeze nor whiff of air, you can feel the air on your skin as if it were another skin, there is no perceptible difference between Baltasar and the world, and between the world and Blimunda what difference could there be. It is already night by the time they reach Mafra. Bonfires are burning on the Alto da Vela. Where the flames fan out in all directions, you can see the irregular walls of the basilica, the empty niches, the scaffolding, the black apertures of the windows, more like a ruin than a new building, but that is always the impression when workers have left a building site.

Days of endless fatigue and sleepless nights. The men rest in these great sheds, more than twenty thousand of them accommodated on rough beds, yet for many of them the bunks are better than what they would have had at home, where they slept on a mat on the floor with only the clothes they wore and their cloak for protection, at least when it is cold here the men can keep one another warm as they huddle together, things get worse in the heat of the summer, when they are tormented by fleas and mosquitoes that suck their blood, their hair and bodies are covered with lice and they itch all over. They feel lustful and crave sex, some discharge semen in their sleep, and the fellow on the next bunk lies panting with desire, but if there are no women what can we do. Or, rather, there are some women, but not for everyone. The most fortunate are the men who have been on the site from the beginning, they have found themselves women who were either widowed or abandoned, but Mafra is a small town, and very soon there were no unattached women left and the main concern for the men was to defend their garden from would-be intruders and assailants, however few or non-existent its charms. This has led to a number of stabbing incidents. When someone is killed, the criminal magistrate arrives with his constables and, if it is considered necessary, the soldiers are asked to intervene, the culprit is sent to prison, so that one of two things ensues, if the criminal was the woman's husband he will soon have a successor, and if the dead man was the woman's husband he will have a successor in even less time.

And what about the other men. They roam the streets, covered with mud because of the constant rain, and visit certain alleyways where the houses are made of timber, perhaps because they were built by the provident Inspectorate General, which is fully aware of the men's needs, or for the benefit of some contractor of brothels, whoever built the house sold it, whoever bought it rented it, and whoever rented it also rented themselves, the donkey hired by Baltasar and Blimunda was much more fortunate, for they decked it out with waterlilies, but no one has offered any flowers to these women lingering in the doorways, all they receive is a rampant penis that enters and withdraws by stealth, often bringing syphilis with it, and the wretched fellows groan in their misery like the wretched women who infected them, as the pus trickles down their legs in an interminable flow, this is not an illness physicians admit to their infirmaries, the remedy, if such a thing exists, is to treat the infected parts with the juice of the miraculous plant already mentioned, which is good for everything and cures nothing. Strapping youths came here and now, after three or four years, they are disease-ridden from head to foot. Healthy women came here, then went to an early grave and had to be buried deep because their corpses decomposed quickly and poisoned the air. Next day the house has another tenant. The pallet is the same, the filthy bedclothes have not been washed, a man knocks at the door and enters, no questions are asked or answered, the price is known, he unbuttons his trousers, she hoists up her skirts, he moans with pleasure, and she is not required to put up any pretence, for we are among serious people.

The friars from the hospice keep their distance when they pass, for the sake of appearing virtuous, we feel no pity for them, for there has never been such a wily congregation when it comes to alternating and compensating sacrifices with consolations. They walk with lowered eyes, rattling their beads, those of the rosary they wear around their waist as well as those of their thingamajig, which they secretly give to their penitents to pray with, and if some shirt made of horsehair girds their loins, perhaps even equipped with prongs in certain extravagant cases, you can be sure that they are not worn for punishment, and read this carefully, so that you get my meaning. When the friars are not engaged in other charitable tasks and duties, they visit the sick in the hospital, cooling and holding out bowls of broth for the patients and assisting the dying, some days they die in twos and threes despite all those prayers to the saints who protect the sick, to St Cosmas and St Damián, the patron saints of doctors, to St Antony, who is capable of mending bones as well as mending jugs, to St Francis, who knows all about stigmata, to St Joseph, who can mend crutches, to St Sebastian, who can resist death, to St Francis Xavier, who is well versed in the medicines of the Far East, and to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the Holy Family, the rabble, however, are carefully segregated from patients of rank and military status, who have their own separate infirmary, and because of this discrimination the friars, who know perfectly well who will help them to secure their convent, administer treatment and the last rites accordingly. Let any man who has not committed similar transgressions cast the second stone, Christ Himself was guilty of favouring Peter and of spoiling John, although there were twelve apostles. One day it will be revealed that Judas betrayed Jesus because he felt jealous and unwanted.

It was about this time that João Francisco Sete-Sóis died. He waited until his son returned home from work, Álvaro Diogo was the first to arrive, eager to eat quickly and get back to the mason's workshop, he was just breaking bread into his soup when Baltasar entered, Good evening, your blessing, Father, it was an evening like any other, only the boy, who was always the last to arrive, was missing, perhaps he is already lurking in the street where the prostitutes ply their trade, but Álvaro Diogo asks himself where he would find the money to pay them, since he hands over his entire daily wage to his father without spending anything on himself, Gabriel has still not arrived, just imagine, after all these years we have known the boy, it is only now that he has grown up that we learn his name, and Inês Antónia tries to make excuses for his lateness, He'll be here any minute, it is an evening like any other, they make the same conversation, and no one notices the look of terror that has come into João Francisco's face as he sits by the hearth despite the heat, not even Blimunda, who became distracted when Baltasar entered, said good evening to his father, and asked for his blessing without waiting to see if the old man would grant it, when someone has been a son for many years, he tends to fall into these careless ways, he simply said, Your blessing, Father, and the old man responded by raising his hand with the slowness of someone who has barely the strength to do it, this was his final gesture, and before he could finish, his hand fell beside his other hand, resting on the folds of his cloak, and when Baltasar finally turned to his father to receive his blessing, he saw him leaning back against the wall with open hands, his head slumped on his chest, Are you ill, a futile question, and they would have been terrified if João Francisco had answered, I am dead, and that would have been the greatest of spoken truths. They wept natural tears, Álvaro Diogo did not return to work that day, and when Gabriel came in he felt obliged to express sorrow, even though he was still savouring the fruits of paradise, let us hope that hell has not scorched him between his legs.

João Francisco left an orchard and an old house. He had owned a plot of land on the Alto da Vela. He had spent years clearing away the stones, until he was finally able to dig into the soft earth. He laboured in vain, the stones are back now, and one might well ask why a man is born into this world.

THE BASILICA OF Saint Peter in Rome has rarely been taken out of the chests in recent years. Contrary to what the ignorant populace believes, kings are just like ordinary men, they grow up, become more mature, and their tastes change as they become older, when their inclinations are not deliberately concealed in order to curry public favour, they are sometimes feigned out of political expediency. Besides, the wisdom of nations and the experience of individuals have shown that repetition makes for boredom. The Basilica of Saint Peter holds no further secrets for Dom João V. He could assemble and dismantle the entire model with his eyes shut, alone or assisted, starting from north to south, with the colonnade or the apse, piece by piece or section by section but the final result would always be the same, a wooden construction, a child's set of blocks, a place of pretence where real Masses will never be said, even though God is omnipresent.

What matters, however, is that a man should prolong himself in his offspring, and if it is true that in his anguish at the thought of old age or its imminent approach, man does not always relish seeing certain of his own actions repeated that were once a cause for public scandal or discord, it is no less true that a man is delighted when he can persuade his children to repeat some of his own gestures, his own attitudes, even his own words, thus appearing to recover some justification for what he himself has been and accomplished. His children, needless to say, keep up the pretence. By means of other signs, which were, it is hoped, clearer, Dom João V, having lost any desire to assemble the Basilica of Saint Peter, still found a way of reviving his interest indirectly and demonstrating in a single gesture his paternal and royal affection, by summoning his children, Dom José and Dona Maria Bárbara, to help him. Both have already been mentioned, and both will be further discussed anon, for the moment all that need be said about Dona Maria Bárbara is that the poor girl was badly disfigured by smallpox, but princesses are so greatly favoured that they always find someone to marry them, even when they are disfigured and extremely ugly, if such a marriage should prove to be in the best interests of the crown and of His Majesty. It goes without saying that the Infantes do not waste much energy in building the model of the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome. If Dom João V had his footmen to fetch and carry the pieces when he set up the dome of Michelangelo, which opportunely reminds us how the vast architecture prophetically reverberated the night the King went to the Queen's private apartments, then these delicate adolescents need even more assistance, the Infanta a mere seventeen years of age, the Infante barely fourteen. The important thing here is the spectacle itself, at least half of the entire court has gathered to watch the Infantes at play, their Majesties sit under a canopy, the friars exchange conventional pleasantries in whispers, the nobles wear expressions that simultaneously convey the respect due to princes, the tenderness one extends to youth, and devotion toward the holy shrine that is at present being constructed, all these emotions embodied in one and the same expression, so it is small wonder that they look as if they are suppressing some secret and perhaps even illicit sorrow. When Dona Maria Bárbara carries in her own hands one of the miniature statues that adorn the coping, the court breaks into applause. When Dom José places the cross on the crest of the dome with his own hands, all those present fall to their knees, for this

Infante is the heir to the crown. Their Majesties smile, then Dom João V summons his children, praises their accomplishments, and gives them his blessing, which they receive on bended knees. There is such harmony here on earth, or so it would appear from the scene we have just described, that the universe clearly mirrors the perfection of heaven. Every gesture witnessed here is noble, even divine, in its studied solemnity, words are uttered like the fragments of a phrase that is neither inclined nor meant to reach any conclusion. This is surely how those who inhabit the celestial dwellings speak when they walk adamantine roads, when they are received in audience by the Father of all universes in His golden palace, when reunited at court they watch His Son and Heir at play as He assembles, dismantles, and reassembles a wooden cross.

Dom João V gave orders that the basilica not be dismantled or disturbed. The court dispersed, the Queen withdrew, and the Infantes departed, the friars in the background go on intoning their litanies while the King gravely examines every detail of the construction and the nobles in attendance try to emulate his expression, ever on their guard at such moments. The King and his retinue remained in this state of contemplation for at least half an hour. We shall make no attempt to probe the thoughts of the footmen, who knows what thoughts were passing through their heads, perhaps they were bothered by the twinges of cramp in one leg, or thinking about a pet dog, due to give birth tomorrow, the unloading at the custom-house of bales of cloth that have just arrived from Goa, a sudden urge to eat toffee, the memory of that soft little hand of the nun at the convent grille, the itchy feeling under their wig, anything and everything except the sublime inspiration that gripped His Majesty as he thought to himself, I want a basilica exactly like this one for my court, this was something we did not expect.

The following day, Dom João V summoned the architect from Mafra, a certain João Frederico Ludovice, a German name translated here into Portuguese, and the King bluntly informed him, It is my will that a church be built for my court like that of the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome, and as he uttered these words, he looked at the architect with the utmost severity. A king must always be obeyed, and this Ludovice, who was known as Ludovisi in Italy, thus having twice renounced the name Ludwig, knows that if an artist is to pursue a successful career, he must be ever accommodating, especially if he depends on the patronage of altar and throne. However, there are limits, this King has no idea what such a demand involves, and he is a fool if he imagines that simply by willing it, one conjures up an artist like Bramante, Raphael, Sangallo, Peruzzi, Buonarroti, Fontana, Della Porta, or Maderno, if he believes that he needs only to come and command me, Ludwig, or Ludovisi, or Ludovice if intended for Portuguese ears, I want the Basilica of Saint Peter, and the basilica will appear in every detail, when the only churches I am capable of building are those on a scale suitable for places like Mafra, I may be an architect of renown, and as presumptuous as the next man, but I know my own limitations and the ways of Portugal, where I have lived for the last twenty-eight years amongst a race known for its pride and lack of perseverance, the essential thing here is to reply with tact, to phrase a refusal that will sound more flattering than any words of

acceptance, which would be even more laborious, and may God defend me from such speeches, Your Majesty's command is worthy of the great King who ordered that Mafra should be built, however, life is short, Your Majesty, and the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome, from the moment the foundation stone was blessed until its consecration, swallowed up one hundred and twenty years of labour and expense, Your Majesty, who, if I am not mistaken, has never been to Rome, may judge from the replica you have there before you that perhaps not even the next two hundred and forty years would suffice to build such a basilica, and by then Your Majesty will be dead, as well as your son, grandson, great-grandson, great-great-grandson, and great-great-great-grandson, therefore I must respectfully urge you to consider whether it is worth building a basilica that will not be completed until the year two thousand, assuming that by that time there will still be a world, nevertheless, it is for Your Majesty to decide, Whether there will still be a world, No, Your Majesty, whether a second Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome should be erected in Lisbon, although it strikes me that it would be much easier for the world to come to an end than to achieve a full-scale copy of the Basilica of Saint Peter, So you think I should forget this whim, Your Majesty will live eternally in the memory of your subjects, as well as in the glory of heaven, but the memory is a poor terrain when it comes to establishing foundations, the walls would soon start to crumble, and the heavens are one united church, where the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome would make as much impact as a grain of sand, If that's the case, then why do we build churches and convents on earth, Because we've failed to recognise that the universe has always been both church and convent, a place of faith and obligation, a place of refuge and freedom, I don't quite grasp your meaning. Just as I don't quite understand what I am saying, but, to return to the question, if Your Majesty wishes to see the walls of the basilica raised even as much as one span before your death, you must issue the necessary orders without a moment's delay, otherwise the building will make no progress beyond the foundations, Is my life likely to be so short, Art is long, life is short.

They might well have remained there conversing for the rest of the day, but Dom João V, who as a rule tolerates no opposition once he has made up his mind, suddenly became melancholy as he visualised the funeral cortège of his descendants, of his son, grandson, great-grandson, great-great-grandson, great-great-great-grandson, each of them dying off without ever having seen the basilica completed, and it was clearly pointless even to start on the project if this was to be the outcome. João Frederico Ludovice tries to conceal his satisfaction, he has already understood that there will be no Basilica of Saint Peter in Lisbon, he has quite enough work in hand with the main chapel of the Cathedral at Évora and the buildings of São Vicente de Fora, which are on a scale suited to Portugal, because it is desirable that everything should be measured appropriately. There is a sudden lapse in the conversation, the King does not speak and the architect remains silent, and so ambitious dreams vanish into thin air, and we should never have known that Dom João V once dreamed of building a replica of the Basilica of St Peter in the Parque Eduardo VII had Ludovice not betrayed the King's secret to his son, who confided in a nun with whom he was intimate, who told her confessor, who told the

Superior General of his order, who told the Patriarch, who asked if it was true of the King, who retorted that anyone who dared raise the subject again would incur his wrath, so everyone held his tongue, and the King's plan has now been revealed because the truth always comes out in the end, it is simply a question of time until the truth unexpectedly comes to the surface and announces, I've arrived, and we are forced to believe, the truth emerges naked from the depth of the well like the music of Domenico Scarlatti, who continues to reside in Lisbon.

Then suddenly the King taps his forehead, and his entire head glows, encircled by a halo of inspiration, And suppose we were to increase the number of friars at the convent of Mafra to two hundred, let's say, even five hundred, or one thousand, for I'm convinced this would make the same overwhelming impact as the basilica we're not going to have. The architect reflected, One thousand friars, even five hundred friars, would constitute a vast community, Your Majesty, and we should need a church as huge as that of St Peter in Rome in order to accommodate them, How many would you say, then, Let's say three hundred, for even then the basilica I have designed and am about to build with the utmost care is going to be much too small for that number, if you will pardon my saying so, Let's settle for three hundred, then, without any further discussion, for I have made my decision, Whatever is decided will be done as soon as Your Majesty gives the necessary instructions.

They were given. But not before the King arranged a meeting with the Provincial Superior of the Franciscans from Arrábida, the treasurer of the royal household, and the architect once again. Ludovice brought along his designs, spread them out on the table, and explained the layout in detail, Here is the church, to the north and south are the galleries and towers belonging to the Royal Palace, and behind are the outbuildings of the convent, which must now be extended even farther back in order to comply with Your Majesty's instructions, here there is a mountain of solid rock, which will be the last major operation in terms of mining and blasting, and much work has already gone into excavating the base of the mountain and levelling the terrain. Upon learning that the King wanted to increase the number of friars in the convent from eighty to three hundred, you can imagine the reaction of the Provincial Superior, who had gone to the Palace without any forewarning of this latest development, he threw himself to the ground in histrionic fashion and kissed His Majesty's hands profusely, before declaring in a voice that quivered with emotion, Your Royal Highness may rest assured that God is this very instant preparing new and even more luxurious apartments in paradise to reward those who exalt and praise His name on earth with living stones, rest assured that for every brick that is laid in the convent of Mafra, a prayer will be offered up for Your Majesty's intentions, not for the salvation of your soul, which is abundantly assured because of your good works, but to embellish with flowers the crown you will wear when you appear before the Supreme Judge, may God grant that you will remain with us for many years to come, so that the happiness of your subjects will not be diminished and the gratitude of the Church and order I serve and represent may endure. Dom João V rose from his throne

and kissed the Provincial Superior's hand, thus subordinating temporal power to that of heaven, and when he sat back down a halo of light once more encircled his head, unless this King exercises caution, he will find himself being sanctified. The royal treasurer wipes a tear from his eye as he watches this moving scene, Ludovice stands there with the index finger of his right hand pointing out on the plan the aforesaid mountain that will be so difficult to raze, and the Provincial lifts his eyes to the ceiling, which here symbolises heaven, while the King looks at all three in turn, mighty, pious, and most faithful, as papal authority has testified, this is what one sees reflected on that magnanimous countenance, for it is not every day that orders are given for a convent to be enlarged from eighty to three hundred friars, good and evil will out, as the popular saying goes, and what we have just witnessed is the greatest good.

Bowing and scraping, João Frederico Ludovice took his leave of the King and went off to modify his designs, the Provincial returned to his diocese to organise the appropriate manifestations of thanksgiving and to spread the glad tidings, only the King stayed behind, and is waiting even now in his Palace for the treasurer of the royal household to return with the accounts, and when he finally appears and places the enormous ledgers on the table, the King inquires, Tell me, what is the balance between our debit and credit. The treasurer strokes his chin with one hand, absorbed in some profound meditation, he opens one of the ledgers as if about to make a definitive statement, but amends the gesture and simply says, Your Majesty should know that as our funds dwindle our debts increase, Last month you gave me much the same report, And in the month before that and in the year before that, and at this rate, Your Majesty, we shall soon empty our coffers, We have a long way to go before we empty our coffers, with one in Brazil and one in India, and when they are exhausted, the news will take so long to reach us that we shall find ourselves saying, so, we were poor, after all, without even having realised it. If Your Majesty will permit me to speak frankly, I am of the opinion that we are facing bankruptcy and must be fully aware of our difficult situation. But, thanks be to God, there has never been any lack of money, That is true, but my experience as treasurer has taught me that the most persistent beggar is the one who has money to squander, just like Portugal, which is a bottomless coffer, the money goes in its mouth and comes out of its arse, if Your Majesty will pardon the expression. Ha ha ha, the King laughed, that's very funny, are you trying to tell me that shit is money, No, Your Majesty, that money is shit, and I'm in a position to know, squatting down here like everyone else who finds himself looking after someone else's money. This dialogue is fictitious, apocryphal, and libellous, and also deeply immoral, it respects neither throne nor altar, It makes a king and his treasurer speak as if they were drovers conversing in a tavern, and all we need are a few comely wenches to provoke the most awful outbursts of foul language, what you have just read, however, is simply an updated rendering of colloquial Portuguese, since what the King really said was, As from today, your stipend is doubled so that you will be under less pressure, whereupon the treasurer replied, I kiss Your Majesty's hand in gratitude.

Even before João Frederico Ludovice had time to finish his designs for the enlarged convent, a royal courier was dispatched in haste to Mafra with strict orders from His Royal Majesty that the mountain be razed without delay. The courier accompanied by his escort dismounted at the door of the Inspectorate General, he shook the dust from his clothes, mounted the stairs, and entered the reception hall, Are you Dr Leandro de Melo, for that was the inspector's name, That's me, the man told him, I have brought you these urgent dispatches on behalf of the King, I am delivering them safely into your hands, and in return I would ask Your Honour to give me a receipt and quittance, for I must return to court and report to His Majesty without delay. This was granted, and the courier and his escort took their leave while the inspector opened the dispatches, after having kissed the seal with reverence, but when he finished reading them, he turned so pale that his deputy was convinced that the inspector had received notice of dismissal, which might augur well for his own promotion, but he was soon to be disappointed, Dr Leandro de Melo rose to his feet and summoned his staff, Let us get down to business, within minutes he was joined by the treasurer, the master carpenter, the master builder, the master mason, the chief steward, the chief engineer in charge of mining operations, the captain of the troops, and everyone else from the site who held a position of any authority, and once they were gathered together, the Inspector General addressed them, Gentlemen, guided by piety and infinite wisdom, His Majesty has decided that the convent should be enlarged to accommodate three hundred friars and that the task of razing the mountain that lies to the east should begin immediately, for that is where the new part of the building is to be erected, in accordance with the specifications roughly outlined in these dispatches, and since His Majesty's orders must be obeyed, I suggest that we proceed to the site at once to see how the job should be carried out. The treasurer pointed out that in order to pay any subsequent costs it was not necessary to measure and weigh up the mountain, the master carpenter insisted that he was only concerned with timber, the plane, and the saw, the master builder suggested that when they were ready to build walls and lay floors they should send for him, the master mason pointed out that he only worked with stones that had already been hewn, the chief steward said that he would be ready to supply oxen and horses as soon as they were required, and if these replies smack of insubordination they are also full of common sense, for what was to be gained from having all these people inspect a mountain when they knew perfectly well just how much it would cost to raze it to the ground. The Inspector General accepted their excuses and finally left, accompanied by the engineers who would supervise the operation and the captain of the troops, who would carry out the blasting.

On a small plot of land situated behind the convent walls lying to the east, the friar in charge of the kitchen-garden attached to the hospice had planted fruit trees and laid out beds with a variety of produce and borders of flowers, the mere beginnings of a fully established orchard and kitchen-garden. All of this would be destroyed. The workers watched the Inspector General go past and the Spaniard in charge of the mines, then they looked at the mountain looming up before them like some apparition, for the news

had spread at once that the convent was to be enlarged on that location, it is incredible how rapidly news is leaked about royal decrees that are supposed to be confidential, at least until such time as a formal statement is issued by the Inspectorate General. One might be tempted to believe that even before writing to Dr Leandro de Melo, Dom João V had forewarned Sete-Sóis or José Pequeno, telling them, Be patient, for I have just decided to provide accommodation for three hundred friars instead of eighty, as agreed previously, good news for all those who work on the site, since their jobs will be guaranteed for an even longer period of time, for there is no lack of funds, according to the report submitted by my reliable treasurer several days ago, and bear in mind that we are the wealthiest nation in Europe, we are indebted to no one and pay everyone what we owe, and we have no financial worries, give my regards to the thirty thousand Portuguese who are trying to make a living and who are making strenuous efforts to give their King the supreme satisfaction of seeing built, for all posterity, the greatest and most beautiful sacred monument in history, which will make the Basilica of St Peter in Rome look like a tiny chapel, farewell, until we meet again, convey my best wishes to Blimunda, of Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço's flying machine I have heard nothing, and to think how I encouraged the venture and provided so much money to ensure its completion. 'The world is full of ungrateful people, that's for certain, farewell.

Dr Leandro de Melo feels somewhat overwhelmed as he stands at the foot of the mountain, the monstrous projection that will tower over the convent walls that are under construction, and since he is merely the magistrate of Torres Vedras, Dr Leandro de Melo relies on the expertise of the engineer in charge of the mining, who, being Andalusian and somewhat given to exaggeration, declares boastfully, Even if it were the Serra Morena, I would pull it down with my own bare hands and throw it into the sea, words that should be translated thus, Leave it to me and soon you will see a square laid out on this location that will make even Lisbon sit up with envy. For some eleven years now the slopes of Mafra have shuddered to the reverberations of continuous blasting, although these have been less frequent of late, and occurred only when the obstinate projection of some spur or other has impeded progress. A man can never tell when the battle will finally be over. He says to himself, It's all over, and suddenly it's not all over and fresh hostilities break out, for if yesterday it was the brandishing of swords, today it is the thundering of cannon balls, if yesterday it was the demolition of ramparts, today it is the destruction of cities, if yesterday it was the extermination of countries, today worlds are shattered, yesterday it was thought to be a tragedy if a man lost his life, while today no one gives a damn if a million men go up in smoke, this is not exactly the situation in Mafra, where we shall never see quite so many people gathered together, numerous as they are, but for anyone who had become accustomed to hearing some fifty or a hundred blasts every day, it now sounded like the end of the world, with this thundering explosion of a thousand discharges lasting from dawn until dusk, occurring in sequences of twenty, and with such violence that the air was rent with soil and stones, so that the workers on the site had to take shelter behind walls or underneath the scaffolding, and, even so, some of the men were seriously injured, not to mention the five charges that exploded

unexpectedly and blew three men to pieces.

Sete-Sóis has still not replied to the King, and he continues to postpone doing so, he feels much too shy to ask anyone to write a letter on his behalf, but should he succeed one day in overcoming his embarrassment, this is the reply he will dictate, Dear King, I've received your letter and taken careful note of everything you have told me, there has been no shortage of work here, we only stop working when it rains so heavily that even the ducks complain, or when the stone was delayed along the way, or when the bricks turned out to be of poor quality and we had to wait for replacements to arrive, now there is a great stir here with the news that the convent is to be enlarged, for, dear King, you cannot imagine how big the mountain is that we have to raze, or the number of men it will take to do the job, they have had to abandon work on the church and the palace, and nothing will be finished on time, even the masons and carpenters are helping to load the stone, and I myself transport it, sometimes with the oxen, sometimes with a hand-cart, I felt very sorry for the lemon and peach trees that were uprooted, and for those pretty little pansies that were destroyed, there wasn't really any point in planting flowers only to see them treated with such cruelty, but, then, as you yourself have said, dear King, we don't owe anyone anything, and that's always reassuring, for, as my old mother used to say, Pay your debts no matter who you owe them to, poor woman, she's now dead, and will never see the greatest and most beautiful sacred monument in history, as you said in your letter, although, to be frank, in the legends I'm familiar with, no one ever speaks about sacred monuments, only about bewitched Moorish women, and hidden treasure, Blimunda is well, thank you, she's not so pretty as she was when I first met her, but there's many a young girl not half as pretty as she is, José Pequeno has asked me to inquire when the marriage of the Infante Dom José will be, for he wants to send him a present, probably because they have the same name, and thirty thousand Portuguese send you their greetings and thanks, their health is so-so, the other day there were so many men with the runs that Mafra stank to high heaven for three leagues on all sides, we must have eaten something that didn't agree with us, weevils rather than flour, botflies rather than meat, but it was funny to watch all those chaps with their bottoms up in the air to catch the fresh breeze coming in from the sea, and no sooner had one bunch relieved themselves than another took their place, and sometimes they were so desperate that they squatted down on the spot, ah, it's true, I almost forgot to mention that I've heard nothing more about the flying machine, it's just possible that Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço took the machine with him to Spain and perhaps the King over there now has it, for rumour has it that he'll soon be a relation of yours, be careful, I'll say no more and leave you in peace, give my regards to the Queen, farewell, dear King, farewell.

This letter was never written, but the paths of communication between souls are as manifold as they are mysterious, and of the many words that Sete-Sóis never got around to dictating, some affected the King deeply, such as that fatal judgment that, as a warning to Baltasar, appeared engraved in fire on the wall, weighed, counted, and

divided, this Baltasar is not the Mateus we know, but that other Baltasar or Belshazzar the King of Babylon who, having desecrated the sacred vessels during a feast at the Temple in Jerusalem, was punished and put to death at the hands of Cyrus, who was destined to execute this divine sentence. The transgressions of Dom João V are of another order, any sacred vessels he desecrates are likely to be the brides of the Lord, but they enjoy the experience and the Lord turns a blind eye, so let us proceed. What struck a deep chord like the stroke of a bell for Dom João V was that phrase when Baltasar, speaking of his mother, expresses his regret that she will never see that greatest and most beautiful of sacred monuments. The King suddenly realises that his own life will be of short duration, that many people have died and will continue to die before the convent of Mafra is finally built, and that he himself might close his eyes tomorrow forevermore. You will recall that he abandoned the idea of building St Peter of Rome precisely because Ludovice convinced him that life is short, and that the same St Peter, as has been recorded, from the time the foundation stone was blessed until the Basilica's consecration, swallowed up one hundred and twenty years of labour and expense. So far, Mafra has already taken eleven years of labour and who knows how much expense, Who can guarantee that I shall still be alive when the consecration finally takes place, when not so many years ago I was not expected to survive, stricken as I was by a melancholia that threatened to carry me off before my time, the simple truth is that Sete-Sóis's mother, poor woman, saw the beginning but will not see the end, and a king is not exempt from a similiar fate.

Dom João V is in a room in the tower that overlooks the river. He orders the footmen, secretaries, friars, and a singer from the Teatro da Comédia to withdraw, for he wishes to be alone. Written on his face is fear of death, the greatest humiliation of all for so mighty a monarch. But this horror of dying is not such as to reduce him in body and spirit, but enough to ensure that his eyes will no longer be open and shining when the consecrated towers and dome of Mafra are finally erected, that his hearing will no longer be sensitive to the sonorous chimes that will triumphantly ring out, his hands no longer be able to touch the sumptuous vestments and hangings of the religious solemnities, his nostrils no longer able to inhale the incense spiralling from those silver thuribles, that he will simply be the monarch who gave the orders that the sanctuary be built, not the monarch who saw it completed. Yonder sails a ship, and who can tell if it will arrive safely in port, A cloud passes overhead, and perhaps it will be obliterated by a rainstorm, Beneath those waters, a shoal of fishes swims toward the fisherman's net, Vanity of vanities, Solomon once declared, and Dom João V repeats these words, All is vanity, to desire is vanity, to possess is vanity.

To overcome vanity, however, does not mean to have achieved modesty, much less humility, it is, rather, an excess of vanity. Upon rousing himself from this anguished meditation, the King did not don the sackcloth of penance and renunciation but summoned back the footmen, secretaries, and friars, the singer from the Teatro da Comédia would arrive later, and asked them if it was really true, as he had always been

led to believe, that basilicas should be consecrated on a Sunday, and they assured him that it was so according to the Holy Liturgy, so the King asked them to check in which year his birthday, the twenty-second of October, would fall on a Sunday, and after consulting the calendar, the secretaries verified that such a coincidence would occur twenty years hence, in the year seventeen hundred and thirty, Then on that day the basilica of Mafra will be consecrated, that is what I wish, ordain, and decree, and when they heard these words, the footmen kissed the hand of their sovereign, you will tell me which is the more excellent thing, to be king of the world or of these people.

João Frederico Ludovice and Dr Leandro de Melo dampened the King's ardour when they were urgently recalled from Mafra, where the former had been sent and the latter offered his assistance, with the place they had come from fresh in their memory, they warned the King that the slow progress of the work at Mafra did not justify any such optimism, the walls of the enlarged section of the convent were going up very slowly, and the church, because of its delicate stone structure and intricate design, could not be built in haste, as Your Majesty knows better than anyone else, from your long experience of reconciling and balancing the different forces that constitute a nation. Dom João V glowered, because this importunate flattery did nothing to console him, he suppressed the temptation to reply with some chilling words of rebuke and instead recalled his secretaries, whom he ordered to verify when his birthday would next fall on a Sunday after the year seventeen thirty, which was obviously too soon. They struggled with their arithmetic and replied with some uncertainty that the coincidence would recur ten years later, in the year seventeen forty.

There were some eight to ten people present, including the King, Ludovice, Leandro, the secretaries, and the nobles in attendance that week, and they all nodded their heads gravely as if Halley himself had just expounded the frequency of the comets, the things that men are capable of discovering. Dom João V, however, was suddenly assailed by a sombre thought, it was reflected in the expression on his face as he rapidly made a mental note with the help of his fingers, In the year seventeen forty I shall be fifty-one years of age, and added mournfully, If I'm still alive. For a few dreadful moments, this King once more ascended the Mount of Olives and there he agonised over his fear of death, terrified at the thought of all that would be taken from him, and envious of the son who would succeed him, along with his young Queen, who would shortly arrive from Spain, together they would share the joy of seeing Mafra inaugurated and consecrated, while he rotted in the Tomb at São Vicente de Fora, alongside the tiny Infante Dom Pedro, who had died in infancy from the shock of being weaned. Those who were present watched the King, Ludovice with scientific curiosity, Leandro de Melo indignant at the intransigent laws of time, which do not even respect the sovereignty of kings, the secretaries wondering whether they had calculated the leap year correctly, the footmen pondering their own chances of survival. Everyone waited. Then João V announced, The consecration of the basilica of Mafra will take place on the twenty-second of October in the year seventeen thirty, whether the building is finished or otherwise, whether there be

rain or shine, snow or wind, flood or bedlam.

If you eliminate the emphatic expressions, you will observe that these words have been used before, this would appear to be nothing other than one of those declarations intended for posterity, like that well-known phrase, Father, into Your hands I commend my spirit, so take it, which just goes to prove that God is not one-handed after all, and Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço committed a minor sacrilege when he led Baltasar Sete-Sóis astray, when all he had to do was go and ask God the Son, who ought to know how many hands God the Father possesses, but in addition to what João V has already said, we should add what we ourselves have discovered about the number of hands his subjects have and to what uses they might be put, for the King went on to say, I hereby command that all the magistrates of the realm should be told to round up and dispatch to Mafra as many skilled workers as they can find in their regions, whether they be carpenters, bricklayers, or manual labourers, even if they should have to be removed by force from their place of work, and they should not be exempt on any pretext whatsoever, no exceptions are to be made for domestic reasons or because of any other commitments or obligations, for nothing surpasses the royal will, and the latter will be appealed to in vain, because it is precisely to serve the divine will that these provisions have been made, I have spoken. Ludovice nodded gravely, as if he had just verified the constancy of a chemical reaction, the secretaries made rapid notes, the footmen exchanged glances and smiled, this was truly a king, Dr Leandro de Melo was safe from this latest decree, because in his region there were no skilled labourers left who were not already engaged, directly or indirectly, in building the convent.

The King's orders were proclaimed and the men arrived. Some went willingly, enticed by the promise of good earnings, or because they craved adventure or experienced some sense of mission, but nearly all of them under duress. The decree was posted in the public squares, and since there were few volunteers, the local magistrate went from street to street, accompanied by his henchmen, forced entry into homes and private property, and scoured the surrounding countryside in search of recalcitrants, by the end of the day, he had rounded up some ten, twenty, thirty men, and when they outnumbered their jailers, they bound them with ropes, adopting various methods, sometimes the men were tied to one another at the waist, sometimes with an improvised halter, and sometimes fettered at the ankles like galley slaves or serfs. Much the same scene was to be witnessed everywhere. By order of His Majesty, you will help to build the convent of Mafra and if the magistrate was particularly zealous, it mattered not whether the prisoner was a man in his prime, on his last legs, or a mere stripling. The men would start off by refusing to go or threatening to escape, then they would make excuses, one had a wife about to give birth any day now, another had to look after his old mother, or there was a brood of children to be provided for, a wall to be finished, a chest to be mended, land to be worked, but if they started to make excuses, they were not allowed to finish, the henchmen would set upon them if they showed any signs of resistance, and many of the men set out on the journey covered with blood.

The women ran behind them weeping, and the screams of the children added to the uproar, one would have thought that the magistrates were recruiting the men by force for the army or for an expedition to India. Rounded up in the main square of Celorico da Beira, Tomar, Leiria, Vila Pouca, Vila Muiita, or in some town known only to those who live there, on distant frontiers or along the coast, around the pillories, in the church squares, at Santarem and Beja, at Faro and Portimão, Portalegre and Setubal, Évora and Montemor, in the mountains and plains, at Viseu and Guarda, Bragança and Vila Real, Miranda, Chaves, and Amarante, Vianas and Póvoas, and in all those places where His Majesty's jurisdiction extends, the men were tied like sheep, the ropes loosened just enough to prevent them from tripping over one another, while their wives and children looked on and pleaded with the magistrate, or tried to bribe the henchmen with some eggs or a chicken, pathetic expedients that proved to be useless, for the King of Portugal prefers to collect any tribute due to him in gold, emeralds, diamonds, pepper, cinnamon, ivory, tobacco, sugar, and precious wood, tears achieve nothing in the custom-house. When there was time, some of the henchmen took the opportunity to rape the wives of their prisoners, the wretched women submitted in the hope of saving their husbands, only to see them dragged off while they looked on in despair and their seducers mocked their gullibility, May you be damned unto five generations, may you be stricken from head to foot with leprosy, may your mother, wife, and daughter be forced into prostitution, may you be impaled from arse to mouth, thricecursed villain. The band of men rounded up are already on their way to Arganil, and the disconsolate women accompany them until they are outside the town, weeping as they go, heads uncovered, Oh, sweet and beloved husband, while another wails, Ah, my beloved boy, who gave me comfort and protection in my weary old age, the lamentations went on and on until the nearby mountains echoed those cries, moved by pity for these poor creatures, the men are already at some distance and finally disappear from sight where the road curves, their eyes filled with tears, large teardrops in the case of the more sensitive among them, and then a voice rends the air, it is that of a farmer so advanced in years that the magistrate's men were reluctant to take him, and mounting an embankment, a natural pulpit for countryfolk, he calls out, Ah, empty ambition, senseless cupidity, infamous King, nation without justice, but no sooner has he uttered these words than one of the henchmen deals him a blow on the head and leaves him for dead on the ground.

The might of kings. There he is, seated on his throne, he relieves himself as and when necessary by defecating, or ejaculating inside the womb of some woman or other, and here, there, or yonder, if so required by the interests of the state, namely himself, he issues orders that men should be brought from Penamacor, able-bodied or otherwise, to build this convent of mine at Mafra, built because petitioned by the Franciscan friars since the year sixteen twenty-four, and because the queen was delivered of a daughter who will not even become the Queen of Portugal but of Spain, because of dynastic and private intrigues. Meanwhile, the men who have never even set eyes on the King arrive against their will, guarded by soldiers and henchmen, unfettered if they are of a peaceful disposition or have already resigned themselves to their fate, or tied with ropes, as we

explained, if rebellious, and permanently shackled if they perversely gave the impression of going along willingly and then tried to escape, and all the worse for him who succeeds in escaping. They make their way cross-country from one region to another, along the few royal routes in existence, sometimes along the roads built by the Romans, and most frequently of all along narrow footpaths, and the weather is unpredictable, scorching sunshine, torrential rain, and freezing cold, while in Lisbon the King expects every man to do his duty.

From time to time they meet up with fellow victims. Some more men were drafted from the northern and eastern regions of Portugal joining up with those from Penela and Proença-a-Nova in Porto de Mos, none of them knowing where these places are located on the map, or about the form of Portugal itself, whether it is square or round or pointed, if it is a bridge for crossing or a rope used for hanging, if it cries out when they beat it or hides in some corner. Both contingents are merged into one, and since the art of detention is not without its refinements, the men are paired up in some mystical way, one from Proença with another from Penela, as a precaution against subversive plotting and with the additional advantage of providing an opportunity for the Portuguese to get to know Portugal. Tell me something about your region, they inquire of one another, and while they are engaged in such exchanges they have no time to think about anything else. Unless one of them should die during the journey. A man might collapse foaming at the mouth after a sudden attack, or perhaps simply topple over, dragging with him to the ground the man in front and the one behind, who panic when they find themselves shackled to a dead man, a man might become ill without any warning in some remote place and be carried on a litter, his arms and legs dangling over the sides, only to die farther ahead and be hastily buried at the roadside, with a wooden cross stuck into the ground near his head, or if he is more fortunate, he might receive the last rites in some village while the men sit around waiting for the priest to finish, *Hoc est enim corpus meum*, this body worn out by fatigue after marching all those leagues, this body tormented by the chafing of ropes, this body deprived of even the most frugal diet. Their nights are spent on haystacks, in convent doorways, in empty granaries, and, when God and the elements permit, out in the open air, thus combining the freedom of nature with human bondage, and there would be much food for thought here if we had time to pause. In the early hours, long before sunrise, and perhaps it is just as well, for these are the coldest hours of all, His Majesty's labourers get to their feet, frostbitten and weak from hunger, fortunately, the henchmen have untied them, since they expect to reach Mafra today and it would give the worst possible impression if the inhabitants were to see a procession of tramps fettered like slaves from Brazil or a drove of pack horses. When the men glimpse the white walls of the basilica in the distance, they do not cry out, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, therefore that friar was lying who preached, when the stone was being transported from Pêro Pinheiro to Mafra, that all these men were the crusaders of a new crusade, for what crusaders are these, who scarcely know why they are crusading, the henchmen call a halt so that the men may survey from this elevation the sweeping panorama encircling the site where they are about to settle, to the right lies the sea,

which is navigated by our ships, sovereign and invincible as they ply those waters, and straight ahead, to the south, lies the justly renowned Serra de Sintra, the pride of the nation and the envy of foreigners, for Sintra would make an admirable paradise if God were to decide to have another go, and that town down there in the valley is Mafra, which scholars tell us is aptly named, but one day the meanings will be modified to read letter by letter, dead, burned, drowned, robbed, dragged off, and it is not I, simple henchman carrying out my orders, who will be so bold as to give such a reading, but a Benedictine abbot in his own time, when he gives his reasons for not attending the consecration of this monstrous edifice, however, let us not anticipate events, for there is still a great deal of work to be done, which explains why you have been brought all this way from your native regions, pay no attention to the lack of concordance, for no one has taught us how to speak properly, we learn from the mistakes of our parents, and, besides, we are a nation in a period of transition, and now that you have seen what awaits you, move on, once we have delivered you, we must go in search of more men.

To arrive at the site from this direction, the men are obliged to go through the town and pass under the shadows of the Viscounts' Palace and alongside the threshold of the house where Sete-Sóis lives, and they know as little about the one as about the other, despite the existing genealogies and annals, Tomas da Silva Teles, Visconde de Vila Nova da Cerveira, and Baltasar Mateus, builder of airships, in the fulness of time we shall see who will win this war. The palace windows are not opened to witness this procession of miserable wretches, the stench they give off, your Ladyship, is quite bad enough. But the front door of the house of Sete-Sóis was opened, and Blimunda peeped out, the scene is familiar, so many detachments have passed this way, but whenever she is at home, Blimunda always watches them go by, it is one way of welcoming whosoever may arrive and when Baltasar returns that evening she tells him, More than a hundred men passed by today, forgive this vagueness on the part of someone who has never learnt how to count properly, however great or small the number involved, just as when she refers to her age by saying, I have passed the age of thirty, and Baltasar retorts, They tell me that five hundred men have arrived in town, So many, Blimunda exclaims in astonishment, and neither he nor she knows exactly how many five hundred make, not to mention that there is nothing in the world so imprecise as numbers, one says five hundred bricks just as one says five hundred men, and the difference between a brick and a man is the difference that one believes to exist between five hundred and five hundred, and anyone who fails to grasp my meaning the first time around does not deserve to have it explained a second time.

The men who entered Mafra today are herded together and settle down to sleep wherever possible, tomorrow they will be sorted out. Just like bricks. If a load of bricks is judged to be no good, it is dumped on the spot, and the bricks will end up being used for jobs of lesser importance, someone will make use of those bricks, but when they are men, they are dismissed without further ado, You're no good to us, go back to where you came from, and off they go along unfamiliar routes, they get lost on the way, become

vagrants, die on the road, sometimes they steal or murder, sometimes they actually reach their homes.

YET CONTENTED FAMILIES are still to be found. The Royal Family of Spain is one of them. That of Portugal is another. The offspring of the one marry the offspring of the other, from the Spanish dynasty comes Mariana Vitória, from that of Portugal, Maria Bárbara, their bridegrooms José from Portugal and Fernando from Spain respectively, as one would say. These unions are the fruit of careful planning, and negotiations have been under way since the year seventeen hundred and twenty-five. Innumerable discussions have taken place, there has been much shuttling of ambassadors, much haggling, much coming and going of plenipotentiaries, many arguments about the various clauses in the wedding contracts, about their respective prerogatives and the dowries of the Princesses, for these royal marriages cannot be entered into lightly or quickly settled at the butcher's shop, as the lower orders quip when referring to some illicit affair, only now after almost five years of protracted negotiations has an agreement been reached about a formal exchange of Princesses, one for you and one for me.

Maria Bárbara has just turned seventeen, her face is as round as a full moon, pockmarked, as we already mentioned, but she has a sweet nature and as good an ear for music as anyone has a right to expect of a royal princess, the lessons she received from Maestro Domenico Scarlatti have borne fruit, and soon he will follow her to Madrid, whence he will not return. The bridegroom who awaits her is two years younger, the said Fernando, who will be the sixth descendant of the Spanish dynasty to bear that name, but he will merely be king in name, a detail we mention in passing lest we are accused of interfering in the internal affairs of a neighbouring country. A country from which, once historical links have been established with Portugal, Mariana Vitória will come, an eleven-year-old girl who, despite her tender years, has already experienced great sorrow, suffice it to say that she was about to marry Louis XV of France when he repudiated her, a word that may seem excessive and lacking in diplomacy, but how else can one describe it if a child at the age of four is sent to reside at the French court in order to be prepared for the aforesaid marriage, only to be sent back home two years later because her betrothed suddenly decided he wanted an heir to the crown, or it suited the interests of whoever was advising him, a demand that would have been physiologically impossible for another eight years. So the poor child, delicate and undernourished, was sent back to Spain on the feeble pretext that she was visiting her parents, King Felipe and Queen Isabel, and there she remained in Madrid, waiting for a bridegroom to be found who would be in less of a hurry to beget heirs, perhaps even our own Infante José, who will soon be fifteen. There is not much to say about the things that afford pleasure to Mariana Vitória, she is fond of dolls and adores sweetmeats, which is not surprising since she is still a mere child, she already shows considerable aptitude for hunting, and as she grows older she will develop a taste for music and literature. When all is said and done, there are those who govern with fewer accomplishments.

Stories about nuptials often relate how some people are treated as outsiders, therefore, to avoid any disappointment, never go to a wedding or a baptism without being invited. Someone who most certainly was not invited was João Elvas, who had

befriended Sete-Sóis during the years he spent in Lisbon before he met Blimunda and came to live with her, João Elvas had offered him shelter in the hut where he slept along with other tramps and vagabonds close to the Convent of Hope, as you will remember. Even then João Elvas was getting on in years, and he is now in his sixties, weary and filled with nostalgia for the land of his birth, from which he took his name, certain longings take possession of the elderly, while there are other things they no longer crave. He hesitated about starting out on the journey, not because of his weak legs, which were still remarkably strong for a man of his age, but because of those vast barren plains of the Alentejo, no one is safe from some evil encounter, such as that experienced by Baltasar Sete-Sóis in the pine forests of Pegões, although on that occasion it was the brigand killed by Baltasar who encountered evil, and his corpse would have lain there exposed to vultures and stray dogs if his companion had not returned to the spot in order to bury him. For a man never really knows what fate awaits him, what good or evil is likely to befall him. Who could ever have told João Elvas when he was still a soldier, or even now that he has become a harmless vagabond, that the day would come when he would accompany the King of Portugal on his journey up the river Caia to deliver one royal princess and bring back another, who would have believed it. No one ever told him, no one ever predicted such a thing, fate alone knew that this would happen, as it began to select and weave the threads of destiny, diplomatic and dynastic intrigues in both courts and a lasting sense of nostalgia and destitution for the veteran soldier. If we ever succeed in unravelling those threads, we shall finally solve the mystery of existence and attain supreme wisdom, if such a thing exists.

Needless to say, João Elvas does not travel by coach or mounted on a horse. We have already mentioned those sturdy legs of his, and he puts them to good use. But, whether farther ahead or farther behind in the procession, Dom João V will continue to keep him company, as will the Queen and the Infantes, the Prince and the Princess and all the powerful nobles who are making the journey. It will never occur to these mighty lords that they are escorting a vagabond, and that their supreme authority is protecting his life and worldly possessions, which will soon be at an end. But lest they should come to an end too quickly, especially his life, which João Elvas cherishes, he carefully avoids getting too close to the main procession, for everyone knows how readily soldiers, God bless them, may strike and with what dire consequences, if they should suspect that the safety of their precious sovereign is at risk.

Ever cautious, João Elvas left Lisbon and made for Aldegalega at the beginning of January in the year seventeen hundred and twenty-nine, and there he lingered, watching coaches and horses disembark that would be used for the journey. Anxious to know what was happening, he began to make inquiries, What is that, where did it come from, who made it, who will use it, these may sound like foolish indiscretions, but, confronted by this venerable old man, however unwashed and dishevelled, any stable hand felt obliged to offer some reply, which encouraged João Elvas to pluck up enough courage to start questioning the head steward himself, he only needs to put on that pious air to achieve

what he wants, for if he knows little about prayers, he knows more than enough about the art of deception. And even when his questions are answered with some rebuff, abuse, or cuff on the ear, that in itself allows him to guess what information has been withheld, for one day, the errors on which history is based will finally be clarified. And so, when Dom João V crossed the river on the eighth of January to embark on his great journey, there awaited him in Aldegalega more than two hundred carriages, including coaches, barouches, chaises, wagons, trailers, and litters, some had been brought from Paris, others had been specially made in Lisbon for the journey, not to mention the royal coaches, with their fresh gilding and refurbished velvet upholstery, their tassels and hand-painted drapes. The household cavalry boasted almost two thousand horses, without counting those of the mounted soldiers who accompanied the royal progress. Aldegalega, because of its strategic location for traffic en route to Alentejo, has seen many expeditions in its time, but never on such a scale, one need only consider the small roster of domestic staff, two hundred and twenty-two cooks, two hundred halberdiers, seventy porters, one hundred and three valets to look after the silver, over a thousand men to attend to the horses, and innumerable other servants and dusky slaves in every shade and hue. Aldegalega is aswarm with people, and the crowds would be even greater if the nobles and other dignitaries had not travelled on ahead in the direction of Elvas and the river Caia, nor was there any other solution, for if they had all set out at the same time, the royal princes would have married before the last of the invited guests entered Vendas Novas.

The King sailed past in his brigantine, having first worshipped at the shrine of Our Lady, Mother of God, and he disembarked accompanied by Prince Dom José and the Infante Dom António and their respective attendants, namely, the Duke of Cadaval, the Marquis of Marialva, and the Marquis of Alegrete, who acted as equerry to the Infante along with other members of the nobility, that they should have fulfilled such a role need cause no surprise, for it is ever an honour to serve the Royal Family. João Elvas was among the crowd that broke ranks and shouted, Long live the King, as Dom João V, sovereign of all Portugal, went past, and if that was not what they were shouting, it sounded very much like it, for one can always tell the difference between acclaim and derision, besides, who would dare to voice resentment in public by shouting insults, it is unthinkable that anyone should show lack of respect for the King, even if he does happen to be the King of Portugal. Dom João V took up residence in the apartments of the Clerk of Council, João Elvas suffered his first disappointment when he discovered there was a horde of beggars and tramps accompanying the procession, on the lookout for scraps of food and alms. Wherever they found something to eat, he would find something, too, but whatever their reasons for making the journey, his were the most worthy of all.

It was about five-thirty and still dark when the King set out for Vendas Novas, but João Elvas had left before him, because he was determined to see the procession pass in full array, in preference to seeing the chaotic preparations for departure while the various carriages took up their positions as dictated by the master of ceremonies amid the cries

of outriders and coachmen, who are notorious for their loud behaviour. João Elvas was unaware that the King still had to attend Holy Mass at the Church of Our Lady of Atalaia, so when dawn broke and there was still no sign of the procession, he slackened his pace and finally came to a halt, where the devil could they be, he thought to himself as he sat by a ditch, sheltered from the morning breeze by a row of aloes. The sky was overcast with clouds that promised rain, and the cold was biting. João Elvas drew his cloak tightly around his body, pulled the brim of his hat down over his ears, and settled down to wait. He waited for an hour, perhaps even more, he saw scarcely anyone go past, and there was nothing to suggest that this was a feast day.

But the feast is on its way. In the distance a fanfare of trumpets and banging of kettledrums can already be heard, those military sounds cause the blood to course through the old man's veins, forgotten emotions are suddenly revived, it is just like watching a woman go by when there is nothing left except the memory of desire, trifling details like a sudden peal of laughter, the swaying of her skirt, or a fetching way of arranging her hair are enough to melt a fellow's heart, take me, do with me what you will, just as if one were being summoned to battle. And behold the triumphal march as it passes. João Elvas sees nothing but horses, people, and coaches, he has no idea who is participating and who is simply looking on, but it costs us nothing to imagine that some kind nobleman sat down beside him, one of those charitable souls whom one sometimes encounters, and since this nobleman is knowledgeable about royalty and court protocol, we listen attentively to what he has to say, Look, João Elvas, behind the lieutenant and the trumpeters and drummers who have just passed by, as you know from your time as a soldier, comes the quartermaster general in charge of billeting the soldiers accompanied by his subalterns, those six horsemen are the royal couriers who carry the dispatches and orders, in the berlin carriage now passing sit the confessors of the King, the Prince, and the Infante, you cannot imagine the burden of sin being transported in that carriage, the penances weigh infinitely less, then comes the carriage with the grooms in charge of the royal wardrobes, why look so startled, His Majesty is not a pauper like yourself, whose only clothes are the ones you're wearing, how curious to possess nothing other than the clothes on your back, and don't be alarmed at the sight of those two carriages packed with clergymen and priests from the Society of Jesus, not always fish or fowl, at some times the Society of Jesus, at others the Society of João, both of whom are kings, but these companions are always agreeable, and while we're on the subject, here comes the carriage of the assistant steward, and the three carriages behind are those of the judicial magistrate and the nobles assigned to the royal household, then comes the coach of the chief steward, then the carriages of the footmen who serve the Infantes, and now watch carefully, for this is where the procession becomes exciting, those empty coaches and carriages now going past are the ceremonial coaches and carriages of the Royal Family, and immediately behind follows the deputy steward on horseback, the great moment has arrived at last, get down on your knees, João Elvas, for His Majesty the King along with the Prince Dom José and the Infante Dom António are passing, did you ever see such splendour, such dignity, such a noble and imperious monarch, this is how God Himself will

appear when we reach heaven, João Elvas, and however long you may live, you will never forget this moment of perfect bliss, when you saw Dom João V go past in the royal coach while you knelt respectfully at the foot of those aloes, be sure to cherish these images in your mind, for you have been truly privileged, and now you may get up, since the royal party has passed and is well on its way, six grooms have also ridden past, then came four carriages carrying members of His Majesty's council, then the chaise carrying the royal surgeon, for if there are so many in the party who take care of the King's soul, it's only fitting that someone should look after his body, from this point on, there is little of interest, six carriages in reserve, seven unmounted horses led by their reins, the cavalry guard led by their captain, and another twenty-five carriages reserved for the King's barber, valets, footmen, architects, chaplains, physicians, apothecaries, secretaries, porters, tailors, laundry-maids, head cook and his assistant, and so on and so forth, two wagons containing the wardrobes of the King and the Prince, and, closing the procession, twenty-six horses in reserve, have you ever seen such an entourage, João Elvas, now join that horde of beggars and tramps trailing behind, for that is where you belong, and don't bother to thank me for having taken the trouble to explain everything to you, for we are all children of the same God.

João Elvas caught up with the throng of vagrants, but though he was more informed about court etiquette than any of them, he was not made welcome because alms distributed to a hundred beggars are not the same as alms distributed to a hundred and one, but the thick cudgel he carried over one shoulder like a lance, and his military bearing and gait, helped to intimidate the hostile rabble. By the time they had marched half a league, they were all like brothers. When they finally reached Pegões, the King was already at supper, a light repast eaten on foot, consisting of water fowl stewed with quinces, pastries filled with marrow, and a traditional Moorish stew, a mere morsel sufficient to fill the cavity of a tooth. Meanwhile, the horses were changed. The horde of beggars swarmed around kitchen doors and intoned a chorus of paternosters and salve reginas, until they were finally served a bowl of broth from a large cauldron. Some, once they had eaten, decided to linger and digest their food without giving any thought to where the next meal might come from. Others, although they had satisfied their hunger, knew from experience that today's bread does not eliminate yesterday's hunger, much less that of tomorrow, and they were determined to keep up with the procession in the hope of scraps. João Elvas, motivated by personal reasons both worthy and unworthy, decided to tag along.

It was about four in the afternoon when the King arrived at Vendas Novas, and João Elvas got there about an hour later. Darkness fell quickly, and the clouds hovered so low that one felt they might be touched simply by stretching out a hand, I think we said this once before, and when left-overs were distributed among the beggars and tramps that evening, the veteran soldier opted for solid food, which he could carry off and eat in peace in some sheltered place, even under a wagon, remote from the conversation of the beggars, who caused him annoyance. The threat of rain appears to have nothing to do

with João Elvas's desire to be alone, and one must not forget that, strange as it may seem, some men can spend their entire life alone and enjoy solitude, especially if it is raining and their crust of bread is hard.

Later that night, João Elvas could not tell if he was awake or dreaming, he heard a crackling sound as if hay were being trampled, someone was approaching and carrying an oil lamp in one hand. From the appearance and quality of the stranger's hose and breeches, from the rich material of his cloak and the lacing of his shoes, João Elvas could see that the newcomer was an aristocrat, and soon recognised him as the nobleman who had given him such a detailed description of the King's entourage when they conversed together by the roadside. Breathless and irritated, the nobleman sat down and complained, I've worn myself out chasing after you. I've been all over Vendas Novas asking, Where is João Elvas, where can I find him, no one could give me an answer, why is it that the poor never tell one another of their whereabouts, now I've found you, at long last, I have come to tell you about the palace the King has ordered to be built for this expedition, the work has been carried out day and night for almost ten months, more than ten thousand torches were needed for the night shift alone, and more than two thousand men were engaged, between painters, blacksmiths, masons, cabinetmakers, apprentices, foot soldiers, and cavalry troops, and I must tell you that the stone was transported for more than three leagues, it took over five hundred wagons and smaller carts to carry all the necessary materials, lime, joists, timber, stone slabs, bricks, tiles, pegs, and metal fittings, more than two hundred yokes of oxen were used to draw the carts, a number exceeded only for the convent at Mafra, I don't know if you have seen it, but it was worth all the labour and expense, I can tell you in confidence, but don't repeat this to anyone, a million cruzados has been spent on the palace and on the house you saw in Pegões, yes, sir, one million cruzados, obviously, you can't imagine what a million cruzados means, João Elvas, but don't be miserly, for though you wouldn't know what to do with all that money, the King has no such difficulty for he has known all his life what it means to be wealthy, the poor may not know how to spend money, but the rich certainly do, just think of all those expensive paintings and sumptuous decorations, and those lavish apartments for the Cardinal and Patriarch, the audience chamber, study, and stateroom for Dom José, and the equally luxurious apartments for Dona Maria Bárbara when she makes her journey here, as well as the private suites for the King and Queen so that they may enjoy some privacy and be spared the discomfort of sleeping in cramped conditions, for, let's be frank, the spacious bed you occupy is a rare privilege indeed, you have the entire universe at your disposal, as you lie there snoring like a pig, if you'll pardon the expression, sprawled out on the hay and wrapped up in your cloak, and you smell terrible, João Elvas, but never mind, for if we should meet up again, I'll bring you a bottle of lavender water, and this is all the news I have to give you, don't forget that His Majesty will leave for Montemor at three o'clock in the morning, so if you want to travel with the King, don't oversleep.

But João Elvas did oversleep and when he awoke it was already after five and raining

cats and dogs. The daylight was such that he realised that, if the King had set out on time, he should already be well on his way. João Elvas wrapped his cloak tightly around him, tucked up his legs as if he were still in his mother's womb, and snoozed in the warmth of the hay, which gave off a pleasant odour generated by the heat of his body. There are refined men and women, and sometimes not all that refined, who cannot bear such odours and who take great pains to cover any traces of their natural smell, and the day will come when artificial roses will be sprayed with the artificial scent of roses, and these refined souls will exclaim, How lovely they smell. João Elvas was at a loss as to why such thoughts came into his head, and he feared that he might be dreaming or suffering from hallucinations. He finally opened his eyes and emerged from his slumber. The rain was falling heavily, vertical and sonorous, pity Their Royal Majesties being forced to travel in such foul weather, their children will never be able to thank them enough for the sacrifices they are making on their behalf. Dom João V was on his way to Montemor, and God alone knows with what courage, as he coped with so many obstacles, with floods, swamps, and rivers that overflowed their banks, it grieves one to think of the fear that gripped those nobles, chamberlains, confessors, chaplains, and aristocrats, I bet the trumpeters put their instruments away in their sacks, and that no drumsticks were needed to hear the ruffling of the drums, as the rain beat down on them. And what about the Queen, whatever became of Her Majesty, she has already made her departure from Aldegalega, accompanied by the Infanta Dona Maria Bárbara and the Infante Dom Pedro, who bears the same name as the child who died, a delicate woman and a delicate child, exposed to the horrors of this inclement weather, yet people continue to insist that heaven is on the side of the rich and mighty, yet it is clear for all to see that when there is a heavy downpour of rain, it falls on everyone alike.

João Elvas spent the entire day in the warmth of the taverns, where he seasoned the scraps of food generously provided by His Majesty's pantry with a bowl of wine. Most of the beggars had decided to remain in the town until the rain stopped before joining the tail of the procession. But the rain did not stop. It was already growing dark when the first coaches of Dona Maria Ana's entourage arrived at Vendas Novas, looking more like an army in retreat than a royal procession. The horses were so tired that they could scarcely pull the coaches and carriages, some even collapsed and died on the spot, still strapped in the harnesses. The grooms and stable hands waved their torches frantically and created the most deafening uproar, and there was such a commotion that it proved impossible to direct all the members of the Queen's party to their respective lodgings, so that many were obliged to return to Pegões, where they somehow managed to secure accommodation in the most wretched conditions. It was a disastrous night. Next day the damage was assessed and it became clear that scores of beasts had perished, without counting those that had been abandoned on the road with severe injuries and broken limbs. The ladies had the vapours or swooned, the gentlemen shrugged off their exhaustion as they swirled their cloaks and preened themselves at social gatherings, while the rain continued to inundate everything, as if God, because of some deep resentment concealed from mankind, had perversely decided to unleash another great

deluge, which this time would be conclusive.

The Queen would have preferred to travel on to Évora that same morning, but she was dissuaded from making such a risky journey, besides, many of the coaches had been delayed along the route, which would seriously undermine the prestige of her retinue, and they warned her, Your Majesty should know that the roads are impassable, when the King travelled through he faced terrible problems, so things are now likely to be much worse after all this perpetual rain, day and night, night and day, but orders have already been dispatched to the acting magistrate of Montemor to enlist men to repair the roads, drain the swamps, and level out the ravines, Your Majesty would be wise to rest on this eleventh day in Vendas Novas, in the magnificent palace the King has commissioned, it has every conceivable amenity, amuse yourself in the company of the Princess, and take advantage of these few days together to impart some final words of maternal advice, Remember, my child, that all men are brutes, not only on the first night but on all the other nights, too, although the first night is always the worst, they promise to be extremely gentle, that it will not hurt in the slightest, and then, good gracious, I don't know what gets into them, but without any warning they start to snarl and howl like wild beasts, if you will pardon the expression, and we poor women have no choice save to put up with their vicious assault, either until they have had their way with us, or, as sometimes happens, till they go limp and when this occurs, we must never laugh, for nothing could offend them more, better to pretend that we do not mind, for if he does not succeed on the first night, he will certainly make it on the second or third night, and no one can save us from this torture, and now I'm going to send for Signor Scarlatti so that he may take our minds off these painful facts of life, music is wonderfully consoling, my child, prayer, too, indeed, I find that everything is music, even though prayer is not quite everything.

While these words of advice were being given and the keyboard of the harpsichord was being fingered, João Elvas was busily engaged in repairing the roads, these are adversities from which one cannot always escape, a man runs from one shelter to another to escape the rain, and suddenly he hears a voice crying, Halt, it is one of the magistrate's henchmen, the tone of that voice was unmistakable, and the challenge so sudden that João Elvas did not even have time to pretend that he was a frail old man on his last legs, the henchman hesitated when he saw more white hairs than he had expected, but what proved decisive in the end was the agility with which the old man fled, anyone capable of running as fast as that was obviously quite capable of wielding a pick and shovel. When João Elvas, along with the others who had been rounded up, arrived at the wilderness where the road disappeared amid bogs and swamps, they found that there were large numbers of men already there, carrying earth and stones from the low hills nearby, which had been less affected by the rain, it was a chore that meant transporting earth and stones from over there and dumping them here, and sometimes canals had to be dug to drain away the water, each man resembled a spectre cast in clay, a puppet or a scarecrow, and it was not long before João Elvas took on much the same

appearance, he would have fared better had he chosen to stay in Lisbon, for no matter how hard a man may try, he cannot recapture his youth. The men toiled relentlessly throughout the day, and the rain eased up, which was a great blessing, because the holes they were filling in now had a better chance of gaining some consistency, unless another storm were to break out and ruin everything. Dona Maria Ana slept soundly under her luxurious feather quilt, which she takes with her everywhere, lulled into peaceful slumber by the sound of falling rain, but because the same causes do not always produce the same effects, much depends on the individuals, the circumstances and the cares they take to bed, it came about that Her Royal Highness Dona Maria Bárbara continued to hear the echoes of those heavy raindrops well into the night, or perhaps they were the distressing words spoken by her mother. Among the men who had marched along that road, some slept well and others badly, much depended on how tired they were, as for shelter and food, they could not complain, for His Majesty did not stint on lodgings and hot food if the workers earned his approval.

Before dawn the Queen's party finally left Vendas Novas, now with all the carriages that had been delayed, although some were lost forever and others needed extensive repairs, the entourage presented a sorry sight, the draperies and hangings saturated, the gilding and paintwork discoloured, and unless a little sunshine should filter through, these are likely to be the most dismal nuptials ever witnessed. The rain has stopped at long last, but the biting cold scorches the skin, and covers one's hands with chilblains despite the use of muffs and cloaks, we are referring to the ladies, of course, who look so cold and feverish that they arouse pity. The procession is headed by a gang of road repairers who travel in ox-drawn carts, and where they come across a hole or a ditch that has been flooded or has caved in, they jump down and set to work, meanwhile, the convoy is delayed in this desolate landscape. Yokes of oxen have been brought from Vendas Novas and other towns in the vicinity, scores of them, to help rescue the chaises, berlins, wagons, and other carriages, which keep getting trapped in the mud, this operation took considerable time as they unharnessed the horses and mules, then harnessed the oxen, then heaved, only to reverse the process by unharnessing the oxen and harnessing the horses and mules once more, amid much shouting and lashing of whips, and when the Queen's coach sank right up to the hubs of the wheels, and it took six yokes of oxen to drag it out of the mud, one of the men there, who had left his home under orders from the district magistrate, observed, as if speaking to himself, One would think we were here to heave that enormous stone destined for Maфра. This being the moment when the oxen were being put to work and the men were allowed to relax, João Elvas asked, What stone was that, my friend, and the other replied, A stone as large as a house that was brought from Pêro Pinheiro for the construction of the convent at Maфра, I only saw it when it arrived, but I also lent a hand, for it was at a time when I used to frequent the place, And was it big, it was the mother of all stones, in the words of a friend of mine who helped transport it from the quarry and then went back to his province, I myself left shortly after that, for I had had enough. The oxen, submerged to their bellies, pulled without any apparent effort, as if they were trying to coax the mud to release them. The wheels of

the coach finally settled on firm ground and the enormous vehicle was pulled from the swamp to the sound of applause, while the Queen smiled graciously, the Princesses nodded, and the young Infante Dom Pedro concealed his annoyance at being denied the pleasure of splashing about in the mud.

It was like this all the way to Montemor, a journey of less than five leagues took almost eight hours of continuous effort and strain by men and beasts as they plied their respective skills. The Princess Dona Maria Bárbara tried to sleep, anxious to overcome her persistent insomnia, but the jostling of the coach, the shouting of those burly road repairers, and the stamping of the horses as they went back and forth obeying orders made her poor little head feel quite dizzy and caused her unspeakable torment, so much effort, dear God, so much disturbance to marry off a young woman, but, then, she is a princess. The Queen goes on muttering her prayers, not so much to ward off any unlikely perils as to while away the hours, for the Queen has lived long enough in this world to have come to terms with life, now and then she dozes off, only to wake up again and continue her prayers as if they had never been interrupted. About the Infante Dom Pedro, for the time being, there is nothing more to be said.

The conversation, however, between João Elvas and the man who had mentioned the stone was resumed as the journey got under way, the old man told him, A fellow I befriended many years ago hailed from Mafra, I never found out what happened to him, he lived in Lisbon, and one day he suddenly disappeared, these things happen, perhaps he went back to his native parts, If he went back to Mafra, it's possible that I might have met him, what was his name, His name was Baltasar Sete-Sóis, and he lost his left hand in the war, Sete-Sóis, Baltasar Sete-Sóis that's the one person I got to know, for we worked together, Well, I never, what a small world this is when all is said and done, we two meet each other by chance only to discover that we have a mutual friend, Sete-Sóis was a fine fellow, Do you think he may be dead, I cannot say, but I doubt it, with a wife such as his, a certain Blimunda, whose eyes were a colour that defied description, when a man has a wife like that, he clings to life and does not let go even if he does only possess his right hand, I never met his wife, sometimes Sete-Sóis would come out with the most incredible statements, one day he even claimed to have been within reach of the sun, It must have been the effect of the wine, We had all been drinking when he said it, yet none of us was drunk, as far as I can remember, what he was trying to say in his own odd way was that he had flown, Flown, Sete-Sóis, I've never heard of such a thing.

Their conversation was interrupted when they reached the bank of the river Canha, which was swollen and turbulent, on the other side, the population of Montemor had assembled outside the gates to await the Queen's arrival, and with the combined efforts of everyone and the assistance of some barrels, which made it possible to float the carriages across the river, within the hour they were sitting down to supper in the town, the nobility seated at specially reserved tables in accordance with their rank, and their aides and servants wherever they could find a place, some eating in silence while others conversed, such as João Elvas who said, in the tone of someone holding two

conversations simultaneously, one with his interlocutor, the other with himself, It now comes back to me that when Sete-Sóis lived in Lisbon he was on friendly terms with the Flying Man, and it was I myself who pointed him out to Sete-Sóis one day when we were together in the Palace Square, I can remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday, who was this Flying Man, The Flying Man was a priest, a certain Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço, who ended his days in Spain, where he died four years ago, the case caused quite a stir, and it was investigated by the Holy Office of the Inquisition, it's possible that even Sete-Sóis was involved in this strange affair, But did the Flying Man actually fly, Some said that he did, while others said that he did not, there's no way now of ever knowing the truth, What is certain is that Sete-Sóis claimed that he had been within reach of the sun, for I myself heard him say so, There must be some mystery here, Of course there is, and with this reply, which begged the question, the man who had reminisced about the stone at Mafra fell silent and they finished their meal.

The clouds lifted, hovered high overhead, and it looked as if the rain might be over. The men who had come from the towns and villages between Vendas Novas and Montemor proceeded no farther. They were paid for their labours, and because of the Queen's kind intervention the day's wages were doubled, there is always some recompense for carrying the burden of the rich and mighty. João Elvas continued his journey, perhaps now with greater ease since he had become friendly with outriders and coachmen who might offer him a lift on one of the wagons, where he could ride with his legs dangling clear of the mud and dung. The man who spoke about the stone stood at the edge of the road, watching with his blue eyes the old man who settled down between two large trunks. They will never see each other again, at least that is what one assumes, for God Himself does not know what the future holds, and as the wagon set off, João Elvas said, If you should ever meet Sete-Sóis again, tell him that you were speaking to João Elvas, for he is sure to remember me, and remember to give him my regards, I shall pass on your message, but I doubt whether I shall ever see him again, By the way, what's your name, I'm called Julião Mau-Tempo, Farewell, then, Julião Mau-Tempo, Farewell, João Elvas.

From Montemor to Évora there would be no lack of work. The rain started up again, and more puddles began to form, axles cracked, and the spokes of the wheels split like kindling wood. The evening drew in quickly, the air grew cold, and the Princess Dona Maria Bárbara, who had fallen asleep at long last, assisted by a consoling languor induced by sweetmeats to settle her stomach and by a stretch of five hundred paces along the road free of any potholes, woke up with a great shudder, as if an icy finger had stroked her forehead, and turning her somnolent gaze to the fields enshrouded in twilight, she saw shadowy human forms lining up along the roadside and tied to one another by ropes, some fifteen men in all.

The Princess took a closer look. She was neither dreaming nor delirious, the sad spectacle of fettered slaves troubled her on the eve of her nuptials, which should have been an occasion for universal gaiety and rejoicing, as if the awful weather, the rain and

clouds were not enough to lower one's spirits, it would have been so much better to have been married in the spring. Dona Maria Bárbara ordered the equerry who was riding beside the carriage to investigate who these men might be, to find out what crimes they had committed, and if they were heading for Limoeiro or for Africa. The officer went in person, probably because he worshipped the Infanta, ugly and pockmarked as she was, and now she was being taken to Spain, far from his pure and despairing love, that a commoner should love a princess is sheer madness, he went and returned, Your Highness, these men are on their way to Mafra to help build the Royal Convent, they are skilled labourers from the region of Évora, But why are they tied with ropes, Because they are being taken there against their will, and if the ropes were untied they would almost certainly escape, Ah. The Princess reclined against her cushions, looking thoughtful, while the officer repeated and engraved in his heart those sweet words they had exchanged, even as an old man, long since retired from military service, he would remember every word of their delightful conversation, and what would she be like after all those years.

The Princess is no longer thinking about the men she saw on the road. It has just occurred to her that she has never been to Mafra, how strange that a convent should be built because Maria Bárbara was born, that a pledge should be honoured because Maria Bárbara was born, yet Maria Bárbara has never seen, known, or touched with her plump little finger either the first or the second stone of its foundations, she has never served broth with her own hands to the workers, never soothed with balm the pain Sete-Sóis feels in his stump when he detaches the hook from his arm, she has never wiped away the tears of the woman whose husband was crushed to death, and now Maria Bárbara is leaving for Spain, for her the convent is like some vision in a dream, an impalpable haze, something beyond the powers of imagination but for this encounter that assists her memory. Ah, the grievous sins of Maria Bárbara, the evil she has already committed simply by being born, the proof is at hand, one need only look at those fifteen men who walk bound to one another, while carriages go past carrying friars, berlin coaches with nobles, wagons with the royal wardrobes, chaises carrying the ladies with their caskets of jewellery and all their other finery, embroidered slippers, flasks of cologne, golden rosary beads, scarves embellished with gold and silver, bracelets, opulent muffs, lace trimmings, and ermine stoles, women are so delightfully sinful, and beautiful to behold even when they are as pockmarked and ugly as this infanta we are accompanying, that seductive melancholy and thoughtful expression are all the wickedness she needs as she confides, Dearest Mother and Queen, here I am on my way to Spain, whence I shall never return, I know that a convent is being built in Mafra because of a vow that partly concerned me, yet no one has ever taken me to see it, there is so much about this affair that leaves me perplexed, My daughter and future Queen, do not waste precious time that should be devoted to prayer on such idle thoughts, the royal will of your father and our sovereign lord decreed that the convent be built, the same royal will has decreed that you go to Spain without seeing the convent, that the King's will should prevail is all that matters, and everything else is futile, So the fact that I am an Infanta means nothing, nor do those men led like captives, nor this coach in which we travel, nor that officer who walks in the

rain while gazing into my eyes, That is correct, my child, and the longer you live the more you will realise that the world is like a great shadow pervading our hearts, that is why the world seems so empty and eventually becomes unbearable, Oh, Mother, what does it mean to be born, To be born is to die, Maria Bárbara.

The best thing about these long journeys is the philosophical discussions. The Infante Dom Pedro is tired and falls asleep, leaning his head against his mother's shoulder, it makes a pretty picture of domestic intimacy, and shows how the Infante is no different from any other child, as he sleeps, his little chin sags in confident abandon and a thread of saliva trickles down the ruffles of his wide embroidered collar. The Princess brushes away a tear. Torches light up the entire length of the procession like a rosary of stars that might have slipped from the Virgin's hand and which, by chance or by some special grace, have landed on Portuguese soil. We shall make our entry into Évora after dark.

The King awaits our arrival with the Infantes Dom Francisco and Dom António, the people of Évora cheer wildly as the light from the torches becomes radiant, the soldiers fire the customary salvos, and when the Queen and the Princess transfer to the King's coach, the enthusiasm of the crowds knows no bounds, one has never seen such rejoicing and happiness. João Elvas has already jumped down from the wagon on which he arrived, he has a cramp in both legs, and he decides that in future he will put them to the use for which they were intended instead of letting them dangle idly while he sits back, there is nothing healthier for a man than to walk on his own two legs. That night, the nobleman did not appear and if he had, what would he have described on this occasion, royal banquets and ceremonies, perhaps, or visits to convents, the conferment of titles, the distribution of alms and the kissing of hands. The only thing here of any interest to João Elvas would have been a few alms, but no doubt these, too, will eventually come his way. The following day, João Elvas could not decide whether he should accompany the King or the Queen, but in the end he chose to travel with Dom João V, he made the right decision, because poor Dona Maria Ana, who set out one day later, got caught in such a snowstorm that for a moment she thought she was back in her native Austria instead of heading for Vila Viçosa, a place noted for its hot climate in another season, like all those other places we have passed through. Finally, on the morning of the sixteenth, eight days after the King set out from Lisbon, the entire procession left for Elvas, monarch, soldier, beggarman, thief, mocked the street urchins who had never seen such pomp and splendour, just imagine, there were one hundred and seventy carriages just for the royal household, to which one must add those of countless nobles and dignitaries, as well as those of the guilds of Évora, and of private individuals who did not wish to lose this opportunity of enhancing their family history, their descendants would be able to boast that their great-great-grandfather had accompanied the Royal Family to Elvas where an exchange of princesses took place, Something you must never forget, is that clear.

Wherever they passed, the local inhabitants flocked to the roadside and fell to their knees, beseeching their sovereign's blessing, as if the poor wretches had guessed that

Dom João V was travelling with a chest of copper coins at his feet which he tossed in handfuls into the crowds on either side with the broad gestures of someone scattering seed, this provoked an uproar and cries of gratitude, the crowds spilled onto the road, where they fought over the money, and it was amazing to watch young and old alike rolling in the mud where some of the coins became embedded, to see blind men groping in the puddles to retrieve a coin that had fallen into the water, while the royal party drove past looking solemn, grave, and imperious without so much as a smile, for God Himself never smiles, and He must have His reasons, who knows, perhaps He has ended up feeling ashamed of this world He has created. João Elvas is also there, when he extended his hat to the King, which he felt to be his obligation as one of His Majesty's loyal subjects, he collected a few coins, what a lucky fellow this old man is, he does not even need to get to his knees, happiness comes knocking at his door, and money falls into his hand.

It was after five that evening when the procession reached the city. The artillery gave a salvo, and things appeared to have been so well timed that a gun salute came resounding back from the other side of the frontier as the Kings of Spain made their entry into Badajoz, anyone arriving here unexpectedly would have thought that a great battle was about to take place, but contrary to custom, monarch and beggarman joined in the hostilities alongside the more familiar soldier and captain. These, however, are salvos of peace, fireworks in the style of those illuminations and pyrotechnics one associates with feast days, the King and Queen have now alighted from their coach, the King wishes to proceed on foot from the city gates to the cathedral, but the bitter cold rasps both hands and face so much that Dom João V resigns himself to losing this first skirmish and climbs back into his coach, that night he may well say a few sharp words to the Queen, for it was she who refused to go any farther, complaining of the chilly air, when it would have given the King pleasure and satisfaction to stroll through the streets of Elvas on foot behind the cathedral chapter who awaited him with raised cross and the Holy Wood, which was kissed but not accompanied, João V did not walk that via crucis.

God has given every proof that He loves His creatures dearly. After testing their patience and constancy for many days and many kilometres by exposing them to unbearable cold and torrential rain, as we have narrated in detail, He decided to reward their faith and resignation. And since with God all things are possible, He only had to raise the atmospheric pressure and, little by little, the clouds lifted and the sun appeared, and all this took place while the ambassadors were drawing up the terms of the treaty between the two realms, a thorny business that took three days of discussion before an agreement was finally reached, and every move, gesture, and word had been carefully calculated, stage by stage, so that neither crown should be tarnished or diminished when compared with its partner. When the King set out from Elvas on the nineteenth and made his way to the River Caia, which lay immediately ahead, accompanied by the Queen and the Crown Princes and all the Infantes, the weather was perfect, with blue skies and the most agreeable sunshine. As you can imagine, everybody was there to see the pomp and

splendour of this never-ending procession, the glossy curls of the braided manes of the horses pulling the coaches, the scintillating gold and silver, the alternating sounds of trumpets and kettledrums, the velvet trappings, halberdiers, cavalry troops, the religious insignia and sparkling gems, we have already admired all these sights under the rain, now we shall be able to affirm that there is nothing like sunshine to gladden the hearts of men and enhance festivities.

The people of Elvas and from all the districts for leagues around gathered by the roadside, having raced across fields to find a vantage point overlooking the river, crowds swarm the banks on either side, the Portuguese over here, the Spaniards over there, as one listens to their cheers and vivas, it is difficult to believe that we have been killing one another for centuries, so perhaps the solution would be to wed the people across the frontier to those who live here, so that any wars in future will be purely domestic since the latter are unavoidable. João Elvas has been here for three days and has found himself a good position, a view from the gallery, as it were, if such a thing existed here. Moved by some curious whim, he decided to avoid entering his native city, notwithstanding his deep longing to return. He will go when all the others have departed and he is able to wander undisturbed through the silent streets, with no rejoicing other than his own, unless it should turn to painful bitterness once he tries to retrace the paths of his youth. Thanks to this decision he was able to lend a hand with the movement of baggage and enter the house where the royal parties would meet which was built on a stone bridge that crosses the river. The house has three rooms, one on either side for the sovereigns of each nation, a third in the middle where the exchange will be made, I hereby deliver Bárbara, now hand over Mariana. No one has any idea of the problems that had to be dealt with at the last minute, it fell to João Elvas to carry the heaviest load, but just at this moment there emerged the kind nobleman whose presence had been so providential during the journey, he told João Elvas, If you could see how that house has been transformed beyond recognition, the room allotted to the Portuguese is decked out in tapestries and draperies in crimson damask with valances of gold brocade, and the same is true of our half of the room in the middle, while the other side, allotted to Castile, is adorned with strands of green-and-white brocade suspended from an ornamental branch made of solid gold, and standing in the centre of the room where the Princesses are being presented is an enormous table with seven chairs on our side of the room and seven on the Spanish side, our chairs are upholstered in gold tissue and theirs in silver, this is all I can tell you, for I saw nothing more, and now I am off, but don't be envious, for even I may not enter there, so imagine if you can, if we should meet again one day, I will tell you what it was like, if anyone tells me first, for if we wish to find out, we must confide in one another.

It was extremely moving to watch the mothers and daughters weep, the fathers put on a severe expression to disguise their true feelings, while the betrothed couples looked out of the corner of one eye to see whether they approved or disapproved of their partners but kept their thoughts to themselves. Gathered along the river-banks, the

crowds saw nothing of the proceedings, but they relied on their own experiences and memories of their own wedding days to visualise the scene, in their mind's eye, they could see the respective parents embrace one another, the sly exchanges between the bridegrooms, and the affected blushes of the brides, now, now then, whether a man be king or commoner, there is nothing more enjoyable than a good fuck, ours is truly a nation of vulgarians.

The ceremony lasted a considerable time. The crowds gradually fell silent, as if by some miracle, the banners and standards scarcely moved in the breeze and all the soldiers turned their gaze towards the house on the bridge. The gentle strains of the sweetest music filled the air, a tinkling of tiny glass and silver bells, an arpeggio, which occasionally sounded hoarse, as if emotion was constricting the throat of harmony, What is that, a woman standing beside João Elvas inquired, and the old man replied, I'm not sure, but it could be someone playing for the pleasure of Their Sovereign Majesties and families, if my nobleman were here I should ask him, because he knows everything, after all, he is one of them. The music ends, everyone goes back where they belong, the River Caia flows quietly past, no shred of bunting remains, nor the tiniest echo of ruffling drums, and João Elvas will never know that he heard Domenico Scarlatti playing his harpsichord.

HEADING THE PROCESSION because of their enormous size, which makes it seem natural that they should have pride of place, are the statues of St Vincent and St Sebastian, both martyrs, although of the former's martyrdom there is no sign other than the symbolic palm, the rest being simply the emblems of his diaconate and the heraldic raven, whereas the other saint is characteristically represented in the nude, lashed to a tree, and with the perforations of those ghastly wounds from which the arrows have been prudently removed in case they should get broken during the journey. Immediately behind come the ladies, three virtuous beauties, and most beautiful of all St Isabel, the Queen of Hungary, then St Clare, and finally St Teresa, who was an extremely passionate woman consumed by spiritual ardour, at least that is what one assumes from her actions and words, and we could assume much more if we understood the souls of the saints. The saint right next to St Clare is St Francis, and this preference comes as no surprise, for they have known each other from their days in Assisi and now they have met up with each other again on the road to Pintéus, their friendship, or whatever it was that brought them together, would count for little if they were not to resume their dialogue at the point where they left off, as we were saying. If this is the most fitting place for St Francis, since of all the saints who are represented in this parade he has the most feminine of virtues, with that soft heart and cheerful disposition, equally well placed are St Dominic and St Ignatius, both Iberian and austere, subsequently demonic, if that does not offend the Demon, if it would not be just, in the end, to say that only a saint could have invented the Inquisition and another saint the spiritual formation of souls. It is evident to anyone familiar with these subtleties, that St Francis is under suspicion.

When it comes to sanctity, however, there is something for everyone. For those who prefer a saint who devotes his time to working the land and cultivating the written word, there is St Benedict. For those who prefer their saint to lead a life of austerity, wisdom, and mortification, bring forth St Bruno. For those who admire a saint of crusading zeal capable of reviving the missionary spirit, there is none to surpass St Bernard. The three saints are placed together, perhaps because they bear a striking resemblance to one another, perhaps because their combined virtues would make an honest man, or perhaps because the names of all three saints begin with the same letter of the alphabet, it is not uncommon for people to come together because of such coincidences, this could also explain why some people known to us, like Blimunda and Baltasar, should come together, and speaking of Baltasar, he is in charge of the yoke of oxen that is carrying the statue of St John of God, the only Portuguese saint among the confraternity that disembarked from Italy at Santo António do Tojal, and is heading for Mafra, like almost everyone else we have mentioned so far in this story.

Behind St John of God, whose house in Montemor was visited more than eighteen months ago by Dom João V when he accompanied the Princess to the frontier, although we omitted to say so earlier, which shows our lack of respect for national shrines, and may the saint forgive this omission, behind St John of God, as we were saying, come half a dozen more saints of lesser glory whose many laudable attributes and virtues we do not

wish to disdain, but daily experience teaches us that unless assisted by fame in this world, one cannot achieve glory in heaven, a flagrant disparity to which all of these saints are subjected and who, because of their inferior status, have to be content with names like John of Matha, Francis of Paola, Cajetan, Felix of Valois, Peter Nolasco, Philip Neri, names that sound like those of ordinary men, but they cannot complain, for each saint has his own cart and is carefully transported horizontally, like the others with five stars on a soft bed of flock, wool, and sackfuls of husks, this prevents the folds in their robes from becoming creased or their ears from getting bent, for these marble statues are fragile, despite their solid appearance, and it takes only two knocks for Venus to lose her arms. We begin to lose our memory as we confuse Bruno, Benedict, and Bernard with Baltasar and Blimunda, and we forget Bartolomeu de Gusmão or Lourenço, whichever form you prefer, but who is never to be readily dismissed. For, as the saying truly goes, Woe to the man who dies, twice woe, unless there be some true or false sanctity to save him.

We have already passed Pintéus, and we are on our way to Fanhões with eighteen statues loaded on eighteen carts and the appropriate number of oxen, and a vast number of men handling the ropes, as already mentioned, but this expedition cannot be compared to the one that transported the Benediction stone, the stone for the balcony from where the Patriarch will give his blessing, these things can happen only once in a lifetime, and if human ingenuity did not invent means of rendering difficult things easy, it would have been preferable to leave the world in its primitive state. The people line the route to greet the procession as it passes, they are all surprised to see the saints lying down, and with good reason, for surely it would have been much nicer and more edifying to see the holy statues standing upright on the carts, as if they were on litters, then even the smallest of the statues, which are under three metres high, our own height, in fact, would have been seen from a distance, and you can imagine the impact of the two statues in front, St Vincent and St Sebastian, which are almost five metres high, two mighty giants, two Christian Hercules and champions of the faith, looking down from their great height over the terraces and crests of the olive groves at the vast world, for them this would truly be a religion comparable with those of ancient Rome and Greece. The procession came to a halt in Fanhões because the local inhabitants insisted upon knowing, name by name, who the various saints were, for it was not every day that they received, even if only in transit, visitors of such corporeal and spiritual stature, the daily transport of building materials is one thing, but quite another was the sight witnessed several weeks ago, when an interminable convoy of bells went past, over a hundred of which will ring out from the bell towers of Mafra, the imperishable memory of these events, and yet another is this sacred pantheon. The local parish priest was summoned to identify the saints, but his answers were not entirely satisfactory, because not all of the statues had the saint's name clearly inscribed on the pedestal, and in many instances the name was all the parish priest could provide, it is one thing to recognise immediately that this is St Sebastian and quite another to recite from memory, Beloved brethren, the saint you see here is St Felix of Valois, who was a disciple of St Bernard, who is up there in front, and who established, together with St John of Matha who is at the back there, the

Order of Trinitarians, which was founded to rescue slaves from the clutches of the infidels, just think of the edifying tales that help strengthen our holy faith, Ha ha ha, laugh the inhabitants of Fanhûes, And when will orders be given to rescue slaves from the clutches of the faithful, Reverend Prior.

Anxious to extricate himself, the priest went to the governor in charge of the expedition and asked to be allowed to consult the documents of exportation that had come from Italy, a cunning move that helped him recover his shaken confidence, and soon the inhabitants of Fanhûes were watching their ignorant pastor mounted on the churchyard wall and heard him read aloud the blessed names of the saints in the order they went past on the carts, right down to the very last saint, who chanced to be St Cajetan, on a cart drawn by José Pequeno, who smiled as much at the applause as at those who were applauding. But, then, José Pequeno is a mischievous fellow who has been justly punished, by God or the devil, with that hump he carries on his back, but it must have been God who punished him, because there is no proof that the devil has any such powers over the human body in this life. The spectacle is over and the procession of saints is now on its way to Cabeço de Monte Achique, Have a good journey.

Less good is the journey made by the novices from the Convent of St Joseph of Ribamar, over there toward Algés and Carnaxide, who are even now trudging along the road to Mafra on account of the pride or transposed mortification of their Provincial Superior. It happened that, as the day approached for the consecration of the convent, trunks were carefully packed and dispatched from Lisbon with the vestments and linen required for the religious ceremonies, along with all the essential supplies for the community of friars assigned to the aforesaid convent. These orders were given by the Provincial, who at the appropriate hour gave fresh orders, namely, that the novices should proceed to their new quarters, and when the King was informed, this compassionate sovereign was so deeply concerned that he invited them to use his own merchant vessels as far as the port of Santo António do Tojal, thus lessening the burden and fatigue of their journey. The waves, however, were so high and turbulent because of the fierce wind that it would have been suicidal madness to attempt any such sea voyage, so the King suggested that the novices might travel in his carriages, whereupon the Provincial Superior, aflame with holy scruple, protested, Surely Your Majesty is not providing comforts for those who should be wearing hairshirts, encouraging leisure for those who should be constantly on their guard, feathering cushions for those preparing for a bed of thorns, I would prefer to give up being provincial superior, Your Majesty, rather than condone such laxity, let them travel on foot so they can give a good example to the people, for they are no better than Our Lord Jesus Christ, who rode on a donkey only once.

Persuaded by these sound arguments, Dom João V withdrew his offer of carriages, just as he had withdrawn his offer of merchant vessels, and the novices, carrying nothing except their breviaries, set out from the Convent of St Joseph of Ribamar in the morning, thirty apprehensive and dispirited adolescents with their novice master, Friar Joseph of St

Teresa. Poor boys, poor little fledglings, as if it were not enough that novice masters should, by some infallible rule, be the most awful tyrants, with a mania for daily floggings of six, seven, eight strokes of the lash until the wretched creatures had their backs covered in raw flesh, as if all this and worse were not enough, the novices also had to carry on their festering and lacerated backs the heaviest loads imaginable, so that their wounds refused to heal, and now they were being ordered to walk barefoot for six leagues across hill and dale, over stone and mud, along roads so bad that the path trodden by the ass that carried the Virgin when she made her flight into Egypt was a pleasant meadow by comparison, as for St Joseph, we have deliberately avoided saying anything about him, for he is a model of patience.

Haifa league on, because of some injury to a big toe, some treacherous stone, or the continuous rubbing of their soles on the rough ground, the more delicate novices had bleeding feet, leaving a trail of pious crimson flowers, it would make a lovely religious picture were it not so cold, were the little snouts of the novices not quite so frostbitten, and their eyes not smarting so badly, it costs dearly to gain heaven. They recited their breviaries, a palliative recommended for all spiritual torments, but these are physical torments and a pair of sandals would be a welcome substitute for any form of prayer, however efficacious, Dear God, if You really insist upon this penance, lead me not into temptation, but first of all remove this stone from my path, since You are the Father of stones and friars, and not their Father and my Stepfather. There is nothing worse than the life of a novice, save perhaps that of a shop assistant in years to come, we were about to say that the novice is the shop assistant of God, as a certain Friar John of Our Lady can testify, a former novice of this very same Franciscan Order, who will go as preacher to Mafra on the third day of the religious solemnities to mark the consecration of the convent but will not be given an opportunity to preach, for he is merely a substitute, as can also be attested by Friar John the Paunch, who was given this name because of his corpulence once he became a friar, although as a scrawny, underfed novice he had tramped throughout the Algarve collecting lambs for the convent, for three whole months, dressed in tatters, barefoot, and starving, just imagine what he suffered collecting those animals, which he had to herd from one village to another as he begged for one more newborn lamb to increase his flock, taking them out to pasture, and carrying out his various religious duties which had to be observed, suffering the pangs of hunger, nothing but bread and water, and with that tempting vision of lamb stew before his eyes. A life of sacrifice always comes to the same thing, whether it be that of a novice, a shop assistant, or a conscript.

There are many roads but sometimes they repeat themselves. Departing from St Joseph of Ribamar, the novices travelled in the direction of Queluz, then to Belas and Sabugo, stopped to rest for a while in Morelena, where they patched up the sores on their aching feet in the local infirmary, and then, suffering twice as much pain as they resumed their journey, they gradually got used to this new torment as they headed for Pêro Pinheiro, the worst stretch of all, because the road was strewn with marble chips. Farther

ahead, as they made their descent to Cheleiros, they saw a wooden cross at the roadside, a clear sign that someone had died there, probably the victim of a crime and whether this was the case or not, one should always say a paternoster for the repose of the dead person's soul, the friars and novices knelt down and prayed together, God bless them, for it is a supreme act of charity to pray for a person one does not even know, and as they knelt there, you could see the soles of their feet, which were in such a pitiful state, covered in blood and grime, clearly the most vulnerable part of the human body, and turned toward a heaven they would never tread. Having finished their paternoster, the novices descended into the valley and crossed the bridge, once more absorbed in reading their breviaries, they had no eyes for the woman at her front door, nor did they hear her mutter, Cursed be all friars.

Fate, that agent of good and evil, ordained that the statues should come face to face with the novices where the road from Cheleiros joins up with the one from Alcaínga Pequena, and this fortuitous omen was seen as an occasion for much rejoicing on the part of the congregation. The friars moved up to the front of the convoy of carts and acted as scouts and exorcists, intoning sonorous litanies as they went but raising no cross, for they had none, even though the liturgy required that it be held aloft. And so they entered Mafra to a triumphant welcome, tortured by the pain in their feet and transported by a faith that makes them look delirious, or could it be hunger, for since leaving St Joseph of Ribamar, they have had nothing to eat except stale bread softened in water from some well or other, but they are hoping for some respite at the hospice where they will spend the day, they can hardly take another step, like bonfires whose flames are reduced to ashes, their elation has given way to melancholy. They even missed seeing the statues being unloaded. The engineers and manual labourers arrived armed with windlasses, pulleys, hoists, cables, pads, wedges, and chocks, treacherous implements that easily slip and cause serious accidents, which explains why the woman from Cheleiros muttered, Cursed be all friars, and with much sweating and gnashing of teeth, the statues were eventually unloaded and set upright in the form of a circle, facing inwards, they look as if they are taking part in some reunion or game, between St Vincent and St Sebastian stand St Isabel, St Clare, and St Teresa, the latter look like midgets by comparison, but women should not be measured in spans, even when they are not saints.

Baltasar goes down into the valley and makes for home, it is true there is still work to be done before the convent is finished, but since he has had such a long and arduous journey, having come all the way from Santo António do Tojal, remember, in a single day, he is entitled to stop earlier, once the oxen have been unyoked and fed. There are moments when time appears to be slow in passing, like a swallow building its nest in the eaves, it enters and leaves, comes and goes, but always within sight, and both we and the swallow might think that we are bound to go on like this for all eternity, or at least half of it, which would be no bad thing. But suddenly the swallow is there, then gone, it is no longer there, yet I saw it a moment ago, so where can it have disappeared to, as when we look into the mirror and think, Dear God, how time has passed, how I have

aged, only yesterday I was the darling of the neighbourhood, and now both darling and neighbourhood are in decline. Baltasar possesses no mirrors, save for these eyes of ours, which watch him descend that mud track leading to the town, and it is they that tell him, Your beard is full of white hairs, Baltasar, your forehead is covered with wrinkles, Baltasar, your neck has become scraggy, Baltasar, your shoulders are beginning to droop, Baltasar, you are a shadow of your former self, Baltasar, but surely this is a question of our failing eyesight, because it is a woman, in fact, who is coming towards us, and where we saw an old man, she sees a young man, who is none other than the soldier whom she once asked, What is your name, perhaps it is not even him she sees but simply this dirty, white-haired, one-handed man, nicknamed Sete-Sóis, coming down the mud track, who, despite his haggard look, is a constant sun in this woman's life, not because he always shines, but because he is so forcefully alive, hidden by clouds and screened by eclipses, but alive, dear God, as arms are outstretched, Whose arms, you may ask, Why, his to her and hers to him, this ageing couple are the scandal of the town of Mafra as they hug each other in the public square, but perhaps because they have never had any children they still think of themselves as being younger than they are, poor deluded creatures, or perhaps they are the only two human beings who see themselves as they really are, which is the most difficult thing of all, and now watching them together, even we can perceive that they have suddenly become physically transformed.

During supper, Álvaro Diogo reveals that the statues must remain where they have been unloaded, for there is no time to set them in their respective niches, the consecration is due to take place on Sunday, and, however carefully they plan or hard they work, there is simply not enough time to put the finishing touches to the basilica, the sacristy has been completed, but the vaults still have to be plastered, and since they look bare it has been decided that they should be covered with hessian dipped in gesso to create the illusion that they have already been plastered and whitewashed, in this way the overall effect will be much more impressive, and even the absence of the dome will scarcely be noticed. Álvaro Diogo knows a great deal about these details, having been promoted from mason to stonecutter, then from stonecutter to carver, and he is held in esteem by his masters and foremen, for he is invariably punctual, hardworking, and reliable, and as capable with his hands as he is willing to please, in no sense can he be compared to the rabble of drovers who disobey orders on the slightest pretext, smell of dung and sweat, while he is covered in marble dust which whitens one's hands and beard and sticks to a man's clothing for the rest of his life. As in the case of Álvaro Diogo, and precisely for the rest of his brief life, because shortly he will fall from a wall that he need never have climbed, since it was not part of his job, to straighten a stone which he himself had dressed and therefore must surely have been cut properly. He will fall to his death from a height of almost thirty metres, and Inês Antónia, who at this moment is so proud of the favourable position her husband holds, will soon turn into a sorrowing widow who will live in fear lest her son meet a similar fate, the afflictions of the poor are never-ending. Álvaro Diogo also informs them that, prior to the consecration of the convent, the novices will be moved to two wings that have already been built over the kitchens, and

this piece of news led Baltasar to point out that, since the plaster was still damp and the weather so cold, there was every likelihood of illness among the friars, whereupon Álvaro Diogo replied that there were braziers already burning night and day in the cells that had been completed, but even so, water was running down the walls, And what about the statues of the saints, Baltasar, were they difficult to transport, Not really, the greatest problem was actually loading them, but, with know-how and brute force as well as the patience of the oxen, we finally made it. Their conversation waned as the fire turned to embers in the hearth, Álvaro Diogo and Inês Antónia retired to bed, and we shall say nothing of Gabriel, who was already dozing off as he chewed his last mouthful of food, then Baltasar asked, Would you like to go to see the statues, Blimunda, the sky ought to be clear, and the moon will be up soon, Let's go, she replied.

The night was clear and cold. While they were climbing the slope to the Alto da Vela the moon appeared, enormous and blood-red, outlining first the bell towers, then the irregular projections of the upper walls, and in the distance the crest of the mountain that had been the cause of so much labour and cost so much gunpowder. Baltasar told Blimunda, Tomorrow I'm off to Monte Junto to see how the machine is faring, six months have passed since I was last there, and who knows what I shall find, I'll go with you, It's scarcely worth it, I'm leaving early, and if there's not much to repair, I shall be back before nightfall, I'd better go now, for later there will be festivities to mark the consecration, and if the rain persists the roads will be much worse, Be careful, Don't worry, I shall not be attacked by thieves or savaged by wolves, I'm not speaking about thieves or wolves, About what, then, I'm speaking about the machine, Stop fussing, woman, I shall go and come straight back, you can't ask more than that, Promise me you'll be careful, Don't fret, woman, my time has not yet come, I cannot help fretting, husband, for our time comes sooner or later.

They had walked up to the large square in front of the church, a massive structure that appeared to burgeon from the earth and rise into mid-air as if quite separate from the other buildings. Of the future palace there was nothing but the ground floor, and on either side stood wooden constructions where the religious ceremonies were to be held. It seems incredible that thirteen years of constant toil should have produced so little, the church unfinished, the convent rising to the second floor on two wings of the projected building, but the rest barely to the height of the doorways, and only forty cells ready for occupation whereas three hundred are needed. So little appears to have been achieved, yet it is a great deal, perhaps even too much. An ant advances across the threshing floor and seizes a beard of corn. From there to the ant-hill is a distance of ten metres, less than twenty paces if covered by a man. However, it is not a man making this journey but an ant. Now, the unfortunate thing about this construction at Mafra is that the work is being done by men rather than by giants, and if with this and similar projects, both in the past and the future, the idea is to prove that men are capable of doing the work of giants, then one must accept that it will take them as long as it takes the ant to cross the threshing floor, everything must be seen in its proper perspective, whether it be ant-hills

or convents, a foundation stone or a beard of corn.

Baltasar and Blimunda enter the circle of the statues. The moon shines directly on the two large effigies of St Sebastian and St Vincent and the three saints set between them, then the forms and faces ranged on either side are cast in encroaching shadows until total darkness conceals the statues of St Dominic and St Ignatius, a grave injustice since St Francis of Assisi has already been cast into total darkness, when he deserves to be illumined at the feet of his St Clare, not that any hint of carnal union is intended here, and even if it were, what harm would be done, this does not prevent people from becoming saints, and it does help make saints more human. Blimunda inspects the statues at length and tries to establish the identity of each saint, some she recognises at a glance, others she identifies after much thought, while still others baffle her completely. She is aware that those letters and markings on the base of the statue of St Vincent clearly indicate the saint's name for anyone who is capable of reading them. With her finger she traces out the curves and the straight lines like a blind man who is still trying to cope with Braille, Blimunda cannot ask the statue, Who are you, the blind man cannot ask the page in front of him, What are you saying, only Baltasar was able to answer, I am called Baltasar Mateus, alias Sete-Sóis, on the fateful day when Blimunda had asked him, What is your name. Everything in this world can volunteer some reply, what takes up time is posing the questions. A solitary cloud wafted in from the sea, alone in that vast expanse of clear sky, and for one long minute it covered the moon. The statues were transformed into amorphous spectres, without form or feature, like blocks of marble before they take shape under the sculptor's chisel. They are no longer saints but simply primitive relics without voice or design, as diffuse in their solidity as that of the man and woman in their midst who dissolve in the shadows, for the latter are not made of marble but merely living matter, and, as we know, nothing merges more readily with its shadow on the ground than human flesh. Beneath the enormous cloud that was slowly drifting past one could distinguish more clearly the glow of the bonfires that accompanied the vigil of the soldiers. In the distance, the Ilha da Madeira was a blurred mass, a huge dragon in repose, snorting through forty thousand nostrils, so many men sleeping there as well as the paupers from the hospices where there is not a bed to spare unless the nurses shift some of the corpses, the one whose internal ulcers burst, the one who bled from the mouth, and this one who was left paralysed after an apoplectic stroke and died when it recurred. The cloud retreated inland, which is another way of saying away from the sea, towards the interior of the country, although we can never be sure what a cloud is doing once we take our eyes away or it hides behind that mountain, it might have gone underground or settled on the surface of the earth in order to fertilise who knows what strange existences and rare powers, Baltasar said, Let's go home, Blimunda.

They left the circle of statues, which were once more bathed in light, and just as they were about to descend into the valley, Blimunda looked back. The statues glistened like crystallised salt. By listening attentively one could hear the sound of conversation from that direction, some council perhaps, or debate or tribunal, probably their first since they

had been shipped from Italy, travelling in damp, rat-infested holds or brutally tied down on the decks, and probably the last conversation they would ever enjoy like this under the moonlight, for soon the statues will be placed inside their niches, where some of them will no longer be able to face one another but will only be able to look sideways, while others will go on looking up at the sky, as if they were being punished. Blimunda said, The saints must be unhappy, as they were made, so they remain, and if this is sanctity, what must damnation be like, They're only statues, I'd like them to come down from those plinths and be human like us, for you can't hold a conversation with a statue, Perhaps they speak to one another when they're alone, That's something we don't know, but if they speak only to each other, and without witnesses, I can't help asking myself why we need them, I've always heard it said that the saints are necessary for our salvation, They didn't save themselves, Who told you that, That's what I feel deep inside me, What do you feel deep inside you, That no one is saved, and no one is lost, It's sinful to think such things, Sin doesn't exist, there is only death and life, Life comes before death, You're deceiving yourself, Baltasar, for death comes before life, who we were has died, who we are is being born, and that's why we do not die all at once, And when we go under the earth, and when Francisco Marques is crushed beneath the cart carrying the stone, is that not death without recourse, If we're talking about Francisco Marques, he is born, But he doesn't know it, Just as we don't really know who we are, yet we are alive, Blimunda, where did you learn these things, My eyes were open when I was still inside my mother's womb, and from there I saw everything.

They entered the yard. The moon was already the colour of milk. More clearly defined than if they had been outlined by the sun, the shadows were black and impenetrable. There was an old hut covered in withered bulrushes where in happier times a donkey could rest from the chore of fetching and carrying. It was known as the donkey's hut, although its occupant had died many years ago, so many that even Baltasar could no longer remember, I used to ride that donkey, no, I didn't, and whenever he vacillated in this way or said, I'll store my rake in the donkey's hut, he was agreeing with Blimunda, it was as if he were seeing the beast standing there before him with its baskets and pack saddle, and were hearing his mother call out from the kitchen, Go help your father unload, he could not offer much help, for he was still a little boy, but as he grew up he gradually got used to heavy work, and since every endeavour brings its rewards, his father would lift him on to the donkey, which was damp with sweat, and take him for a little ride around the yard, and in the end I looked upon that donkey as if it were mine. Blimunda led him inside the hut, it was not the first time that they had gone in there at night, sometimes to please him, sometimes to please her, they went there when they could no longer repress their urgent need, when they could no longer resist giving way to passion with moans and cries likely to provoke a scandal when compared with the discreet embraces of Álvaro Diogo and Inês Antónia and the anguished restlessness of their nephew, Gabriel, who was driven to relieve himself by sinful means. The huge, old-fashioned manger, which had once been attached to supports at a convenient height from the ground, was now lying on the floor, badly cracked but as comfortable as a royal couch

once furnished with straw and two old blankets. Álvaro Diogo and Inês Antónia knew what took place there but said nothing. They themselves felt no desire to experience such novelties, being tranquil creatures whose sexual needs were modest, only Gabriel will come here for amorous encounters after their fortunes have altered, which will be sooner than anyone imagines. Save perhaps someone like Blimunda, not because she pulled Baltasar towards the hut for, after all, she was always the sort of woman who made the first move, uttered the first word, and made the first gesture but because of a sudden anxiety that catches at the throat, because of the violence with which she embraces Baltasar, because of her eagerness to kiss him, poor mouths, their bloom gone, with some teeth missing and others broken, but in the end it is love that prevails.

Contrary to their custom, they spent the night there. When dawn broke, Baltasar announced, I am going to Monte Junto, and Blimunda got up and went into the house, the kitchen was plunged in semi-darkness as she rummaged and eventually found some food, her in-laws and nephew were still asleep when she left, closing the door behind her, she also brought Baltasar's knapsack, into which she packed the food and his tools, taking care not to forget the spike, for no one can be certain of avoiding some evil encounter. They left together, and Blimunda accompanied him until they were outside the town, in the distance, the white towers of the church were visible against the clouds in the sky, quite unexpected after such a clear night. They embraced each other sheltered by the branches of a tree and the burnished leaves of autumn, while treading those that had fallen until they merged with the soil, thus providing nourishment for another verdant spring. This is not Oriana in courtly dress bidding Amadis farewell, or Romeo gathering Juliet's kiss as he descends from her balcony, it is only Baltasar on his way to Monte Junto to repair the ravages of time, it is only Blimunda trying in vain to arrest the fleeting hours. In their dark clothing they look like two restless shadows, no sooner do they part than they come together, who can tell what these two perceive, or what new intrigues they are preparing, perhaps it will all turn out to be illusory, the fruit of a certain time and a certain place, for we know that happiness is short-lived, that we fail to cherish it when it is within our grasp and value it only when it has vanished forever, Don't stay away too long, Baltasar, You must sleep in the hut, it will probably be dusk by the time I get back, but if there are many repairs to be done, don't expect me before tomorrow, Of course, Farewell, Blimunda, Farewell, Baltasar.

There is little point in narrating journeys that have already been described. Enough has been said about the considerable changes in those who made those journeys, and as for the locations and settings, one need only observe that men and seasons pass, the former in gradual stages, as that house, roof, plot of land, wall, palace, bridge, convent, carriage, street, and mill, the latter more abruptly, as if never to return, spring, summer, autumn as at present, then winter, which is fast approaching. Baltasar knows these roads like the palm of his right hand. He rests on the riverbank at Pedrulhos, where he once relaxed with Blimunda in a season of flowers, of marigolds in the woodlands, of poppies in the cornfields and muted colours in the copses. Along the route he meets people

making their way down to Maфра, throngs of men and women who roll drums both large and small and play the bagpipes, sometimes accompanied by a priest or a friar and often by a cripple on crutches, could this be the day of consecration, marked by one or more miracles, one can never tell when God may decide to apply His remedies, which helps explain why the blind, the lame, and the paralytic walk in perpetual pilgrimage, Will Our Lord appear today, perhaps I have deceived myself with this false hope, probably I shall make the journey to Maфра only to discover that it is the Lord's day for resting, or that He has sent His Mother to Our Lady of the Cape, it is impossible to fathom this distribution of powers, but in the end our faith will save us, Save us from what, Blimunda would inquire.

Early that afternoon, Baltasar reached the foothills of the Serra do Barregudo. In the background towered Monte Junto, bright in the sunlight, which had just emerged from clouds. Shadows flitted over the sierra like great nocturnal beasts roving the hills and creasing them as they went, until the sun brought warmth to the trees and was reflected in the puddles. The wind beat against the stationary vanes of the windmills and whistled in the clay pots, these are details observed by those who stroll without care in the world, who are content just to stroll and contemplate that cloud in the sky, the sun as it begins to set, the wind that blows up here only to die down over there, the leaf shaken from its branch or dropping to the ground when it withers, that an old and cruel soldier has eyes for such details, a soldier who has a man's death on his conscience, a crime perhaps redeemed by other episodes in his life, such as to have been marked with a cross signed in blood over his heart, and has perceived how huge the world is and how small all that inhabits it, and speaks to his oxen in a low and gentle voice, this may seem little, but someone will know if it is enough.

Baltasar was already tackling the rugged slopes of Monte Junto and searching out amid the undergrowth the almost invisible path that would lead him to the flying machine, he invariably feels tense as he approaches the spot, afraid that someone might have discovered its presence, that it might have been damaged or even been stolen, and with every visit he is surprised to find it sitting there as if it had just landed, still vibrating after its rapid descent as it nestles in shrubs and wondrous creepers, truly wondrous, because this is not their natural habitat. The flying machine has not been stolen or damaged, it stands in the very same spot, its wings sagging, its birdlike neck entangled with the tallest branches, its dark head like a nest suspended in mid-air. Baltasar drew near, threw his knapsack to the ground, and sat down to rest a while before setting to work. He ate two fried sardines on a slice of bread, using the tip and the blade of the knife with the dexterity of someone carving ivory miniatures, when he had finished, he cleaned the blade on the grass, wiped his hand on his breeches, and went up to the machine. The sun was fierce, the heat stifling. Climbing on to the wing and treading carefully so as not to disturb the camouflage of willow canes, Baltasar entered the Passarola. Some of the timber planks on deck had rotted. He would have to fetch the necessary materials and stay here several days to replace them, or, and only now did he think of this, he would have to dismantle the machine section by section, take the pieces

back to Mafra, and conceal them under some haystack or in an underground passage of the convent, provided he could enlist the help of a few close friends by confiding part of his secret, he was amazed that he had not thought of this solution before, when he got back home, he would talk to Blimunda. Lost in thought, he scarcely noticed where he was putting his feet, suddenly two planks gave way and caved in. He made a desperate attempt to break his fall, causing the hook attached to his arm to get caught in the metal ring used to tie back the sails, hanging there in mid-air, Baltasar watched the sails slip away to one side with a resounding thud, Sunlight flooded into the machine, the amber balls and globes started to gleam. The machine turned on itself twice, broke free of the surrounding shrubs, and rose into the air. There was not a cloud to be seen in the sky.

BLIMUNDA DID NOT sleep that night. She settled down to wait for Baltasar's return at dusk, as on other occasions, fully expecting to see him at any moment, she set out to meet him and walked almost half a league along the road that he would travel, and for some considerable time, until the twilight closed in, she sat by the side of the road watching the pilgrims pass on their way to the consecration ceremonies at Mafra, for this was an event not to be missed, there would certainly be food and alms for everyone who turned up, or at least there would be plenty for those who were most alert and insistent, for if the soul needs to be satisfied, the same is true of the body. Seeing that woman seated by the roadside, some ruffians who had come from distant parts thought that this must be how the town of Mafra welcomed male visitors, with all comforts provided, and they began making lewd remarks which they soon swallowed when confronted by that forbidding stare. One fellow who was bold enough to attempt further advances withdrew in terror when Blimunda warned him in a low voice, I spit upon the toad in your heart, upon you, and your children. When dusk had finally settled, there were no more pilgrims, Baltasar is unlikely to turn up at this late hour, or he will arrive so late that he will find me in bed, or, if he has found there are many repairs needing to be done, he might postpone his departure until tomorrow after all. Blimunda went back to the house and sat down to supper with her in-laws and nephew, So Baltasar hasn't turned up, one of them commented, I'll never understand these trips of his, the other rejoined, Gabriel remained silent, for he is still far too young to speak up in the presence of his elders, but he was thinking to himself that his parents had no right to meddle in the affairs of his uncle and aunt, one half of the human race is obsessively curious about the other half, while the latter are just as curious about them, and for a child of his age, this boy is already quite shrewd. After supper, Blimunda waited until everyone had retired to bed before going out into the yard. The night was peaceful, the sky clear, the coolness of the night air barely perceptible. Perhaps at that very moment Baltasar was walking along the river at Pedrulhos, with the spike attached to his left arm instead of the hook, for no one can avoid evil encounters, as we have already had occasion to observe and verify. The moon is shining, which will help Baltasar see the road more clearly, soon we shall almost certainly hear his footsteps, in the cautioning silence of night, he will push open the yard gate, and Blimunda will be waiting there to greet him, the rest we shall not see, because discretion forbids it, and all we need to know is that this woman is haunted by a sense of foreboding.

She has not slept all night. Lying in the manger and wrapped in blankets, which smell of human sweat and sheep's dung, she opened her eyes and looked toward the chinks in the thatching, where the moonlight came filtering through, the moon began to wane, dawn was about to break, and the night had scarcely had time to settle. Blimunda got up with the first glimpse of light and went into the kitchen to find some food, she feels so uneasy, despite Baltasar's warning that he might be delayed, perhaps he will get back around midday, there were lots of repairs on the machine, so old, and exposed to all that wind and rain. Blimunda cannot hear us, for she has already left the house and is walking the familiar route that Baltasar must follow, there is no risk of their missing each other.

One person, however, whom they will both miss meeting will be the King when he enters the town of Mafra that same afternoon, accompanied by the Prince Dom José and the Infante Dom António, as well as by all the servants of the royal household, with all due pomp and ceremony, opulent coaches drawn by prancing horses, everything in perfect array as the procession comes into sight, wheels turning, hooves stamping, an amazing sight such as has never been seen before. Royal pomp and ceremony we have experienced elsewhere, and we are aware of the distinctions, a little more brocade here, a little less brocade there, a little more gold here, a little less gold there, but our concern is to follow that woman who asks everyone she meets whether they have seen a man with such-and-such characteristics, the most handsome man in the world, and from this false description it is clear that one cannot always express one's true feelings, who would ever recognise the swarthy, grizzled, one-handed Baltasar from such a description, No, good woman, they tell her, we have not seen him, and Blimunda walks on, now remote from the main roads and taking short cuts, as when they made the journey together, she passes that same mountain, that same wood, those four boulders in a row, those six hills forming a circle, it is getting late and there still is no sign of Baltasar. Blimunda did not pause to eat but chewed some food as she continued walking, but after a sleepless night, she felt exhausted, anxiety is sapping her energies as the food churns in her mouth, and Monte Junto, which can already be seen in the distance, gives the impression of receding, what phenomenon is this. There is no mystery, it is simply the slowness of her progress as she struggles to go on, thinking to herself, At this pace I shall never arrive. There are certain places Blimunda cannot remember having passed, others she suddenly recognises upon seeing a bridge, a merging of slopes, or a meadow set in some valley. She realised that she had already passed this way because at that same door sits that same old woman sewing that same skirt, everything remains unchanged, except Blimunda, who now travels alone.

She recalls that they met a shepherd in these parts who told them that they were in the Serra do Barregudo, beyond stands Monte Junto, which looks just like any other hill, but this was not how she remembered it, perhaps because of its bulge, which makes it look like a miniature of this side of the planet so that one is convinced that the earth is truly round. Now there is neither shepherd nor flock but only a deep silence as Blimunda comes to a halt, only a deep solitude as she looks around her. Monte Junto is so close she has the impression that she need only stretch a hand to touch those foothills, like a woman on her knees who is stretching out an arm to touch her lover's hips. Blimunda was clearly incapable of such subtle thoughts, therefore, we are perhaps not inside these people and cannot tell what they are thinking, all we are doing is putting our own thoughts into the heads of others and then saying, Blimunda thinks, or Baltasar thought, and perhaps we have also imagined them with our own sensations, just as when Blimunda touches her lover's hips and imagines that he has touched hers. She stopped to rest because her legs were trembling, weary after such a long walk and weakened by that imaginary physical contact, but suddenly she felt certain in her heart that she would find Baltasar up there toiling and sweating, perhaps tying the final knots, perhaps slinging

his knapsack over one shoulder, perhaps already making his way down into the valley, and this caused her to cry out, Baltasar.

There was no reply, nor could there be, a cry means nothing, it reaches that escarpment and reverberates, a feeble echo that no longer sounds like a human voice. Blimunda began to clamber up rapidly, her strength comes rushing back, she even starts running where the slope diminishes before becoming steep once more, and farther ahead, between two dwarf holm oaks, she can barely perceive the track opened up by Baltasar on the successive journeys, that will lead her to the Passarola. She calls out once more, Baltasar, now he must hear her, for there are no mountains in between, only several hillocks, if she had time to stop, she would surely hear him cry out, Blimunda, she feels so certain that she has heard him call that she smiles and uses her hand to wipe the sweat or tears from her face, or perhaps she is arranging her hair or cleaning her dirty face, that gesture could be interpreted in so many different ways.

There is the place, like the nest of a huge bird that has taken flight. Blimunda's cry, her third, and invoking the same name, was not nearly so loud, a strangled utterance as if the entrails were being ripped from her body by some monstrous claw, Baltasar, and even as she called out his name, she realised that she had known from the start that she would find this place abandoned. Her tears dried at once, as if some scorching wind had blown from the bowels of the earth. She approached by fits and starts, saw the uprooted shrubs and the depression caused by the weight of the flying machine, and on the other side, at a distance of six paces, Baltasar's knapsack lay on the ground. There were no other signs of what might have happened there. Blimunda raised her eyes to the sky, which was now less clear, clouds drifted serenely as the light of day faded, and for the first time she felt the emptiness of space, as if musing, There is nothing beyond, but this was precisely what she refused to believe, Baltasar had to be flying somewhere in that sky and struggling with the sails to make the machine come down. Blimunda looked at the knapsack again and went to retrieve it, she felt the weight of the spike inside and then remembered that if the machine had gone up the previous day, it would have come down at night, so that was why Baltasar was not to be seen in the sky, he must be somewhere on earth, perhaps dead, perhaps alive, but almost certainly injured, for she still remembered how violent their descent had been, although on that occasion the machine had had a heavier load.

She slung the knapsack over her shoulder, there was nothing more to be done there, so she began searching in the vicinity, going up and down the slopes, which were covered with scrub, looking out for vantage points and wishing that her powers of vision were sharper, not the powers she enjoyed when she fasted, but those of the falcon and lynx, which were capable of sighting everything that moved on the surface of the earth. With bleeding feet and her skirt torn by briars and thorns, she went around the northern side of the mountain and then returned to her point of departure in search of a higher level, and it now occurred to her that neither she nor Baltasar had ever reached the summit of Monte Junto, now she must try to get up there before dark, from the top she would have

a much wider view, it is true that from a distance the machine would not be all that conspicuous, but sometimes fortune steps in, and perhaps once she was up there she would see Baltasar waving to her with one arm, from beside a fountain where they could both quench their thirst.

Blimunda began to clamber up farther, reproaching herself for not having thought of this sooner, before the evening light began to dim. Unexpectedly, she found a path that went winding up the slope and, higher up, a road wide enough for carts to pass, she was surprised at this discovery, what could there be on the summit of the mountain to have justified opening up this road, it showed every sign of being in use and of having been there for a considerable time, and who knows, perhaps Baltasar had also come across it. Upon turning a bend, Blimunda halted in her tracks. Directly ahead she saw a friar on foot, a Dominican, to judge from his habit, which scarcely disguised his thickset body and bull neck. In her panic, Blimunda hesitated before running or calling out, the friar appeared to have sensed her presence. He halted, looked to one side and the other, and then turned around. He made a gesture as if blessing himself, and waited. Blimunda approached, *Deo gratias*, said the Dominican, and what brings you here, I'm looking for my husband, she replied, without knowing what more she should say, for the friar might think she was demented if she started to talk about a flying machine, to explain about the Passarola and about those dark clouds. She retreated several paces, We hail from Mafra, and my husband came here to Monte Junto because of a huge bird we were told inhabited these parts, I'm afraid the bird may have carried him off, I have never heard anyone, not even the other friars, speak of such a bird, Is there a convent up here on the mountain, Yes, there is, I didn't know. The friar, as if distracted, descended a few paces down the slope. The sun was rapidly setting, clouds had gathered seawards, and the evening sky was turning grey. You haven't by any chance seen a man around here with a hook strapped to the stump of his left arm, Blimunda asked him, Is he your husband, Yes, No, I haven't seen him, And you haven't seen a large bird flying over in that direction, either yesterday or today, No, I haven't seen any large bird, Well, I'd better be off, then, give me your blessing, Father, It's almost dark, you might lose your way if you set out at this hour, or be attacked by the wolves that prowl this region, If I leave at once, I should be able to reach the valley before dark, It's much farther away than it looks from here, listen, near the convent stand the ruins of another convent, which was never finished, you can spend the night there and continue the search for your husband tomorrow, No, I must go, As you wish, but don't forget that I warned you of the dangers, and with these words the friar started to climb back up the wide track.

Blimunda remained standing there, unable to decide what she should do. Up here there was still some light, although the countryside was enveloped in darkness. The clouds dispersed throughout the sky, and a hot, clammy wind began to blow, perhaps there was rain on the way. Blimunda felt so weary that she believed herself capable of dying from sheer exhaustion. She had hardly thought about Baltasar. In her muddled state of mind she was somehow convinced that she would find him next day and that

there was little point in searching any further that night. She sat down on a boulder at the side of the road, slipped her hand into the knapsack, and found the remains of Baltasar's provisions, a sardine as dry as a bone and a stale crust of bread. If anyone were to pass at this moment, they would get the shock of their life upon finding seated there a woman who betrayed no fear, almost certainly a witch lying in wait to suck the blood of some traveller or waiting for her cronies, whom she will accompany to a witches' sabbath. In fact, she is simply an unfortunate woman who lost her husband when he vanished into thin air, and though she would cast every conceivable spell in order to get him back, she does not know, alas, any such spell, so she has achieved nothing by seeing what others cannot see, just as she has achieved nothing by gathering wills, for it was those very wills that carried him off.

Night fell. Blimunda rose to her feet. The wind became more chilly and fierce. There was an overpowering sense of helplessness on those slopes, which made her weep, and it was timely that she should unburden herself in that way. The night was full of alarming noises, the screeching of an owl, the rustling of holm oaks, and unless her ears deceived her, a wolf howling in the distance. Blimunda still had enough courage to descend a further hundred paces in the direction of the valley, but it was like slowly lowering herself to the bottom of a well without knowing what gaping jaws might be waiting to swallow her up. Later there would be a moon to show her the way, provided the sky cleared, which would also make her visible to any living creature who might be roving in the mountains, she might frighten some of them off, but others would make her freeze in terror. She came to a sudden halt, covered in goose-pimples. A short distance away, something crept off in haste. She could bear it no longer. She darted up the road as if she were being pursued by all the demons in hell and all the monsters who inhabit the earth, whether real or imagined. As she came round the last bend, she saw the convent, a low, squat building. Pale light filtered through the church windows. There was a deep silence beneath the starry sky, beneath the murmuring clouds, which were so close that Monte Junto might well have been mistaken for the highest mountain in the world. Blimunda approached, she thought she heard prayers being intoned in a low voice, almost certainly those of compline, and as she drew closer the chanting became louder, the voices more sonorous, as the friars prayed to heaven, prayed so humbly that Blimunda began to weep once more, perhaps those friars were unwittingly rescuing Baltasar from the skies or from the perils of the forest, perhaps the magical Latin words were healing the wounds he must surely have sustained, so Blimunda joined in the prayers by mentally reciting the ones she knew that serve for everything, a personal loss, an attack of malaria, some private anxiety, somebody up there must be responsible for sorting out our needs.

On the other side of the convent, in a hollow facing the slope, stood the ruins. There were high walls, vaulted roofs, and recesses that one could visualise as cells, the perfect shelter, where she could spend the night and ward off the cold and wild beasts. Blimunda, still apprehensive, penetrated the dark interior of those ruins, fumbling with her hands and feet as she tried to find her way without falling into a hole. Gradually her

eyes grew accustomed to the dark, then the diffused light in this space outlined the openings of the windows and defined the walls. The ground was covered with grass but reasonably tidy. There was an upper floor without any visible access, at least for the present. Blimunda stretched out her cloak in one corner, improvised a pillow with her knapsack, and lay down. The tears came back. Still weeping, she fell asleep, she passed from wakefulness to sleep between two tears, and continued to weep as she slept. This did not last very long. Pushing aside the clouds, the moon appeared. The moonlight penetrated the ruins like a mysterious presence, and Blimunda woke up. She could have sworn that the light of the moon had shaken her gently, had stroked her face or her hand resting on the cloak, but the grating noise she now heard was the same sound she imagined she had heard earlier in her sleep. The noise seemed to draw closer, then recede, as if someone were searching in vain yet reluctant to abandon the search as he retraced his steps, like an animal taking refuge after momentarily losing the scent. Blimunda sat up, rested on her elbows, and listened attentively. She heard wary footsteps, almost inaudible yet alarmingly close. A form passed in front of one of the windows, and the light of the moon outlined a profile that became distorted on the rough surface of the stone wall. Blimunda knew at once that it was the friar she had met on the road. He had told her where she could find shelter and he had come to see whether she had followed his advice, but not out of Christian charity. Blimunda lay back quietly and remained quite still, perhaps he had not seen her, or perhaps he had seen her and said, Rest, poor weary soul, if this were so, it would have been truly miraculous and spiritually uplifting, but it was not so, the friar had come to satisfy his lust, and who could blame him, lost in this desert here on the summit of the world, human existence is so miserable. The form shuts out the moonlight streaming through the window, it is that of a tall burly man, and she can hear him breathing heavily. Blimunda had pushed her knapsack to one side, and when the man knelt down beside her she quickly slipped her hand into the bag and grasped the spike firmly, as if it were a dagger. We already know what is about to happen, it has been decreed ever since that farrier in Évora made the spike and hook, the spike is here in Blimunda's hand, and who can tell where the hook might be. The friar stroked Blimunda's feet and slowly eased her legs apart, her motionless body excited him beyond endurance, perhaps she is awake and welcomes his advances, her skirts have already been pulled back, the friar's habit is already turned up under his belt, his hand reaches out to explore her sex, the woman trembles but makes no other movement, in triumph, the friar thrusts his penis toward that invisible orifice, feels the woman's arms clasp him by the waist, there are great consolations in the life of a Dominican friar. Driven by two hands, the spike embeds itself between his ribs, grazing his heart for a second before plunging deeper, for twenty years the spike has pursued this second death. The cry that had begun to form in the friar's throat became a hoarse death-rattle of short duration. Blimunda writhed in terror, not because she had killed him, but because of that inert body that threatened to crush her beneath its weight. Using her elbows, she pushed his body away with all the strength she could muster, and finally managed to crawl out. The moon lit up a fragment of his white habit and the dark stain, which was rapidly spreading. Blimunda struggled to her feet and listened carefully. All was silent in the

ruins, she could hear nothing except her own heart beating. She fumbled on the ground, retrieved her knapsack and the cloak, which had become entangled around one of the friar's legs, and set them down in a spot where there was light. She then returned to the corpse, seized the groove of the spike, and tugged once, then a second time. With the contortion of the body, the spike must have got trapped between two ribs. In despair, Blimunda placed one foot on the man's back and with a sharp pull released the spike. There was a deep gurgle, and the black stain spread like an inundation. Blimunda wiped the spike on the friar's habit and put it in the knapsack, which she threw over one shoulder along with her cloak. Just as she was about to leave, she looked back and noticed that the friar was wearing sandals, so she went back to remove them, a dead man travels barefoot wherever he may go, be it heaven or hell.

In the shadows projected by the walls of the ruins, Blimunda paused to decide which route she should take. She could not risk crossing the square in front of the convent. Someone might see her, perhaps another friar, who had shared the dead man's secret and was waiting for him to return, while no doubt thinking to himself that he must be taking so long because he was thoroughly enjoying himself, Cursed be all friars, muttered Blimunda. Now she had to overcome all those fears, the wolf, which could be sheer fantasy, the mysterious noise of someone prowling in the dark, which she had not imagined after all, the thought of losing herself in the woods before she found the path where she could no longer be seen. She removed her shabby clogs and slipped into the dead man's sandals, which were much too big and flat, although sturdy, she tied the leather thongs around her ankles and set off, making certain that she was screened from the convent by the ruins until she found herself protected by the undergrowth or some hillock or other. She was bathed in the moon's silvery light, then clouds enshrouded her in darkness, but realising that she was no longer afraid, she descended into the valley without further hesitation, and should she encounter ghosts or werewolves, wandering souls or flashes of lightning, she would ward them off with her spike, a much more powerful weapon than any witchcraft or physical onslaught, May the lamp I carry before me illumine my path.

Blimunda walked all night. She was anxious to be as far away as possible from Monte Junto before dawn, when the community would assemble for matins. Once they discovered that one of the friars was missing they would examine his cell and search the entire convent, the refectory, the chapter house, the library, and the kitchen garden, the abbot would come to the conclusion that he had fled, and there would be endless gossiping in corners, but if one of the friars had been taken into the missing friar's confidence, he would be anxious, perhaps envying the other's good fortune, for she must have been quite a wench to drive him to abandon his habit among the nettles, then the search would be extended beyond the convent walls, and it would probably be broad daylight before they found the corpse, I've had a narrow escape, the friar would think to himself, no longer feeling envious, for after all he is still in the grace of God.

When Blimunda arrived mid-morning at the river-bank at Pedrulhos, she decided to

rest a while after her reckless journey. She had thrown away the friar's sandals lest the devil use them to have her exposed, and she had got rid of the clogs because they were beyond repair, now she plunged her legs into the cold water, taking care to examine her clothing for any bloodstains, such as this mark on her torn skirt. She ripped off any tatters and threw them away. Watching the water flow, she asked herself, What now. She had already washed the iron spike, and it was as if she were washing the missing hand of Baltasar, who was also missing, and wandering who knows where. She stepped out of the water, And now what, she asked herself once more. Then suddenly it dawned on her that Baltasar must be waiting for her in Mafra, and she felt certain that she would find him there, they had simply missed each other on the road, the machine had probably flown off on its own, whereupon Baltasar had come away, he must have forgotten to collect his knapsack and cloak before leaving, or perhaps he had panicked and fled, for every man is entitled to his own fears, and now he was probably wondering what he should do next, whether he should wait or set out at once, for that woman was capable of doing something foolish, ah, Blimunda.

Along the road approaching Mafra, Blimunda ran like one possessed, outwardly exhausted after two sleepless nights, inwardly glowing after two nights of battle, she catches up with and overtakes, the pilgrims who are on their way to attend the consecration, and they are coming so thick and fast that Mafra will soon be overcrowded. As far as the eye can reach there are flags and banners and milling crowds, until Sunday the work on the convent will be suspended, all that remains to be done is to put the finishing touches on the decorations. Blimunda heads for home, there stands the Viscounts' Palace, with soldiers from the royal guard on duty at the gates, and carriages and coaches lined up along the road, this is where the King has been lodged. She pushed the yard gate open and called out, Baltasar, but no one appeared. She sat down on the stone step, dejected and close to tears when it suddenly occurred to her that she would be unable to explain how Baltasar's cloak and knapsack came to be in her possession if she were to confess that she had gone to look for Baltasar without finding any trace of him. Barely able to stand up, she struggled as far as the hut and concealed them under a bundle of reeds. Now she could not muster enough strength to go back. She lay down in the manger, and since the body sometimes takes pity on the soul, she was soon fast asleep. Therefore she missed the arrival of the Patriarch from Lisbon, who rode in a truly magnificent coach, with four more coaches in the rear carrying his private retinue, and preceded by a mounted cross-bearer holding the patriarchal crucifix aloft, accompanied by the apparitor of the clergy, followed by the officers of the municipal council, who had set out to receive the King some considerable distance from the town, words cannot describe the splendour of this procession, which gladdened the hearts of the crowds who came to watch, Inês Antónia's eyes almost popped out of her head, Álvaro Diogo looked on gravely, as befitted a stonemason, as for Gabriel, the scoundrel was nowhere to be seen. Blimunda even missed the arrival of more than three hundred Franciscans from various provinces who had come out of obedience to attend the solemn act of consecration and to grace the proceedings, as it were, with their presence, had it been a

congregation of Dominicans, one would have been missing. Blimunda was not there to see this parade of the triumphant militia as they marched past four-deep, they had come to make certain that the religious garrison was ready, the artillery range aimed at souls, the arsenal of altar breads, the storehouse of sacraments, the embroidered lettering of the banner, *In hoc signo vinces*, and should that motto fail to secure victory, they would resort to more aggressive tactics. At this hour Blimunda is asleep, like a stone resting on the ground, and unless someone disturbs her with a foot, she will settle there, and the grass will grow all around her, as tends to happen whenever there is a long vigil.

Late that same afternoon, once the festivities had ended, Álvaro Diogo and his wife returned home, they did not go in through the yard and therefore did not discover Blimunda immediately, but when Inés Antónia went to gather in the hens that were still running loose, she found her sister-in-law, fast asleep but making wild gestures, which was not so surprising since she was murdering a Dominican in her sleep, although Inés Antónia could not be expected to know this. She went into the hut and shook Blimunda by the arm, but did not touch her with her foot, for Blimunda was not a stone to be kicked around, and Blimunda opened her eyes in terror and was baffled by her surroundings, for whereas there was nothing but darkness in her dream, here there was still twilight, and instead of the friar there was this woman, Who can she be, ah, it is Baltasar's sister, And where is Baltasar, asks Inês Antónia, the very same words Blimunda was asking to herself, what reply could she give, she struggled to her feet, aching in every limb, a friar had died one hundred times, only to resuscitate one hundred times, Baltasar cannot come just yet, and to say this is to say nothing, the question is not whether he can or cannot come, the question is that he is not coming because he is thinking of staying on as a farm steward in Turcifal, every explanation is valid as long as it is accepted, sometimes even indifference can be useful, as in the case of Inês Antónia, who feels little affection for her brother and, when she inquires about him, it is merely out of curiosity and little else.

During supper, Álvaro Diogo, after having expressed his surprise that Baltasar had not yet returned after three days, gave them a full account of those who had arrived or were expected to arrive for the consecration, the Queen and the Princess Dona Mariana Vitória had remained in Belas, because there was no suitable accommodation in Mafra, and for the same reason the Infante Dom Francisco had gone to Ericeira, but what gives Álvaro Diogo the greatest satisfaction of all, in a manner of speaking, is that he should breathe the same air as the King, the Prince Dom José, and the Infante Dom António, who are lodged immediately opposite in the Viscounts' Palace, as we sit down to supper, they sit down to supper, each family on its own side of the road, Say, neighbour, can you spare me some parsley. The Cardinals Cunha and Mota had already arrived and the Bishops of Leiria and Portalegre, of Para and Nanking, who are not there, but are here, and members of the court are arriving, and an endless train of nobles, God willing, Baltasar should be here on Sunday to attend the ceremony, Inés Antónia declared, as if she felt it was expected of her, He'll be here, murmured Blimunda.

That night she slept in the house. She forgot to eat her bread before getting up, and when she entered the kitchen she saw two diaphanous ghosts that were suddenly transformed into bundles of entrails and clusters of white bones, it was the nausea of life itself, and she felt like vomiting, she looked away in haste and began to chew her bread, whereupon Inés Antónia let out a roar of laughter, though without meaning to give offence, Don't tell me you're pregnant after all these years, innocent words that only intensified Blimunda's sorrow, Now not even if I wanted to be pregnant, she thought to herself, as she suppressed her inner cries of despair. This was the day on which they blessed the crosses, the paintings in the chapels, the vestments and other sacred objects pertaining to the sacraments, and then the convent and all the outbuildings. The crowds were kept at a distance, Blimunda did not even get around to leaving the house and had to be content with a glimpse of the King accompanied by the Prince and Infante getting into his coach, he was on the way to meet the Queen and the Princesses, and that night Álvaro Diogo described the spectacle as best he could.

At last the most glorious day of all arrived, the immortal date of the twenty-second of October in the year of grace seventeen hundred and thirty, when King Dom João V celebrates his forty-first birthday and attends the consecration of the most prodigious monument ever to have been built in Portugal, and only the short-sighted will argue that it is still unfinished. So many wonders defy description, Álvaro Diogo has not yet seen everything, and Inés Antónia became terribly confused, Blimunda accompanied them, because it would have looked bad to refuse, but she could not tell whether she was dreaming or awake. They set off at four o'clock in the morning to be sure of having a good view in the square, at five o'clock the troops assembled and torches were alight wherever one looked, then dawn began to break, a fine day, to be sure, for God looks after His estates, now the splendid patriarchal throne can be seen on the left-hand side of the portico, with matching chairs and canopy in crimson velvet trimmed with gold, and precious rugs on the floor, perfect in every detail and resting on a credence are the silver bowl and aspergillum along with all the other liturgical objects required for the service, the solemn procession has already formed and will circle the entire church, the King at its head, followed by the Infantes and nobility in order of rank and precedence, but the main protagonist is the Patriarch himself, who blesses the salt and the water, sprinkles holy water on the walls, though probably not enough, otherwise Álvaro Diogo would not fall from a height of thirty metres several months later, and then he taps three times with his crozier on the main door, which was closed, at the third stroke, God's sacred number, the door opened and the procession entered, and we regret that Álvaro Diogo and Inês Antónia were unable to get into the church, and Blimunda too, accompanying them with reluctance, where they could have witnessed the solemnities, some of which were truly sublime, others deeply moving, some compelled one to prostrate oneself, while others uplifted the soul, such as when the Patriarch used the tip of his crozier to write characters in Greek and Latin on piles of ashes set on the church floor, it sounds more like witchcraft, I inscribe and divide you, than a canonical rite, and the same is true of all that freemasonry that is standing over there, gold dust, incense, more ashes, salt, white wine

in a silver carafe, lime and powdered stone on a tray, a silver spoon, a golden shell, and heaven knows what else. There is no lack of hieroglyphics, scribblings, toings, and froings, back and forth, holy oils, blessings, the relics of the twelve apostles, twelve of them, and this took up the entire morning and the greater part of the afternoon, and it was five o'clock when the Patriarch began to celebrate the pontifical High Mass, which, needless to say, took some considerable time, the service finally ended, and the Patriarch then came out on to the balcony for the Benediction, and blessed the people waiting outside, some seventy or eighty thousand people, who with a great flurry of gestures and rustling of garments fell to their knees, a moment I shall never forget as long as I live, Dom Tomás de Almeida, up there on the pulpit, recites the words of blessing, anyone with good eyesight can see those lips moving, but no one can possibly hear what he is saying, and if those ceremonies were being enacted today, electronic fanfares would resound throughout the world, the papal blessing *urbi et orbi*, the true voice of Jehovah, who would have to wait thousands of years to be heard, but the wise man contents himself with what he has, until such time as he invents something better, that is why there is such great rejoicing in the town of Mafra among the pilgrims who have gathered there, well satisfied with those measured gestures as the Patriarch moves his right hand up and down and from left to right, with that sparkling ring, that resplendent gilt and purple, the snow-white linen, the resounding thud of the crozier against the stone that came from Pêro Pinheiro, as you will recall, Behold the blood spurting from the stone, a miracle, a miracle, a miracle, as the wedge is finally removed and the pastor withdraws with his entourage and the flock rises to its feet, the festivities will go on, solemnities to mark the consecration for eight days, and this is only the first.

Blimunda told her in-laws, I'm coming straight back. She made her way down the slope to the deserted town. In their haste, some of the town's inhabitants had left their doors and shutters open. The fires were spent. Blimunda entered the shed to retrieve the cloak and the knapsack. Then she went into the house and collected some provisions, a wooden bowl, a spoon, some clothing for herself and for Baltasar. She packed everything into the knapsack and left. It was already growing dark, but she no longer feared the night, for there was no greater night than her inner darkness.

FOR NINE LONG years, Blimunda searched for Baltasar. She came to know every road and track from the dust and mud, the sandy soil and treacherous stones, experienced many severe frosts and two blizzards, which she survived only because she had no intention of dying just yet. In summer she was blackened by the sun like a log drawn from the fire before it turns to ashes, and her skin wrinkled like that of a parched fruit, she was a scarecrow amid cornfields, a ghostly presence amongst the villagers, an awesome vision in tiny hamlets and abandoned settlements. Wherever she arrived, she inquired if anyone had seen a man with his left hand missing, as tall as any soldier from the royal guard, with a full beard already turning grey but, should he have shaved it off in the meantime, a face not easily forgotten, At least I haven't forgotten it, and he could be travelling along the common highways or along paths crossing the countryside, just as he might have fallen from the sky in a bird made of iron and wicker with a black sail, balls of yellow amber, and two globes in base metal that contain the greatest secret in the world, even if nothing should be left of all this except the remains of the man and the bird, lead me to them, for I need only touch them in order to know who they are. People thought that she must be mad, but if she lingered there for any time they found her so rational in everything else she said and did that they began to doubt their initial impression that she was unsound of mind. She soon became known from one province to the next, so that her reputation often preceded her and they called her the Flying Woman on account of the strange tale she told. She would sit in doorways conversing with the women, who confided their grievances and woes, less frequently their joys, which were all too few, besides, joys are better kept to oneself, lest they be lost. Wherever she passed, there remained a ferment of disquiet, the men did not recognise their womenfolk, who suddenly began to stare at them, sorry that they, too, had not disappeared so that they, too, might go in search of them. But these same men asked, Has she already gone, with an inexplicable sorrow in their heart, and if the women replied, She is still wandering about, the men went out again in the hope of finding her in that wood, or in those ripe cornfields, bathing her feet in the river or stripping behind a canebrake, it did not matter which, because they could do no more than feast their eyes on her body, for between the hand and the fruit there was an iron spike, but fortunately, nobody else was to die. Blimunda never entered a church if there were people inside, otherwise she would rest a while, seated on the floor and leaning against a pillar say, I just came in for a moment, I'm off now, for this is not my house. Priests, upon hearing people speak of her, sent messages urging Blimunda to come and be confessed, anxious to probe the mysteries surrounding this wandering pilgrim, to know what secrets were lurking in that inscrutable face, in those expressionless eyes, which rarely closed and which at certain moments, under a certain light, gave the impression of lakes where the shadows cast by clouds hovered. She sent word back to the priests that she would accept their offer whenever she had some sin to confess, no reply could have provoked a greater scandal, since we are all sinners, but when she discussed this matter with other women, she often gave them food for thought, after all, what are these sins of ours, of yours, of mine, if we women are truly the lamb that will take away the sins of the world, the day when this message is understood, it will be necessary to start everything anew. But her experiences

along the way were not always in this vein, sometimes she was stoned and mocked, and in one village where she was subjected to abuse, she worked such a miracle that they almost took her for a saint, for it so happened that there was a serious drought in this locality, because all the fountains were exhausted and the wells had dried up, and Blimunda, after having been driven out of the village, roved the outskirts using her fasting and powers of vision, and the following night, when the inhabitants were asleep, she stole back into the village and, standing in the middle of the public square, called out that in such-and-such a place, at such-and-such a depth, there flowed a rivulet of pure water which she herself had seen, and this explains why she was given the name Eyes of Water, the first eyes to bathe therein. She also encountered eyes capable of generating water, many such eyes, and when she said that she had come from Mafra, women asked her if she had known a man there with such-and-such a name with such-and-such physical characteristics, for he was my husband, my father, my brother, my son, my betrothed, and he was dragged off to work on the convent by order of the King, and I never saw him again for he never returned, he must have died there, or perhaps got lost on the way, for nobody has ever been able to give me any news of him, his family has lost its breadwinner and his land has been neglected, or he might have been carried off by the devil, but I already have another man, for that is one animal that never fails to appear if a woman allows him into her lair, if you get my meaning. Blimunda passed through Mafra and heard from Inés Antónia how Álvaro Diogo had met his death, but there was nothing to suggest that Baltasar had died, or, for that matter, that he was still alive.

Blimunda searched for nine long years. She started off counting the seasons, until they lost any meaning. At the outset, she also tried to calculate the number of leagues she walked each day, four, five, sometimes six, but she soon began to get muddled, and there came a point when space and time ceased to matter, she then began appraising everything in terms of morning, afternoon, night, rain, the midday sun, hail, fog, and mist, deciding whether the road was good or bad, whether the slope went up or down, whether this was plain, mountain, seashore, or river-bank, and then there were those faces, thousands upon thousands of faces, countless faces, which exceeded by far those that had gathered in Mafra, and among the faces those of the women, which invited questions, those of the men, which might provide the answers, and among the latter neither the very young nor the very old, but a man who was forty-five years old when we left him yonder in Monte Junto, that day he went up into the sky, and in order to work out how old he is now, we only need to add one year at a time, for every month add on so many wrinkles, for each day so many white hairs. How often Blimunda imagined herself seated in some village square begging alms, and a man coming up to her who, instead of offering alms, would extend his iron hook, whereupon she would put her hand into her knapsack and bring out a spike forged at the same anvil, the symbol of her constancy and vigil, And so I've found you, Blimunda, And I've found you, Baltasar, Where have you been all these years and what things and misfortunes have befallen you, First tell me about yourself, for it was you who was lost, Let me tell you what happened, and there

they would remain, conversing until the end of time.

Blimunda walked thousands of leagues, nearly always barefoot. The soles of her feet became hard and scarred like the bark of a tree. Those feet walked the length and breadth of Portugal, on several occasions they even crossed the Spanish border, because Blimunda failed to notice any line on the ground dividing this territory here from that territory there, she simply heard a foreign language being spoken and turned back. In the space of two years she travelled from the beaches and rocks of the ocean to the frontier, then explored other places and different routes, and her travels and explorations made her realise just how small this country was where she was born. I've been here before, I remember passing through this place, and she came across faces she recognised, Don't you remember me, they used to call me the Flying Woman, Ah, of course I remember, so you found the man you were looking for, You mean my man, That's right, No, I didn't find him, Ah, poor woman, He didn't turn up here by any chance, after I went away, No, he hasn't been seen and I haven't heard anyone mention him in these parts, Well, then, I'm off, farewell, Have a good journey, If only I could find him.

She did find him. She had passed through Lisbon six times and this was the seventh. She had come from the south, from near Pegões. It was almost night when she crossed the river in the last boat to take advantage of the tide. She had not eaten for almost twenty-four hours. There was still some food in her knapsack, but every time Blimunda was about to put it into her mouth, it was as if another hand had been placed on hers and a voice warned her, Don't eat, for the hour has come. Beneath the dark waters of the river, she saw fish swimming past at a great depth, shoals of crystal and silver fish, their elongated backs covered in scales or quite smooth. The light inside each house filtered through its walls like a beacon in mist. She entered the Rua Nova dos Ferros and turned right at the Church of Our Lady of Oliveira towards the Rossio, the same journey she had made twenty-eight years ago. She walked amid phantoms, among mists that were human. Amid the thousand rancid smells of the city, the evening breeze brought to her nostrils that of charred flesh. Crowds were milling around the Church of St Dominic amid the torches, black smoke, and bonfires. Blimunda pushed her way through until she reached the front row, Who are they, she asked a woman holding a child in her arms, I only know three of them, that man there and the woman beside him are father and daughter who have been found guilty of Judaism and are to burn at the stake, and the one at the end is a fellow who wrote comedies for puppet shows named António José da Silva, but I know nothing about the others.

Eleven people have been sentenced. The stake is already ablaze and the faces of the victims are barely distinguishable. The last man to be burned has his left hand missing. Perhaps because of his blackened beard, a miraculous transformation caused by the soot, he looks much younger. And there is a dark cloud in the centre of his body. Then Blimunda said, Come. The will of Baltasar Sete-Sóis broke free from his body, but did not ascend to the stars, for it belonged to the earth and to Blimunda.

Translator's Note

Padre Bartolomeu Lourenço de Gusmão is a historical figure. He was born in Santos, Brazil (1685?) and studied for the priesthood at the Seminary of Belem in Bahia. In 1708 he travelled to Portugal, where he soon attracted attention because of his prodigious memory and his mechanical skills. The following year he sent a memorandum to João V, informing the King that he had invented an instrument "that could travel through the air over land and sea". Lourenço then published a treatise on the art of air navigation. His theories were ridiculed in satirical verses, and he was called "O Voador" (The Flying Man). He confounded his critics by inventing a rudimentary airship, which he launched August 8, 1709. A sketch of this strange invention circulated in Lisbon, and because of its resemblance to an enormous bird it was called "La Passarola".

From 1713 until 1716 Lourenço studied in Holland. Upon his return to Portugal, he completed a doctorate in canon law at Coimbra. Such was his prestige in academic circles that João V made him a member of the Academy of History and appointed him to a chaplaincy in the royal household. Lourenço went on to invent many other devices, including a machine for grinding sugar-cane.

It has not been established precisely when he converted to Judaism, but when he realised that the Inquisition had begun investigating him and was about to order his arrest, he fled from Lisbon in September 1724 and found sanctuary in Spain. He died several months later at the Hospital de la Caridad in Toledo, finally reconciled with the Roman Catholic Church.

Today, Lourenço is largely remembered as a pioneer of aviation

Publishers' Note

The English text as originally published embodied a number of editorial amendments which the author requested be overruled; the labour of reinstating the text in accordance with the author's wishes was undertaken by Giovanni Pontiero. The text of the present edition is thus in conformity with the author's and the translator's wishes.

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GIOVANNI PONTIERO
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THE YEAR OF THE DEATH OF RICARDO REIS

Translated by Giovanni Pontiero

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S R Q P O N M L K

Wise is the man who contents himself with the
spectacle of the world.

—RICARDO REIS

To choose ways of not acting was ever the concern
and scruple of my life.

—BERNARDO SOARES

If they were to tell me that it is absurd to speak
thus of someone who never existed, I should reply
that I have no proof that Lisbon ever existed, or I
who am writing, or any other thing wherever it might be.

—FERNANDO PESSOA

Here the sea ends and the earth begins. It is raining over the colorless city. The waters of the river are polluted with mud, the riverbanks flooded. A dark vessel, the Highland Brigade, ascends the somber river and is about to anchor at the quay of Alcântara. The steamer is English and belongs to the Royal Mail Line. She crosses the Atlantic between London and Buenos Aires like a weaving shuttle on the highways of the sea, backward and forward, always calling at the same ports, La Plata, Montevideo, Santos, Rio de Janeiro, Pernambuco, Las Palmas, in this order or vice versa, and unless she is shipwrecked, the steamer will also call at Vigo and Boulogne-sur-Mer before finally entering the Thames just as she is now entering the Tagus, and one does not ask which is the greater river, which the greater town. She is not a large vessel, fourteen thousand tons, but quite seaworthy, as was demonstrated during this crossing when, despite constant rough weather, only those unaccustomed to ocean voyages were seasick, or those accustomed but who suffer from an incurably delicate stomach. On account of the homey atmosphere and comforts on board, the ship has come to be affectionately known, like her twin the Highland Monarch, as the family steamer. Both vessels are equipped with spacious decks for games and sunbathing, even cricket, a field sport, can be played on deck, which shows that for the British Empire nothing is impossible. When the weather is fine, the Highland Brigade becomes a garden for children and a paradise for the elderly, but not today, because it is raining and this is our last afternoon on board. Behind windowpanes ingrained with salt the children peer out at the gray city, which lies flat above the hills as if built entirely of one-story houses. Yonder, perhaps, you catch a glimpse of a high dome, some thrusting gable, an outline suggesting a castle ruin, unless this is simply an illusion, a chimera, a mirage created by the shifting curtain of the waters that descend from the leaden sky. The foreign children, whom nature has endowed more generously with the virtue of inquisitiveness, are curious to know the name of the port. Their parents tell them or it is spelled out by their nurses, amas, bonnes, Fräuleins, or perhaps by a passing sailor on his way to some maneuver. Lisboa, Lisbon, Lisbonne, Lissabon, there are four different ways of saying it, leaving aside the variants and mistaken forms. And so the children come to know what they did not know before, and that is what they knew already, nothing, merely a name, causing even greater confusion in their childish minds, a name pronounced with the accent peculiar to the Argentinians, if that is what they happen to be, or to the Uruguayans, the Brazilians, the Spaniards. The latter, writing Lisbon correctly in their respective versions of Castilian or Portuguese, then pronounce it in their own way, a way beyond the reach of ordinary hearing or any representation in writing. When the Highland Brigade sails up the straits early tomorrow morning, let us hope there will be a little sunshine and a clear sky, so that the gray mist does not completely obscure, even within sight of land, the already fading memory of those voyagers who passed here for the first time, those children who repeated the word Lisbon, transforming it into some other name, those adults who knitted their eyebrows and shivered with the general dampness which penetrates the wood and metal, as if the Highland Brigade had emerged dripping from the bottom of the sea, a ship twice transformed into a phantom. No one by choice or inclination would remain in this port.

A few passengers are about to disembark. The steamer has docked, the gangplank has been lowered and secured, unhurried baggage handlers and stevedores appear below, guards emerge from the shelter of their huts and sheds, and the customs officers begin to arrive. The rain has eased off and almost stopped. The passengers gather at the top of the gangplank, hesitant, as if in some doubt as to whether permission has been granted to disembark, or whether there could be a quarantine, or perhaps they are apprehensive about those slippery steps. But it is the silent city that frightens them, perhaps all its inhabitants have perished and the rain is only falling to dissolve into mud what has remained standing. Along the quayside grimy portholes glow dimly, the spars are branches lopped from trees, the hoists are still. It is Sunday. Beyond the docksheds lies the somber city, enclosed by façades and walls, as yet protected from the rain, perhaps drawing back a heavy, embroidered curtain, looking out with vacant eyes, listening to the water gurgling on the rooftops, down the drainpipes to the gutters below, and onto the gleaming limestone of the pavement to the brimming drains, some of their covers raised where they have flooded.

The first passengers disembark. Their shoulders bent under the monotonous rain, they carry sacks and suitcases and have the lost expression of those who have endured the voyage as if in a dream of flowing images, between sea and sky, the prow going up and down like a metronome, the waves rising and falling, the hypnotic horizon. Someone is carrying a child in his arms, a child so silent it must be Portuguese. It does not ask where they are, or else it was promised that if it went to sleep at once in that stuffy berth, it would wake up in a beautiful city where it would live happily ever after. Another fairy tale, for these people have been unable to endure the hardships of emigration. An elderly woman who insists on opening her umbrella has dropped the green tin box shaped like a little trunk that she was carrying under her arm. The box has crashed onto the pebbles on the quayside, breaking open, its bottom falling out. It contained nothing of value, a few souvenirs, some bits of colored cloth, letters and photographs scattered by the wind, some glass beads shattered into smithereens, balls of white yarn now badly stained, one of them disappearing between the quayside and the side of the ship. The woman is a third-class passenger.

As they set foot on land, the passengers run to take shelter. The foreigners mutter about the storm as if we were responsible for the bad weather, they appear to forget that in their beloved France or England the weather is usually a great deal worse. In short, they use the slightest pretext, even nature's rain, to express their contempt for poorer nations. We have more serious reasons for complaint, but we remain silent. This is a foul winter, with whatever crops there were uprooted from the fertile soil, and how we miss them, being such a small country. The baggage is already being unloaded. Under their glossy capes the sailors resemble hooded wizards, while, down below, the Portuguese porters move swiftly in their peaked caps and short jackets weatherproofed and lined, so indifferent to the deluge that they astonish all who watch. Perhaps this disdain for personal comfort will move the purses of the passengers, or wallets as one says

nowadays, to take pity on them, and that pity will be converted into tips. A backward clan, with outstretched hand, each man sells what he possesses in good measure, resignation, humility, patience, may we continue to find people who trade in this world with such wares. The passengers go through customs, few in number, but it will take them some time to get out, for there are many forms to be filled in and the handwriting of the customs officers on duty is painstaking. It is just possible that the quickest of them will get some rest this Sunday. It is growing dark although it is only four o'clock, a few more shadows and it will be night, but in here it is always night, the dim lamps lit all day long and some burned out. That lamp there has been out for a week and still hasn't been replaced. The windows, covered with grime, allow a watery light to penetrate. The heavy air smells of damp clothing, rancid baggage, the cheap material of uniforms, and there is not a trace of happiness in this homecoming. The customs shed is an antechamber, a limbo, before one passes on to what awaits outside.

A grizzled fellow, skin and bones, signs the last of the forms. Receiving copies, the passenger can go, depart, resume his existence on terra firma. He is accompanied by a porter whose physical appearance need not be described in detail, otherwise we should have to continue this examination forever. To avoid confusing anyone who might need to distinguish this porter from another, we will say only that he is skin and bones, grizzled, and as dark and clean-shaven as the man he is accompanying. Yet they are both quite different, one a passenger, one a porter. The latter pulls a huge suitcase on a metal cart, while the other two suitcases, small by comparison, are suspended from his neck with a strap that goes around the nape like a yoke or the collar of a religious habit. Once outside, under the protection of the jutting roof, he puts the luggage on the ground and goes in search of a taxi, they are usually here waiting when a ship arrives. The passenger looks at the low clouds, the puddles on the rough ground, the water by the quayside contaminated with oil, peelings, refuse of every kind, then he notices several unobtrusive warships. He did not expect to find them here, the proper place for these vessels is at sea, or, when not engaged in war or military maneuvers, in the estuary, which is more than wide enough to give anchorage to all the fleets in the world, as one used to say and perhaps still says, without bothering to see what fleets they might be. Other passengers emerged from customs, accompanied by their porters, then the taxi appeared, splashing water beneath its wheels. The waiting passengers waved their arms frantically, but the porter leaped onto the running board and made a broad gesture, It's for this gentleman, thus showing how even a humble employee in the port of Lisbon, when rain and circumstances permit, may hold happiness in his meager hands, which he can bestow or withhold at a moment's notice, a power attributed to God when we talk of life. While the taxi driver loaded his luggage into the trunk, the passenger, betraying for the first time a slight Brazilian accent, asked, Why are warships moored here. Panting for breath as he helped the taxi driver lift the heavy suitcase, the porter replied, Ah, it's the naval dock, because of the weather these ships were towed in the day before yesterday, otherwise they would have drifted off and run ashore at Alges. Other taxis began to arrive. Either they had been delayed or else the steamer docked an hour earlier than expected. Now

there was an open-air market in the square, plenty of taxis for everyone. How much do I owe you, the passenger asked. Whatever you care to give on top of the fixed fare, the porter replied, but he did not say what the fixed fare was or put an actual price on his services, trusting to the good fortune that protects the courageous, even when the courageous are only baggage handlers. I have only English money, Oh, that's fine, and he saw ten shillings placed into his right hand, coins that shone more brightly than the sun itself. At long last the celestial sphere has banished the clouds that hovered oppressively over Lisbon. Because of such heavy burdens and deep emotions, the first condition for the survival and prosperity of any porter is to have a stout heart, a heart made of bronze, otherwise he will soon collapse, undone. Anxious to repay the passenger's excessive generosity, or at least not to be indebted in terms of words, he offers additional information that no one wants, and expressions of gratitude that no one heeds. They are torpedo boats, they are ours, Portuguese, this is the Tejo, the Dao, the Lima, the Vouga, the Tâmega, the Dao is that one nearest you. No one could have told the difference, one could even have changed their names around, they all looked alike, identical, painted a drab gray, awash with rain, without a sign of life on the decks, their flags soaked like rags. But no disrespect is intended, we know that this destroyer is the Dao. Perhaps we shall have news of her later.

The porter raises his cap and thanks him. The taxi drives off, Where to. This question, so simple, so natural, so fitting for the place and circumstances, takes the passenger unawares, as if a ticket purchased in Rio de Janeiro should provide the answer to all such questions, even those posed in the past, which at the time met with nothing but silence. Now, barely disembarked, the passenger sees at once that this is not so, perhaps because he has been asked one of the two fatal questions, Where to. The other question, and much worse, is Why. The taxi driver looked into his rearview mirror, thinking the passenger had not heard him. He was opening his mouth to repeat, Where to, but the reply came first, still indecisive, hesitant, To a hotel. Which hotel, I don't know, and having said, I don't know, the passenger knew precisely what he wanted, knew it with the utmost conviction, as if he had spent the entire voyage making up his mind, A hotel near the river, down in this part of the city. The only hotel near the river is the Bragança, at the beginning of the Rua do Alecrim. I don't remember the hotel, but I know where the street is, I used to live in Lisbon, I'm Portuguese. Ah, you're Portuguese, from your accent I thought you might be Brazilian. Is it so very noticeable. Well, just a little, enough to tell the difference. I haven't been back in Portugal for sixteen years. Sixteen years is a long time, you will find that things have changed a lot around here. With these words the taxi driver suddenly fell silent.

His passenger did not get the impression that there were many changes. The avenue they followed was much as he remembered it, only the trees looked taller, and no wonder, for they had had sixteen years in which to grow. Even so, because in his mind's eye he could still see green foliage, and because the wintry nakedness of the branches diminished the height of the rows, one image balanced out the other. The rain had died

away, only a few scattered drops continued to fall, but in the sky there was not a trace of blue, the clouds had not dispersed and they formed one vast roof the color of lead. Has there been much rain, the passenger inquired. For the last two months it has been bucketing down like the great flood, the driver replied as he switched off his windshield wipers. Few cars were passing and even fewer trams, the occasional pedestrian warily closed his umbrella, along the sidewalks stood great pools of muddy water caused by blocked drains. Several bars were open, side by side, murky, their viscous lights encircled by shadows, the silent image of a dirty wineglass on a zinc counter. These façades are the great wall that screens the city, and the taxi skirts them without haste, as if searching for some break or opening, a Judas gate, or the entrance to a labyrinth. The train from Cascais passes slowly, chugging along at a sluggish pace yet still with enough speed to overtake the taxi, but then it falls behind and enters the station just as the taxi turns into the square. The driver informs him, The hotel is that one as you enter the street. He halted in front of a café and added, You'd better ask first if they have any rooms, I can't park outside the door because of the trams. The passenger got out, glanced fleetingly at the café, which was named Royal, a commercial example of monarchical nostalgia in a republican era, or of reminiscences of the last reign, here disguised in English or French. A curious situation, one looks at the word without knowing whether it should be pronounced rôial or ruaiale. He had time to consider the problem because it was no longer raining and the road went uphill. Then he imagined himself walking back from the hotel, with or without a room, and no sign of the taxi, it has vanished with all his luggage and clothes, his papers, and he wondered how he could exist deprived of these things and all his other worldly goods. Climbing the front steps of the hotel, he realized from these musings that he was exhausted, that he was suffering from an overwhelming fatigue, an infinite weariness, a sense of despair, if we really know what despair means when we say that word.

As he pushed open the door of the hotel, an electric buzzer sounded. At one time it would have been a little bell, ting-a-linga-ling, but one must always count on progress and its improvements. There was a steep flight of stairs and on the post at the bottom stood a figurine in cast iron holding aloft, in its right hand, a glass ball. The figurine represented a page in court dress, if the expression isn't redundant, for who ever saw a page not in court dress. It would be clearer to say a page dressed as a page, and judging from the cut of his costume, he was of the Italian Renaissance. The traveler went up endless steps. It seemed incredible that one should have to climb so far to reach the first floor, it was like scaling Mount Everest, a feat which continues to be the dream and Utopia of every mountaineer. To his relief, a man with a mustache appeared at the top of the stairs offering words of encouragement, Up you come then. The man did not say these words but that was how one might have interpreted the look on his face as he leaned over the landing to investigate what fair winds and evil times had brought this guest. Good evening, sir. Good evening, he has no breath left for more. The man with the mustache smiles patiently, You need a room, the smile becomes that of someone apologizing, There are no rooms on this floor, this is the reception desk, dining room,

lounge, and through here is the kitchen and pantry, the rooms are upstairs, and to inspect them we must go up to the second floor. This room is no good, it is small and gloomy, nor this, it looks onto the back, and these are already occupied. What I wanted was a room with a view of the river. Ah, in that case you will like room two hundred and one, it was vacated only this morning, I'll show it to you right away. The door at the end of the hallway had a little enameled plate, black numerals on a white background. If this were not a humble hotel room without any luxuries, and the room number were two hundred and two, and if the guest were called Jacinto and like Eça de Queirós's hero owned an estate in Tormes, then this episode would be set not in the Rua do Alecrim but on the Champs Elysées, on the right as one goes up, just like the Hotel Bragança, but that is the only detail they have in common.

The traveler approved of the room, or rooms to be precise, for there were two of them connected by a broad archway, on that side the bedroom, which once upon a time would have been described as an alcove, and on this side the sitting room, living quarters as satisfactory as in any apartment, with dark furniture in polished mahogany, drapes over the windows, and lampshades. The traveler heard the harsh screeching of a tram going up the street. The taxi driver was right. It seemed ages since the traveler had left the taxi waiting, and he smiled inwardly at his fear of being robbed. Do you like the room, the manager asked with the voice and authority of his profession but ever courteous, as befits someone negotiating a rental. It's fine, I'll take it, How long are you staying, I can't tell you, much depends on the time it takes to settle my affairs. It is the usual dialogue, the exchange one expects in such situations, but on this occasion there is an element of falsehood, because the traveler has no affairs to settle in Lisbon, no affairs worthy of the name, he has told a lie, he who once declared that he despised inaccuracy.

They descended to the first floor and the manager summoned an employee, a messenger and luggage porter, whom he sent to fetch the gentleman's suitcases. The taxi was waiting in front of the café and the traveler went down with him to pay the fare, an expression that harks back to the days of the horse-drawn cab, and also to check that there was nothing missing, but his mistrust is misguided, undeserved, the driver is an honest fellow and wishes only to be paid what is on the meter plus the customary tip. He will not share the good fortune of the baggage handler at the docks, there will be no further distribution of silver coins, for the traveler by now has changed some of his money at the reception desk, not that we disapprove of generosity, but enough is enough, too much ostentation is an insult to the poor. The suitcase weighs a great deal more than money, and when it reaches the landing, the manager is waiting to supervise its transportation. He moves forward to help by placing his hand underneath, a symbolic action, like someone laying the first stone, for the load is carried up on the errand boy's shoulders. A boy by profession rather than age, and he is beginning to feel his years as he carries up the heavy suitcase, supported on either side by futile gestures of assistance, for those made by the guest are not much help as he looks on in distress at the man's exertions, One more flight to go and you are there. It is room two hundred and one,

Pimenta. This time Pimenta is in luck, he does not have to climb to the upper floors.

Meanwhile the guest returns to the reception desk, somewhat out of breath after all that effort. He takes the pen and enters the essential details about himself in the register of arrivals, so that it might be known who he claims to be, in the appropriate box on the lined page. Name, Ricardo Reis, age, forty-eight, place of birth, Oporto, marital status, bachelor, profession, doctor, last place of residence, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, whence he has arrived aboard the Highland Brigade. It reads like the beginning of a confession, an intimate autobiography, all that is hidden is contained in these handwritten lines, the only problem is to interpret them. And the manager, who has been craning his neck to follow the linking of words and decipher their meaning at the same time, thinks he knows more or less everything. He introduces himself, beginning, Doctor. This is not intended as flattery but rather as a sign of respect, the acknowledgment of a right, a merit, a quality, which warrants immediate recognition even when not made known in writing. My name is Salvador, I am in charge of this hotel, should you require anything, Doctor, you need only tell me. At what time is dinner served. Dinner is at eight, Doctor, I hope you will find our cuisine satisfactory, we also serve French dishes. Doctor Ricardo Reis concedes with a nod that he shares that hope, retrieves his raincoat and hat from a chair, and withdraws.

The porter was waiting for him in the open doorway of his room. Ricardo Reis saw him there as he entered the corridor and knew that the man would hold out a hand, servile yet nonetheless imperious, demanding according to the weight of the luggage. As he proceeded, he noticed something he had failed to observe before, there were doors only on one side of the corridor, on the other side was the wall that formed the well of the staircase. He thought about this as if it were an important matter that must be borne in mind, really feeling very tired. The man hefted the tip rather than look at it, from long experience, and was satisfied, so much so that he said, Many thanks, Doctor. We cannot explain how he knew, for he had not seen the register of arrivals. The fact is that the lower orders are every bit as shrewd and perceptive as those who have been educated and lead a privileged existence. All that bothered Pimenta was the wing of his shoulder blade, for one of the straps reinforcing the suitcase had not been adjusted right. One would think that he did not know how to carry luggage.

Ricardo Reis sat on a chair and looked around him. This is where he will live who knows for how many days, perhaps he will rent a house and open consulting rooms, or he might decide to return to Brazil. But for the moment the hotel will do nicely, a neutral place requiring no commitment. He is in transit, his life is suspended. Beyond the smooth drapes the windows have suddenly become luminous, an effect created by the street lamps. Already so late, this day has ended, what remains hovers in the remote distance over the sea and is fast escaping. Yet only a few hours ago, Ricardo Reis was still sailing those waters. Now the horizon is within arm's reach, embodied by walls, pieces of furniture that reflect the light as a black mirror, and instead of the deep vibration of the steamer's engines he can hear the whispering, the murmuring of the city, six hundred thousand people sighing, calling in the distance. Then cautious footsteps in the corridor, a

woman's voice saying, I'm coming at once. These words, this voice, it must be the maid. He opened one of the windows and looked outside. The rain had stopped. The fresh air, damp with the wind that was sweeping over the river, pervaded the room and cleared away the musty smell, the smell of dirty linen forgotten in some drawer. He reminded himself that a hotel is not a home, smells of one kind or another linger, the perspiration of insomnia or of a night of love, a drenched overcoat, mud brushed from shoes at the hour of departure, the maids who enter to change the beds and sweep the rooms, the odor peculiar to women, unavoidable smells, the signs of our humanity.

He left the window open and went to open another. In his shirt sleeves, refreshed, his vigor suddenly restored, he began to unpack his suitcases. Within half an hour he had emptied them and transferred his clothes to the chest of drawers, his shoes to the shoe rack, his suits to the hangers in the closet, his black suitcase with the medical instruments to a dark recess of a cupboard. The few books he had brought with him were placed on a shelf, some Latin classics which he had got out of the habit of reading, some well-thumbed editions of his favorite English poets, three or four Brazilian authors, less than a dozen Portuguese authors. Among them he found one from the library of the Highland Brigade, a book he had forgotten to return. If the Irish librarian notices the book is missing, grave and grievous accusations will be made against the Lusitanian nation, a land of slaves and brigands, as Byron once quipped, and O'Brien will concur. Insignificant local transgressions often give rise to resounding and universal consequences. But I am innocent, I swear it was merely forgetfulness on my part and nothing more. He placed the book on his bedside table, intending to finish it one of these days, *The God of the Labyrinth* by Herbert Quain, also Irish, by no unusual coincidence. But the name itself is certainly most unusual, for without any great variation in the pronunciation one might read Quain as the Portuguese for Who. Take note, Quain, Quem, a writer who is no longer unknown because someone discovered him on the Highland Brigade. And if that was the only copy, and even it is now missing, all the more reason for asking ourselves Who. The tedium of the voyage and the book's evocative title had attracted him. A labyrinth with a god, what god might that be, which labyrinth, what labyrinthine god. In the end it turned out to be a simple detective story, an ordinary tale of death and investigation, the murderer, the victim, and finally the detective, all three accomplices to the crime. In my honest opinion, the reader of a mystery is the only real survivor of the story he is reading, unless it is as the one real survivor that every reader reads every story.

There are also documents to be stored away, handwritten sheets of verse, the oldest of them dated the twelfth of June, nineteen fourteen. War was about to break out, the Great War, as they were later to call it, until they experienced one even greater. Maestro, placid are the hours we lose, if in losing them, as in a vase, we place flowers. And then it finished, Tranquil, we depart this life, feeling no remorse at having lived. The most recent sheet of all is dated the thirteenth of November, nineteen thirty-five, six weeks have passed since he wrote it. Still fresh, the lines read, Innumerable people live within us. If I

think and feel, I know not who is thinking and feeling, I am only the place where there is thinking and feeling, and, though they do not end here, it is as if everything ends, for beyond thinking and feeling there is nothing. If I am this, muses Ricardo Reis as he stops reading, who will be thinking at this moment what I am thinking, or think that I am thinking in the place where I am, because of thinking. Who will be feeling what I am feeling, or feel that I am feeling in the place where I am, because of feeling. Who is using me in order to think and feel, and among the innumerable people who live within me, who I am, Who, Quem, Quain, what thoughts and feelings are the ones I do not share because they are mine alone. Who am I that others are not nor have been nor will come to be. He gathered together the sheets of paper and put them into a drawer of the little writing desk, closed the windows, and went to run the hot water for a bath. It was after seven.

As the last stroke of eight echoed on the pendulum clock that adorned the wall above the reception desk, Ricardo Reis descended punctually to the dining room. The manager, Salvador, smiled, raising his mustache above his teeth, which looked none too clean, as he hurried forward to open the double doors. Their glass panels, engraved with the initials H and B, the B entwined with curves and countercurves, with appendages and floral elongations, stylized acanthuses, palm fronds, and spiraling foliage, bestowed dignity on this otherwise modest hotel. The maître d' led the way. There were no other guests in the dining room, only two waiters who had finished setting the tables. Noises could be heard coming from behind the pantry door, which bore the same monogram. From that door soup tureens, covered dishes, and platters would soon make their entrance. The furnishings were what you might expect, anyone who has seen one of these dining rooms has seen them all, a few dim lights on the ceilings and walls, immaculate white cloths on the tables, the pride of the establishment, freshened up with bleach in the laundry, if not in the Canecas, which only uses soap and sunshine, but with so much rain for days on end, it must be well behind with its work. Ricardo Reis is now seated. The maître d' tells him what is on the menu, soup, fish, meat, unless the doctor prefers something lighter, that is, another kind of meat, fish, soup. I should advise the latter until you get used to your new diet, since you have just come back from the tropics after an absence of sixteen years. So even in the dining room and kitchen they know all about him. The door leading from the reception desk was pushed open in the meantime and a couple entered with two young children, a boy and a girl, both of them the color of wax though their parents were florid, but both legitimate, to judge from appearances, the head of the family in front, guiding his tribe, the mother pushing her children forward from behind. Then a man appeared, fat and heavy, with a gold chain crossing his stomach from one little waistcoat pocket to another, and almost immediately after him came another man, very thin, with a black tie and a mourning band on his arm. No one else arrived for the next quarter of an hour. The noise of cutlery could be heard against the plates. The father of the children, authoritative, struck the knife against his wineglass to summon the waiter. The thin man, his mourning disturbed and good breeding offended, gave him a severe look, but the fat man calmly went on chewing. Ricardo Reis

contemplated the blobs of grease that floated on his chicken broth. He had chosen the lighter meal, following the maître d's suggestion out of indifference rather than conviction, for he could see no real advantage to it. A ruffling sound against the windowpanes told him that it had started raining again. These windows do not face onto the Rua do Alecrim, what street could it be, he cannot remember, if he ever knew, but the waiter who comes to change his plate informs him, This is the Rua Nova do Carvalho, Doctor, before asking, Did you enjoy your soup. From the waiter's pronunciation, which is good, one can tell that he is Galician.

Through the door now entered a middle-aged man, tall and distinguished in appearance, with a long, lined face, along with a girl in her twenties, if that, and thin, although it would be more correct to describe her as slender. They made their way to the table facing Ricardo Reis and it suddenly became clear that the table had been awaiting them, just as an object awaits the hand that frequently reaches out and takes possession. They must be regular clients, perhaps the owners of the hotel. It is interesting how we forget that hotels have an owner. These two, whether the owners or not, crossed the room at their leisure as if in their own home. Such details you notice when you pay attention. The girl sat in profile, the man with his back to Ricardo Reis, and they conversed in a whisper, but she raised her voice as she reassured him, No, Father, I'm fine. So they are father and daughter, an unusual pairing in any hotel nowadays. The waiter came to serve them, solemn but friendly in his manner, then went away. The room was silent again, not even the children raised their voices. How strange that Ricardo Reis cannot remember having heard the children speak, perhaps they are mute or have their lips stapled together with invisible clips, an absurd thought, since they are both eating. The slender girl, finishing her soup, puts down the spoon, and her right hand starts to caress her left hand as if it were a little lapdog resting on her knees. Surprised by this, Ricardo Reis realizes that her left hand has never moved, he remembers that she used only her right hand to fold her napkin, and now she is holding the left and is about to rest it on the table, very gently, like the most fragile crystal. There she leaves it, beside her plate, a silent presence at the meal, the long fingers extended, pale, inert. Ricardo Reis feels a shiver, no one is feeling it for him, his skin shivers within and without, as in utter fascination he watches that hand, paralyzed and insensible, ignorant of where it should go unless taken, resting to catch the sun or listen to the conversation or be seen by the doctor who has just arrived from Brazil. A tiny hand which is left on two counts, left because it is lying on the left side and left because it is a gauche, disabled, lifeless, and withered thing that will never knock on any door. Ricardo Reis observes that the plates for the girl come from the pantry already prepared, the fishbones removed, the meat diced, the fruit peeled and cut into segments. It is clear that the daughter and father are well known to the hotel staff, they may even live in the hotel. He finished his meal but lingered a while, to allow time, but what time and for what. At last he got up, drew back his chair, and the noise he made, too loud perhaps, caused the girl to turn around. Seen from the front, she looks older than twenty, but in profile her youth is immediately restored, her neck long and fragile, her chin finely molded, the entire restless line of her

body insecure, unfinished. Ricardo Reis got up from the table, headed for the glass-paneled door with the monograms, where he was obliged to exchange courtesies with the fat man who was also leaving. After you, sir, Please, after you. The fat man went out, Thank you, kind sir, a somewhat obsequious use of the word sir, for if we are to take all words literally, Ricardo Reis would have passed first, for he is innumerable men, according to his own understanding of himself.

The manager Salvador is already holding out the key of room two hundred and one. He makes a solicitous gesture, as if about to hand it over but then slyly drawing back. Perhaps the guest wishes to slip out quietly in search of Lisbon by night and its secret pleasures, after so many years in Brazil and so many days crossing the ocean, although the wintry night makes the cozy atmosphere of the lounge seem more enticing, here at hand, the deep high-backed armchairs in leather, the chandelier in the center of the room so rich in crystal pendants, and that big mirror that encompasses the entire room and duplicates it in another dimension. This is no simple reflection of the common and familiar proportions the mirror is confronted with, length, width, height, they are not reproduced in it one by one and readily identifiable. Instead they are fused into a single intangible apparition on a plane that is at once remote and near, unless there is some paradox in this explanation which the mind avoids out of laziness. Here is Ricardo Reis contemplating himself in the depths of the mirror, one of the countless persons that he is, all of them weary. I am going up to my room, I'm exhausted after my journey, two whole weeks of the most awful weather, have you by any chance some newspapers, I'd like to catch up on the national news until I'm ready to fall asleep. There you are, Doctor, help yourself. Just at this moment the girl with the paralyzed hand and her father passed into the lounge, he in front, she behind, one pace apart. Ricardo Reis had already picked up his key and the newspapers, the color of ashes, the print blurred. A gust of wind caused the front door to bang downstairs, the buzzer sounded. There is no one there, only the storm which is gathering. This night will bring nothing more of interest, only rain, tempest over land and sea, solitude.

The sofa in his room is comfortable, the springs on which so many bodies have reclined form a human hollow, and the light from the lamp which stands on the writing desk illuminates the newspaper at the correct angle. This is like being at home, in the bosom of one's family, by the fireside I do not possess and perhaps never will. These are the newspapers of my native Portugal, they inform me that the Head of State has inaugurated an exhibition in honor of Mousinho de Albuquerque at the Colonial Office, one is not spared imperial commemorations or allowed to forget imperial personages. There is cause for anxiety in Golegã, I can't even remember where it is, ah yes, in the province of Ribatejo, that the floods may burst the dike known as Vinte, a most curious name, where could it have come from, we shall see a repetition of the disaster of eighteen ninety-five. In ninety-five I was eight years old, naturally I don't remember. The tallest woman in the world is Elsa Droyon, two and a half meters tall, the water won't rise that much. And that girl, I wonder what her name is, that paralyzed hand, so limp, it

might have been an illness or perhaps some accident. The fifth national contest for beautiful babies, half a page of photographs of infants, stark naked, their rolls of puppy fat bulging, nourished on powdered milk. Some of these babies will grow up to become criminals, vagabonds, and prostitutes, after being photographed like this, at such a tender age, before the lewd eyes of those who have no respect for innocence. The military operations in Ethiopia continue. What news from Brazil, nothing new, everything destroyed. General advance of the Italian troops. There is no human force capable of stopping the Italian soldier in his heroic onslaught, what can the Abyssinian rifle achieve against him, the inferior lance, the wretched cutlass. The lawyer of a famous woman athlete has announced that his client has undergone a major operation in order to change her sex, within a few days she will be a man, as if from birth, do not forget to change her name too, what name, Bocage, before the Tribunal of the Holy Office. A painting by the artist Fernando Santos, the fine arts are cultivated in this country. At the Coliseu they are showing The Last Wonder with Vanise Meireles, a statuesque figure clad in silver, a Brazilian celebrity. Funny, I must have missed her in Brazil, my fault. Here in Lisbon one can get a seat in the gallery for three escudos, a seat in the stalls costs five escudos and up, there are two performances daily and matinees on Sundays. The Politeama is showing The Crusades, a spectacular epic. Numerous contingents of English troops have landed at Port Said, every era has its crusades, these are the crusades of modern times, it is rumored that they are making for the borders of Italian-occupied Libya. A list of the Portuguese who have died in Brazil during the first half of December. These names are unknown to me, I don't need to express my sympathy or go into mourning, but clearly lots of Portuguese immigrants die down there. Charity fetes with free dinners for the poor throughout the country, the quality of food has been improved in the hospices for the poor, the elderly are so well treated in Portugal, not to mention abandoned children, little flowers left on the streets. Then this item of news, the president of the city council in Oporto sent a telegram to the Minister of the Interior, At today's session the council over which I preside resolved, after discussion of the decree which will provide assistance for the poor throughout the winter, to congratulate Your Excellency on this admirable enterprise. Other news, polluted drinking troughs full of cattle dung, smallpox is spreading in Lebução and Fatela, an outbreak of flu in Portalegre and typhoid fever in Valbom, a sixteen-year-old girl has died of smallpox, a pastoral flower of bucolic innocence, a lily cruelly severed from its stem and so prematurely. I have a foxhound bitch, not a purebred, who has already had two litters and on both occasions she was found eating her young, not one escaped, tell me, dear editor, what should I do. In reply to your question, dear reader, the cannibalism of bitches is generally due to malnutrition during the period of gestation. The dog must be well fed with meat as her staple diet and supplemented with milk, bread, and vegetables, in brief, a well-balanced diet. If this does not change her habits, there's no remedy, either destroy the dog or do not allow her to mate, let her put up with being in heat or you can have her spayed. Now let us try to imagine what would happen if women suffering from malnutrition during pregnancy, starved of meat, bread, and green vegetables, which is fairly common, were also to begin eating their infants. After trying to imagine it and having confirmed that such crimes do

not occur, it becomes easy to see the difference between people and animals. The editor did not add these comments, nor did Ricardo Reis, who is thinking about something else, a suitable name for the bitch. He will not call her Diana or Lembrada, but a name to throw light on her crime or motives, and will the wicked creature die from eating poisoned food or from a rifle shot fired by her own master. Ricardo Reis persists and finally finds the right name, one which comes from Ugolino della Gherardesca, that most savage, lusty nobleman who ate his children and grandchildren, there are testimonies to this in the History of the Guelphs and Ghibellines, also in the Divine Comedy, chapter thirty-three of the Inferno. Therefore let the bitch who eats her young be called Ugolina, so unnatural that her heart suffers no compassion as she tears the warm and tender skin of her defenseless brood with her jaws, slaughtering them, causing their delicate bones to snap, and the poor little pups, whining, perish without realizing who is devouring them, the mother who gave them birth. Ugolina, do not kill me, I am your offspring.

The page which calmly narrates these horrors falls onto the lap of Ricardo Reis. He is fast asleep. A sudden gust of wind rattles the windowpanes, the rain pours down like a deluge. Through the deserted streets of Lisbon prowls the bitch Ugolina slavering blood, sniffing in doorways, howling in squares and parks, furiously biting at her own womb, where the next litter is about to be conceived.

After a night of severe winter, of violent storm, the latter two words, violent storm, have been linked together since their inception, the first pair not quite as much, but both phrases are so pertinent to the circumstance that they spare one the effort of having to invent new words, the morning might well have dawned with bright sunshine, blue skies, and joyful flutterings of pigeons in flight. But there was no change in the elements. The swallows continue to fly over the city, the river is not to be trusted, the pigeons scarcely venture there. It is raining, but tolerably for anyone going out with a raincoat and umbrella, and in comparison with the gales earlier this morning, the wind is a mere caress on one's cheek. Ricardo Reis left the hotel early, he went to the Banco Comercial to change some of his English money into escudos, and for every pound sterling he received one hundred and ten thousand reis. A pity those pounds were not gold, otherwise he could have changed them for almost double that amount. Even so, the returning traveler has no real cause for complaint, seeing as he leaves the bank with five thousand escudos in his wallet, a small fortune in Portugal. From the Rua do Comércio, where he finds himself, the Terreiro do Paço is only a few meters away, but Ricardo Reis will not risk crossing the square. He looks into the distance under the protection of the colonnades, the river dark and choppy, the tide high. When the waves rise offshore, one imagines they are about to inundate and submerge the square, but that is an optical illusion, they disperse against the wall, their impact broken by the sloping steps of the wharf. He recalls having sat there in days gone by, days so remote he doubts whether he really experienced them. It may have been someone on my behalf, perhaps with the same face and name, but some other person. His feet are cold and wet, he also feels a shadow of gloom pass over his body, not over his soul, I repeat, not over his soul. The impression is physical, he could touch it with his hands were they not both gripping the handle of his umbrella, which is needlessly open. This is how a man alienates himself from the world, how he exposes himself to the jesting of some passerby who quips, Hey mister, it's not raining under there. But the man's smile is spontaneous, without a hint of malice, and Ricardo Reis smiles at his own distraction. Without knowing why, he murmurs two lines from a poem by João de Deus, well known to every child in nursery school. Under this colonnade one could comfortably spend the night.

He came here because the square was so near and in order to verify in passing if his memory of the place, clear as an engraving, bore any resemblance to the reality. A quadrangle surrounded by buildings on three sides, a regal equestrian statue in the middle, a triumphal arch which he cannot see from where he is standing. But everything is diffuse and hazy, the architecture nothing but blurred lines. It must be the weather, the hour of day, his failing eyesight. Only the eyes of remembrance remain, as sharp as those of a hawk. It is almost eleven o'clock, and there is much activity under the colonnades, but activity is not the same thing as haste. This dignified lot move at a steady pace, all the men in soft hats, their umbrellas dripping, few women are in sight at this hour, the civil servants are arriving at their offices. Ricardo Reis walks on in the direction of the Rua do Crucifixo, resisting the insistent pleas of a lottery-ticket vendor who tries to sell him a ticket for the next draw. It is number one thousand three hundred and forty-nine, the

wheel will spin tomorrow. That is not the number and the wheel will not be spinning tomorrow, but this is how the soothsayer's chant goes, a licensed prophet with a badge on his cap. Do buy a ticket, sir, if you refuse to buy, you will live to regret it, believe me, it's a winner. There is menace in this imposition. Ricardo Reis enters the Rua Garrett, goes up the Chiado, where four porters lean against the plinth of the statue, paying no heed to the drizzle. This is the island of the Galicians. Farther ahead it has actually stopped raining. There is a white patch of light behind Luis de Camoes, a nimbus. That is the trouble with words, nimbus signifies rain as well as cloud as well as halo, and since the poet is neither God nor saint, the rain stopping was merely the clouds thinning out as they passed. Let us not imagine that these are miracles like the ones at Ourique or Fatima, not even the simple miracle of the sky turning blue.

Ricardo Reis goes to the newspaper archives. Yesterday he made a note of the directions before going to bed. There is no reason to believe he slept badly, that he found the bed or country strange. When one awaits sleep in the silence of a room that is still unfamiliar, listening to the rain outside, things assume their real dimension, they all become great, solemn, heavy. What is deceptive is the light of day, transforming life into a shadow that is barely perceptible. Night alone is lucid, sleep, however, overcomes it, perhaps for our tranquillity and repose, the peace of our souls. Ricardo Reis goes to the newspaper archives, where everyone must go who wishes to know what has taken place, for here in the Bairro Alto the entire world passes, leaving footprints, broken twigs, trampled leaves, spoken words. What remains is this necessary invention, so that of the aforesaid world a face may be preserved, a look, a smile, a mortal agony. The unexpected death of Fernando Pessoa caused much sadness in intellectual circles. The poet of Orfeu, an admirable spirit who not only composed poetry in original forms but also wrote cogent critical essays, died the day before yesterday, in silence, just as he had always lived. Since no one can earn a living in Portugal by writing literature, Fernando Pessoa found employment as a clerk in a commercial firm. Some lines further on, his friends left wreaths of remembrance beside his tomb. This newspaper gives no more information. Another reports the same facts with different words, Fernando Pessoa, the extraordinary poet of Mensagem, an ode of patriotic fervor and one of the most beautiful ever written, was buried yesterday, taken unawares by death in a Christian bed at the Hospital of Sao Luis during the late hours of Saturday night. In his poetry he was not only Fernando Pessoa but also Alvaro de Campos, Alberto Caeiro, and Ricardo Reis. There you are, an error caused by not paying attention, by writing what one misheard, because we know very well that Ricardo Reis is this man who is reading the newspaper with his own open and living eyes, a doctor forty-eight years of age, one year older than Fernando Pessoa when his eyes were closed, eyes that were dead beyond a shadow of doubt. No other proofs or testimonies are needed to verify that we are not dealing with the same person, and if there is anyone who is still in doubt, let him go to the Hotel Brangança and speak to the manager Senhor Salvador, ask him if there is not a gentleman in residence there called Ricardo Reis, a doctor, newly arrived from Brazil. He will say Yes, the doctor said he would not be back for lunch but would almost certainly be dining here this

evening, if you would care to leave a message, I shall see that he receives it. Now who will dare impugn the word of a hotel manager, an excellent physiognomist and well practiced in establishing identities. But rather than satisfy ourselves with the word of a man whom we cannot claim to know intimately, here is another paper which has reported the news on the page under obituaries. It outlines his career in detail, Yesterday there took place the funeral of Fernando Antonio Nogueira Pessoa, bachelor, forty-seven years of age, forty-seven, take note, born in Lisbon, studied literature at an English university, became established as a writer and poet in literary circles, on his coffin were placed sprays of wild flowers, worse luck for them, as they wither so quickly. While he is waiting for the tram that will take him to Prazeres, Doctor Ricardo Reis reads the funeral oration delivered at the graveside, he reads it near the place where a man was hanged, as everyone knows, almost two hundred and twenty-three years ago, during the reign of Dom João V, who is not mentioned in the Mensagem. They hanged a Genoese swindler who for the sake of a piece of cloth killed one of our countrymen, stabbing him in the throat with a knife, then doing the same to the dead man's mistress, who died on the spot. He then inflicted two wounds on their servant, which were not fatal, and put out another's eye as if he were a rabbit. The murderer was arrested, and sentenced to death here, since it was near the house where he committed the crimes, in the presence of the crowd that had gathered to watch. Scarcely comparable with this morning in nineteen thirty-five, the month of December, the thirtieth to be precise, the sky overcast, and only those who cannot avoid it out walking in the streets, even though it is not raining now as Ricardo Reis, leaning against a lamppost at the top of the Calçada do Combro, reads the funeral oration. Not for the Genoese swindler, who did not receive one, unless you count the insults of the rabble, but for Fernando Pessoa, poet and innocent of any murders. Two words about the poet's earthly passage. For him two words suffice, or none. Indeed silence would be preferable, the silence that already enshrouds both him and us and which is in keeping with his temperament, for what is close to God is close to him. Yet those who were his peers in extolling beauty should not, could not have allowed him to descend into the earth, or rather ascend to the final horizons of Eternity without voicing their protest, calm yet aggrieved at this departure, the companions of Orpheus, more brothers than companions, who pursued the same ideal of beauty, they could not, I repeat, abandon him in this final resting place without having showered his gentle death with the white lilies of silence and suffering. We mourn the man whom death takes from us, and the loss of his miraculous talent and the grace of his human presence, but only the man do we mourn, for destiny endowed his spirit and creative powers with a mysterious beauty that cannot perish. The rest belongs to the genius of Fernando Pessoa. Come now, come now, exceptions can fortunately still be found to the normal rules of life. Since the time of Hamlet we have been going around saying, The rest is silence, in the end it's genius that takes care of the rest, and if this genius can do it, perhaps another genius can too.

The tram has come and gone, Ricardo Reis has found a seat all to himself. The ticket cost seventy-five centavos, in time he will learn to say, One at seven and a half. He

resumes his reading of the funeral oration, unable to convince himself that it is dedicated to Fernando Pessoa, who must be dead if we look at the press reports, because the poet would not have tolerated such grammatical and lexical bombast. How little they must have known him, to address him and speak of him in this way. They take advantage of his death, his feet and hands are bound. They call him a despoiled lily, a lily like a girl stricken by typhoid fever, and use the adjective gentle. Such banality, dear God. Since gentle means noble, chivalrous, gallant, elegant, pleasing, and urbane, which of these would the poet have chosen as he lay in his Christian bed in the Hospital of Sao Luis. May the gods grant that it be pleasing, for with death one should lose only life.

When Ricardo Reis reached the cemetery, the bell at the gate was ringing, its peals filled the air with the sound of cracked bronze like the bell of some rustic villa ringing out in the drowsy heat of the siesta. About to disappear, a bier was carried by hand, its funeral valances swaying, the women's faces covered with black shawls, the men attired in their Sunday best, purplish chrysanthemums in their arms, more chrysanthemums on the upper ledges of the coffin, not even flowers enjoy a common destiny. The bier disappeared into the depths and Ricardo Reis went to the registry office to inquire where he might find the grave of Fernando Antonio Nogueira Pessoa who died on the thirtieth day of last month, buried on the second of this month, laid to rest in this cemetery until the end of time, when God will command poets to awaken from their temporary death. Realizing that he is in the presence of an educated man of some standing, the clerk carefully informs him about the road and the number, for this is just like any city, sir. In order to make quite certain that his instructions are clear, he comes around the counter, accompanies him outside, and points, Go straight down the avenue, turn right at the bottom, then straight ahead, it's on the right-hand side about two-thirds down the path, look carefully, the tomb is small and you could easily miss it. Ricardo Reis thanks him for his assistance. The winds that come from afar over sea and river, he does not hear them wailing as one might expect in a cemetery, there are only these gray skies, these damp marble stones glistening after the recent rain, the dark-green cypresses darker than ever. As instructed, he starts to descend the road lined with poplars, in search of the grave numbered four thousand three hundred and seventy-one, a number which was drawn in the lottery yesterday and will be drawn no more, drawn by destiny rather than fortune. The road slopes gently downward, one is almost strolling. At least those remaining few steps were not difficult, that final walk of the funeral procession, for nevermore will Fernando Pessoa be accompanied, if during his lifetime he was truly accompanied by those who brought him here. Here is the corner we must take. We ask ourselves why we came, what tears remain to be shed, and why, if we did not shed them before. Perhaps we were more shocked than grieved, the sorrow came later, dull, as if our entire body were a single muscle being crushed internally, no black stain visibly locating our grief. On either side, the chapels of the family tombs are locked, the windows are covered with curtains made of lace, the finest linen like that of handkerchiefs, the most delicate flowers embroidered between two plants, or in heavy crochet made with needles like naked swords, or saying richelieu or ajour, Gallicisms pronounced God alone knows how.

It reminds me of those children on the Highland Brigade, now far, far away, sailing northward over seas where the salt of Lusitanian tears is that of fishermen amid the waves that claim their lives and of their families crying on the shore. The threads of this embroidery were made by the Coats and Clark Company, Anchor Brand, so as not to stray from the disasters of maritime history. Ricardo Reis has already proceeded halfway along the path, constantly looking to the right. Eternal regret, Sad remembrance, Here lies in loving memory of, we would see the same inscriptions if we looked on the other side, angels with drooping wings, lachrymose statues, fingers entwined, folds carefully arranged, drapes neatly gathered, broken columns. Perhaps the stonemasons cut them like that, or delivered them in perfect condition so the relatives of the deceased could break them as a token of their grief, like those warriors who marked the death of their leader by solemnly smashing their shields. Skulls at the foot of the crosses. The evidence of death is the veil with which death masks itself. Ricardo Reis has gone past the tomb he was looking for. No voice called out, Hello, it's here, yet there are still those who insist that the dead can speak. What would become of the dead if there were no means of identifying them, no name engraved on a tombstone, no number as on the doors of the living. A good thing they taught us how to read, for you can imagine some illiterate needing to be led by the hand and told, The tomb is here. He will look at us suspiciously, because should we mislead him, either out of error or malice, he would find himself praying to Capuletto instead of Montecchio, to Gonçalves instead of Mendes.

These are titles of property and occupation, the tomb of Dona Dionísia de Seabra Pessoa inscribed on the front, under the overhanging eaves of this sentry box where the sentinel, a romantic touch, is sleeping. Below, at the height of the door's lower hinge, another name and nothing more, that of Fernando Pessoa, with the dates of his birth and death, and the gilded outline of a funeral urn that says, I am here. Ricardo Reis repeats the words aloud, He is here. At that moment it starts raining again. He has traveled so far, all the way from Rio de Janeiro, days and nights on the high seas, the voyage seems so recent and yet so remote, now what is he to do, alone in this road, among graves, his umbrella open. Time to be thinking about lunch. In the distance he could hear the hollow sound of a bell tolling, the sound he had expected to hear upon arrival, when he touched these railings, his soul gripped by panic, a deep laceration, an inner turmoil, like great cities collapsing in silence because we are not there, porticoes and white towers toppling. In the end nothing but a gentle sensation of burning in one's eyes, no sooner felt than gone, not even time to think about it or be troubled by the thought. There is nothing more to be done in this place, what he has done is nothing. Inside the tomb is a mad old woman who cannot be left to roam at will. Under her watchful eye is also the decomposing body of a composer of verses who left his share of madness in the world. The great difference between poets and madmen is the destiny of the madness that possesses them. He felt afraid, thinking about grandmother Dionísia lying in there, and about her afflicted grandson Fernando, she keeping vigil with eyes wide open, he with eyes averted, looking for a gap, a breath of air, a glimmer of light, his uneasiness turned to nausea as if he were being assailed and suffocated by a great sea wave, he who

throughout the fourteen days of the voyage had not once been seasick. Then he thought, It must be my empty stomach, and he was probably right, for he had eaten nothing all morning. The rain came pouring down, arriving just in time. Now Ricardo Reis will have his answer ready if anyone questions him, No, I didn't spend much time there, it was raining so heavily. As he started to climb the road, walking slowly, he felt the nausea pass. All that remained was a slight headache, perhaps an emptiness in his head, like an absence, a piece of brain missing, the piece relinquished by Pessoa. He found his informant standing in the doorway of the registry, and it was obvious from the grease on the man's lips that he had just finished eating lunch. Where, right here, a napkin spread out on his desk, the food he brought from home, still warm because wrapped in newspapers, or perhaps reheated on a gas flame, there at the far end of the filing cabinets, interrupting his chewing three times to file. So I must have spent more time there than I thought. Then you found the tomb you were looking for. I found it, Ricardo Reis replied, and as he went through the gate he repeated, Yes, I found it.

Famished and in a hurry, he gestured toward the row of taxis. Who knows if he can still find a restaurant or eating house prepared to serve him lunch at this late hour. The driver was methodically chewing a toothpick, passing it from one corner of his mouth to the other with his tongue. It must have been with his tongue, since his hands were occupied with the steering wheel. From time to time he noisily sucked the saliva between his teeth. The sucking sound, the intermittent warbling of digestion, made two simultaneous notes like birdsong, Ricardo Reis thought to himself and smiled, but at the same moment his eyes filled with tears. Strange that such a sound should have such an effect. Or it might have been the sight of a little angel being carried to its grave on a white bier, some Fernando who did not live long enough to become a poet, some Ricardo who could not become a doctor or poet. Perhaps the reason for this outburst of weeping is simply that the moment had come for the release of pent-up emotions. These physiological matters are complicated, let us leave them to those who understand them, particularly if it should prove necessary to follow the path of sentiment into the tear glands themselves, to determine, for example, the chemical difference between tears of sadness and tears of joy, almost certainly the former are more salty, which explains why one's eyes smart so much. In front, the driver pushed the toothpick between his canine teeth on the right. Silently he moved the toothpick up and down, respecting the passenger's sorrow, something he is used to doing when he picks up people at the cemetery. The taxi descended the Canada da Estrela, turned at the Cortes, heading toward the river, and then, reaching the Baixa, went up the Rua Augusta. As it entered the Rossio, Ricardo Reis suddenly remembered, Stop at the Irmãos Unidos, the restaurant just ahead, draw up on the right, there is an entrance at the back, in the Rua dos Correeiros. One can be sure of a good meal here, the food is excellent, the atmosphere traditional, because the restaurant is situated on the very spot where the Hospital de Todos os Santos once stood many years ago. You would think we were narrating the history of another nation. An earthquake comes along, and behold the result, but whether we change for better or for worse depends on how alive we are and hopeful.

Ricardo Reis lunched without worrying about his diet. Yesterday had been an act of weakness on his part. When a man comes ashore after an ocean voyage he is like a child, sometimes seeking a woman's shoulder on which to rest his head, at other times ordering one glass of wine after another in some tavern until he finds happiness, provided happiness has been poured in that bottle beforehand. At other times it is as if he has no will of his own. Any Galician waiter can decide what he should eat, I'd suggest a little chicken if you are feeling queasy, sir. Here no one wishes to know whether he disembarked yesterday, whether tropical dishes have ruined his digestion, what special food will cure his nostalgia for his native land, if that is what he suffers from. If not, why did he come back. From the table where he is sitting, between the gaps in the curtains he can see the trams pass outside, he can hear them creaking on the turns, the tinkling of their little bells, a liquid sound in the rain, like the bells of a submerged cathedral or the strains of a harpsichord echoing ad infinitum within a well. The waiters hover patiently, waiting for this last customer to finish his lunch. He arrived late and pleaded with them to serve him, and his request was granted, although the kitchen staff was already clearing away the pots and pans. Now he's done, he thanks the waiters, politely wishing them a pleasant afternoon as he leaves by the door to the Rua dos Correeiros, which opens onto that Babylon of iron and glass, the Praça da Figueira. Still bustling with activity, the market is calm by comparison with the morning hours, when the noisy cries of the tradesmen grow louder and louder. One inhales a thousand pungent odors, kale trampled and wilting, the excrement of rabbits, the feathers of scalded chickens, blood, bits of flayed skin. They are washing the benches and the alleyways with buckets, hoses, and brooms with tough bristles. From time to time you can hear the scraping of metal, then a sudden boom as a shutter is rolled down, Ricardo Reis went around the square from the southern side and turned into the Rua dos Douradores. The rain almost over, he could now close his umbrella and look up at the tall, grimy façades. Rows of windows at the same height, some with sills, others with balconies, the monotonous stone slabs extending all along the road until they merge into thin vertical strips which narrow more and more but never entirely disappear. Down in the Rua da Conceição, appearing to block the road, rises a building of similar color with windows and grilles of the same design or only slightly modified. All exude gloom and humidity, releasing into the courtyards the stench of cracked sewers, with scattered whiffs of gas. Little wonder that the shopkeepers standing in their doorways have an unhealthy pallor. Dressed in their smocks or aprons of gray cotton, their pens stuck behind one ear, they look disgruntled, because this is Monday and Sunday was disappointing. The road is paved with rough irregular stones, the gravel almost black where the metal wheels of the carts have bounced as they passed. It used to be that in the dry season, which this is not, the iron shoes of the mules gave off sparks when the loads they hauled exceeded the strength of man and beast. Today only lighter freight is carried, such as those sacks of beans which appear to weigh about sixty kilos and are now being unloaded by two men, or should one say liters when referring to beans and seeds. Since the bean by its nature is light, every liter of beans weighs approximately seven hundred and fifty grams, so let us hope that those who filled the sacks took this into account and reduced the load accordingly.

Ricardo Reis started walking back to his hotel and suddenly remembered the room where he had spent his first night like a prodigal son under a paternal roof. He remembered it as if it were his home, not the one in Rio de Janeiro, nor in Oporto, where we know he was born, nor here in Lisbon, where he lived before sailing off to exile in Brazil, none of these, even though they had all been homes to him. A strange sign, and of what, a man thinking of his hotel room as if it were his own home. Disquieted, uneasy at being out for so long, since early morning, he murmured, I'll go back at once. He fought down the urge to hail a taxi, allowed a tram to pass that would have dropped him almost at the hotel door, managed in the end to quell this absurd anxiety, to force himself to be simply someone going back to his hotel, unhurried yet without any needless delay. He may see the girl with the paralyzed arm in the dining room this evening, it is a possibility, like that of seeing the fat man, the thin man in mourning, the pale children and their ruddy parents, who knows what other guests, mysterious arrivals from an unknown place enshrouded in mist. Thinking about them, he felt a consoling warmth in his heart, a deep sense of reassurance, Love one another were the words once spoken, and it was time to begin. The wind blew with force, channeled into the Rua do Arsenal, but it was not raining, all that fell on the pavements were some heavy drops shaken from eaves. Perhaps the weather will change for the better, this winter cannot last forever. For the last two months there has been nothing but heavy showers, the taxi driver told him yesterday, in the tone of one who no longer believes that things will improve.

A sharp buzz as he opened the door, and it was as if he were being welcomed by the statue of the Italian page. Pimenta looked down the steep flight of stairs from the landing above, waiting to greet him, deferential and punctilious, his back slightly stooped, perhaps the result of those loads he is constantly carrying. Good afternoon, Doctor. The manager Salvador also appeared on the landing, saying the same words but in a more refined tone. Ricardo Reis returned their greetings. No longer manager, hotel porter, and doctor, they became simply three men smiling, pleased to be seeing one another again after such a long time, not since early that morning, just imagine, and such nostalgia, dear God. When Ricardo Reis entered his room and observed how carefully it had been cleaned, the bedspread neatly arranged, the washbasin shining, the mirror spotless despite the dents it had collected over the years, he sighed with satisfaction. Changing his clothes and getting into slippers, he pulled open one of the bedroom windows, the gesture of someone who is glad to be home, then settled in the armchair. It was as if he had fallen into himself, a sudden violent fall inside. And now, he asked, And now, Ricardo Reis or whoever you are, as others might say. In an instant he understood that the real conclusion of his voyage was this precise moment, that the time which had elapsed since he set foot on the quay at Alcântara had been spent, so to speak, in the maneuvers of berthing and dropping anchor, probing the tide, throwing the cables, because this was what he'd been doing when he looked for a hotel, read those first newspapers, then visited the cemetery, lunched in the Baixa, strolled down to the Rua dos Douradores. That sudden longing for his room, the impulse of indiscriminate, universal affection, the welcome extended by Salvador and Pimenta, the immaculate bedspread, and finally the

wide-open window, its net curtains fluttering like wings. And what now. The rain has started up again, making a noise on the rooftops like sand being sieved, numbing, hypnotic. Perhaps during the great flood God in His mercy put men to sleep in this way so death might be gentle, the water quietly penetrating their nostrils and mouths without suffocating them, rivulets gradually filling, cell after cell, the entire cavity of their bodies. After forty days and forty nights of sleep and rain, their bodies sank slowly to the bottom, at last heavier than water itself. Ophelia, too, allows herself to be swept away by the current, singing, but she will inevitably die before the end of act four. Each human being has his own way of sleeping and dying, but the flood continues, time rains on us, drowns us. On the waxed surface of the floor raindrops collected and spread, having entered through the open window or spluttered from the sill. Some careless guests give no thought to humble labor, perhaps believing that the bees not only make the wax but also spread it on the floorboards and rub it and buff it until it shines, but it is maids, not insects, who do this work, and without them these shining floors would be drab and grimy. The manager will soon rebuke and punish them, because that is a manager's job, and we are in this hotel for the greater honor and glory of God, whose deputy is Salvador. Ricardo Reis rushed to close the window, with the newspapers mopped up most of the water, and having no other means to finish the job properly he rang the bell. That's the first time I've used it, he thought, like someone begging his own pardon.

He heard steps in the corridor, knuckles tapped discreetly on the door. Come in, words of entreaty rather than command. When the maid opened the door, he said, scarcely bothering to look at her, The window was open, the rain came in, there was water all over the floor. Then he fell silent, realizing that he had produced doggerel, he, Ricardo Reis, the author of Sapphic and Alcaic odes. He almost continued in stupid anapests, Could you do me a favor and clean up this mess. But the maid, without verses, understood what had to be done. She went out and returned with a mop and bucket, and down on her knees, her body wriggling, did her vigorous best to remove the offending moisture. Tomorrow she will give the floor another coat of wax. Can I do anything else for you, Doctor. No, much obliged. They looked straight into each other's eyes. Beating heavily on the windowpanes, the rain's rhythm accelerated, ruffling like a great drum, causing those who were asleep to wake up in alarm. What is your name. Lydia, sir, she replied, then added, At your service, Doctor. She could have expressed it more formally, saying, for example, in a louder voice, I was instructed to do my utmost to please the doctor, for the manager said, Look here, Lydia, take good care of the guest in room two hundred and one, Doctor Reis. The doctor made no reply, he appeared to be whispering the name Lydia in case he should need to call her again. There are people who repeat the words they hear, because we are all like parrots repeating one another, nor is there any other way of learning. This reflection is inappropriate, perhaps, since it was not made by Lydia, who is the other interlocutor and already has a name, so let us allow her to leave, taking her mop and bucket with her. Ricardo Reis remains there smiling ironically, moving his lips in a way that deceives no one. Lydia, he repeats, and smiles, and smiling goes to the drawer to look for his poems, his Sapphic odes, and reads the verses which

catch his eye as he turns the pages. And so, Lydia, sitting by the hearth, Lydia, let the image be thus, Let us show no desire, Lydia, at this hour, When our autumn comes, Lydia, Come sit with me, Lydia, on the riverbank, Lydia, the most abject existence is preferable to death. There is no longer any trace of irony in his smile, if the word smile is an apt description for those parted lips exposing his teeth, the facial muscles fixed into a sneer or pained expression, with which one might say, This, too, shall pass. Like his face reflected in a tremulous mirror of water, Ricardo Reis leans over the page and recomposes old verses. Soon he will be able to recognize himself, It is I, without irony, without sorrow, content to feel not even contentment, as a man who desires nothing more or knows that he can possess nothing more. The shadows in the room thicken, some black nimbus must be passing in the sky, a cloud black as lead, like those summoned for the deluge. The furniture suddenly falls asleep. Ricardo Reis makes a gesture with his hands, groping the colorless air, then, barely able to distinguish the words he traces on the paper, writes, All I ask of the gods is that I should ask nothing of them. Having written this, he does not know how to continue. There are such moments. We believe in the importance of what we have just said or written, if for no other reason than that it is impossible to take back the sounds or erase the marks, but the temptation to be silent pervades our body, the fascination of silence, to be silent and immobile like the gods, watching and nothing more. He moves over to the sofa, leans back, closes his eyes, feels that he could sleep, is already half asleep. From the closet he takes a blanket, wraps himself in it, now he will sleep, and dream that it is a sunny morning and he is strolling along the Rua do Ouvidor in Rio de Janeiro, not exerting himself, for it is very hot. In the distance he hears shooting, bombs, but does not awaken. This is not the first time that he has had this dream, nor does he hear the knocking at the door and a voice, a woman's voice asking, Did you call, Doctor.

Let us say that it was because he slept so little the previous night that he slept so soundly now. Let us say that they are fallacies of doubtful depth, these interchanging moments of enchantment and temptation, of immobility and silence. Let us say that this is no story about deities and that we might have confidentially told Ricardo Reis, before he dozed off like any ordinary human being, What you are suffering from is a lack of sleep. There is, however, a sheet of paper on the table and on it is written, All I ask of the gods is that I should ask nothing of them. This page exists, the words occur twice, each word by itself and then together, and when they are read together they convey a meaning, no matter whether there are gods or not, or whether the person who wrote them has fallen asleep or not. Perhaps things are not as simple as we were inclined to show them at first. When Ricardo Reis awakens, the room is plunged in darkness, the last glimmer dispersed on the clouded windowpanes, in the mesh of the curtains. An enclosing heavy drape blocks one of the windows. There is not a sound to be heard in the hotel, now transformed into the palace of the Sleeping Beauty, where Beauty has withdrawn or never was. Everyone is asleep, Salvador, Pimenta, the Galician waiters, the guests, the Renaissance page, even the clock on the landing has stopped. Suddenly the distant sound of the buzzer at the entrance can be heard, no doubt the prince is coming

to wake Beauty with a kiss, he is late, poor fellow, I came feeling so merry and left in despair, the lady gave me her promise then sent me away, it's a nursery rhyme rescued from the depths of memory. Children shrouded in mist are playing at the bottom of a wintry garden, singing with high, sad voices, they move forward and backward at a solemn pace, unknowingly rehearsing the pavane for the dead infants they will join upon growing up. Ricardo Reis pushes away the blanket, scolds himself for having fallen asleep without first undressing. He has always observed the code of civilized behavior, the discipline it requires, not even sixteen years in the languors of the Tropic of Capricorn succeeded in blunting the sharp edge of his dress and his verse, so that he can claim in all honesty that he has always tried to conduct himself as if he were being observed by the gods themselves. Getting up from the armchair, he goes to switch on the light, and, as if it were morning and he were awakening from some nocturnal dream, he looks at himself in the mirror and strokes his face. He should shave before dinner, at least change his clothes, he must not go to dinner with his clothes all crumpled. He needn't bother. He has not noticed how carelessly the other residents are dressed, their jackets like sacks, trousers bulging at the knees, ties with a permanent knot which are slipped on and off over the head, shirts badly cut, wrinkles, creases, the signs of age. And long, pointed shoes so that one has room to wiggle one's toes, although the result is otherwise, for in no other city in the world do calluses, corns, bunions, and growths, not to mention ingrown toenails, flourish in such abundance, an enigma for any podiatrist and one that requires closer study, which we leave to you. He decides not to shave after all, but puts on a clean shirt, chooses a tie to match his suit, combs his hair in the mirror, and parts it carefully. Although it is not yet time for dinner, he decides to go down, but before leaving, and without touching the sheet of paper, takes another look at what he wrote, looks with a certain impatience, as if finding a message left by one whom he dislikes or who once annoyed him beyond the bounds of tolerance and forgiveness. This Ricardo Reis is not the poet, but simply a hotel guest who, ready to leave his room, discovers a sheet of paper with one and a half stanzas written on it. Who could have left it here. Surely not the maid, not Lydia, this Lydia or any other, how aggravating. It never occurs to people that the one who finishes something is never the one who started it, even if both have the same name, for the name is the only thing that remains constant.

The manager Salvador was at his post, stationary, beaming his perennial smile. Ricardo Reis greeted him and walked on, but Salvador pursued him, wanting to know if the doctor would like to have a drink before dinner, an *apéritif*. No, thank you, this was another habit Ricardo Reis had not acquired, perhaps in years to come, first the taste, then the need, but not just yet. Salvador lingered for a moment in the doorway to see if the guest might change his mind or make some other request, but Ricardo Reis had already opened one of the newspapers. That entire day he had spent in ignorance of what was happening in the world. Not that he was an assiduous reader by nature, on the contrary, he found those large pages and verbose articles tiresome, but here, having nothing better to do and in order to avoid being fussed over by Salvador, he made the paper with all its news from abroad serve as a shield against this more immediate and

encroaching world. The news of the distant world can be read as insignificant dispatches whose use and destination are questionable. The Spanish Government has resigned, the dissolution of Parliament has been decreed, says one headline. The Negus, in a telegram to the League of Nations, claims that the Italians are using asphyxiating gases. How typical of newspapers, all they can talk about is what has already happened and nearly always when it is much too late to rectify mistakes, prevent shortages, or avert disasters. A worthwhile paper should tell you, on the first day of January in the year nineteen fourteen, that war will break out on the twenty-fourth of July, then we would have almost seven months at our disposal to ward off the threat. Perhaps that would be enough time. Better still if a list were published of those about to die. The millions of men and women who, as they drink their morning coffee, come upon the announcement of their own deaths, their destinies sealed and shortly to be fulfilled, the day, hour, and place, their names printed in full. What would they have done, what would Fernando Pessoa have done if he had read two months beforehand, The author of Mensagem will die on the thirtieth of next November from hepatitis. Perhaps he would have consulted a doctor and stopped drinking, or else he would have started drinking twice as much in order to die sooner. Ricardo Reis lowers the newspaper to look at himself in the mirror, a reflection that is twice deceiving because it shows a deep space then shows that the space is a mere surface where nothing actually happens, only the illusion, external and silent, of persons and things, a tree overhanging a lake, a face seeking itself, a face undisturbed, unaltered, not even touched, by the images of tree and lake and face. The mirror, this one and all others, is independent of man. Before it we are like a conscript departing for the nineteen-fourteen war. Admiring his uniform in the mirror, he sees something more than himself, not knowing that he will never see himself again in this mirror. We are vanity and cannot endure, but the mirror endures, the same, because it rejects us. Ricardo Reis averts his eyes, changes position, leaves, he the one rejecting, turning his back on the mirror. Perhaps, then, he too is a mirror.

The clock on the landing struck eight, and the last echo had scarcely died away when an invisible gong rang out in muted tones. It can only be heard in the immediate vicinity, the guests on the upper floors certainly cannot hear it. But one must bear in mind the weight of tradition, it is not just a matter of pretending that wine bottles are encased in wickerwork when wicker is no longer available. Ricardo Reis folds the newspaper, goes to his room to wash his hands and tidy up. Returning immediately, he sits at the table where he has eaten from his very first day here and waits. Anyone watching him, following those rapid footsteps, would think that he must be either famished or in a great hurry, had an early lunch and eaten little or else bought a ticket for the theater. But we know otherwise, he didn't have an early lunch, we also know that he is not going to the theater or the cinema, and in weather such as this, becoming steadily worse, only a fool or an eccentric would dream of going for a walk. Why, then, the sudden haste, if people are only just arriving for dinner, the thin man in mourning, the placid fat man with the excellent digestion, those others whom I did not see last night. The mute children and their parents are missing, perhaps they were only passing through. As of tomorrow I shall

not enter the dining room before half past eight. Here I am as ridiculous as any bumpkin newly arrived in the city and staying for the first time in a hotel. He ate his soup slowly, idly playing with his spoon, then toyed with the fish on his plate, pecked at it, not feeling the least bit hungry. As the waiter was serving the main course, the maître d' guided three men to the table where, the evening before, the girl with the paralyzed hand and her father had dined. So she won't be coming, they've left, he thought, or are dining out. Only then did he admit what he already knew but had pretended not to, that he had really come down early to see the girl whose left hand is paralyzed and who strokes it as if it were a little lap dog, even though it does nothing for her, or perhaps for that reason. Why. The question is a pretense, in the first place because certain questions are posed simply to call attention to the absence of any reply, in the second place because there is something both true and false about the possibility that his interest does not require any deeper explanation. He cut short his dinner and ordered coffee and a brandy. He would wait in the lounge, one way of killing time until he could ask the manager Salvador who those people were. That father and daughter, you know I believe I've seen them before, elsewhere, perhaps in Rio de Janeiro, certainly not in Portugal, that is obvious because sixteen years ago the girl would have been a mere child. Ricardo Reis spins and weaves this web of overtures, so much inquiring to discover so little. Meanwhile Salvador is attending to other guests, one who is leaving early tomorrow morning and wishes to settle his bill, another who complains that he cannot sleep when the window shade starts banging. Salvador attends to all the guests with tact and solicitude, with his discolored teeth and smooth mustache. The thin man dressed in mourning came into the lounge to consult a newspaper and left almost immediately. The fat man appeared at the door biting a toothpick, hesitated when confronted with a blank stare from Ricardo Reis, then quickly withdrew, his shoulders drooping from lack of courage. Some retreats are like this, moments of extreme moral weakness which are difficult to explain, especially to oneself.

Half an hour later the affable Salvador is able to inform him, No, you must have mistaken them for someone else, as far as I know they have never visited Brazil, they've been coming here for the last three years, we have often chatted and they would almost certainly have told me about such a voyage. Ah, so I was mistaken, but you say they have been coming here for the last three years. That's right, they are from Coimbra, they live there, the father is Doctor Sampaio, a lawyer. And the girl. She has an unusual name, she is called Marcenda, would you believe it, but they belong to an aristocratic family, the mother died some years ago. What is wrong with her hand. I believe her whole arm is paralyzed, that's why they come to stay here in the hotel for three days every month, so that she can be examined by a specialist. Ah, every month for three days. Yes, three days every month, Doctor Sampaio always warns me in advance so that I can keep the same two rooms free. Has there been any improvement during the last three years. If you want my frank opinion, Doctor, I don't think so. What a pity, the girl is so young. That's true, Doctor, perhaps you could offer them some advice next time, if you are still here. It's most likely I shall be here, but in any event I am not specialized in that field, I practice general medicine, I did some research into tropical diseases but nothing that would be

helpful in a case like hers. Never mind, but it's very true that money doesn't bring happiness, the father so rich and the daughter a cripple, no one has ever seen her smile. You say she's called Marcenda. Yes, sir. A strange name, I've never come across it before. Nor I. Until tomorrow, Senhor Salvador, Until tomorrow, Doctor.

Upon entering his room, Ricardo Reis sees that the bed has been prepared, the bedspread and sheet neatly tucked back at an angle, discreetly, not that unsightly clutter of bedclothes tossed aside every which way. Here there is merely a suggestion, should he wish to lie down, his bed is ready. Not just yet, first he must read the one and a half stanzas he left on the sheet of paper, examine them critically, look for the door that this key, if key it is, can open, and imagine other doors beyond, doors locked and without a key. In the end, after much persistence he found something, it had been left there out of weariness, his or someone else's, but whose, and so the poem ended, Neither tranquil nor troubled, I wish to lift my being high above this place where men know pleasure and pain, the pause in the middle, the spondee, should be changed. Good fortune is a burden that oppresses the happy man, because it is no more than a particular state of mind. He then went to bed and fell asleep at once.

Ricardo Reis had told the manager, I would like breakfast brought up to my room at nine-thirty. Not that he intended to sleep so late, but he wished to avoid having to jump out of bed half-awake, struggling to slip his arms into the sleeves of his dressing gown, groping for his slippers, and feeling panic that he wasn't moving quickly enough to satisfy whoever was standing outside his door, arms laden with a huge tray bearing coffee and milk, toast, a sugar bowl, perhaps some cherry preserve or marmalade, a slice of dark grainy quince paste, a sponge cake, brioches with a fine crust, crunchy biscuits, or slices of French toast, those scrumptious luxuries served in hotels. We shall soon learn if the Brangança goes in for such extravagance, because Ricardo Reis is about to sample his first breakfast. It would be nine-thirty on the dot, Salvador promised him, and did not promise in vain, for here at nine-thirty on the dot Lydia is knocking on the door. The observant reader will say that this is impossible, she has both her arms occupied, but we would be in a sorry state if we had to hire only servants who possess three arms or more. This maid, without spilling a drop of milk, manages to knock gently with her knuckles, while the hand belonging to those knuckles continues to support the tray. One must see this to believe it, as she calls out, Your breakfast, Doctor, which is what she was instructed to say, and although a woman of humble origins, she has not forgotten her instructions. If Lydia were not a maid, there is every indication that she would make an excellent tightrope walker, juggler, or magician, for she has talent enough for any of those professions. What is incongruous about her is that, being a maid, she should be called Lydia and not Maria. Ricardo Reis is already dressed and presentable, he has shaved and his dressing gown is tied at the waist. He even left the window ajar to air the room, for he detests nocturnal odors, those exhalations of the body from which not even poets are exempt. The maid finally entered, Good morning, Doctor, and proceeded to put down the tray, less lavish in its offerings than he had imagined. Nevertheless, the Brangança deserves an honorable mention, and it is no wonder that some of its guests would never dream of staying at any other hotel when they visit Lisbon. Ricardo Reis returns the greeting, then dismisses her, No, many thanks, that will be all, the standard reply to the question every good maid asks, Can I get you anything else, sir. If the answer is no, she must withdraw politely, backing away if at all possible, for to turn your back would be to show disrespect to one who pays your wages and gives you a living. But Lydia, who has been instructed to be especially attentive to the doctor's needs, goes on to say, I don't know if you have noticed, Doctor, but the Cais do Sodré is under water. Trust a man not to notice, the water could be forcing its way under his door and he wouldn't see it, having slept soundly all night. He woke up as if he had only been dreaming about the rain. And even in a dream he would not dream that there has been so much rain that the Cais do Sodré is flooded. The water comes up to the knees of a man who finds himself obliged to cross from one side to the other, barefoot, his clothes hitched up, carrying an elderly woman on his back through the flood, she much lighter than the sack of beans carried from the cart to the warehouse. Here at the bottom of the Rua do Alecrim the old woman opens her purse and finds a coin, with which she pays Saint Christopher, who has already gone paddling back into the water, for on the other side there is already someone else making frantic gestures. The second person is young

and sturdy enough to cross on his own, but, being smartly dressed, he has no desire to get his clothes dirty, for this water is more like mud than water. If only he could see how silly he looks riding piggyback with his clothes all crumpled, his shins exposed, revealing green garters over white long underwear. Some are laughing now at the spectacle, in the Hotel Brangança, on the second floor, a middle-aged guest is grinning, and behind him, unless our eyes are deceiving us, stands a woman also grinning, yes, a woman, without a shadow of doubt, but our eyes do not always see right, because this one appears to be a maid. It is hard to believe that that is really her station, unless there has been some dangerous subversion of social class and ranking, a thing greatly to be feared, we hasten to add, yet there are occasions, and if it is true that occasion can turn a man into a thief, it can also cause a revolution such as the one we are witnessing. Lydia, daring to look out of the window, stands behind Ricardo Reis and laughs, as if she were his equal, at a scene they both find amusing. These are fleeting moments of a golden age, born suddenly and dying at once, which explains why happiness soon grows weary. The moment has already passed, Ricardo Reis has closed the window, Lydia, once more simply a maid, backs toward the door. Everything must now be done in haste because the slices of toast are getting cold and no longer look quite so appetizing. I shall ring for you to come and remove the tray, Ricardo Reis tells her, and this happens about half an hour later. Lydia quietly enters and quietly withdraws, her burden not as heavy, while Ricardo Reis pretends to be absorbed as he sits in his room leafing through the pages of *The God of the Labyrinth* without actually reading.

Today is the last day of the year. Throughout the world where this calendar is observed, people amuse themselves by weighing the resolutions they intend to put into practice during the incoming year. They swear that they will be honest, just, and forbearing, that their reformed lips will utter no more words of abuse, deceit, or malice, however much their enemies may deserve them. Clearly we are speaking about the common people. The others, uncommon and superior, have their own good reasons for being and doing quite the opposite whenever it suits or profits them, they do not allow themselves to be deceived, and laugh at us and our so-called good intentions. In the end we learn from experience, no sooner is January upon us than we forget half of what we promised, and then there is little point in trying to carry out the rest. It is rather like a castle made of cards, better for the upper part to be missing than have the whole thing collapse and the four suits mixed up. This is why it is questionable whether Christ departed from life with the words we find in the Holy Scriptures, those of Matthew and Mark, My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me, or those of Luke, Father, into Thine hand I commit my spirit, or those of John, It is fulfilled. What Christ really said, word of honor, as any man on the street will tell you, was, Good-bye, world, you're going from bad to worse. But the gods of Ricardo Reis are silent entities who look upon us with indifference and for whom good and evil are less than words, because they never utter them, and why should they, if they cannot even tell them apart. They journey like us in the river of things, differing from us only because we call them gods and sometimes believe in them. We were taught this lesson lest we wear ourselves out making new and

better resolutions for the incoming year. Nor do the gods judge, knowing everything, but this may be false. The ultimate truth, perhaps, is that they know nothing, their only task being precisely to forget at each moment the good as well as the evil. So let us not say, Tomorrow I shall do it, for it is almost certain that tomorrow we will feel tired. Let us say instead, The day after tomorrow, then we will always have a day in reserve to change our mind and make new resolutions. It would be even more prudent, however, to say, One day, when the day comes to say the day after tomorrow, I shall say it, but even that might not prove necessary, if definitive death comes first and releases me from the obligation, for obligation is the worst thing in the world, the freedom we deny ourselves.

It has stopped raining, the sky has cleared, and Ricardo Reis can take a stroll before lunch without any risk of getting soaked. He decides to avoid the lower part of the city because the flood has still not subsided completely in the Cais do Sodré, its paving stones covered with fetid mud which the current of the river has lifted from deep and viscous layers of silt. If this weather persists, the men from the cleaning department will come out with their hoses. The water has polluted, the water will clean, blessed be the water. Ricardo Reis walks up the Rua do Alecrim, and no sooner has he left the hotel than he is stopped in his tracks by a relic of another age, perhaps a Corinthian capital, a votive altar, or funereal headstone, what an idea. Such things, if they still exist in Lisbon, are hidden under the soil that was moved when the ground was leveled, or by other natural causes. This is only a rectangular slab of stone embedded in a low wall facing the Rua Nova do Carvalho and bearing the following inscription in ornamental lettering, Eye Clinic and Surgery, and somewhat more austere, Founded by A. Mascaró in 1870. Stones have a long life. We do not witness their birth, nor will we see their death. So many years have passed over this stone, so many more have yet to pass, Mascaró died and his clinic was closed down, perhaps descendants of the founder can still be traced, they pursuing other professions, ignoring or unaware that their family emblem is on display in this public place. If only families were not so fickle, then this one would gather here to honor the memory of their ancestor, the healer of eyes and other disorders. Truly it is not enough to engrave a name on a stone. The stone remains, gentlemen, safe and sound, but the name, unless people come to read it every day, fades, is forgotten, ceases to exist. These contradictions walk through the mind of Ricardo Reis as he walks up the Rua do Alecrim, where tiny rivulets of water still course along the tram tracks. The world cannot be still, the wind is blowing, the clouds soaring, don't let us talk about the rain, there has been so much of it. Ricardo Reis stops before a statue of Eça de Queirós, or Queiroz, out of respect for the orthography used by the owner of that name, so many different styles of writing, and the name is the least of it, what is surprising is that these two, one called Reis, the other Eça, should speak the same language. Perhaps it is the language that chooses the writers it needs, making use of them so that each might express a tiny part of what it is. Once language has said all it has to say and falls silent, I wonder how we will go on living. Problems already begin to appear, perhaps they are not problems as yet, rather different layers of meaning, displaced sediments, new questioning formulations, take for example the phrase, Over the great nakedness of truth, the

diaphanous cloak of imagination. It seems clear, compact, and conclusive, a child would be able to understand and repeat it in an examination without making any mistakes, but the same child might recite with equal conviction a different phrase, Over the great nakedness of imagination, the diaphanous cloak of truth, which certainly gives one more to ponder, more to visualize with pleasure, the imagination solid and naked, the truth a gauzy covering. If our maxims are reversed and become laws, what world will be created by them. It is a miracle that men do not lose their sanity each time they open their mouths to speak. The stroll is instructive, a moment ago we were contemplating Eça, now we can observe Camoes. They forgot to put any verses on his pedestal. Had they done so, what would they have put, Here with deep sorrow, with mournful song. Better to leave the poor, tormented creature and climb what remains of the street, the Rua da Misericórdia formerly the Rua do Mundo, unfortunately one cannot have it both ways, it has to be either Mundo or Misericórdia. Here is the old Largo de Sao Roque, and the church dedicated to that saint, whose festering wounds caused by plague were licked by a dog. The plague was almost certainly bubonic, the animal hardly of the same breed as the bitch Ugolina that knows only how to tear and devour. Inside this famous church you will find the chapel of Sao João Baptista, its decorations entrusted to Italian artists by Dom João V, king, mason, and architect par excellence, who won such renown during his reign. Take a look at the convent of Mafra and also the aqueduct of Águas Livres, of which the full history has yet to be written. Here too, on the diagonal of the two kiosks that sell tobacco, lottery tickets, and spirits, stands the monument in marble erected by the Italian colony to commemorate the marriage of King Dom Luis, the translator of Shakespeare, and Dona Maria Pia di Savōia, the daughter of Verdi, that is to say, of Vittorio Emmanuele, King of Italy, the only monument in the entire city of Lisbon which resembles a chastising rod or carpet beater with its five eyelets. At least that is what it suggests to the little girls from the orphanages, with their startled eyes, or if blind, they are so informed by their seeing companions, who from time to time pass this way dressed in little smocks and walking in formation, getting rid of the stench of the dormitory, their hands still smarting from the latest caning. This is a traditional neighborhood, exalted in name and location, but low in its way of life, for the laurel branches on the doors of the taverns alternate with women of easy virtue, al though, because it is still morning and the roads have been washed by the recent rain, you can sense a freshness, an innocence in the air, an almost virginal breeze. Who would have thought this possible in such a disreputable place, but the canaries affirm it with their song, their cages hanging out on the balconies or at the entrances to the taverns, they warble as if demented. One has to take advantage of the fine weather, especially when it is not expected to last, for once the rain starts up again their singing will die away, their feathers will ruffle. One little bird, more prescient than the others, buries its head under its wing and pretends to be asleep, its mistress is coming to fetch it indoors, and now only rain can be heard, also the strumming of a guitar nearby, where it is coming from Ricardo Reis cannot tell. He has taken shelter in this doorway at the beginning of the Travessa da Agua da Flor. It's often said that the sun is here then gone again, the clouds that let it through cover it quickly, but showers, too, come and go, the rain pours down, passes, the eaves and verandahs

trickle water, the wash on the clotheslines is dripping, then a cloudburst so sudden there is no time for the women to do anything, to shout, as is their wont, It's raiiiiining, passing the word from one to another like soldiers in their sentry boxes at night. But the canary's mistress is on the alert and manages, in the nick of time, to retrieve it. Just as well that its frail little body has been protected, see how its heart is beating, Jesus, such violence, such speed. Was it the fright, no, it is always like this, a heart that lives for a short time beats fast, in compensation. Ricardo Reis crosses the park to take a look at the city, the castle with its walls in ruins, the terraced houses collapsing along the slopes, the whitish sun beating on the wet rooftops. Silence descends on the city, every sound is muffled, Lisbon seems made of absorbent cotton, soaked, dripping. Below, on a platform, are several busts of gallant patriots, some box shrubs, a few Roman heads out of place, so remote from the skies of Latium, as if one of Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro's native rustics had been set up to make a rude gesture to the Apollo Belvedere. The entire terrace is a belvedere as we contemplate Apollo, then a voice joins the guitar and they sing a fado. The rain appears to have finally disappeared.

When one idea is drawn from another, we say that there has been an association. Some are even of the opinion that the whole human mental process derives from this succession of stimuli, sometimes unconscious, sometimes only pretending to be unconscious, which achieves original combinations, new relationships of thoughts interlinked by the species and together forming what might be called a commerce, an industry of ideas, because man, apart from all the other things he is, has been, or will be, performs an industrial and commercial function, first as producer, then as retailer, and finally as consumer, but even this order can be shuffled and rearranged. I am speaking only of ideas and nothing else. So, then, we can consider ideas as corporate entities, independent or in partnership, perhaps publicly held, but never with limited liability, never anonymous, for a name is something we all possess. The logical connection between this economic theory and the stroll Ricardo Reis is taking, which we already know to be instructive, will become apparent when he arrives at the entrance of the former convent of Sao Pedro de Alcântara, nowadays a refuge for little girls pedagogically chastised with the rod. In the vestibule he comes face to face with the tiled mural depicting Saint Francis of Assisi, il poverello, freely translated as poor devil, kneeling in ecstasy and receiving the stigmata, which in this symbolic representation reach him by means of five cords of blood that descend from on high, from Christ crucified, who hovers in the heavens like a star, or like a kite launched by urchins in the open countryside where there is no lack of space and where people still remember a time when men could be seen flying. With his hands and feet bleeding, his side a gaping wound, Saint Francis holds on to Christ's cross to prevent Him from disappearing into the cloistered heights. There the Father calls to His Son, Come, come, your time for being a man is at an end. That is why we see Saint Francis twitching in saintly fashion as he struggles to hold on, as he murmurs what some believe to be a prayer, I won't let you go, I won't let you go. From these events, which are only now being revealed, you can see just how urgent it is to dismiss orthodox theology and forge a new theology totally opposed to traditional

beliefs. Here is an association of ideas for you, then, to illustrate, because first there were Roman heads on the terrace, which was a belvedere, then Ricardo Reis remembered the obscene gesture of the Portuguese rustic, and now, at the entrance to an old convent in Lisbon, not in Wittenberg, he discovers how and why the common people call that gesture the heraldic arms of Saint Francis, for it is the gesture the desperate saint makes to God when He tries to take away his star. There will be no lack of skeptics and conservatives who reject this hypothesis, but that need not surprise us, it is, after all, what always happens to new ideas, ideas born by association.

Ricardo Reis searches his memory for fragments of poems composed some twenty years ago, how time flies, Unhappy God, essential to all, perhaps because He is unique. It is not you, Christ, whom I despise, but do not usurp what belongs to others. Through the gods we men stand united. These are the words he mutters to himself as he walks along the Rua de Dom Pedro V as if looking for fossils or the ruins of an ancient civilization, and for a moment he wonders whether there is any meaning left in the odes from which he has taken these random lines, lines still coherent but weakened by the absence of what comes before and what follows, paradoxically assuming, by that absence, another meaning, one obscure and authoritative, like that of an epigraph to a book. He asks himself if it is possible to define a unity that joins, like a fastener or clip, two things opposed, divergent, such as that saint who went healthy to the mountain and returned oozing blood from five wounds. If only he had succeeded, at the end of the day, in winding up those cords and returning home, weary as any laborer after his toil, carrying under his arm the kite he was able to retrieve only by the skin of his teeth. It would rest by his pillow while he slept. Today he has won, but who can tell if he will win tomorrow. Trying to join these opposites is probably as absurd as trying to empty the sea with a bucket, not because that is so enormous a task, even if one has the time and energy, but because one would first have to find somewhere on land another great cavity for the sea, and this is impossible. There is so much sea, so little land.

Ricardo Reis is also absorbed by the question he posed himself upon arriving at the Praça do Rio de Janeiro, once known as the Praça do Príncipe Real and which one day may go back to that name, should anyone live to see it. When the weather becomes hot, one longs for the shade of these silver maples, elms, the Roman pine which looks like a refreshing pergola. Not that this poet and doctor is so well versed in botany, but someone must make up for the ignorance and lapses of memory of a man who for the last sixteen years has grown accustomed to the vastly different and more baroque flora and fauna of the tropics. This is not, however, the season for summer pursuits, for the delights of beach and spa, today's temperature must be around ten degrees Centigrade and the park benches are wet. Ricardo Reis pulls his raincoat snugly around his body, shivering, he goes back by other avenues, now descending the Rua do Século, unable to say what made him decide on this route, this street so deserted and melancholy. A few grand residences remain alongside the squat, narrow houses built for the poorer classes, at least the nobility in former days were not all that discriminating, they lived side by side

with the common folk. God help us, the way things are going we will see the return of exclusive neighborhoods, nothing but private residences for the barons of industry and commerce, who very soon will swallow up whatever is left of the aristocracy, residences with private garages, gardens in proportion to the size of the property, dogs that bark ferociously. Even among the dogs one notices the difference. In the distant past they attacked both rich and poor.

Showing no haste, Ricardo Reis proceeds down the street, his umbrella serving as a walking stick. He taps the paving stones as he goes, beating time with every other step, the sound precise, distinct, sharp. There is no echo, yet the impact is almost liquid, if the term is not absurd, let us say that it is liquid, for so it seems as the tip of the umbrella strikes the limestone. He is absorbed by these puerile thoughts when suddenly he becomes aware of his own footsteps, almost as if, since leaving the hotel, he has not met a living soul. He would swear to that if called upon to testify, I saw no one on my walk. How is that possible, my good man, in a city one could scarcely regard as being small, where did all the people disappear to. He knows, of course, because common sense, the only repository of knowledge which common sense itself assures us is irrefutable, tells him so, that this cannot be true, he must have passed a number of people along the route, and now in this street, for all its tranquillity, there are groups of people, all walking downhill. They are poor people, some almost beggars, entire families with the elderly walking behind, dragging their feet, with sunken hearts, and the children are tugged along by their mothers, who shout, Hurry up, or everything will be gone. What has gone is peace and quiet, the street is no longer the same. As for the men, they try to adopt the severe expression one expects of the head of a family, they walk at their own pace, like someone who has another goal in sight. Together the families disappear. On the next street corner is a stately residence with palm trees in the courtyard, reminding one of Arabia Felix. Its medieval features have lost none of their charm, concealing surprises on the other side, not like these modern urban arteries designed in straight lines with everything in sight, as if sight can be so easily satisfied. Ricardo Reis is confronted by a dense multitude crowding the entire width of the road, patient and restless at the same time, heads bobbing like the playing of waves, like a cornfield ruffled by the breeze. Ricardo Reis draws close, asks to be allowed to pass. The person in front of him makes a gesture of refusal, turns to him and is on the point of saying, If you're in a hurry, you should have got here sooner, but comes face to face with a smart gentleman wearing neither beret nor cap, dressed in a light raincoat, white shirt and tie. That is all that is needed to persuade the man to step aside and, as if this were not enough, to tap the shoulder of the man in front, Let this gentleman pass. The other follows suit, which is why we can see the gray hat worn by Ricardo Reis advancing as smoothly amid this human mass as the swan of Lohengrin over the becalmed waters of the Black Sea. His crossing, however, takes time, for the crowd is vast. Besides, as one draws nearer the center, it becomes increasingly difficult to persuade people to let one through, not because of any sudden ill will but simply because no one can move in the crush. What is going on, Ricardo Reis asks himself, but does not dare ask the question aloud, reasoning

that where so many have gathered for a purpose known to all, it would be wrong, improper, indelicate, to show one's ignorance. People might take offense, for how can we be certain of the feelings of others when we are often surprised by our own. Ricardo Reis is halfway down the street, standing before the entrance of the large building occupied by O'Século, the country's leading newspaper. The crowd is less dense in the crescent fronting the building, and only now does Ricardo Reis become aware that he has been holding his breath to avoid the stench of overcooked onion, garlic, of sweat, of clothes that are scarcely ever changed, of bodies that are never washed unless they are going to be examined by a doctor. Olfactory organs in any way squeamish would find this journey a tribulation. Two policemen are posted at the entrance, close by are another two. Ricardo Reis is about to ask one of them, What is this gathering, officer, when the representative of law and order informs him respectfully, for one can tell at a glance that the gentleman making the inquiry is here by accident, It's the charity day organized by O Século. But there is such a crowd. Yes sir, they reckon that there are over a thousand here. Are all of them poor. All of them, sir, poor people from the back streets and slums. So many. Yes sir, and they are not all here. Of course, but all these people gathered to receive charity, it is a disturbing sight. It doesn't disturb me, sir, I'm used to it. And what are they given. Each pauper gets ten escudos. Ten escudos. That's right, ten escudos, and the children are given clothing, toys, and books. To help educate them. Yes sir, to help educate them. Ten escudos won't go very far. It's better than nothing, sir. Too true. Some of them spend the whole year just waiting for this distribution of charity, for this one and others, and there are even some who spend all their time running from charity event to charity event, grabbing what they can get, the trouble starts when they turn up in places where they are unknown, in other districts, other parishes, the poor who belong there chase them out, each pauper keeps a sharp eye on the other paupers. A sad business. It may be sad, sir, but otherwise there would be no controlling them. Thank you for the information, officer. At your service, sir, pass this way, sir. With these words the policeman took three steps forward, his arms outspread like someone shooing chickens toward the coop, All right now, move on quietly, unless you want to see me wielding my saber. With these persuasive remarks the crowd moves on, the women protesting as usual, the men acting as if they have heard nothing, the children thinking about the toys they will receive, perhaps a little car, perhaps a cycle, perhaps a celluloid doll, for these they would gladly exchange their sweaters and readers. Ricardo Reis climbed the slope of the Calçada dos Caetanós, from where he had a bird's-eye view and could estimate the size of the crowd. More than a thousand, the policeman was right, a country well endowed with paupers. Let us pray that charity will never dry up for this mob in shawls, kerchiefs, patched shirts, cheap cotton pants with the seats mended in a different material, some people in sandals, many barefoot. Despite the various colors, they form, massed together, a dark smudge, a black, fetid mud like that in the Cais do Sodré. They wait, and will continue to wait until their turn comes, hours and hours on their feet, some since dawn, mothers holding children in their arms, breast-feeding newborn infants, fathers conversing among themselves on topics that interest men, the aged taciturn and glum, shaky on their legs, drooling at the mouth. The day on which alms are distributed is

the only day their families do not wish them dead, for that would mean fewer escudos. And there are plenty of people with fever, coughing their heads off, passing a few small bottles of liquor to help pass the time and ward off the cold. If the rain starts up again, they will get soaked, because there is no shelter here.

Ricardo Reis crossed the Bairro Alto, descending by the Rua do Norte, and when he reached the Rua de Camoes he felt as if he were trapped in a labyrinth that always led him back to the same spot, to this bronze statue ennobled and armed with a sword, another D'Artagnan. Decorated with a crown of laurels for having rescued the queen's diamonds at the eleventh hour from the machinations of the cardinal, whom, however, with a change of times and politics he will end up serving, this musketeer standing here, who is dead and cannot reenlist, ought to be told that he is used, in turn or at random, by heads of state and even by cardinals, when it serves their interests. The hours have passed quickly during these explorations on foot, and it is time for lunch. This man appears to have nothing else to do, he sleeps, eats, strolls, and composes poetry line by line with much effort, agonizing over rhyme and meter. It is nothing compared to the endless dueling of the musketeer D'Artagnan, and the Lusiads run to more than eight thousand lines, yet Ricardo Reis too is a poet, not that he boasts of that on the hotel register, but one day people will remember him not as a doctor, just as they do not think of Alvaro de Campos as a naval engineer, or of Fernando Pessoa as a foreign correspondent. Our profession may earn us our living but not fame, which is more likely to come from having once written *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita* or *Menina e moga me levaram da casa de metis pais* or *En un lugar de la Mancha*, of which I do not wish to remember the name, so as not to fall once again into the temptation of saying, however appropriately, *As armas e os barões assinalados*, may we be forgiven these borrowings, *Arma virumque cano*. Man must always make an effort, so that he may deserve to be called man, but he is much less master of his own person and destiny than he imagines. Time, not his time, will make him prosper or decline, sometimes for different merits, or because they are judged differently. What will you be when you discover it is night and you find yourself at the end of the road.

It was almost nightfall before the Rúa do'Sáculo was clear of paupers. Ricardo Reis had lunched in the meantime, browsed in two bookshops, lingered at the door of the Tivoli debating whether or not he wanted to see the film *I Lave All Women* starring Jan Kiepura. In the end, he decided to see the film some other time and return to the hotel by taxi, because his legs were giving him trouble after all that walking. When it started raining, he retreated to a nearby café, read the evening newspapers, agreed to have his shoes shined, clearly a waste of polish on streets like these, where a shower can cause a flood without any warning, but the bootblack insisted that an ounce of prevention was better than a pound of cure, *A shoe when it's polished keeps out the rain, sir*, and the man was right, because when Ricardo Reis removed his shoes once back in his room, his feet were warm and dry. Just what one needs to keep healthy, warm feet and a cool head. Universities may not recognize this wisdom based on experience, but one has

nothing to lose by observing the precept. The hotel is so peaceful, no banging doors, no sounds of voices, the buzzer silent. Salvador is not at the reception desk, most unusual, and Pimenta, who went to look for the key, moves as swiftly and ethereally as a sprite. Obviously he has not had to carry any luggage since early that morning, lucky for him. When Ricardo Reis went down to dinner, it was almost nine o'clock, the dining room, just as he had intended, was empty, the waiters chatting in a corner, but when Salvador appeared, the staff busied themselves, for that is what we must always do when our immediate superior suddenly enters. It is enough, for example, to shift our weight to the right leg if before it was resting on the left, that's all that's required, sometimes even less. Are you serving dinner, the guest asked hesitantly. But of course, that was what they were there for. Salvador told the good doctor that on New Year's Eve they generally had few customers, and the few they had generally dined out, the traditional réveillon or révelion, what was the word. Once, they used to celebrate the festivities in the hotel, but the owners found it a costly business, the practice was discontinued, such a lot of work involved, not to mention the damage caused by the boisterousness of the guests, you know how things happen, one drink follows another, people start quarreling, and then all the noise, bedlam, and the complaints of those in no mood for merrymaking, because there are always such people. We finally stopped having the révelion, but I must confess I'm sorry, it was such a jolly occasion and the hotel enjoyed the reputation of having class and moving with the times. Now, as you can see, it's completely deserted. Well, at least you can get to bed early, Ricardo Reis consoled him, but Salvador assured him that he always waited up to hear the bells ring in the New Year at midnight, a family tradition. They always ate twelve raisins, one for each chime, to bring luck during the next year, a popular custom widely observed abroad. You're talking about rich countries, but do you really believe such a custom will bring you good fortune. I do not know, but perhaps my year would have been even worse had I not eaten those raisins. It is with such arguments that the man who has no God seeks gods, while he who has abandoned his gods invents God. One day we shall rid ourselves of both God and gods.

Ricardo Reis dined with a single waiter in attendance, the maître d' decorously positioned at the end of the dining room, and Salvador installed himself behind the reception desk to while away the hours until it was time for his révelion intime. Nothing is known of Pimenta's whereabouts, and as for the chambermaids, either they have disappeared upstairs into the attics, if there are attics, where they will toast one another's health on the stroke of midnight with intoxicating homemade liquors served with biscuits, or else they have gone home, leaving an emergency staff, as in hospitals. The kitchen already looks like an abandoned fortress. But this is mere speculation, guests are generally not interested in knowing how a hotel functions behind the scenes, all they want is a comfortable room and meals at regular intervals. For dessert Ricardo Reis did not expect to be served a large slice of cake specially baked for the festivities of Epiphany or Dia de Reis. These are thoughtful little courtesies which make a friend of every customer. The waiter smiled and quipped, Dia de Reis, you pay, Doctor. Agreed, Ramón, for that was the waiter's name, I'll pay on the Dia dos Reis, but the pun was lost on

Ramón. It is still not ten o'clock, time is dragging, the old year lingers on. Ricardo Reis looks at the table where two days before he watched Doctor Sampaio and his daughter Marcenda and felt himself being enshrouded by a gray cloud. If they were present now, they might converse together, the only guests on this night which marks an ending and a new beginning, what could be more appropriate. He visualizes again the girl's pitiful gesture as she took hold of her lifeless hand and placed it on the table, that tiny hand she so dearly cherished while the other, strong and healthy, helped its sister but had its own, independent existence. It could not always assist. For example, shaking the hand of others when formally introduced, Marcenda Sampaio, Ricardo Reis, the doctor's hand would grip that of the girl from Coimbra, right hand with right hand, but while his left hand, should it so desire, could hover close to witness the encounter, hers, dangling at her side, might just as well not be present. Ricardo Reis feels the tears come to his eyes. There are still some people who speak ill of doctors, convinced that because doctors are accustomed to illness and misfortune they have hearts of stone, but look at this doctor, he belies any such criticism, perhaps because he is also a poet, though somewhat skeptical in outlook, as we have seen. Ricardo Reis is engrossed in these thoughts, some of them perhaps too difficult to unravel for anyone who like ourselves is on the outside, but Ramón, who sees much, inquires, Do you wish anything else, Doctor, a tactful way of saying, though expecting the negative, that the doctor does. We are so apt at understanding that sometimes half a word suffices. Ricardo Reis rises to his feet, says Good-night to Ramón, wishes him a Happy New Year, and as he passes the reception desk slowly repeats the greeting and the wish to Salvador. The sentiment is the same, its expression more deliberate, after all Salvador is the manager. As Ricardo Reis goes slowly upstairs, he looks worn-out, like one of those caricatures or cartoons in a magazine of the period, the Old Year covered with white hair and wrinkles, his hourglass emptied, disappearing into the deep shadows of the past, while the New Year advances in a ray of light, as chubby as those infants nourished on powdered milk, reciting a nursery rhyme that invites us to the dance of the hours, I am the year nineteen thirty-six, come rejoice with me. Ricardo Reis enters his room and sits down. The bed has been prepared, fresh water stands in the carafe should he feel thirsty during the night, his slippers wait on the bedside mat. Someone is watching over me, a guardian angel, my heartfelt thanks. On the street there is the clatter of tin cans as revelers pass. Eleven o'clock has struck already, and at that moment Ricardo Reis jumps to his feet, almost in anger, What am I doing here, everyone else is out celebrating, having a good time with their families on the streets, in dance halls, theaters, cinemas, nightclubs, I should at least go to the Rossio to see the clock at Central Station, the eye of time, those Cyclopes who hurl not thunderbolts but minutes and seconds, every bit as cruel as thunderbolts and which we must all endure, until finally they shatter me along with the planks of the ship, but not like this, sitting here watching the clock, crouched in a chair. Having finished this soliloquy, he put on his raincoat and hat, grabbed his umbrella, suddenly eager, a man transformed by having made up his mind. Salvador had gone home to his family, so it was Pimenta who asked, You're going out, Doctor. Yes, I will take a little stroll, and he started downstairs. Pimenta pursued him to the landing, When you come back, Doctor,

ring the bell twice, one short ring followed by a longer one, then I'll know it's you. Will you still be up. I'll turn in after midnight, but don't worry about me, sir, you come back whenever you like. Happy New Year, Pimenta. A very prosperous New Year, Doctor, the phrases one reads on greeting cards. They said nothing more, but when Ricardo Reis reached the bottom of the stairs he remembered that one normally tips the hotel staff at this time of the year, they rely on such tips. Forget it, I have been here only three days. The Italian page is asleep, his lamp extinguished.

The pavement was wet, slippery, the tram lines gleamed all the way up the Rua do Alecrim to the right. Who knows what star or kite holds them at that point, where, as the textbook informs us, parallel lines meet at infinity, an infinity that must be truly vast to accommodate so many things, dimensions, lines straight and curved and intersecting, the trams that go up these tracks and the passengers inside the trams, the light in the eyes of every passenger, the echo of words, the inaudible friction of thoughts. A whistling up at a window as if giving a signal, Well then, are you coming down or not. It's still early, a voice replies, whether of a man or woman it does not matter, we shall encounter it again at infinity. Ricardo Reis descended the Chiado and the Rua do Carmo, a huge crowd going with him, some in groups, entire families, although for the most part they were solitary men with no one waiting for them at home or who preferred to be outdoors to watch the passing of the old year. Perhaps it will truly pass, perhaps over their heads and ours will soar a line of light, a frontier, then we shall say that time and space are one and the same thing. There were also women who for an hour were interrupting their wretched prowling, calling a halt, wanting to be present should there be any proclamation of a new life, anxious to know what their share will be, whether it will be really new or the same as before. Around the Teatro Nacional the Rossio was crowded, there was a sudden downpour, umbrellas opened like the gleaming carapaces of insects or as if this were an army advancing under the protection of shields, about to assault an impassive citadel. Ricardo Reis mingled with the crowd, less dense than it had appeared from a distance, and pushed his way through. Meanwhile the shower has passed, the umbrellas close like a flock of birds shaking their wings as they settle down for the night. Everyone has his nose in the air, his eyes fixed on the yellow dial of the clock. From the Rua do Primeiro de Dezembro a group of boys come running, beating on the lids of pots and pans, tang, tang, while others keep up a shrill whistling. They march around the square in front of the station before settling under the portico of the theater, blowing their whistles all the while and banging on their tin lids, and this uproar combines with that of the wooden rattles resounding throughout the square, ra-ra-ra-ra, four minutes to go before midnight. Ah, the fickleness of mankind, so niggardly with the little time they have to live, always complaining that their lives are short, leaving behind only the hushed hiss of effervescence, yet they are impatient for these minutes to pass, such is the strength of hope. Already there are cries of anticipation, and the din reaches a crescendo as the deep voice of anchored ships can be heard from the direction of the river, dinosaurs bellowing with that prehistoric rumble that makes one's stomach churn. Sirens rend the air with piercing screams like those of animals being slaughtered, the frantic hooting of cars

nearby is deafening, the little bells of the trams tinkle for all they are worth, which is not much, until finally the minute hand covers the hour hand, it is midnight, the happiness of freedom. For one brief moment time has released mankind, has allowed them to live their own lives, time stands aside and looks on, ironic, benevolent, as people embrace one another, friends and strangers, men and women kissing at random. These are the best kisses of all, kisses without any future. The clamor of the sirens now fills the air, the pigeons stir nervously on the pediment of the theater, some flutter in a daze, but in less than a minute the noise abates, a few last gasps, the ships on the river seem to be disappearing into the mist, out to sea. Speaking of this, there is Dom Sebastião in his niche on the façade, a little boy masked for some future carnival. Since he has not been placed elsewhere, but here, we shall have to reconsider the importance and paths of Sebastianism, with or without mist. It is clear that the Awaited One will arrive by train, subject to delays. There are still groups in the Rossio, but the excitement is over, people are clearing the pavements, they know what will happen next. From the upper stories rubbish comes hurtling down, it is the custom, not so noticeable here because few people inhabit these buildings, which are mainly offices. All the way down the Rua do Ouro the ground is strewn with litter. From windows people are still chucking out rags, empty boxes, cans, leftovers, fish bones wrapped in newspapers, it all scatters on the pavement. A chamberpot full of live embers bursts into sparks in every direction, and pedestrians seek protection under balconies, pressing themselves against the buildings and shouting up at the windows. But their protests are not taken seriously, the custom is widely observed, so let each man protect himself as best he can, for this is a night for celebrating and for whatever amusements one can devise. All the junk, things no longer in use and not worth selling, is thrown out, having been stored for the occasion, these are amulets to ensure prosperity throughout the New Year. At least now there will be some empty space to receive any good that may come our way, so let us hope that we are not forgotten. A voice called from an upper story, Look out, something's coming, considerate of them to warn us, a large bundle came hurtling through the air, describing a curve, almost hitting the tram cables, how careless, it could have caused a serious accident. It was a tailor's dummy, the kind set on three legs and suitable for either a man's jacket or a woman's dress, the black padding ripped open, the frame worm-eaten. Lying there crushed by the impact, it no longer resembled a human body with the head missing and no legs. A passing youth pushed it into the gutter with his foot. Tomorrow the garbage truck will come and clear all this away, the scraps and peelings, the dirty rags, the pots of no use either to the tinker or the metal scavenger, a roasting pan without its bottom, a broken picture frame, felt flowers reduced to tatters. Soon the tramps will be rummaging through the debris and surely find something they can put to use. What has lost its value for one can profit another.

Ricardo Reis returns to the hotel. In many parts of the city the festivities go on, with fireworks, sparkling wine or genuine champagne, and wild abandon, as the newspapers never forget to say. Women of easy or not-so-easy virtue are also available, some quite open and direct, others observing certain rituals in the making of their advances. This

man, however, is not adventuresome, he knows about such exploits only from the lips of others, and any experience he has had was a matter of walking in one door and out the other. A group of passing revelers call out in discordant chorus, Happy New Year old man, and he replies with a gesture, a raised hand. Why say anything, they are so much younger than I. He tramples through the rubbish on the street, avoiding the boxes. Broken glass crunches under his feet. They might as well have tossed out their old parents with the tailor's dummy, there is little difference, for after a certain age the head no longer governs the body and the legs do not know where they are taking us. In the end we are like small children, orphaned, because we cannot return to our dead mother, to the beginning, to the nothingness that was before the beginning. It is before death and not after that we enter nothingness, for from nothingness we came, emerging, and when dead we shall disperse, without consciousness yet still existing. All of us once possessed a father and mother, but we are the children of fortune and necessity, whatever that means. It is Ricardo Reis's thought, let him do the explaining.

Although it was already after twelve-thirty, Pimenta had still not gone to bed. He came downstairs to open the door and was surprised, So you came back early after all, you didn't do much celebrating. I was feeling tired, sleepy, and you know, this business of seeing in the New Year is no longer the same. That's true, the festivities are much livelier in Brazil. They made these polite exchanges as they went upstairs. On the landing Ricardo Reis wished him good-night, Until tomorrow, then tackled the second flight of stairs. In reply Pimenta said good-night, then switched off the lights on the landing, then the lights on all the other floors before finally turning in, confident of undisturbed sleep, because no new guests were likely to arrive at this hour. He could hear the footsteps of Ricardo Reis in the corridor. The place is so quiet, no lights from any of the bedrooms, either the occupants are asleep or the rooms are empty. At the end of the corridor the number plate two hundred and one glows dimly, and Ricardo Reis notices a ray of light coming from under the door. He must have forgotten to turn off the light, well, these things do happen. He inserted the key in the lock and opened the door, and there was a man sitting on the sofa. He recognized him at once, though they had not seen each other for many years. Nor did he think it strange that Fernando Pessoa should be sitting there waiting for him. He said Hello, not expecting a reply, absurdity does not always obey logic, but Pessoa did in fact reply, saying, Hello, and stretched out his hand, then they embraced. Well, how have you been, one of them asked, or both, not that it matters, the question is so meaningless. Ricardo Reis removed his raincoat, put down his hat, carefully rested his umbrella on the linoleum floor in the bathroom, taking the precaution of checking the damp silk, no longer really wet, because during the walk back to the hotel there had been no rain. He pulled up a chair, sat in front of his visitor, saw that Fernando Pessoa was casually dressed, which is the Portuguese way of saying that he was wearing neither overcoat nor raincoat nor any other form of protection against the inclement weather, not even a hat, all he wore was a black suit comprising a double-breasted jacket, vest, and trousers, a white shirt with black tie, and black shoes and socks, like someone attending a funeral, or an undertaker. They look at each other with affection,

obviously happy to be reunited after years of separation, and it is Fernando Pessoa who speaks first, I believe you came to visit me, I wasn't there, but they told me when I got back. Ricardo Reis replied, I was sure I'd find you there, never imagining you could leave that place. Fernando Pessoa said, For the time being it's allowed, I have about eight months in which to wander around as I please. Why eight months, Ricardo Reis asked, and Fernando Pessoa explained, The usual period is nine months, the same length of time we spend in our mother's womb, I believe it's a question of symmetry, before we are born no one can see us yet they think about us every day, after we are dead they cannot see us any longer and every day they go on forgetting us a little more, and apart from exceptional cases it takes nine months to achieve total oblivion, now tell me, what brings you to Portugal. Ricardo Reis removed his wallet from his inside pocket and took out a folded piece of paper, which he offered to Fernando Pessoa, but the latter made a gesture of refusal, I can no longer read, you read it. Ricardo Reis obeyed, Fernando Pessoa has died Stop I am leaving for Glasgow Stop Alvaro de Campos. When I received this telegram, I decided to return, I felt it was almost an obligation. The tone of the communication is very interesting, unmistakably from Alvaro de Campos, even in those few words one detects a note of malign satisfaction, even amusement, Alvaro is like that. There was another reason, this one a matter of self-interest, in November a revolution erupted in Brazil, many died, many were arrested, and I feared that the situation might get worse, I couldn't make up my mind whether to leave or stay until this telegram arrived, that decided it. Reis, you seem destined to flee revolutions, in nineteen nineteen you went to Brazil because of a revolution that failed, now you are fleeing Brazil because of another that has probably failed as well. Strictly speaking, I did not flee Brazil, and perhaps I would be there still had you not died. I remember reading something about this revolution a few days before my death, I believe it was instigated by the Bolsheviks. Yes, the Bolsheviks were responsible, a number of officers, some soldiers, those who weren't killed were arrested, and the whole thing blew over within two or three days. Were people frightened, They most certainly were, Here in Portugal, too, there have been several revolutions, I know, the news reached me in Brazil, Do you still believe in monarchism, I do, Without a king, One can be a monarchist without clamoring for a king, Is that how you feel, It is, A nice contradiction, No worse than some, To advocate by desire what you know you cannot advocate by reason, Exactly, you see I still remember you, Of course.

Fernando Pessoa rose from the sofa, paced a little, then paused in front of the bedroom mirror before returning to the sitting room. It gives me an odd feeling to look in the mirror and not see myself there, Don't you see yourself, No, I know that I am looking at myself, but I see nothing, Yet you cast a shadow, It's all I possess. He sat down again and crossed his legs, Will you now settle for good in Portugal or will you go back to Brazil. I still haven't made up my mind, I brought only the bare necessities, perhaps I'll stay, open an office, build up a clientele, I might also go back to Rio, I don't know, for the moment I'm staying, but the more I think about it, I believe I came back here only because you died, it's as if I alone can fill the void you left behind. No living person can

substitute for a dead one. None of us is truly alive or truly dead. Well said, an aphorism suitable for one of your odes. They both smiled. Ricardo Reis asked, Tell me, how did you know that I was staying at this hotel. When you are dead, replied Fernando Pessoa, you know everything, that's one of the advantages. And how did you get into my room, Just as anyone else gets in, Didn't you come through the air, didn't you pass through the walls, What a ridiculous idea, my good fellow, such things happen only in ghost stories, no, I came from the cemetery at Prazeres, and like any other mortal walked upstairs, opened that door, and sat on this sofa to await your arrival. And did no one express surprise upon seeing a stranger walk in, That is another privilege the dead enjoy, no one can see us unless we so desire, But I see you, Because I want you to see me, besides, if you think about it, who are you. The question was clearly rhetorical, expected no answer, and Ricardo Reis said nothing, had not even heard it. There was a long-drawn-out silence, opaque. The clock on the landing could be heard striking two, as if coming from another world. Pessoa rose to his feet, I must be getting back. So soon. My time is my own, I am free to come and go as I please, it's true that my grandmother is there but she no longer bothers me. Stay a little longer, No, it's getting late and you should rest, When will I see you again, Do you wish me to return, Very much, we could converse, renew our friendship, don't forget that after sixteen years I feel like a stranger here. Remember that we can be together only for eight months, then my time runs out, Eight months, at the beginning, seems a lifetime, Whenever possible, I will come to see you, Wouldn't you like to fix a day, an hour, a place, Impossible, Very well, see you soon, Fernando, it was good seeing you again, And you, Ricardo, Should I wish you a Happy New Year, Go ahead, go ahead, it can't do me any harm, they're only words, as you well know. Happy New Year, Fernando, Happy New Year, Ricardo.

Fernando Pessoa opened the bedroom door and went out into the corridor, his footsteps inaudible. Two minutes later, the time it took to descend that steep flight of stairs, the front door banged, the buzzer having droned briefly. Ricardo Reis went to the window. Fernando Pessoa was already disappearing down the Rua do Alecrim. The tram rails shone, still running parallel.

Whether because they themselves believe it or because someone took them in hand after they failed to respond to suggestions and hints, the newspapers inform us, as if it were a great prophecy, that over the ruins of the mighty states ours, the Portuguese state, will demonstrate its remarkable strength and the prudence and intelligence of the men who govern it. For fall those states shall, and their crash will be resounding. The proud nations who boast of their present supremacy are much deceived, because the day is fast approaching, the happiest day of all in the annals of this nation among nations, when the leaders of other states come to these Lusitanian shores to seek advice, assistance, wisdom, benevolence, oil for their lamp from our great Portuguese statesmen. Who are these rulers, starting with the next cabinet, which is already being formed. In supreme command is Oliveira Salazar, President of the Council and Minister of Finance, then, at a respectful distance and in the order in which the newspapers publish their photographs, Monteiro of Foreign Affairs, Pereira of Commerce, Machado of Colonies, Abranches of Public Works, Bettencourt of the Navy, Pacheco of Education, Rodrigues of justice, Sousa of War, Sousa of the Interior, the former is Passos de Sousa and the latter Paes de Sousa, write their names out in full so that petitions will reach them without delay. And we must not forget to mention Duque of Agriculture, without whose opinion not a grain of wheat would be produced in Europe or elsewhere. For the posts that remain, In Parentheses Lumbrals of Finance and Andrade of Corporations, because this new state of ours, although in its infancy, is corporate, which explains why an undersecretary is quite sufficient. The newspapers here also say that most of the country has reaped the abundant fruits of an exemplary administration keen on maintaining public order, and if such a statement smacks of self-praise, read that paper from Geneva, Switzerland, which at length and with greater authority, because it is in French, describes the abovementioned dictator of Portugal, calling us most fortunate to be led by this wise leader, and the author of the article is absolutely right, and we thank him with all our hearts. But please bear in mind that Pacheco is no less wise if tomorrow he should say, as say he will, that elementary education must be given its due and no more, because knowledge, if imparted too soon, serves no real purpose, and also that an education based on materialism and paganism, which stifle noble impulses, is much worse than the darkness of illiteracy, therefore Pacheco concludes that Salazar is the greatest educator of our century, if that is not too bold an assertion when we are only one-third of the way through it.

Do not think that these items all appeared on the same page of the same newspaper, for then they would be seen as linked, they would be given the mutually complementary and consequential meaning they appear to have. These are the reports, rather, of the last few weeks, juxtaposed here like dominoes, each half set against its equal unless it happens to be double, in which case it is placed crosswise. These are current events seen from a distance. Ricardo Reis reads the morning newspapers as he savors his coffee with milk and eats the delicious toast served at the Brangança Hotel, greasy and crisp, clearly a contradiction, the pleasure of an age long forgotten, which explains why combining the two adjectives might strike you as inappropriate. We already

know the maid who brings in his breakfast, it is Lydia, who also makes the bed and cleans and tidies up the room. When speaking to Ricardo Reis, she addresses him always as doctor, whereas he calls her simply Lydia, nothing else, but being an educated man he never uses the familiar form when he requests of her, Do this, Bring me that. Unaccustomed to such politeness, she is flattered, because as a rule the guests treat her with the familiarity shown servants, believing that money bestows every right, although to be fair, there is another guest who treats her with the same consideration, that is Senhorita Marcenda, the daughter of Doctor Sampaio. Lydia must be about thirty years of age, a mature and well-developed young woman, dark-haired and unmistakably Portuguese, short rather than tall, if there is any point in mentioning the physical traits of an ordinary maid who so far has done nothing but scrub floors, serve breakfast, and on one occasion laugh as she watched a man on another man's back while this guest stood there smiling. Such a nice person, yet sad, he cannot be happy, although there are moments when his face lights up just like this gloomy room when the clouds allow the sun to come through. It is more moonlight than the light of day, a shadow of light. Because it caught Lydia's head at a favorable angle, Ricardo Reis noticed the birthmark at the side of one nostril. It becomes her, he thought, although later he could not say if he was referring to the birthmark or to her white apron, or to the starched cap on her head, or to the embroidered collar she wore around her neck. Yes, you may remove the tray.

Three days went by and Fernando Pessoa did not reappear. Ricardo Reis did not ask himself the obvious question, Could it have been a dream, he knew that Fernando Pessoa, with enough flesh and bone to embrace and be embraced, had been in this very room on New Year's Eve and had promised to return. He believed him, but was beginning to lose patience at the delay. His life now seemed suspended, expectant, problematic. Meticulously he scanned the newspapers for signs, threads, outlines of a whole, the features of a Portuguese face, not simply to evoke an image of the country but to clothe his own portrait with a new substance, to be able to raise his hands to his face and recognize himself, to be able to place one hand upon another and clasp them together, It is I and I am here. On the last page he came across a large advertisement, two columns wide. In the top right-hand corner was depicted Freire the Engraver, in monocle and cravat, an old-fashioned sketch. Underneath, down to the bottom of the page, a cascade of other drawings advertised his workshops, the only ones that could justly claim to offer a comprehensive range of goods, with explanatory and superfluous captions, as if proving that a picture is as good or better than any description in words, except that no picture can show the excellent quality of the products of a firm established fifty-two years ago by a master engraver, a man of unblemished character and reputation, who studied in the major capitals of Europe and whose children after him have learned the skills and techniques of his trade. Unique in Portugal, he has been awarded three gold medals, has installed in his factory sixteen machines worked by electricity, one worth sixty contos, and these machines can do almost everything except speak, good Lord. A whole world is portrayed here, and since we were not born in time to see the fields of Troy or the shield of Achilles that reflected all heaven and earth, let us admire this Portuguese shield here

in Lisbon, depicting the nation's latest wonders, number plates for buildings and hotels, for rooms, cupboards, and umbrella stands, strops for razor blades, whetstones for knives, scissors, pens with gold nibs, presses and scales, glass plates with chains in polished brass, machines for punching checks, seals made of metal and rubber, enameled letters, stamps for labeling clothing, sealing wax, numbered disks for lines at banks, business firms, and cafés, irons with which to brand cattle and wooden boxes, penknives, municipal registration plates for automobiles and bicycles, rings, medals for every type of sport, badges for the caps worn by the employees in milk bars, cafés, and casinos. Look at this one for the Leitaria Nivea, not for the Leitaria Alentejana, since the employees of the latter do not wear caps with badges. And lockers, and those pennants in enameled metal that are placed above the doors of institutes and foundations, and soldering irons, electric lanterns, knives with four blades as well as other types, emblems, puncheons, printing frames, molds for biscuits, toilet soaps, rubber soles, monograms and coats of arms in gold, metal for every imaginable purpose, cigarette lighters, rollers for inking type, stone and ink for taking fingerprints, escutcheons for Portuguese and foreign consulates, yet more plaques for doctors, for lawyers, for registry offices where births and deaths are recorded for the parish council, Midwife, Notary Public, those that say No Entry, and rings for pigeons, and padlocks, etc., etc., etc., and another three etc.'s, to abridge and treat the rest as having been said. Let us not forget that these are the only workshops offering a comprehensive inventory, you can even have made to order ornamental iron gates for family tombs, but enough, period. Compared with this, what are the achievements of the divine blacksmith Hephaestus, he who chiseled and embossed the entire universe on the shield of Achilles but forgot to save a little space on which to engrave the heel of the illustrious warrior pierced by the quivering arrow of Paris. Even the gods forget about death, but no wonder, if they are immortal. Or was this an act of charity on the part of Hephaestus, a cloud cast over the transitory eyes of men, for whom it is enough, in order to be happy, to know neither where nor when nor how. Freire, however, is the more rigorous god and engraver, specifying everything, his advertisement is a labyrinth, a skein, a web. Studying it, Ricardo Reis allowed his coffee with milk to get cold, the butter to congeal on his toast. Please note, esteemed clients, our establishment has no branches anywhere, beware of those who call themselves agents and representatives, they are out to deceive the public with counterfeit tags for marking barrels and counterfeit branding irons for cattle. When Lydia arrived to collect the tray, she was worried, You haven't eaten anything, Doctor, didn't you like it. He protested that he had, but reading the newspaper he became distracted. Should I order some fresh toast, reheat your coffee. There's no need, I'm fine, besides he did not feel hungry, and saying this he got to his feet and placed a reassuring hand on her arm. He could feel the silky texture of her sleeve, the warmth of her skin. Lydia lowered her eyes, moved sideways, but his hand accompanied her and they remained like this for a few seconds. Finally Ricardo Reis released her arm and she gathered up the tray. The crockery shook as if the epicenter of an earthquake were located in room two hundred and one or, to be more precise, in the heart of this maid. Now she departs, she will not regain her composure in a hurry, she will go into the pantry and deposit the tray, her

hand resting where that other hand rested, a delicate gesture unlikely in someone of so lowly a profession. That is what those who allow themselves to be guided by preconceived ideas must be thinking, perhaps even Ricardo Reis, who at this moment is bitterly upbraiding himself for having given in to foolish weakness, What an incredible thing I've done, and with a maid. It is his good fortune that he does not have to carry a tray laden with crockery, otherwise he would learn that even the hands of a hotel guest can tremble. Labyrinths are like this, streets, crossroads, and blind alleys. There are those who claim that the surest way of getting out of them is always to make the same turn, but that, as we know, is contrary to human nature.

Ricardo Reis invariably sets out from this street, the Rua do Alecrim, then takes any other, up, down, left, right, Ferragial, Remolares, Arsenal, Vinte e Quatro de Julho. These are the first unwindings of the skein, of the web, Boavista, Crucifixo. After a while his legs begin to tire, a man cannot wander about forever. It is not only the blind who need a walking stick to probe one step ahead or a dog to sniff out danger, even a man with the sight of two eyes needs a light he can follow, one in which he believes or hopes to believe, his very doubts serving in the absence of anything better. Now Ricardo Reis is watching the spectacle of the world, a wise man if one can call this wisdom, aloof, indifferent by upbringing and temperament, but quaking because a simple cloud has passed. One can easily understand the Greeks' and Romans' belief that they moved among gods, under the gaze of the gods at all times and in all places, whether in the shade of a tree, beside a fountain, in the dense, resounding depths of a forest, on the seashore, or on the waves, even in bed with one's beloved, be she woman or goddess, if she agrees. What Ricardo Reis requires is a guide dog, a walking stick, a light before him, because this world, and Lisbon too, is a dark mist in which north, south, east, and west all merge, and where the only open road slopes downward. If a man isn't careful, he will fall headlong to the bottom, a tailor's dummy without legs or head. It isn't true that Ricardo Reis returned from Rio de Janeiro out of cowardice or, to phrase it better, out of fear, it isn't true that he returned because Fernando Pessoa died, because one cannot put a thing back in the space and time from which it was removed, whether it be Fernando or Alberto. Each of us is unique and irreplaceable, which is the greatest of platitudes and may not be entirely true. Even if he appears before me at this very moment, as I make my way down the Avenida da Liberdade, Fernando Pessoa is no longer Fernando Pessoa, and not only because he is dead. The important and decisive thing is that he is no longer able to add to what he was and what he achieved, to what he experienced and what he wrote. He can no longer even read, poor fellow. It will be up to Ricardo Reis to read him this other article published in a magazine with the poet's portrait in an oval frame. A few days ago death robbed us of Fernando Pessoa, the distinguished poet who spent his short life virtually ignored by the masses, one could say that because he knew the value of his work, he jealously hoarded it like a miser lest it be taken from him, some day full justice will be rendered to his dazzling talent, as has been rendered to other great geniuses in the past, dot dot dot. The bastards. The worst thing about journalists is that they believe they are authorized to put into the readily accepting heads of others ideas such as this

one, that Fernando Pessoa hoarded his poems in the fear that others might steal them. How can they print such rubbish. Ricardo Reis impatiently tapped the pavement with the tip of his umbrella, which he could use as a walking stick but only so long as it didn't rain. A man can go astray even when he follows a straight line. He entered the Rossio and might just as well have been at a crossroads formed by four or eight choices which, if taken and retraced, would all end, as everyone knows, at the same point in infinity. There is little to be gained, therefore, in taking any of them. When the time comes, we will leave this matter to chance, which does not choose but simply drives and is driven in turn by forces about which we know nothing, and even if we knew, what would we know. Much better to rely on these nameplates probably manufactured in the fully equipped workshops of Freire the Engraver, which bear the names of doctors, lawyers, notaries, people to whom we have recourse in time of need and who have learned how to use a compass. Their compasses may not coincide, but this matters little, it is enough for the city to know that directions exist. You are not obliged to leave, because this is not the place where streets branch out, nor is it that magnificent point where they converge, rather, it is here that they change their sense, north becoming south, and south north. The sun has stopped between east and west, the city is a scar that has been burned, beset by earthquake, a teardrop that will not dry and has no finger to remove it. I must open an office, don a white coat, receive patients, even if only to allow them to die, Ricardo Reis muses. At least they will keep me company while they are alive, their last good deed being to play the ailing doctor of the ailing doctor. We are not saying that these are the thoughts of all doctors, but of this one certainly, for reasons of his own, reasons as yet barely glimpsed. What kind of practice shall I set up, where, and for whom. If you think that such questions require nothing but answers, you are deceived. We reply with actions, just as with actions we ask questions.

Ricardo Reis is about to descend the Rua dos Sapateiros when he sees Fernando Pessoa standing on the corner of the Rua de Santa Justa. Fernando Pessoa looks as if he has been kept waiting yet shows no sign of impatience, he wears the same black suit, his head uncovered, and, a detail previously unobserved by Ricardo Reis, he is without spectacles. Ricardo Reis thinks he knows why, it would be absurd and in thoroughly bad taste to bury a man in his spectacles, but that is not the reason, they had simply failed to hand them to him in time as he was dying. Give me my spectacles, he had asked, and was left lying there unable to see, for we are not always in time to satisfy the last wishes of the dying. Fernando Pessoa smiles and wishes him good afternoon, Ricardo Reis returns the greeting, and they walk together in the direction of the Terreiro do Paço. A little farther the rain starts up again. One umbrella shelters both of them, and although Fernando Pessoa has nothing to fear from this water, his huddling gesture was that of one who has still not completely forgotten life. Or it could have been the comforting thought of sharing the same roof and so close, Get underneath, there is room for two. No one will turn down such an offer by replying, There's no need, I don't mind the rain. Ricardo Reis is curious, If someone is watching us, whom does he see, you or me. He sees you, or rather he sees a shadowy form that is neither you nor I. The sum of both of

us divided by two. No, I would say it is the result of multiplying the one' by the other. Does this arithmetic exist. Two, whatever they may be, are not added up, they multiply. Be fruitful and multiply, says the commandment. Not in that restricted biological sense, dear fellow, take me, for example, I've left no children behind. I'm fairly certain that I, too, shall leave no children behind, nevertheless we are multiple, I wrote an ode in which I say that innumerable people exist within us. I don't recall it. Because I wrote it about two months ago. As you can see, each of us says the same thing. Then there was no point in our multiplying. If we had not multiplied, multiplying would not have been possible. Such a precious conversation, with its Paulist and intersectionist theories, as they walk along the Rua dos Sapateiros down as far as the Rua da Conceição, where they turn left into the Rua Augusta, then straight once more. Stopping, Ricardo Reis suggested, Let's go into the Cafe Martinho, and Fernando Pessoa replied brusquely, That would be unwise, the walls have ears and a good memory, we can go another day when there is no danger of anyone recognizing me, it's a question of time. As they lingered there under the arcade, Ricardo Reis closed his umbrella and said, apropos of nothing, I am thinking of settling here, of establishing a practice, So you have no intention of ever going back to Brazil, why, It's difficult to explain, I'm not even sure that I could give an explanation, let's say that I'm like the insomniac who finally finds a comfortable position on the pillow and can get some sleep. If it's sleep you're after, you've come to the right country. If I accept sleep, it's to be able to dream, To dream is to be absent, to be on the other side, But life has two sides, Pessoa, at least two, we can only reach the other side through dreams, you say this to a dead man, who can tell you from his own experience that on the other side of life there is only death. Well I don't know what death is, but I am not convinced that it is this other side of life we are discussing, because death, in my opinion, limits itself to being. Death is, it does not exist, it is. Are being and existing not the same thing then, No, my dear Reis, being and existing are not the same thing, and not simply because we have these two different words at our disposal, on the contrary it is because they are not the same thing that we have these two words and make use of them. They stood there arguing under the arcade while the rain formed tiny lakes in the square which gathered into larger lakes which became muddy seas. Not even on this occasion would Ricardo Reis go as far as the wharf to see the waves breaking. He was about to say this, to recall that he had been here before, when looking around he saw that Fernando Pessoa was walking away. Only now did he notice that the poet's trousers were too short, making him look as if he were walking on stilts. At last he heard his voice, nearby although Fernando Pessoa was already some distance away, We will continue this conversation another time, I must go now, over there. In the rain he waved his hand but did not say good-bye or I shall return.

The year has started in such a way that deaths are becoming an everyday occurrence. True, every age sweeps away what it can, sometimes with greater ease, when there are wars and epidemics, sometimes at a steady pace, one death after another, but it is most unusual to find so many famous people dying, both at home and abroad, within such a short space of time. We are not referring to Fernando Pessoa, who

departed this world a while ago, no one is to know that he comes back from time to time, but to Leonardo Coimbra, who invented creationism, to Valle-Inclan, the author of *Romance de Lobos*, to John Gilbert, who starred in *The Big Parade*, to Rudyard Kipling, the poet who wrote *If*, and last but not least to the King of England, George V, the only monarch with his succession guaranteed. There have certainly been other misfortunes although much less important, such as the poor old man who was buried by a mud slide or those twenty-three people who came from Alentejo and were attacked by a cat with rabies. They disembarked, as black as a flock of ravens with lacerated wings, old folk, women, children being photographed for the first time in their lives, not knowing where they were supposed to look, their eyes gazing up at the sky, flustered and desperate, poor people, but that isn't all. What you don't know, Doctor, is that last November in the main towns of the region two thousand four hundred and ninety-two individuals died, one of them being Senhor Fernando Pessoa. It is not a large or small number, it is what has to be, but the saddest thing is that seven hundred and thirty-four were children under the age of five. If this is the situation in the main towns, thirty percent, imagine what it must be like in the villages, where even the cats have rabies. But we can always console ourselves with the thought that the majority of the little angels in heaven are Portuguese. Furthermore, words can be most effective. When a government takes office, people go in droves to pay their respects to the honorable minister, everyone goes, teachers, civil servants, representatives of the three armed forces, leaders and members of the National Alliance, unions, guilds, farmers, judges, policemen, republican guards, excise men, and members of the general public. The minister thanks each of them with a little speech couched in the patriotism of the school primer and adapted to the ears of his audience. Those who are present arrange themselves so that they can all get into the photograph, the ones in the back rows craning their necks and standing on tiptoe to peek over the shoulder of their taller neighbors, That's me there, they will proudly tell their dear wife when they get home. The ones in front are puffed up with conceit, they have not been bitten by the cat with rabies but they have the same foolish expression, startled by the flashbulb. In the confusion some words were lost but can be deduced from the tone set by the Minister of the Interior at Montemor-o-Velho when he inaugurated the installation of electricity, a great improvement, I shall tell them in Lisbon that the leading citizens of Montemor know how to be loyal to Salazar. We can easily visualize the scene, Paes de Sousa explaining to the wise dictator the name he was given by the Tribune des Nations and that the good people from the land of Fernão Mendes Pinto are all loyal to your Excellency. With such a medieval regime, it's well known that peasants and laborers are often excluded from that goodness, people who have not inherited possessions, therefore they are not good men, perhaps neither good nor men but creatures no different from these insects that bite or gnaw or infest. You must have had occasion to observe what kind of people inhabit this country, Doctor, bearing in mind that this is the capital of the empire, when you passed the entrance to O'Século the other day and saw the mob waiting for alms. If you wish to see real poverty, go into those districts, parishes, neighborhoods, and see for yourself the soup kitchens, the campaign for helping the poor during the winter months, an admirable enterprise, as the President of the Municipal

Council of Oporto said in a telegram, God bless his soul. Don't you think it would have been better to let them die, then we would have spared ourselves the shameful spectacle of life in Portugal, beggars sitting on the curb eating a crust of bread and scraping the bottom of their bowls. They don't even deserve electric lights, all they need to know is the road from their plate to their mouth and that can be found in the dark.

Inside the body, too, there is profound darkness, yet the blood reaches the heart, the brain is sightless yet can see, it is deaf yet hears, it has no hands yet reaches out. Clearly man is trapped in his own labyrinth. The next two mornings, Ricardo Reis went downstairs to the dining room to have breakfast, a man frightened, alarmed at the possible consequences of a gesture as simple as that of placing his hand on Lydia's arm. He was not afraid that she had complained, after all it was just a gesture, nevertheless he felt some anxiety when he spoke for the first time after the incident with the manager Salvador. Needless anxiety, because the man could scarcely have been more respectful, affable. On the third day, Ricardo Reis decided that he was being foolish and did not go down to breakfast, he pretended to have forgotten breakfast and hoped they would do the same. He did not know Salvador. At the last minute there was a knock, Lydia entered carrying a tray, laid it down on the table and said, Good morning, Doctor, her natural self. It is nearly always like this, a man torments himself, frets, thinks the worst, believes that the world is about to demand a full explanation, when in fact the world has moved on, thinking about other things. It is not certain, however, that upon returning to his room to collect the tray, Lydia is still part of this world moved on, she seems to be waiting behind with an air of uncertainty. She goes through the usual motions, is about to lift the tray, has already gripped it, holds it level, hoists it into the air in a semicircle, and heads for the door. Oh my God, will he speak, not speak, perhaps he won't say anything, perhaps simply touch me on the arm like the other day, and if he does, what shall I do, it won't be the first time a guest has taken liberties, twice I gave into them, why, because this life is so sad. Lydia, Ricardo Reis spoke her name. She put down the tray, raised her eyes filled with terror, tried to say Doctor, but her voice stuck in her throat. He did not have the courage, repeated, Lydia, then said almost in a whisper, horribly banal, the ridiculous seducer, I find you very pretty. He stood there staring at her for a second, he couldn't bear it for more than a second, and turned away. There are moments when it would be preferable to die, I who have made a fool of myself with hotel maids, you too, Alvaro de Campos, all of us. The door closed slowly, and only later could Lydia's footsteps be heard retreating.

Ricardo Reis spent the whole day out of doors brooding over his shame, all the more so because he had been unmanned not by an adversary but by his own fear. He decided that the following day he would change his hotel or rent part of a house, or return to Brazil on the first available ship. These may seem dramatic effects for such a tiny cause, but each person knows how much it hurts and where. Ridicule is like heartburn, an acidity continuously revived by memory, an incurable wound. He returned to the hotel, dined, and went out again, to see a film at the Politeama, The Crusades. Such faith, such ardent

battles, such saints and heroes and splendid white horses. The film ended and an aura of religious fervor pervaded the Rua de Eugénio dos Santos, each spectator appearing to have a halo over his head, and yet there are people who remain unconvinced that art can improve mankind. Over and done with, the morning's episode assumed the right proportions, How foolish of me to get into such a state. Pimenta opened the door for him, the building was incredibly peaceful, obviously the hotel staff did not live in. He entered his room and immediately, almost by instinct, looked at the bed. The covers had not been folded back at an angle, as usual, but both sheet and eiderdown had been turned down straight from side to side, and instead of one pillow there were two, the message could not have been clearer. It remained to be seen how it would become explicit, unless it was not Lydia who made the bed but another maid, who thought the room was occupied by a couple. Yes, let us assume that the maids change floors every so often, perhaps so that they have equal opportunities for receiving tips, or to discourage them from becoming too set in their ways, or, and here Ricardo Reis smiled, to prevent them from becoming too friendly with the guests. Well, tomorrow we shall see. If Lydia appears with breakfast, then she must have prepared the bed. And then what. He lay down, switched off the light without bothering to remove the second pillow, closed his eyes firmly. Come, sleep, come, but sleep did not obey. A tram passed in the street, perhaps the last one. Who is that in me who doesn't wish to sleep, whose restless body possesses mine, or is it some intangible force that grows restless in all of me, or at least in this part of me that grows. Good Lord, the things that can happen to a man. He got up angrily and fumbling his way by the pale light that filtered through the windows went to release the latch on the door, then left the door slightly ajar, one only had to push it ever so gently. He returned to his bed. This is childish, if a man wants something, he does not leave it to chance but sets out to achieve it, consider what the Crusaders achieved in their time, swords against scimitars, prepared to die if necessary, and those castles and coats of armor. No longer knowing whether he is awake or finally asleep, he thinks about medieval chastity belts, the keys carried off by the knights, poor deluded creatures. The door of his room opens in silence, now it is closed, a shadowy figure crosses the room, groping toward the edge of the bed. The hand of Ricardo Reis reaches out and meets a frozen hand, draws it to him, Lydia trembles, all she can say is, I am cold. He remains silent, debating whether he should kiss her on the lips, such a depressing thought.

Doctor Sampaio and his daughter are due to arrive today, Salvador announced, as euphoric as if the good news would bring a reward. The lookout from the reception desk sees the train from Coimbra advancing from a distance through the afternoon haze, chug-chug, chug-chug. Quite paradoxical, because the ship that is anchored in port and gathering slime by the quay is the Hotel Brangança and it is the land that is coming here, sending smoke up the funnel. When the train arrives at Campolide, it goes underground before emerging from a black tunnel as it belches steam. There is still time to call Lydia and say, Go and make sure that everything is in order. The rooms of Doctor Sampaio and Senhorita Marcenda, as she is aware, are two hundred and four and two hundred and five. Lydia appeared not to notice that Doctor Ricardo Reis was standing there as she went bustling up to the second floor. How long are they staying, the doctor inquired. They usually stay for three days, tomorrow evening they will go to the theater, I have already reserved their seats. To the theater, which one. The Teatro Dona Maria. Ah. This interjection is not one of surprise, it has been inserted here to terminate a dialogue which we are unable or unwilling to continue. In fact, most people from the provinces, when they visit Lisbon, may Coimbra forgive me for putting it in the provinces, take the opportunity of going to the theater, perhaps a revue at the Parque Mayer or a film at the Apolo or the Avenida, while those with more refined tastes invariably go to the Teatro Dona Maria, also known as the Teatro Nacional. Ricardo Reis moved into the lounge, leafed through a newspaper, looked up the entertainment page, the theater guide, and saw advertised Mar by Alfredo Cortez. He decided then and there that he too would go to the theater. As a good Portuguese citizen he should support Portuguese artists. He almost asked Salvador to reserve him a seat by telephone, but changed his mind, deciding to tend to the matter himself next day.

There are still two hours to go before dinner. In the meantime the guests from Coimbra will arrive, unless their train is delayed. But why should I be interested, Ricardo Reis asks himself as he goes upstairs to his room. He tells himself that it is always agreeable to meet people from other parts, civilized people, besides there is the interesting clinical case presented by Marcenda. An unusual name, a name unknown to him, it resembles a murmuring, an echo, the bowing of a cello, *les sanglots longs de l'automne*, alabasters, balustrades, this morbid twilight poetry exasperates him, the things a name can provoke, Marcenda. He passes room two hundred and four, the door is open and inside Lydia is running a feather duster over the furniture. They look furtively at each other, she smiles, he does not. Shortly afterward he is back in his room and hears a gentle knocking on the door, it is Lydia, who steals in quietly and asks him, Are you annoyed with me. He barely replies, tight-lipped. Here in the light of day he does not know how to behave. She is only a chambermaid and he could lecherously stroke her hips now, but he feels much too awkward to make such a gesture. Earlier perhaps, but not after they have already been together, have lain in the same bed, a kind of consecration, mine, ours. If I can, I'll join you tonight, Lydia said, and he made no reply. That she should warn him beforehand seemed inopportune, with the girl with the paralyzed hand so near, sleeping and unaware of the nocturnal secrets of this corridor and of the room at

the far end. But he was incapable of saying, Don't come. Lydia left, and he stretched out on the sofa to rest. Three nights of sexual activity after a long period of abstinence, and at his age, no wonder he can scarcely keep his eyes open. He knits his brow, asks himself, without finding the answer, whether he should pay Lydia, give her some little present, a pair of stockings, a cheap ring, something suitable for someone of her class. He must resolve this uncertainty, weighing the motives and reasons for and against. This is not like that business of whether or not to kiss her on the lips, circumstances made that decision for him, the so-called flame of passion, he himself did not know how it had happened, his kissing her as if she were the most beautiful woman in the world. Perhaps this will turn out to be just as easy, as they lie in each other's arms he will say, I'd like to give you a little memento, and she will find it quite natural. She is probably wondering even now why it has taken him so long.

Voices, footsteps can be heard in the corridor, Pimenta saying, Many thanks, sir, then two doors being closed. The travelers have arrived. He was almost asleep, now he stares up at the ceiling, examining the cracks in the plaster meticulously, as if tracing them with his fingertips. He imagines that he has the palm of God's hand overhead and is reading there the lines of life, of a life that narrows, is interrupted and revived, becomes more and more tenuous, a besieged heart solitary behind those walls. The right hand of Ricardo Reis, resting on the sofa, opens upward and reveals its own lines. Those two spots on the ceiling are like eyes. Who can tell who is reading us as we sit reading, oblivious of ourselves. Day turned to night some time ago, perhaps it is already time for dinner, but Ricardo Reis does not wish to be the first to go down. If I didn't hear them leaving their rooms, he thinks to himself, perhaps I slept without knowing it, and woke without realizing that I slept, I thought I was only dozing and I slept for a century. He sits up, uneasy, looks at his watch, it is already after eight-thirty, and at this very moment a man's voice can be heard in the corridor saying, Marcenda, I'm waiting for you. A door opens and there are vague sounds, footsteps moving away, then silence. Ricardo Reis rises, goes to the washbasin to freshen up, to comb his hair. The hair at his temples looks even whiter today, he ought to use one of those lotions or dyes that progressively restore the natural color to one's hair, Nhympha do Mondego, for example, a popular and reliable preparation that can be used to achieve the original tone without going any further, or it may be applied until the hair becomes as black as a raven's wing, if so desired. He is discouraged, however, by the idea of having to examine his hair each day, to check whether it is time to apply more lotion, mix more dye in a bowl, Crown me with roses, I ask no more. He changes his trousers and jacket, he must remember to tell Lydia they need pressing, and leaves his room with the incongruous and disagreeable presentiment that he will give this order without the neutrality of tone that an order should have when it is given by someone who naturally commands to someone who must naturally obey, if obeying and commanding are indeed natural. To put it more clearly, what Lydia will she be now, the one who heats the iron, folding the trousers on the ironing board to get a crease, inserting her left hand into the sleeve of the jacket near the shoulder so as to follow the line with the hot iron and restore its shape, no doubt remembering the body

that wears these garments. If I can, I'll join you tonight, she said, and now brings down the iron nervously, alone in the laundry room. This is the suit Doctor Ricardo Reis will wear to the theater, if only I could accompany him. What a ninny, what's got into you, she dries two tears that will inevitably appear, they are tomorrow's tears. Ricardo Reis is still here, making his way down to the dining room, he has not told Lydia yet that he needs the suit she has just pressed, and she still does not know that she will weep.

Nearly all the tables are occupied. Ricardo Reis pauses at the entrance. The maître d' comes to guide him to his table, there's really no need, it's where he always sits, but what would life be like without these and other rituals, kneel when you pray, uncover your head when the flag is carried past, sit down, unfold your napkin on your knees, if you look around to see who is sitting near you, do it discreetly, nod to anyone you know. Which Ricardo Reis does. That couple, this guest sitting on his own, these people here. He also knows Doctor Sampaio and his daughter Marcenda, but they do not recognize him, the lawyer looks at him with a vacant expression, perhaps he is searching his memory, but he does not lean toward his daughter and whisper in her ear, Aren't you going to greet Doctor Ricardo Reis who has just arrived. It is she who glances at him a little later, looking over the waiter's sleeve as he serves her, the faintest tremor on her pale face, the faintest blush, an indication of recognition. She remembers, Ricardo Reis thought to himself, and in an excessively loud voice asked Ramón what there was for dinner. This might explain why Doctor Sampaio looked at him, but no, two seconds earlier Marcenda said to her father, That gentleman over there, he was staying in the hotel the last time we were here. As they rose from the table, Doctor Sampaio gave him a little nod, and Marcenda at her father's side not even that, restrained and discreet as befits a dutiful daughter. Ricardo Reis rose ever so slightly from his chair in acknowledgment, one has to be endowed with a sixth sense to measure these subtle gestures and greetings, and their reciprocation must be carefully balanced. Everything has been so perfect on this occasion that it augurs well for a blossoming friendship. Father and daughter have already withdrawn, no doubt they are making their way into the lounge, but no, they retire to their rooms. Later Doctor Sampaio will probably take a stroll despite the rainy weather, because Marcenda goes to bed early, she finds these train journeys exhausting. When Ricardo Reis enters the lounge, all he will see are a few taciturn guests, some reading newspapers, others yawning, while the radio quietly grinds out Portuguese songs from popular revues, strident and grating even though barely audible. In this light, or because of these somber faces, the mirror resembles an aquarium, and when Ricardo Reis crosses the lounge on the far side and comes back by the same route in order not to turn around and make a beeline for the doorway, he sees himself in the greenish abyss as if he were walking on the ocean floor amid wreckage and drowned corpses. He must leave this place at once, reach the surface, breathe again. He goes up to his chilly room. Why should these minor irritations depress him so, if that is what is troubling him, after all they are simply two people who live in Coimbra and come to Lisbon once a month. This doctor is not looking for patients, this poet has plenty of muses to inspire him, this man is not seeking a wife, he did not return to Portugal with

that intention, and consider the difference in their ages. It is not Ricardo Reis who thinks these thoughts, nor one of those innumerable beings who exist within him, it is perhaps thought thinking itself while he looks on in amazement as a thread unwinds, leading him down unknown paths and corridors, at the end of which there waits a girl dressed in white, who cannot even hold a bouquet of flowers, because her right arm will be in his as they return from the altar treading the solemn red carpet to the strains of the wedding march. Ricardo Reis, as you can see, has already taken up the reins of thought, already controls and guides it, makes use of it to mock himself. The orchestra and red carpet are flights of fancy, and now, so that this poet's tale may have a happy ending, he accomplishes the clinical miracle of placing a bouquet of flowers in Marcenda's left arm and having it remain there without any assistance. The altar and priest can now disappear, the music cease, the wedding guests vanish in smoke and dust. The bridegroom withdraws, his services no longer required, the doctor has cured the patient, the rest must have been the work of the poet. These romantic episodes cannot be fitted into an Alcaic ode, which goes to prove, if any proof is needed, that what is written is often confused with what, having been experienced, gave birth to it, therefore one does not ask the poet what he thought or felt. It is precisely to avoid having to reveal these things that he composes verses.

The night passed and Lydia did not descend from the attic, Doctor Sampaio came back late, Fernando Pessoa is God knows where, then it was day, Lydia took away the suit for pressing, and Marcenda left with her father to keep their appointment with the specialist. She's gone for physiotherapy, says Salvador, who like most people cannot pronounce the word properly. For the first time Ricardo Reis finds it odd that a disabled girl should come to Lisbon when she lives in Coimbra, a city with such a wide range of specialists, for a course of treatment that can be administered just as easily there as here. Ultraviolet rays for example, unless applied with a certain frequency, provide little benefit. Ricardo Reis turns these doubts over in his mind as he goes down the Chiado on his way to the box office at the Teatro Nacional, but he was distracted at the sight of so many people wearing signs of mourning, a number of women in veils and the men even more conspicuous in their black suits and grave expressions, some even with mourning bands on their hats. George V of England, our oldest ally, was being buried. Despite the official mourning, there is a performance this evening, no disrespect intended, life must go on. The man in the box office sold him a seat in the stalls, and informed him, The fishermen will be in the audience tonight. What fishermen, asked Ricardo Reis before realizing that he had committed an unforgivable blunder. The box-office attendant frowned and altered his tone of voice, snapped, The fishermen from Nazaré, obviously. What others did he expect, there would be little sense in bringing fishermen from Caparica or from Póvoa. The journey and lodgings of the fishermen from Nazaré had been paid so that they might participate in this cultural event. Because they had inspired the play, it was only right that they should be represented, both the men and the women. Let's go to Lisbon, let's go and see the sea there, what gimmicks will be used to produce waves breaking over the stage, and what will Dona Palmira Bastos be like in the role of

Ti Gertrudes, and Dona Amélia as Maria Bern, and Dona Lalande as Rosa, and Amarante in the role of Lavagante, how well will they imitate our lives. And since we are going, let's take this opportunity to ask the government, for the sake of the suffering souls in Purgatory, to build us the little port of refuge we have been in such need of since the first boat was launched from our shore, whenever that was. Ricardo Reis whiled away the afternoon in cafés, went to inspect the work being carried out on the Teatro Eden. Any day now they will remove the hoardings, the Chave de Ouro is almost ready to be inaugurated, and both natives and foreigners can see that Lisbon is progressing so rapidly that it will soon be able to compete with the great cities of Europe, and rightly so as the capital of a great empire. He did not dine in the hotel, only went back to change his clothes. His jacket, trousers, waistcoat too had been put neatly on a hanger, beautifully pressed, the work of loving hands, pardon the hyperbole, for how can there be love in the nocturnal coupling of a hotel guest and a chambermaid, he a poet, she by chance named Lydia, a different Lydia, although still fortunate, because the Lydia in his poems never heard his moans and sighs, she only sat on a riverbank listening to someone confide, I suffer■, Lydia, from the fear of destiny. He ate a steak at the Restaurante Martinho, the one in the Rossio, and watched a keenly contested game of billiards, the chipped ball of Indian ivory rolling smoothly over the green baize. Since it was almost time for the performance to begin, he left, making a discreet approach and entering the theater, flanked by two large family groups. He had no wish to be seen until he himself chose the moment, heaven knows what emotional strategy he was pursuing, and crossed the foyer without pausing, one day it will be called a hallway or vestibule, unless some other term is borrowed from some other foreign language to say the same thing. At the entrance to the auditorium he was met by an usher, who led him down the left-hand aisle to the seventh row, It's that seat there, beside the lady. Don't let your imagination run riot, the man said lady, not girl, an usher in the Teatro Nacional can be relied upon to speak with decorum and the utmost clarity, his masters are the great dramatists of the classical and modern repertoire. Marcenda is sitting three rows ahead and to the right, too far to be near, and not even aware of my presence, she is sitting on her father's right, and just as well, for when she speaks to him and turns her head a little, Ricardo Reis can see her in profile. Is it because she is wearing her hair down that her face seems longer. She raises her right hand to the level of her chin, to clarify some word she has uttered or is about to utter, perhaps she is discussing the specialist who is treating her, perhaps the play they are about to see. Who is this Alfredo Cortez, her father cannot tell her much, he saw The Gladiators on his own two years ago and was not impressed, but this play caught his attention because of its traditional theme. It won't be long now before we discover what the play is like. This conversation, assuming it ever took place, was interrupted by the dragging of chairs overhead, by a loud whispering that made all the heads turn around and look upward. The fishermen from Nazaré have arrived and are getting into their seats in the boxes on the upper tier. They sit tall in order to see and be seen, both the men and the women are dressed in their own fashion, they are probably barefoot, one cannot see from down here. Some people in the audience applaud, others condescendingly join in. Irritated, Ricardo Reis clenches his fists, snobbish affectation in one who does not

have blue blood, we might say, but this is not the case, it is simply a question of decorum, Ricardo Reis finds the outburst of applause vulgar, to say the very least.

The lights dim, the auditorium is in darkness, the loud knocks ascribed to Molière can be heard onstage, what terror they must strike in the hearts of the fishermen and their wives, perhaps they imagine them to be the last-minute hammerings of carpenters on the set. The curtain opens, a woman is lighting a fire, it is still night, from behind the scenery a man's voice can be heard, calling Mané Zé, Ah, Mané Zé, the play has started. The audience sighs, wavers, sometimes smiles, becomes excited as the first act ends with that great stampede of women, and when the lights go up, faces are animated, a good sign. There is shouting overhead, people calling from box to box, one could mistake those fishermen for the actors themselves, their way of speaking almost the same, whether better or worse depending on the measure of comparison. Reflecting on this, Ricardo Reis decides that the purpose of an is not imitation, that the author has made a serious error of judgment by writing the play in the dialect of Nazaré, or in what he supposed was the dialect of Nazaré, because reality does not tolerate its reflection, rather, it rejects it. Only a different reality, whatever it is, may be substituted for the reality one wishes to convey. The difference between them mutually demonstrates, explains, and measures them, reality as the invention it was, invention as the reality it will be. Ricardo Reis thinks these things with even greater confusion, it is difficult, after all, to think and clap one's hands at the same time. The audience applauds, and he joins in out of sympathy, for despite the use of dialect, grotesque as spoken by the actors, he is enjoying the play. Marcenda is not clapping, she cannot, but she is smiling. Most of the women remain seated, it's the men who need to stretch and exercise their legs, to pay a visit to the gents', to smoke a cigarette or cigar, exchange views with their friends, greet acquaintances, to see and be seen in the foyer. If they remain in their seats, it is generally for reasons of love and courtship. As they stand up, their eyes rove like those of hawks, they are the protagonists of their own drama, actors who perform during the intermission while the real actors back in their dressing rooms discard roles they will shortly resume. As he gets up, Ricardo Reis looks between the heads and sees that Doctor Sampaio is also getting up. Refusing with a nod, Marcenda remains seated. Her father, already on his feet, places his hand affectionately on her shoulder, then moves toward the aisle. Hurrying, Ricardo Reis reaches the foyer first. Shortly they will meet face to face, amid all these people who are walking up and down and conversing in an atmosphere soon thick with tobacco smoke. There are voices and commentaries, Palmira is splendid, In my opinion they've put far too many fishing nets on the stage, What a bunch of harpies, grappling with each other, you'd think they were in earnest, That's because you've never seen them, dear fellow, as I've seen them in Nazaré, there they fight like the Furies, At times it is difficult to make out what they're saying, Well that's how they talk there. Ricardo Reis moved among the groups, as attentive to their words as if he himself were the author of the play, while watching the movements of Doctor Sampaio from a distance, anxious that they should bump into each other as if by chance. Then he realized that Doctor Sampaio had spotted him, was heading his way, and was the first to speak, Good evening, how are you

enjoying the play then. Ricardo Reis felt no need to say, What a surprise, what a coincidence, he immediately reciprocated the greeting, assured him that he was enjoying the play, and added, We are staying at the same hotel. Even so he ought to introduce himself, My name is Ricardo Reis. He hesitated, wondering whether he should add, I'm a doctor of medicine, I was living in Rio de Janeiro, I've been back in Lisbon less than a month. Doctor Sampaio barely listened, smiling, as if to say, If you knew Salvador as long as I have, you would realize that he has told me everything about you, and knowing him as well as I do, I guess he has told you about me and my daughter. Doctor Sampaio is undoubtedly shrewd, many years of experience as a notary bring certain advantages, We need hardly introduce ourselves, said Ricardo Reis. That's right. They went on almost immediately to discuss the play and the actors, treating each other with the utmost respect, Doctor Reis, Doctor Sampaio. A pleasant sense of equality is conferred upon them by their titles, and so they remained until the warning bell rang, when they returned to the auditorium together, and said, See you soon. Each went to his seat, Ricardo Reis, the first to sit down, kept watching, saw him speak to his daughter. She looked back, gave him a smile, he returned her smile, the second act was about to begin.

All three of them met during the next intermission. Even though they knew all about each other, they still had to be introduced, Ricardo Reis, Marcenda Sampaio. It was inevitable, the moment they both awaited, they shook hands, right hand with right hand, her left hand hanging limp, trying to fade from sight, shy, as if nonexistent. Marcenda's eyes shone brightly, she was clearly moved by the sufferings of Maria Bern, perhaps there was a deep reason in her personal life for accompanying, word for word, that final speech made by the wife of Lavagante, If there is a hell, it can be no worse than this, Virgin Mother of the Seven Sorrows. Marcenda would have made this speech in the dialect of Coimbra, but speaking in a different dialect in no way changes these feelings which cannot be explained in words, I fully understand why you do not touch this arm, you who share the same hotel corridor, man of my curiosity, I am she who hailed you with a lifeless hand, don't ask me why, I haven't even asked myself that question, I simply hailed you, one day I will learn what prompted that gesture, or perhaps not, now you will withdraw rather than give me the impression that you are being indiscreet, inquisitive, taking advantage, as one would say, go, I will know where to find you, or you me, for you have not come here by chance. Ricardo Reis did not remain in the foyer but wandered in the aisles behind the boxes on the grand tier and peered up at the boxes overhead to get a closer look at the fishermen. But the warning bell started ringing, this second intermission was shorter, and when he reached the auditorium the lights were already beginning to dim. During the whole of the third act he divided his attention between the stage and Marcenda, who never once looked behind her. But she had slightly altered the position of her body so that he could see a little more of her face, a mere glimpse, and from time to time she drew back her hair on the left side with her right hand, very slowly, as if on purpose. What does this girl want, who is she, because people are not always what they seem. He saw her dry her cheeks as Lianor confesses that she stole the key of the life jacket so that Lavagante would die, and again when Maria Bern and Rosa,

the one beginning, the other concluding, declare that this was an act of love and that love, being a noble sentiment, turns to torment when it is frustrated, and finally in the brief closing scene when Lavagante and Maria Bern are about to be united in the flesh. Suddenly the lights went up, the curtain fell to wild applause, and Marcenda was still drying her tears, now with a handkerchief. She was not alone, weeping women could be seen everywhere in the auditorium. Nervously smiling, the actors, such sensitive souls, acknowledged the ovation, made gestures as if returning it to the upper boxes occupied by the real heroes of these tales of love and adventure at sea. All inhibitions forgotten, the audience looked up in their direction, this is the communion of art, and applauded the intrepid fishermen and their courageous womenfolk. Even Ricardo Reis is clapping. Here in this theater one sees how easily understanding can be created between different classes and professions, between the rich, the poor, and those in-between, let us savor this rare spectacle of fraternity. The fishermen are now being coaxed to join the actors on the stage, the dragging of chairs can be heard once more. The performance is not over yet, the audience sits down. Now comes the climax, such merriment, such animation, such rejoicing, as the fishing community of Nazaré comes down the center aisle and climbs onto the stage. There they dance and sing the traditional airs of their region along with the actors, a night to be recorded forever in the annals of the Casa de Garrett. The leader of the group embraces the actor Robles Monteiro, the oldest of the fishwives receives a kiss from the actress Palmira Bastos, they all talk at once, utter bedlam, each speaking in his own dialect but managing to understand the others nonetheless, then there is more singing and dancing. The younger actresses demonstrate the traditional folk dance of Minho until the ushers finally start pushing us gently toward the exits. A dinner is to be served on stage, a communal love festival for the actors and their muses, corks will pop from the bottles of that sparkling wine which stings one's nostrils, the good women of Nazaré will be in fits of laughter once their heads start spinning, unaccustomed as they are to sparkling wine. Tomorrow, when the bus departs in the presence of journalists, photographers, and leaders of the corporations, the fishermen will give loud cheers for the New State and the Fatherland. One cannot be certain if they were paid to do so, but let us assume it is a spontaneous expression of gratitude at having been promised that port they so earnestly desire. If Paris was worth a mass, perhaps a few cheers will gain them salvation.

Ricardo Reis made no attempt to avert a second meeting as he left the theater. On the sidewalk he asked Marcenda if she had enjoyed the play. She confided that the third act had moved her deeply and brought tears to her eyes. Yes, I saw you weeping, he told her, and there the conversation ended. Having hailed a taxi, Doctor Sampaio suggested that Ricardo Reis might care to join them if he intended going straight back to the hotel. Thanking them, he declined. Until tomorrow then, Good-night, Pleased to meet you. The taxi drove off. He would have liked to accompany them, but realized it would be awkward, they would all feel ill at ease, be silent, finding another topic of conversation would not be easy, not to mention the delicate question of the seating arrangement, since there would not be room enough for three on the back seat, and Doctor Sampaio

would not wish to travel in front leaving his daughter alone with a stranger. Yes, a stranger, and in propitious darkness, for even if there was not the slightest physical contact between them, the darkness would draw them together with hands of velvet, and they would be drawn together even more closely by their thoughts, which gradually would become secrets difficult to conceal. Nor would it be right to have Ricardo Reis sit beside the driver, you cannot offer someone a lift and then ask him to sit in front, facing the meter. Also, at the end of the ride it is inevitable that the person beside the driver will feel obliged to pay. The host, sitting in the back, cannot find his wallet but insists he will pay, saying, Leave this to me, telling the driver not to accept any money from the man in front, I'm paying the fare. The taxi driver patiently waits for them to make up their mind, this is an argument he has heard a thousand times, taxi drivers have to put up with such absurdities. With no other pleasures or obligations in store, Ricardo Reis walks back to his hotel. The night is cold and damp, but it is not raining. Now he feels like going for a stroll, he descends the entire Rua Augusta, crosses the Terreiro do Paço to take those steps leading down to the quayside where the dark polluted waters turn to spray only to fall back into the river from whence they came. There is no one else at the quayside, yet other men are watching the night, the flickering lights on the opposite embankment, the mooring lamps of the anchored ships. This one man, physically present, is watching today, but there are in addition the innumerable beings he claims to be, the others he has been each time he came here and who remember having been here, even though he does not remember. Eyes accustomed to the dark see much farther. In the distance are gray outlines of ships belonging to the squadron which has left the safety of the harbor. Although still rough, the weather is no longer too rough for the ships, a sailor's life is one of sacrifice. Seen from this distance, a number of ships appear to have the same dimensions, these must be the torpedo boats named after rivers. Ricardo Reis does not recall all of the luggage porter's litany, there was the Tagus, now sailing the Tagus, and the Vouga, and the Dao, which is nearest of all, as the man told him. Here then is the Tagus, here are the rivers that flow through my village, all flowing to the sea which receives water from all the rivers and then restores it. If only this regression were eternal, but alas, it will last only as long as the sun, mortal like all of us. Glorious is the death of those men who died with the setting sun, they did not see the first day but they will see the last.

This cold weather is not good for philosophical musings. His feet are freezing. A policeman paused warily to keep an eye on him. The man contemplating the water didn't strike him as a scoundrel or tramp but might be thinking of throwing himself into the river. At the thought of all the trouble this would cause, having to raise the alarm, fishing out the corpse, writing up a formal report of the incident, the policeman decided to approach him, not quite knowing what to say but hoping that his presence would be sufficient to discourage the would-be suicide, to persuade him to postpone this act of madness. Ricardo Reis heard footsteps, felt the coldness of the flagstones penetrate his feet. He must buy boots with thick soles. It was time to get back to the hotel before he caught a chill. He said, Good evening, officer. The policeman, reassured, asked, Is there

anything wrong. No, nothing, it is the most natural thing in the world for a man to stroll along the quay, even at night, to watch the river and the ships. This is the Tagus which does not flow through my village, because the Tagus that flows through my village is called the Douro, but the fact that it does not have the same name does not mean that the river that flows through my village is any less beautiful. The policeman went off in the direction of the Rua da Alfândega, reflecting on the madness of certain people who appeared in the middle of the night. Whatever possessed this man to think he could enjoy a view of the river in such weather, if he were obliged like me to patrol the docks night after night he would soon find it tiresome. Ricardo Reis continued along the Rua do Arsenal and within ten minutes arrived at the hotel. Pimenta appeared on the landing with a bunch of keys, looked down, and withdrew, not waiting, as he usually did, for the guest to come upstairs, why should this be. Asking himself this natural question, Ricardo Reis began to worry. Perhaps he already knows about Lydia, he is bound to find out sooner or later, a hotel is like a glass house. Pimenta, who never leaves the place and knows every nook and cranny, must suspect something. Good evening, Pimenta, he said with exaggerated warmth, and the other replied with no apparent reserve, no trace of hostility. Perhaps I'm mistaken, Ricardo Reis thought, and when Pimenta handed him his key, he was about to continue on but turned back and opened his wallet, This is for you, Pimenta, and handed him a twenty-escudo note. He gave no explanation and Pimenta asked no questions.

No light came from any of the rooms. Ricardo Reis went quietly down the corridor for fear of disturbing the sleeping guests. For three seconds he paused outside the door of Marcenda's room. In his room the air was cold and damp, not much better than out by the river. He shivered, as if still gazing at those livid ships and listening to the policeman's footsteps. What would have happened had he replied, Yes, there is something wrong, although he would not have been able to elaborate. Approaching the bed, he noticed a bulge in the eiderdown, something had been placed between the sheets, a hot-water bottle, he was sure, but to make certain he put his hand on top. It was warm. She was a good sort, Lydia, just like her to remember to warm his bed, these were little comforts for the chosen few. She probably won't come tonight. He lay down, opened the book at his bedside, the one about Herbert Quain, glanced at a couple of pages without taking in the sense. Three motives had been suggested for the crime, each in itself sufficient to incriminate the suspect, on whom all three converged, but the aforesaid suspect, availing himself of the law, argued that the real motive, were it to be proven that he was in fact the criminal, might be a fourth or fifth or sixth motive, each motive equally feasible, and so the full explanation of the crime could be reached only in the interrelation between all these motives, in the effect of each on each in every combination until finally the effects all canceled out, the result being death. Moreover, one had to consider to what extent the victim himself was responsible, which possibility could provide, both morally and legally, a seventh and even definitive motive. Ricardo Reis felt restored, the hot-water bottle was warming his feet, his brain worked without any interference from the outside world, the tediousness of the book made his eyelids

heavy. He shut his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, Fernando Pessoa was sitting at the foot of the bed as if he had come to visit the sick. That same estranged look had been captured for posterity in several portraits, the hands crossed over the right thigh, the head slightly forward, deathly pale. Ricardo Reis put his book aside between the two pillows. I didn't expect you at this late hour, he said, and smiled amiably lest his visitor catch the note of impatience in his voice, the ambiguity of his words which amounted to saying, I could have done without your visit today. And he had good reason, two to be precise, the first being that he felt like talking, but not to Fernando Pessoa, about his evening at the theater, the second being that Lydia might enter the room at any moment. Not that there was any danger of her crying out, Help, a ghost, but Fernando Pessoa, though it was not in his nature, might wish to stay and witness these intimacies of flesh and spirit, the possibility could not be ruled out. God, who is God, frequently does this, nor can He avoid it, since He is everywhere, but that is something we accept. Ricardo Reis appealed to masculine complicity, We cannot chat for long, I am expecting a visitor, you must agree that it could be embarrassing. You don't waste time, you've been here less than three weeks and already you're involved in amorous intrigues, at least I presume they are amorous. It depends what you mean by amorous, she's a chambermaid in the hotel. My dear Reis, you, an aesthete, intimate with all the goddesses of Olympus, sharing your bed with a chambermaid, with a servant, and I used to listen to you speak incessantly and with the utmost constancy of your Lydia, Neaera, and Chloe, and now you tell me you are infatuated with a chambermaid, you deeply disappoint me. The chambermaid's name is Lydia and I am not infatuated, I am not one for infatuation. Ah, so this much-praised poetic justice exists after all, what an amusing situation, you clamored for Lydia at such length that Lydia finally came, you have been more fortunate than Camões who, in order to win his Natércia, was obliged to invent the name but got no further, so the name Lydia came but not the woman, don't be ungrateful, how do you know what the Lydia of your odes is like, supposing such a phenomenon exists, an intolerable embodiment of passivity, thoughtful silence, and pure spirit, indeed, it is doubtful, as doubtful in fact as the existence of the poet who wrote your odes. But I did write them. Allow me to be skeptical, my dear Reis, I see you there reading a detective story with a hot-water bottle at your feet and waiting for a chambermaid to come and warm the rest of you, if you'll pardon the expression, and you expect me to believe that you are the same man who wrote, Serene and watching life from a distance, I must ask you where you were when you watched life from a distance. You yourself wrote that a poet is someone who pretends. We utter such intuitions without knowing how we arrive at them, unfortunately I died without discovering whether it is the poet who pretends to be a man or the man who pretends to be a poet. To pretend and to deceive oneself are not the same thing. Is that a statement or a question. It is a question. Of course they're not the same, I only invented, but you invented yourself, if you want to see the difference, read my poems and go back and read your own. This conversation is certain to keep me up all night. Perhaps your Lydia will come and cradle you in her arms, from what they tell me chambermaids who worship their masters can be extremely affectionate. You sound vexed. Perhaps I am. Tell me something, is my

pretense that of a poet or a man. Your situation, Reis my friend, is hopeless, you have invented yourself, you are your own invention, and this has nothing to do with either man or poet. Hopeless. Is that another question, It is, Yes, hopeless, first of all because you do not know who you are, And what about you, did you ever discover who you were, I no longer count, I'm dead, but don't worry, there will be lots of people ready to explain everything about me. Perhaps I came back to Portugal to learn who I am. Nonsense, my dear fellow, childish nonsense, revelations of this kind are only to be found in works of mysticism and on roads leading to Damascus, don't forget that we're in Lisbon and no roads lead from here. I can scarcely keep my eyes open. I'll leave you now to get some sleep, sleep is really the only thing I envy you, only fools believe that sleep is the cousin of death, cousin or brother, I can't remember, I think it's cousin, after so few words of sympathy, do you really want me to return. Please do, I don't have many people to confide in. That is certainly a valid reason. Listen, do me a favor, leave the door ajar, it will save me getting out of bed and catching cold. Are you still expecting company. One never knows, Fernando, one never knows.

Half an hour later, the door was pushed open. Lydia, shivering after a lengthy crossing of stairs and corridors, slipped into his bed, curled up beside him, and asked, Was the theater nice, and he told her the truth, Yes, very nice.

Marcenda and her father did not appear for lunch. To discover why did not require any great tactical subtlety on the part of Ricardo Reis, or any of the dialectical cunning of a detective carrying out an investigation, he simply gave Salvador and himself a little time, chatting idly, his elbows resting on the reception desk with the self-assured air of a friendly guest, and in passing, as a parenthesis or fleeting rhetorical digression, a melody that unexpectedly surfaces during the development of another, he informed Salvador that he had met and made the acquaintance of Doctor Sampaio and his daughter, the most agreeable and refined of people. The smile on Salvador's face became slightly contorted, after all he had spoken to the two guests when they left and they had not mentioned the encounter with Doctor Reis in the theater. Now he knew, true, but not until almost two in the afternoon. How could such a thing happen. Of course he did not expect a written note upon their return telling him, We came across Doctor Reis, I met Doctor Sampaio and his daughter, nevertheless he felt it was a great injustice to have kept him in the dark for so many hours. A hotel manager who is on such friendly terms with the guests should not be treated in this way, what an ungrateful world. For a smile to become contorted, since we are on the subject, only a moment is needed, and it may last only a moment, but to explain the contortion may require a little longer. The fact is that the human mind has such deep recesses that if we venture therein with the intention of examining everything, there is a good chance that we will not emerge quickly. Not that Ricardo Reis made any close examination, all he perceived was that a sudden thought had troubled Salvador, and so it had. Yet even had he tried to figure out what that thought was, he never would have succeeded, which goes to show how little we know each other and how soon our patience runs out when from time to time, though not frequently, we try to find motives, to explain impulses, unless we are dealing with a genuine criminal investigation as in *The God of the Labyrinth*. Salvador overcame his annoyance before one could count to ten, as the saying goes, and allowing himself to be guided solely by his good nature he expressed his delight, praising Doctor Sampaio and his daughter, he a thorough gentleman, she a most refined young lady so carefully brought up, what a pity her life was so sad, with that disability or illness. Between ourselves, Doctor Reis, I don't believe there is a cure. Ricardo Reis had not started the conversation to become involved in a medical debate for which he had already declared himself unqualified, therefore he turned the discussion to what mattered, or mattered to him, without knowing to what extent it mattered, the fact that Doctor Sampaio and Marcenda had not come down for lunch. Suddenly aware of the possibility, he asked, Have they already gone back to Coimbra. Salvador, who could at least claim to know everything in this regard, replied, No, not until tomorrow, today they lunch in the Baixa because Senhorita Marcenda has an appointment with the specialist and then they will take a look around and purchase a few items they need. But will they be dining here this evening. Most certainly. Ricardo Reis moved away from the reception desk, took two paces, changed his mind, and announced, I think I'll take a stroll, the weather looks settled. Salvador, with the tone of one who is merely passing on useless information, said, Senhorita Marcenda said she intended to return to the hotel after lunch and that she would not be accompanying her father on some business matters. Now Ricardo Reis went into the lounge, looked out the window

with a weather eye, and returned to the reception desk. On second thought, I'll stay here and read the papers, it isn't raining but it must be cold. Salvador, wholeheartedly endorsing this new proposal, said, I'll have a paraffin heater put in the lounge right away. He rang the hand bell twice. A chambermaid appeared, but it wasn't Lydia. Ah, Carlota, light a heater and put it in the lounge. Whether such details are indispensable or not for a clear understanding of this narrative is something each of us must judge for himself, and the judgment will vary according to our attention, mood, and temperament. There are those who value broad ideas above all, who prefer panoramas and historical frescoes, whereas others appreciate the affinities and contrasts between small brush strokes. We are well aware that it is impossible to please everyone, but here it was simply a question of allowing enough time for the feelings, whatever they might be, to develop between and within the protagonists while Carlota goes back and forth, while Salvador struggles with some difficult calculations, while Ricardo Reis asks himself if he has aroused suspicions by suddenly changing his mind.

Two o'clock came, then two-thirty, the Lisbon newspapers with their faint print were read and reread, the headlines on the front page. Edward VIII to be crowned King of England, the Minister of the Interior congratulated by historian Costa Brochado, wolves are prowling urban areas, the Anschluss plan, which, for those who may not know, proposes the annexation of Austria to Germany, has been repudiated by the Austrian Patriotic Front. The French government has tendered its resignation, and the rift between Gil Robles and Calvo Sotelo could endanger the electoral bloc of the Spanish right-wing parties. Then the advertisements. Pargil is the best elixir for oral hygiene, tomorrow evening the famous ballerina Marujita Fontan will make her debut at the Arcadia, we present the latest automobiles manufactured by Studebaker, the President, the Dictator, if the advertisement of Freire the Engraver offered the universe, this one epitomizes the world in which we live today, an automobile called the Dictator, a clear sign of the times and of contemporary taste. From time to time the buzzer sounds, people leaving, people arriving, a guest checking in, a sharp ping on the bell from Salvador, Pimenta carrying up the luggage, then silence, prolonged and oppressive. The afternoon turns gloomy, it is after three-thirty. Ricardo Reis gets up from the sofa, drags himself to the reception desk, Salvador looks at him with sympathy, even compassion, So you've finished reading all the newspapers. Everything now happens so quickly that Ricardo Reis is given no time to reply. The sound of the buzzer, a voice at the bottom of the stairs, I say Pimenta, could I ask you to help me carry these parcels upstairs. Pimenta goes down, comes up again, Marcenda with him, and Ricardo Reis does not know what to do, should he remain where he is, go back and sit down and pretend that he is reading or dozing in the gentle warmth. If he does so, what will that cunning spy Salvador think. He is undecided between these two courses of action as Marcenda arrives at the desk and says, Good afternoon, and is taken by surprise, Why it's you, Doctor. I was reading the papers, he replies, but hastens to add, I've just this minute finished. These are disastrous sentences, much too peremptory, if I'm reading the papers I'm not interested in conversation, and if I've just finished reading them then I'm on my way out. Feeling utterly ridiculous, he goes

on to say, It's quite warm in here. Appalled at the banality of this statement, he still cannot make up his mind, he cannot go back and sit down again, not just yet, if he does she will think he wishes to be alone, and if he waits until she goes up to her room she will think that he is going out. Any move on his part must be carefully timed so that she will think that he has been waiting for her. All of which proved unnecessary, because Marcenda simply said, I am going up to put these things in my room and will come right down for a little chat, if you have the patience to bear with me and don't have more important things to do. We should not be surprised that Salvador is smiling, he likes to see his clients strike up friendships, it is good for the hotel's image, creates a pleasant atmosphere, and even if we were surprised, it does not help the story to speak at length of a thing that no sooner does it surface than it disappears. Ricardo Reis also smiled, and speaking slowly, assured her, I would be delighted, or words to that effect, for there are many other expressions equally commonplace, although to our shame we never stop to analyze them. We should remember them, empty and colorless as they are, as they were spoken and heard for the first time, It will be a pleasure, I am entirely at your service, little declarations of such daring that they cause the person making them to hesitate, and cause the person to whom they are addressed to tremble, because that was a time when words were pristine and feelings came to life.

Marcenda lost no time in coming down. She had tidied her hair, freshened her lipstick, some consider such things automatic, responses in the mirror, while others believe that a woman is conscious of her appearance in all circumstances, and of her moods and the least flirtatious gesture. Ricardo Reis rose to greet her and led her to the sofa which stood at a right angle to his own, reluctant to suggest that they should move to another, more spacious sofa where they might sit side by side. Marcenda sat down, resting her left hand on her lap, and smiled in a strange remote way, as if to say, Take a good look, my hand is quite helpless. Ricardo Reis was about to ask, Are you tired, when Salvador appeared and asked if he could bring them anything, some coffee or tea. They accepted, a coffee would be most welcome in this cold weather. But first Salvador checked the heater, which filled the room with a smell of paraffin that made one feel slightly giddy, while the flame, subdivided into a thousand tiny blue tongues, whispered incessantly. Marcenda asked Ricardo Reis if he enjoyed the play. He said he did, although he found the naturalism of the performance somewhat artificial. He tried to explain more clearly, In my opinion, a stage performance should never be natural, what is presented on stage is theater, not life, life cannot be reproduced, even the most faithful of reflections, that of a mirror, transforms right into left and left into right. But did you enjoy it or not, Marcenda insisted. Yes, he said, and after all one word sufficed. At this moment Lydia entered, put the coffee tray down on the table, asked if they wished anything else. Marcenda said, No, many thanks, but Lydia was looking at Ricardo Reis, who had not raised his eyes and who was carefully taking his cup and asking Marcenda, How many spoons. Two, she replied. Lydia's presence was clearly no longer required, so she withdrew, much too hastily to Salvador's mind, and he reprimanded her from his throne, Be careful with that door.

Putting her cup down on the tray, Marcenda placed her right hand over her left. Both were cold, yet between the two was the difference between the quick and the dead, between what can still be salvaged and what is forever lost. My father would not be pleased if he knew that I am about to take advantage of our acquaintance by asking your medical opinion. Do you want my opinion about your infirmity. Yes, about this arm which cannot move, this wretched hand of mine. I hope you will understand my reluctance to offer any advice, first because I am not a specialist, second because I know nothing of your clinical history, third because professional etiquette forbids my interfering in a case being handled by a colleague. I know all that, but no one can prevent an invalid from having a doctor as a friend and consulting him about her personal problems. Of course not. Then answer my question as a friend. I am happy to be your friend, to use your own words, after all we have known each other for a month. Then you will give me your opinion. I will try, but first must ask you one or two questions. Ask me anything you like, this is another of those phrases we could add to the long list of expressions that meant a great deal once, when words were still in their infancy, At your service, Happy to oblige, It will give me great pleasure, Whatever you wish. Lydia came back into the lounge and saw at a glance that Marcenda was blushing, saw the tears in her eyes, saw Ricardo Reis resting his left cheek on his clenched fist. Both were silent, as if they had come to the end of an important conversation or were preparing for one, what could it have been, what will it be. Lydia took the tray. We all know how coffee cups shake if not placed firmly on their respective saucers, something we must always check when we are not altogether certain that our hands are steady and if we do not want to hear Salvador warn, Careful with that crockery.

Ricardo Reis seemed to reflect. Then, leaning forward, he extended his hands to Marcenda and asked, May I. She also leaned forward slightly, and with her right hand put her left into his hands as if it were an injured bird, its wing broken, a lead pellet embedded in its breast. Slowly, gently but firmly applying pressure, he ran his fingers over the hand, up to the wrist, for the first time in his life knowing what is meant by total surrender, the absence of any reaction, be it voluntary or instinctive, of any resistance, worse, it seemed an alien body, not of this world. Marcenda stared fixedly at her hand, that paralyzed mechanism. Other doctors have probed those lifeless muscles, those useless nerves, those bones that protect nothing, now they are being touched by this man to whom she has entrusted them, if Doctor Sampaio were to walk in this moment, he would not believe his eyes. But no one came into the lounge, usually the scene of so much traffic. Today it is a place for quiet intimacy. Slowly withdrawing his hand, Ricardo Reis looked at his own fingers without knowing why, then asked, How long has it been like this. Four years last December, Did it come about gradually or all of a sudden, Would you call a month gradually or all of a sudden, Are you telling me that within a month you completely lost the power in your arm, I am. Was there any prior sign that something might be wrong, No, No injury, heavy fall or blow, None, What did the doctor say, That it is the consequence of my heart disease, You didn't tell me that you suffer from heart disease, I thought you were interested only in my arm, What else did the doctor say, In

Coimbra they told me there is no cure, here, the same thing, but the latest specialist, who has been treating me for almost two years now, says that I can get better. What treatment is he giving you, Massage, sunlamp treatment, electric shock, With what results, None, Your arm does not respond to electric shock, It responds, it jumps, trembles, then is still again. Ricardo Reis fell silent, perceiving a sudden note of hostility and resentment, as if Marcenda were telling him to stop asking so many questions, or to ask her other, different ones, this question for example, Can you remember if something important happened at that time, or, more to the point, have you experienced some misfortune. Marcenda's face showed that she was close to tears. Apart from this problem with your hand, are you troubled by some unhappiness, Ricardo Reis asked her. She nodded, began to gesture but could not finish, convulsed by a deep sob as if her heart had been wrenched, and tears ran uncontrollably down her cheeks. Alarmed, Salvador appeared in the doorway, but Ricardo Reis dismissed him brusquely. Salvador withdrew, lingering just outside the door. Marcenda pulled herself together, only her tears continued to flow, but quietly, and when she spoke, the note of hostility, if that was what it had been, was gone from her voice. After my mother died I found I could no longer use my arm. But you told me only a moment ago that the doctors said the paralysis was the result of heart disease. That is what they said, And do you believe them, I do, Then why do you think that there is a connection between your mother's death and the paralysis in your arm, I am certain of it, but cannot explain it. She paused, summoned what remained of her animosity, and snapped, I am not looking for a healer of souls. Nor am I a healer of souls, just an ordinary doctor in general practice. It was now Ricardo Reis who was irritated. Marcenda raised her hand to her eyes and said, Forgive me, I am annoying you. You are not annoying me, I would gladly help you in whatever way I can. Probably no one can, I had to confide in someone, that was all. So you are truly convinced that this connection exists, As truly as we're sitting here together, And are you not able to move your arm just by knowing that the paralysis came about only because your mother died. Is that all it is, Yes, that's all, which is saying a great deal, because for you, given your deep conviction, there was no other cause, the time has come to ask yourself a straightforward question, is your arm immobile because you cannot move it or because you do not wish to. These words were uttered in a whisper, sensed rather than heard, and Marcenda would not have sensed them had she not been expecting them. Salvador strained to hear, but Pimenta's footsteps could be heard on the landing, he came to ask if there were any documents to be taken to the police. This question, too, was asked in a low voice, and for the same reason, so that the reply would not be heard. Sometimes a reply is not even spoken, trapped between one's teeth, one's lips, and if spoken, it remains inaudible, a tenuous yes or no that dissolves in the shadows of a hotel lounge like a drop of blood in a transparent sea, present but invisible. Marcenda did not say, Because I cannot, she did not say, Because I do not wish to, instead she looked at Ricardo Reis and asked, Have you any advice to offer, something that might lead to a cure, some treatment. I already told you that I'm not a specialist, but as far as I can judge, Marcenda, if you are suffering from heart disease, you are also suffering from yourself. That's the first time anyone ever told me that. We are all ill, with one malaise or

another, a deep-rooted malaise that is inseparable from what we are and that somehow makes us what we are, you might even say that each one of us is his own illness, we are so little because of it, and yet we succeed in being so much because of it. But my arm doesn't move, my hand is completely useless. Perhaps it does not move because it does not choose to. This conversation, forgive me, has got us nowhere. You said you feel no improvement, I do not, Then why do you keep coming to Lisbon, It is not my doing, my father insists, and he has his own reasons, What reasons, I am twenty-three years of age, unmarried, brought up never to discuss certain things even though I might think them, for thinking is something one cannot avoid. Can't you be more explicit, Is that necessary. Lisbon, despite being Lisbon and having ships at sea, What's that, A line of verse, I don't remember who wrote it, Now it's my turn not to understand. Although Lisbon has so much, it doesn't have everything, yet there are some who think that here they will find their heart's desire. If in this roundabout way you are asking me whether my father has a mistress in Lisbon, the answer is yes. Surely your father doesn't need to justify his visits to Lisbon when he has a daughter in need of medical advice, besides he is still a young man, widowed, and therefore free. As I said before, I was brought up not to mention certain things, yet I go on mentioning them slyly, I am like my father, given the position he holds and the kind of education he received, I believe that the more secretive the better. A good thing I didn't have children. Why. There is no mercy in the eyes of one's children. I love my father. I believe you, but love is not enough. Obligated to remain behind the desk, Salvador has no idea what he is missing, revelations, confidences freely exchanged between two people who barely know each other, but to hear he would have to be seated here, on this third sofa, leaning forward, reading on their lips the words they scarcely utter. It would almost be easier to understand the murmuring of the paraffin heater than these subdued voices, they come as if from the confessional, may we be forgiven all our sins.

Marcenda placed her left hand in the palm of her right. Untrue, she did not, the sentence suggests that her left hand was capable of obeying such a command transmitted by the brain. One would need to be present to see how this was done. First the right hand slipped underneath the left, then held the wrist with the little finger and fourth finger, and now both came toward Ricardo Reis, each hand offering the other, or pleading for help, or simply resigned to the inevitable. Tell me, do you think I will ever be cured. I cannot say, you have been like this for four years without any improvement, your own doctor has all the details of your medical history, which I don't, besides, as I've already explained, I have no competence in this field. Should I stop coming to Lisbon, tell my father that I accept the situation, that he shouldn't waste any more money trying to find a cure. Your father has two reasons for coming to Lisbon, if you take away one of them he may or may not find the courage to continue coming on his own, but he will have lost the alibi your illness provided, at present he sees himself only as the father who wishes his daughter cured. What should I do then. We two scarcely know each other, I have no right to give you advice, Please, I am asking it, Don't give up, keep coming to Lisbon for your father's sake, even if you no longer believe there is a cure, I have almost

stopped believing in a cure, Cling to whatever belief you have left, believing will be your alibi, Alibi for what, To hope, Hope in what, Hope, just hope, one reaches a point where there is nothing but hope, and that is when we discover that hope is everything. Marcenda leaned back on the sofa, slowly stroking her left hand, her back to the window, her face scarcely visible. Normally Salvador would appear now to turn on the chandelier, the pride and joy of the Hotel Brangança, but on this occasion he does not, as if to show his displeasure at being excluded from a conversation which he, after all, made possible. This is how they repay him, sitting there rapt in conversation, whispering almost in darkness. No sooner did he think this than the chandelier went on, Ricardo Reis had taken the initiative, because anyone walking into the lounge would have been suspicious to find a man and a woman together in the shadows, even if the man was a doctor and the woman a cripple. Much worse, this, than the backseat of a taxi. As was to be expected, Salvador appeared, I was coming this very moment to switch on the light, Doctor. He smiled, and they smiled too, gestures and postures according to the rules of civilized behavior, part hypocrisy, part necessity, to disguise our anguish. After Salvador withdrew, there was a long silence, it seemed less easy to speak with all this light, then Marcenda said, Without wishing to pry into your affairs, can I ask you why you have been living for a whole month in this hotel. I still haven't decided whether or not to look for a place, I may return to Rio de Janeiro. Salvador tells me that you lived there for sixteen years, what made you decide to come back. I felt homesick. You've got over it quickly, if already you're talking about leaving. It isn't exactly that, when I embarked for Lisbon, I felt I could put it off no longer, there were important matters to be dealt with here. And now. And now, he broke off, staring into the mirror ahead, now I am like an elephant that senses its approaching end and begins heading for the place where it must die. If you return to Brazil for good, then that will be the place where the elephant goes to die. When a man emigrates, he thinks of the country where he might die as the country where he will spend the rest of his life, and that is the difference. Perhaps, when I return to Lisbon next month, you will no longer be here. By then I might have found a place to live, opened a practice, settled into a routine. Or you might have returned to Rio de Janeiro. You will be informed, our friend Salvador will pass on all the news. I will come in order not to lose hope, And I will be here, if I have not lost hope.

Marcenda is twenty-three. We don't know for certain what kind of education she has received, but being the daughter of a notary, and from Coimbra no less, she almost certainly attended grammar school. Had it not been for her illness, no doubt she would have enrolled in some faculty, perhaps law or arts, preferably arts, because apart from the fact that we already have a lawyer in the family, the tedious study of codes and regulations is not suitable for women. If only she had been born a boy, to continue the Sampaio dynasty and legal practice. But this isn't the problem, the problem here is to find a young woman at this time in Portugal capable of sustaining such a lengthy and elevated conversation, we mean elevated when compared with the standards of the day. She did not make a single frivolous remark, showed no pretentiousness, did not affect wisdom or try to compete with the male, if you'll pardon the expression, she spoke naturally, was

obviously intelligent, perhaps in compensation for her disability, something which can happen with women as well as with men. She rises from the sofa, holds her left hand up to her breast and smiles, I am deeply grateful for the patience you have shown me. No need to thank me, I enjoyed our conversation. Are you dining here this evening, Yes, I am, Then we shall see each other soon, good-bye for now. Ricardo Reis watched her leave, she was not as tall as he remembered her, but slender, that was why his memory had deceived him. He heard her say to Salvador, Tell Lydia to come to my room as soon as she is free. Ricardo Reis alone will find this request startling, because certain shameful acts of promiscuity between social classes are weighing on his conscience. What could be more natural than a maid's being summoned to a guest's bedroom, especially if the guest in question needs help to change her dress, for example, because her arm is paralyzed. Ricardo Reis stays a little longer, switches on the radio just as they are broadcasting the music from *The Sleeping Beauty*, one of those coincidences which only a novelist would exploit to draw parallels between a silent lake and a young virgin. Although this has not been mentioned and she herself does not declare it, Marcenda is a virgin, a wholly private matter, even a fiancé, should she ever have one, will not dare to ask, Are you a virgin. For the time being and in this social ambiance one assumes that she is. Later, at the opportune moment, we may discover with some indignation that she wasn't after all. The music came to an end, was followed by a Neapolitan song, a serenata or something of the kind, *amore mio, cuore ingrato, con te, la vita insieme, per sempre*, the tenor was singing these heartfelt protestations when into the lounge came two guests sporting diamond tiepins in their cravats, their double chins concealing the knots. They sat down, lit their cigars, were about to discuss a business deal involving cork or canned fish, we would know for certain except that Ricardo Reis is now leaving, so engrossed that he even forgets to greet Salvador. Something strange is going on in this hotel.

Later that evening Doctor Sampaio arrives. Ricardo Reis and Marcenda have not left their rooms. Lydia has been seen from time to time on the stairs or in the halls, but only where she has been summoned. She was rude to Pimenta, and he gave her as good as he got, the incident occurring out of everyone's hearing, and just as well, because Salvador would certainly have demanded an explanation from Pimenta, who was muttering insinuations about certain people who walked in their sleep and could be found wandering down corridors in the middle of the night. It was eight o'clock when Doctor Sampaio knocked on the door. He would not bother coming in, thank you all the same, he had only called to invite Ricardo Reis to join them for dinner, Marcenda had told him about their little chat, I am greatly indebted to you, Doctor. Ricardo Reis insisted that he come in and sit down for a moment. I didn't do anything, simply listened and gave the only advice that could be given by someone without any special knowledge of the case, to persevere with the treatment, not to become disheartened. That's what I'm always telling her, but she no longer pays attention, you know what children are, yes Papa, but she comes to Lisbon without any real interest, and yet she must come so that the specialist can follow the progression of her illness, though of course the treatment itself is administered in Coimbra. But surely there are specialists in Coimbra. Very few, and those

we consulted, without wishing to give offense, did not inspire much confidence, whereas the specialist in Lisbon is a man of considerable skill and experience. These absences from Coimbra must interfere with your work. Sometimes, but no father worthy of the name would refuse to sacrifice some time for his children. In this vein they exchanged a few more phrases matched in subtlety of intent, concealing as much as they revealed, as tends to happen in conversations in general and in this one in particular, for the reasons known to us, until Doctor Sampaio finally decided it was time to withdraw. Well then, we will knock on your door at nine, No, I will come by, I don't see why you should go to any trouble. And so at the appointed hour Ricardo Reis knocked on the door of room two hundred and five. It would have been most indelicate to have knocked on Marcenda's door first, another of those subtle formalities.

Their entrance into the dining room was unanimously greeted with smiles and little deferential nods. Salvador, his annoyance forgotten or diplomatically suppressed, threw open the glass-paneled doors, and Ricardo Reis and Marcenda walked in front as etiquette demanded, he is their guest. From where we are standing we can scarcely hear the radio, there would be much food for thought if it should happen to be the wedding march from Lohengrin or the one by Mendelssohn or, less well known, perhaps because it is played as the prelude to disaster, the one in Lucia di Lammermoor by Donizetti. Needless to say, the table where they will sit is that of Doctor Sampaio, which is invariably waited upon by Felipe, but Ramón does not abdicate his prerogative, he will assist his colleague and compatriot. Both of them were born in Villagarcia de Arosa, it is the destiny of humans to follow their own distinct paths in life. Some have followed theirs from Galicia to Lisbon, while this man Reis was born in Oporto, for a time lived in the capital, then emigrated to Brazil, and the two people with him have been shuttling back and forth between Coimbra and Lisbon for the last three years. Each is searching, for a cure, for money, for peace of mind, for pleasure, each has his own goal, which explains why it is so difficult to satisfy all who are in need. The dinner passes tranquilly. Marcenda is seated on her father's right, her left hand reclining as usual at the side of her plate, but curiously enough it is not hiding, on the contrary, it almost appears to glory in being seen, and if you think that word excessive, then you certainly haven't heard how ordinary people speak. Let us not forget, either, that this hand has rested in the hands of Ricardo Reis, and how should it feel if not glorious. Marcenda's disability is not discussed, the noose has been mentioned far too often already in the house of this woman condemned to the gallows. Doctor Sampaio is speaking of the wonders of the Athens of Portugal, There I was born into the world, there I was reared, there I graduated, there I exercise my profession, I swear the city is incomparable. His style is vigorous, but there is no danger of entering into an argument at the table about the merits of Coimbra compared with other cities, whether Oporto or Villagarcia de Arosa. Ricardo Reis does not care where one was born, and Felipe and Ramón would never dare to join in the conversation. They know their place, which is not the place of their birth. It was inevitable that Doctor Sampaio should learn that Ricardo Reis had gone to Brazil for political reasons, although it is hard to say how he learned it. Salvador did not tell him, because he does not know

either, nor did Ricardo Reis confide it, but certain things are gleaned from broken words, moments of silence, a glance. He only had to say, I left for Brazil in nineteen nineteen, the year in which the monarchy was restored in the north, he only had to use a certain tone of voice, and the notary's sharp ear, accustomed to listening to falsehoods, oaths, confessions, was not deceived. It was inevitable, then, that the conversation should turn to politics. By indirect routes, testing the ground, trying to detect hidden mines or snares, but feeling incapable of changing the topic, Ricardo Reis allowed himself to be carried along, and before the dessert he had already stated that he had no faith in democracies and heartily despised socialism. You're among friends, Doctor Sampaio assured him with a smile. Marcenda showed little interest in their conversation, for some reason she placed her left hand on her lap. If there had been glorying, it was now burned out. What we need, my dear Reis, in this corner of Europe, is a man of vision and firm resolve to head our government and run the country. These were the words spoken by Doctor Sampaio, who continued, There is no possible comparison between the Portugal you knew when you left for Rio de Janeiro and the Portugal you have come back to find, I know that you have only recently returned, but if you have been around and kept your eyes open, you must have noticed enormous changes, greater prosperity, public order, a coherent plan to encourage patriotism, the respect of other nations for the achievements of our fatherland, for its secular history and empire. I haven't seen much, Ricardo Reis confessed, but I'm up to date on what is reported in the newspapers. The newspapers must be read, of course, but that is not enough, you must see with your own eyes the roads, the ports, the schools, the public works everywhere, and the atmosphere of discipline, my dear fellow, the calm on the streets and in people's hearts, an entire nation dedicated to honest labor under the leadership of a great statesman, truly an iron hand in a velvet glove, precisely what we needed. A splendid metaphor, that. Yes, I'm sorry not to have invented it myself, it stuck in my mind, how true it is that a single image can be worth a hundred speeches, it appeared two or three years ago on the front page of *Sempre Fixe*, or was it *Os Ridículos*, an iron hand in a velvet glove, and the drawing was so excellent that both the velvet and the iron were conveyed. In a satirical magazine. Truth, dear Doctor Reis, does not always choose the place. It remains to be seen if the place always chooses the truth. Doctor Sampaio frowned a little, the contradiction disturbing him somewhat, but he treated the remark as if it were too profound to be discussed then and there among the wines from Colares and the cheeses. Self-absorbed, Marcenda nibbled little bits of rind, she raised her voice to say that she did not want any dessert or coffee, then began a sentence which might have diverted the conversation to Ta Mar, but her father went on, It's not a literary masterpiece but it's certainly a useful book, easy to read, and should open many people's eyes. What is the book. The title is *Conspiracy*, written by a patriotic journalist, a nationalist, a certain Tomé Vieira, I don't know whether you've heard of him. No, I haven't, living so far away. The book was published only a few days ago, you really must read it and give me your opinion. I'll certainly read it if you recommend it with such enthusiasm. Ricardo Reis was beginning to regret that he had declared himself anti-socialist, anti-democratic, and also anti-Bolshevik, not because he was not all these things but because he was growing tired of such unrelieved nationalism, perhaps even

more tired at not having been able to speak to Marcenda. As it so often happens, the thing left undone tires you most of all, you only feel rested when it has been accomplished.

The dinner at an end, Ricardo Reis drew back Marcenda's chair and allowed her to walk ahead with her father. Once outside, all three hesitated, wondering whether they should pass into the lounge, but Marcenda finally decided to retire to her room, complaining of a headache. Tomorrow we probably will not see each other, we are leaving early, she told him. Ricardo Reis wished them a good journey, Perhaps I will still be here when you return next month. Should you be gone, do leave us your new address, Doctor Sampaio urged him. Now there is nothing more to be said, Marcenda will go to her room, she has or claims to have a headache, Ricardo Reis does not know what he wants to do, Doctor Sampaio will be going out again later this evening.

Ricardo Reis also went out. He wandered, went into various cinemas to look at the posters, watched a game of chess, white won, and it was raining when he left the café, so he took a taxi back to the hotel. Entering his room, he noticed that the covers had not been turned back and that the second pillow had not been removed from the closet. Vague, foolish sorrow stops at the door of my soul, stares at me awhile, and moves on, he murmured, smiling to himself.

A man must read widely, a little of everything or whatever he can, but given the shortness of life and the verbosity of the world, not too much should be demanded of him. Let him begin with those titles no one should omit, commonly referred to as books for learning, as if not all books were for learning, and this list will vary according to the fount of knowledge one drinks from and the authority that monitors its flow. In the case of Ricardo Reis, educated by Jesuits, we can form some idea despite the considerable difference between the teachers of yesterday and those of today. Then come the inclinations of youth, those favorite authors, those passing infatuations, those readings of Werther spurring one to suicide or self-preservation, then on to the serious reading of adulthood. Once we reach a certain stage in life we all read the same things more or less, although the starting point always makes a difference, and the living have the distinct advantage of being able to read what others, because they are dead, will never know. To give but one example, here is Alberto Caeiro, who, having died in nineteen fifteen, poor fellow, did not read *Nome de Guerra*, he has no idea what he missed, and Fernando Pessoa, and Ricardo Reis too, will depart this world before Almada Negreiros publishes his novel. This is almost a repetition of the amusing tale about the gentleman from La Palice, who a quarter of an hour before dying was still alive and kicking, as those wits would say. Not for a moment did he contemplate the sorrow of no longer being alive and kicking a quarter of an hour hence. Let us move on. A man, then, will sample everything, even *Conspiracy*, and it will do him no harm whatsoever to come down every now and then from the clouds where he is in the habit of taking refuge, in order to see how commonplace thoughts are forged, because it is these that help people exist from day to day, not those of Cicero or Spinoza. All the more so, when the recommendation, a nagging exhortation, comes from Coimbra, Read *Conspiracy*, my friend, there you will find some sound opinions, any weaknesses of form or plot are compensated for by the worthiness of the message. Coimbra, most learned of cities, teeming with scholars, knows what it is talking about. The very next day Ricardo Reis went out and bought the slim volume, took it up to his room, unwrapped it furtively, for not all acts carried out behind closed doors are what they appear, sometimes they are nothing other than a person's shame at his own private habits, secret pleasures, picking his nose, scratching his scalp. Perhaps this cover, which shows a woman in a raincoat and cap walking down a street by a prison, the barred window and sentry box eliminating any doubt about the fate of conspirators, is no less embarrassing. Ricardo Reis, then, is in his room, comfortably settled on the sofa. It is raining wherever one looks, as if the sky were a suspended sea draining interminably through countless leaks. Everywhere there is flood and famine, but this little book will tell how a woman's soul launched itself into the noble crusade of restoring to reason and to the nationalist spirit a man whose mind became confused by dangerous ideas. Women are extremely able in such matters, perhaps to atone for those wiles more akin to their nature, by which they have perturbed and brought about the downfall of men since Adam. Ricardo Reis has now read the first seven chapters, namely, *On the eve of the election*, *A bloodless coup*, *The fable of love*, *The feast of the Holy Queen*, *A university strike*, *Conspiracy*, and *The senator's daughter*. The plot is as follows, a university student, a farmer's son, gets into some mischief, is

arrested, locked up in the prison of Aljube, and it is the daughter of the aforementioned senator who with patriotic fervor and missionary zeal will move heaven and earth to secure his release, which is not all that difficult in the end, because to the astonishment of the man who brought her into the world, this senator who belonged to the democratic party but is now an unmasked conspirator, she is much esteemed in the upper spheres of government, a father can never tell how his own daughter will turn out. Though there are of course certain differences, she speaks like Joan of Arc. Papa was on the point of being arrested several days ago, I gave my word of honor that Papa would not evade his responsibilities, I also guaranteed that Papa would stop his plotting. Such filial devotion, so touching, Papa invoked three times in one sentence, the bonds of affection reach such extremes in life. The devoted girl continues, You may attend your meeting arranged for tomorrow, nothing will happen to you, I promise, because I know and the police also know that the conspirators are meeting again, but they have decided to turn a blind eye, such a benevolent, kind-hearted police force here in Portugal, and little wonder, since they have an informer in the enemy camp, none other, would you believe it, than the daughter of a former senator and opponent of this regime. Family traditions have been betrayed, but all will end happily for the parties in question if we take the author of the work seriously. Let us now hear what he has to say, The situation in our country has been discussed with enthusiasm in the foreign press, our economic strategy has been upheld as a model, there are constant admiring references to our monetary policies, throughout the land industrial projects continue to provide employment for thousands of workers, every day the newspapers outline governmental steps to overcome the crisis which, on account of world events, has also affected us, but when compared with that of other countries the state of our economy is most encouraging, the Portuguese nation and the statesmen who guide her are quoted worldwide, the political doctrine we pursue here is being studied abroad, and one can confidently say that other nations regard us with envy and respect, the world's leading newspapers send their most experienced journalists to discover the secret of our success, the head of our government is finally coaxed out of his persistent humility, out of his stubborn aversion to publicity, and is featured in newspaper columns throughout the world, his image is given maximum exposure and his political pronouncements are transformed into an evangelical mission. In the face of all this, which is only a pale shadow of what could be said, you must agree, Carlos, that it was utter madness to become involved in university strikes which have never achieved anything worthwhile, are you even aware of the trouble I'm going through to get you out of here. You are right, Marilia, but the police have no proof that I did anything wrong, all they know for certain is that it was I who waved the red flag, which wasn't a flag at all or anything remotely like a flag, it was only a handkerchief that cost twenty-five cents, a prank. This conversation takes place in the prison, in the visitors' room, but in a village, also as it happens in the district of Coimbra, another farmer, the father of the sweet girl whom this Carlos will marry toward the end of the story, explains to a gathering of subordinates that there is nothing worse than being a Communist, the Communists want neither bosses nor workers, they don't accept laws or religion, they don't believe anyone should be baptized or get married, for them love does not exist, woman is a fickle

creature, all men are entitled to use her, children are not answerable to their parents, and everyone is free to behave as he likes. In another four chapters and in the epilogue, the gentle but Valkyrian Marília rescues the student from prison and the political scourge, rehabilitates her father who abandons his subversive activities once and for all, and declares that within the new corporative plan the problem is being resolved without hypocrisy, conflict, or insurrection. The class struggle is over and has been replaced with a system of good values, capital, and labor. To conclude, the nation must be run like a family with lots of children, where the father imposes order to safeguard their education, because unless children are taught to respect their father everything falls apart and the household is doomed. Bearing these irrefutable facts in mind, the two landowners, the fathers of the bride and groom, after settling some minor disagreements, even help to resolve certain little conflicts between the workers, God need not have bothered expelling us from His paradise, seeing as we have succeeded in regaining it so soon. Ricardo Reis closed the book, it hadn't taken him long to read it. These are the best lessons of all, concise, brief, almost instantaneous, Such stupidity, with this outburst he repays the absent Doctor Sampaio and for a moment loathes the entire world, the incessant rain, the hotel, the book tossed on the ground, Marcenda. But then he decides, without quite knowing why, to exempt Marcenda, perhaps simply for the pleasure of saving something, just as we pick up a piece of wood or stone from a pile of rubble. The shape caught our eye, and without the courage to throw it away we end up putting it in our pocket, for no good reason.

As for us, we are doing fine, as fine as those wonders described above. In the land of nuestros hermanos, on the other hand, things are going from bad to worse, the family is sadly divided, Gil Robles may win the election, or Largo Caballero, and the Falange has made it clear that it will confront the Red dictatorship on the streets. In our oasis of peace we watch with regret the spectacle of a chaotic and quarrelsome Europe locked in endless debates, in political squabbles which according to Marília never achieved anything worthwhile. In France, Sarraut has now formed a Coalition Republican government and the right-wing parties have lost no time in pouncing on him, launching a hail of criticisms, accusations, and insults couched in the foul language one associates more with rowdy hooligans than with the citizens of a country that is a model of propriety and the beacon of Western culture. Thank heaven there are still voices in this continent, and powerful voices at that, who are prepared to speak out in the name of peace and harmony, we are referring to Hitler, the proclamation he made in the presence of the Brownshirts, all that Germany wants is to work in a climate of peace, let us banish once and for all mistrust and skepticism, and he dared to go further, Let the world know that Germany will pursue and cherish peace as no other nation has ever cherished it before. Indeed, two hundred and fifty thousand German soldiers are ready to occupy the Rhineland, and within the last few days a German military force invaded Czechoslovakian territory. If it is true that Juno sometimes appears in the form of a cloud, then all clouds are Juno. The life of nations, after all, consists of much barking and little biting, and you will see, God permitting, that all will end in perfect harmony. What we cannot accept is that Lloyd George should assert

that Portugal has far too many colonies in comparison with Germany and Italy, when only the other day we observed public mourning to mark the death of their King George V, men in black ties and bands, women in crepe. How dare he complain that we have too many colonies, when in fact we have too few, take a look at the Pink Map of the Portuguese territories in Africa. Had that outrage been avenged as justice demanded, no one would be competing with us now, from Angola to Mozambique there would be no obstacle in our way and everything would be under the Portuguese flag, but the English, true to character, stalked us, the perfidious Albion, one doubts whether they are even capable of behaving otherwise, it is a national vice, and there is not a single nation that does not have reason to complain of them. When Fernando Pessoa turns up, Ricardo Reis must not forget to raise the interesting question as to whether colonies are a good or bad thing, not from the point of view of Lloyd George, whose sole concern is to appease Germany by handing over what other nations have acquired with considerable effort, but from his own point of view, the view of Pessoa, who revived Padre Vieira's dream by prophesying the advent of the Fifth Empire. He must also ask him, on the one hand, how he would resolve the contradiction of his own making, that Portugal has no need of colonies in order to fulfill her imperial destiny yet without them is diminished at home and abroad in material and moral terms, and, on the other hand, what he thinks of the prospect of our colonies being handed over to Germany and Italy, as Lloyd George is about to propose. What Fifth Empire will that be, when we are despoiled and betrayed, stripped like Christ on His way to Calvary, a people condemned to suffering, hands outstretched, the bonds loosely tied, for real imprisonment is the acceptance of imprisonment, hands humbly reaching to receive the alms distributed by 0 Século. Perhaps Fernando Pessoa will reply, as he has on other occasions, As you well know, I have no strong principles, today I argue for one thing, tomorrow for another, I may not believe in what I defend today or have any real faith in what I defend tomorrow. He might even add, by way of justification, For me there is no longer any today or tomorrow, how can I be expected to go on believing or expect it of others, and even if they believe, do they really know what they believe in. My vision of a Fifth Empire was vague and fanciful, why should it become a reality for you, people were too quick to believe in what I said, yet I never attempted to conceal my doubt, I would have done better to remain silent, simply looking on. As I myself have always done, Ricardo Reis will reply, and Fernando Pessoa will tell him, Only when we are dead do we become spectators, nor can we even be sure of that. I am dead and wander about, I pause on street corners, if there are people capable of seeing me, and they are rare, they will think that all I am doing is watching others pass, they do not know that if anyone falls I cannot pick him up, and yet I do not feel that I am simply looking on, all my actions, all my words continue to live, they advance beyond the street corner where I am resting, I watch them go and can do nothing to amend them, even when they are the result of an error. I cannot explain or sum up myself in a single action or word, even if only to replace doubt with negation, shadows with darkness, a yes with a no, both having the same meaning, but worse than that, perhaps they are not even the words I spoke or the actions I performed, worse because irremediable, perhaps they are the things I never did, the words I never uttered,

the one word or gesture which would have given meaning to what I was. If a dead man can get so upset, death clearly does not bring peace. The only difference between life and death is that the living still have time, but the time to say that one word, to make that one gesture, is running out for them. What gesture, what word, I don't know, a man dies from not having said it, from not having made it, that is what he dies of, not from sickness, and that is why, when dead, he finds it so difficult to accept death. My dear Fernando Pessoa, you're reading things upside down. My dear Ricardo Reis, I can no longer read. Improbable on two counts, this conversation is reported as if it actually took place. There was no other way of making it sound plausible.

Since Ricardo Reis had given her no cause for jealousy other than to have conversed in public with Marcenda, albeit in a low voice, Lydia's anger could not be expected to last. First they had told her clearly that they wished nothing more, then they had waited in silence while she removed the coffee cups. This was enough to make her hands tremble. For four nights she wept into her pillow before falling asleep, not so much at the humiliation of being ignored, after all what right had she to indulge in such tantrums, but because the doctor stopped having his breakfast in his room, he was punishing her, Why, upon my soul, when I have done nothing wrong. But on the fifth morning Ricardo Reis did not come down to breakfast, and Salvador said, Ah Lydia, take some coffee up to two hundred and one, and when she entered the room, she shook with nerves, poor girl, she could not help it. He looked at her soberly, placed his hand on her arm, and asked, Are you angry with me. She replied, No, Doctor. But you haven't been back. Lydia did not know what to say, she shrugged her shoulders, wretched, and he drew her toward him. That same night she descended to his room, but neither mentioned the reason for their separation, unthinkable that she should dare, I was jealous, or that he should condescend, My darling, what on earth possessed you, no, it could never be a conversation between equals, everybody knows that there is nothing more difficult to achieve in this world.

Nations struggle against each other on behalf of interests that are not those of Jack or Pierre or Hans or Manolo or Giuseppe, all masculine names to simplify matters, yet these and other men innocently consider those interests to be theirs, or which will be theirs at considerable cost, when the moment arrives to settle accounts. The rule is that some eat figs while others watch. People struggle for what they believe to be their values but what may be merely emotions momentarily aroused. Such is the case of Lydia, our chambermaid, and Ricardo Reis, known to everyone as a doctor of medicine, should he finally resume his practice, and to some as a poet, should he ever allow anyone to read what he painstakingly composes. But people also struggle for other reasons, for the same reasons, power, prestige, hatred, love, envy, jealousy, sheer malice, hunting grounds marked out and trespassed on, competition and rivalry, even loot, as occurred recently in the neighborhood of Mouraria. Ricardo Reis had not seen it reported, but Salvador was devouring the details avidly, his elbows resting on the opened newspaper, the pages carefully smoothed out, A dreadful business, Doctor, they're a violent lot, those people in

Mouraria, they've no respect for human life, the slightest excuse and they're ready to stab each other without compassion or pity, even the police are frightened, they go in there only when it's all over, to pick up the pieces, listen to this, it says here that a certain José Reis, nicknamed José Rola, fired five shots at the head of one Antonio Mesquita, known as O Mouraria, and killed him, needless to say, no, it had nothing to do with women, the newspaper says it was a case of a quarrel over stolen goods, the one cheated the other, it happens all the time. Five shots, Ricardo Reis repeated, not to appear unconcerned, and grew pensive. He could visualize the scene, the gun firing five shots at the same target, the head receiving the first bullet while still erect, then the body on the ground spurting blood, rapidly growing weaker, and the other four bullets, superfluous yet somehow necessary, two, three, four, five, a whole barrellful of hatred in every shot, the head jerking on the pavement each time, terror and dismay on all sides, then uproar, women screaming out of the windows. It's doubtful that anyone would have had the courage to grab José Rola by the arm, most likely the bullets in the magazine were used up, or his finger suddenly froze on the trigger, or his hatred was satisfied. The assassin will escape, but he will not get far, for no one gets away with anything in Mouraria. The funeral is tomorrow, Salvador informs him, were I not on duty I would be there. Do you like funerals, Ricardo Reis asks him. It's not exactly a question of liking them, but a funeral such as this one is worth seeing, especially when there has been a crime. Ramón lives in the Rua dos Cavaleiros and he has heard rumors which he passes on to Ricardo Reis at dinnertime. The whole neighborhood is expected to turn up, Doctor, and it is even said that the cronies of José Rola are threatening to smash open the coffin, if they carry out their threat there will be merry hell, I swear by Jesus. But if O Mouraria is dead, what more can they do to him, a man like that is not likely to come back from the other world to finish what he began in this one. With people of that sort you can never tell, deep hatred doesn't end with death. I'm almost tempted to attend this funeral myself. Go, then, but don't get too close, and if there is trouble, take shelter under a staircase and let them fight it out among themselves.

Things did not come to that pass, perhaps because the threat had been nothing but bravado, perhaps because two armed policemen were patrolling the neighborhood, a symbol of protection which would have proved ineffectual if the troublemakers had gone ahead with their gruesome plan, but when all is said and done, the presence of the law commands some respect. Ricardo Reis appeared discreetly before the funeral cortege was due to set off, he watched from a distance as he had been advised, having no desire to find himself in the midst of a sudden riot, and was amazed at the hundreds of people cramming into the street in front of the morgue, just like the charity day organized by O'Século, were it not for all those women dressed in garish red, their skirts, blouses, shawls, and their youths in suits of the same color, a most unusual expression of mourning if these are friends of the deceased, and a blatant provocation if they are his enemies. This looks more like a carnival parade. Now the bier comes into sight, drapes flapping as it heads for the cemetery, drawn by two mares with plumes and trappings, and two policemen march, one on either side of the coffin, a guard of honor for O

Mouraria, these are the ironies of fate, who would have imagined it. There go the military policemen with their swords knocking against their legs and their holsters unbuttoned, and the mourners wail and sob, those dressed in red making as much noise as those in black, the latter for the dead man being carried to his grave, the former for his assassin locked up in jail. Lots of people barefoot and covered with rags. Some women, dressed in all their finery and wearing gold bracelets, walk arm in arm with their menfolk, the latter have black sideburns and clean-shaven faces still blue from the razor, they look around them with suspicion, other women shout insults, their bodies sway at the hips, but however sincere or false their sentiments all the people show a kind of ferocious gaiety which has brought friends and enemies together. This tribe of criminals, pimps, whores, pickpockets, and burglars fences the black horde that marches across the city. Windows open to watch them file past. The courtyard of the miracles, reminiscent of Victor Hugo's Notre Dame de Paris, has emptied, and the residents tremble with fear, because the thief who will enter their house tomorrow might be out there. Look, Mummy, the children shout, but for children everything is one big celebration. Ricardo Reis accompanied the funeral cortege as far as the Paço da Rainha. Women began to cast furtive glances at the well-dressed gentleman, Who can he be, this is feminine curiosity, natural in those who spend their life sizing up men. The cortege disappeared around a corner, almost certainly heading toward the Alto de São João, unless it took another turn farther on, to the left, in the direction of Benfica, it was definitely not heading toward the Cemetery of Prazeres, and what a pity, for we are losing an edifying example of the equality bestowed by death, O Mouraria lying side by side with Fernando Pessoa. What conversations would those two have under the shade of the cypress trees as they watched the ships enter the harbor on sultry afternoons, the one explaining to the other how words must be juggled in order to pull off a confidence game or pull off a poem. That same evening, as he served the soup, Ramón explained to Doctor Ricardo Reis that the red garments indicated neither mourning nor disrespect, rather it was a custom peculiar to the neighborhood, whose inhabitants donned red for all special occasions. The tradition existed before he arrived from Galicia, and he learned about it from others. Did you catch sight of a very striking woman at the funeral, tall, dark eyes, dressed in fine clothes, wearing a stole made of soft merino wool. My dear fellow, there were so many women in the crowd, hundreds of them, who was she. The lover of O Mouraria, a singer. No, I didn't notice her. Such a beauty and what a voice, it will be interesting to see who grabs her now. It's not likely to be me, Ramón, and I don't think it will be you either. That I should be so lucky, Doctor, that I should be so lucky, but that kind of woman costs money. This is just talk, wishful thinking, a fellow has to say something, does he not, but as for the red garments, I believe the custom goes back to the time of the Moors, the devil's weeds, nothing to do with Christianity. When Ramón came back later to remove his plate, he asked Ricardo Reis what he thought about the news arriving from Spain as the elections drew near, and who in his opinion would win, The outcome won't affect me, I am doing all right here, but I'm thinking about my father back in Galicia, where I still have some relatives, although most of them have emigrated. To Portugal. All over the world, in a manner of speaking, between brothers, nephews, and cousins my family is scattered throughout Cuba, Brazil,

and Argentina, I even have a godson in Chile. Ricardo Reis told him what he knew from press reports, the right-wing parties were expected to win, and Gil Robles had said, You know who Gil Robles is, I've heard the name, Well, he said that when he comes to power he will abolish Marxism and the class struggle and establish social justice. Do you know what Marxism is, Ramón, No I don't, Doctor, And the class struggle, No, And social justice, I've never had any dealings with the law, thanks be to God. Well, within the next few days we will know who has won, probably nothing will change, Better the devil you know, as my grandfather used to say, Your grandfather was right, Ramón, your grandfather was a clever man.

Whether he was or not, the left won. The following morning the newspapers reported that at first it looked as if the right had won in seventeen provinces, but when all the votes were counted, it became apparent that the left had elected more deputies than the center and right put together. Rumors were already circulating that a military coup was being planned with the connivance of Generals Goded and Franco, but these were being denied. President Alcalá Zamora entrusted Azaña with the task of forming a government. Let's see what this will bring, Ramón, whether it will be good or bad for Galicia. Here, walking in these streets, one sees grim faces, but a few dissimulate, if that gleam in their eye is not one of satisfaction, you could have fooled me. Here in the last sentence does not mean all of Lisbon let alone all Portugal, who knows what is happening in the rest of the country, Here means only the thirty streets located between the Cais do Sodré and Sao Pedro de Alcântara and between the Rossio and Calhariz, like an inner city surrounded by invisible walls that protect it from an invisible siege. The besieged and besiegers coexist, each side refers to the other as They, because the two are different, mutually foreign, they eye each other with suspicion, one side craves more power, the other side finds its strength insufficient. The wind blowing from Spain, what will it bring us, what nuptials. Fernando Pessoa replied, Communism, it won't be long in coming. Ironically he added, Hard luck, my dear Reis, you fled from Brazil in order to live the rest of your days in peace, and the next thing you know our neighbor, Spain, is in turmoil, soon they will invade us. How often do I have to tell you that if I came back, it was because of you. You still haven't convinced me. I'm not trying to convince you, all I ask is that you spare me your views on this matter. Don't be angry with me. I lived in Brazil, now I'm here in Portugal, I have to live somewhere, when you were alive you were sufficiently intelligent to understand this and more. This is the drama, my dear Reis, one has to live somewhere, for there is nowhere that is not somewhere and life cannot be other than life, at long last I am becoming aware of this, the greatest evil of all is that a man can never reach the horizon before his eyes, and the ship in which we do not sail, we would have that be the ship of our voyage, Ah, the entire quay, a memory carved in stone. And now that we have yielded to sentiment and started quoting verses, here is a line by Alvaro de Campos, who someday will achieve the recognition he deserves, Console yourself in the arms of Lydia, if your love endures, and remember that that too was denied me. Good-night, Fernando, Good-night, Ricardo. Carnival will soon be here, enjoy yourself but don't expect to see me for the next few days. They had met in a local

café, half a dozen tables, no one there knew them. Fernando Pessoa came back and sat down again, I've just had an idea, why don't you dress up as a horse trainer, high boots and riding breeches, a red jacket with braiding, Red, Yes, red is just the color, and I will dress as death, in black mesh with bones painted on it, you cracking your whip and I scaring the old women, I'll carry you off, I'll carry you off, and fondling the young girls as we go, at a masked ball we would easily win first prize. I've never been one for dancing, There's no need, the crowd would only have ears for your whip and eyes for my bones, Don't you think we're both a little old for such games, Speak for yourself, I've stopped being any age. With these words Fernando Pessoa got to his feet and departed. It was raining outside and the waiter behind the bar said, Without a raincoat or umbrella that friend of yours is going to get a soaking. He doesn't mind, he's accustomed to it.

When Ricardo Reis returned to the hotel, he felt something stirring in the air, a restless buzz, as if all the bees in a hive had suddenly gone crazy. The weight on his conscience, of which we are well aware, made him immediately think, They've discovered everything. A romantic, he is convinced that the day his little adventure with Lydia comes to light the Brangança will crumble under the scandal, he lives with the constant fear or perhaps the morbid desire that this should happen, an unexpected paradox in a man who claims to be so detached from the world yet who after all wants the world to trample on him. Little does he suspect that the story is already circulating, whispered amid furtive smiles. This was the work of Pimenta, not the type of person to mince words. The guilty walk in innocence, but Salvador has not yet been informed, what verdict will he deliver when at last some envious informant, man or woman, says to him, Senhor Salvador, this affair between Lydia and Doctor Reis is scandalous. He would do well to repeat nobly the words of the Bible, He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone. Ricardo Reis walked up to the reception desk feeling apprehensive. Salvador was on the telephone, speaking in a loud voice, there was a bad connection, Your voice sounds as if it were coming from the other side of the world, hello, can you hear me, yes, Doctor Sampaio, I must know when you are coming, hello, hello, yes now I can hear you, the problem is that I have scarcely any rooms left, why, because of all the Spaniards, yes, from Spain, they arrived today, on the twenty-sixth then, after Carnival, very well, the two rooms are reserved, no, Doctor, not at all, our special guests come first, three years are not three days, my regards to Senhorita Marcenda, by the way, sir, Doctor Reis is standing right beside me and sends his regards. It was true, Ricardo Reis, by means of signs and mouthed words, was sending his greetings, for two reasons. First, to feel himself close to Marcenda, even through a third party, and second, to become friendly with Salvador, thus removing the man's authority over him, which may seem a blatant contradiction but is not. Relations between two people cannot be explained simply by adding and subtracting arithmetically. How often we think we are adding, only to end up with a remainder, and how often, on the other hand, we think we are subtracting, and it turns out to be not even the straightforward opposite, addition, but multiplication. Salvador put down the receiver, triumphant, having succeeded in a coherent and conclusive telephone conversation with the city of Coimbra, and now he was answering

Ricardo Reis, who had asked how things were going. I've just signed in three Spanish families who turned up without any warning, two from Madrid and one from Cáceres, refugees. Refugees. Yes, because the Communists have won the election. It wasn't the Communists, it was the left-wing parties. It comes to the same thing. But are they really refugees. Even the newspapers are carrying the story. I missed that. Well, from now on he would no longer be able to say so, he could hear Spanish being spoken on the other side of the doors, not that he was listening, but the sonorous language of Cervantes penetrates everywhere. There was even a time when it was spoken throughout the universe, we Portuguese never achieved as much. That these were wealthy Spaniards became apparent at dinner, judging from their clothes, their jewels, both the men and women bedecked with rings, cuff links, tiepins, clasps, bangles, bracelets, chains, earrings, necklaces, strands, cords, chokers of gold studded with diamonds and an occasional ruby, emerald, sapphire, or turquoise. They spoke in high-pitched voices from table to table, flaunting their triumph in misfortune, if one may be permitted this contradiction in terms. Ricardo Reis could find no other expression which reconciled their imperious tone with their bitter lamentations. When they spoke of the Reds, they twisted their lips with contempt. The dining room in the hotel Brangança is transformed into a stage set, Calderón's droll gracioso. Clarín is likely to appear at any minute and tell us, Here concealed, I watch the festivities, that is to say, the Spanish festivities as seen from Portugal, for death will not find me now, I don't give a damn for death. The waiters Felipe and Ramón, and there is a third waiter, but he is a Portuguese from Guarda, are rushed off their feet and irritable. This is not the first time they have waited on their countrymen, but never so many at a time and in circumstances such as these. They who have seen so much of life are unaware or have not yet had time to notice that these families from Cáceres and Madrid do not address them as fond compatriots whom misfortune has reunited. Anyone standing on the side can hear the tone of voice, it is the same when they address the Galicians as when they refer to the Reds, substituting scorn for hatred, but now Ramón is seething with resentment, offended by their surly looks and haughty language, and when he comes over to serve Ricardo Reis he can contain himself no longer, They needn't have troubled coming in here decked up in all that jewelry, nobody will steal it from their rooms, this is a respectable hotel. A good thing that Ramón says so, it will obviously take more than Lydia's visits to a guest's room to make him change his mind. Moral attitudes vary, as do other attitudes, sometimes for the slightest thing, more often than not because of knocks to one's self-esteem, now it is Ramón's that is bruised, hence his need to unburden himself to Ricardo Reis. Let's be fair, however, at least as fair as possible, these people here in the dining room have been driven to Portugal by fear, they have brought their jewels, their money, in the circumstances of their hasty flight what else could they have brought to live on. It is doubtful that Ramón will give or lend them a cent, and why should he, charity is not one of God's commandments, and if the second commandment, Love thy neighbor as thyself, has any validity, it would still take another two thousand years, more, before these neighbors from Madrid and Cáceres would come to love Ramón. But the author of Conspiracy says we are on the right road, thanks be to God, capital, and labor, and it is probably in order

to decide who will pave that road that our procurators and deputies have assembled for a confraternity dinner at the spa of Estoril.

Because of this wretched weather, day and night, which shows no sign of clearing and gives no respite to farmers and agriculturists, with flooding that is reckoned to be the worst in the last forty years, a fact confirmed by the records and testimonies of the elderly, Carnival will be memorable this year, memorable in itself but especially with these dreadful floods that have nothing to do with it but will be talked about for years to come. As we have already stated, Spanish refugees are pouring into Portugal. If they can raise their spirits, they will find plenty of diversions here which are sadly lacking in their own country, now more than ever before. Here we have every reason to feel self-satisfied. Consider the government's decision to go ahead with the plan to build a bridge over the Tagus, or the decree that will limit the use of state automobiles to official functions and services, or the aid given to the workers in the Douro with the distribution of five kilos of rice, five kilos of dried cod, and ten escudos per worker, and no one need be surprised at such lavish generosity, because cod is the cheapest commodity available. And within the next few days a government minister will make a speech announcing the establishment of a soup kitchen for the poor in each parish, and the same minister, returning from Beja, will assure journalists as follows, I have witnessed in Alentejo the importance of organizing private charities in order to combat the labor crisis, which translated into everyday Portuguese reads, Some alms, kind sir, for the sake of your dear ones in Purgatory. Best of all, however, because it emanated from a supreme authority subordinate only to that of Almighty God, was the speech by Cardinal Pacelli in which he praised Mussolini as the mighty defender of Rome's cultural heritage. Clearly this cardinal, so wise and likely to become even wiser, deserves to be Pope, may the Holy Spirit and the conclave not forget him when that blissful day comes. Even now, the Italian troops are on their way to bombard Ethiopia, and God's humble servant is already prophesying empire and emperor, Hail Caesar, Hail Mary.

But how different Carnival is here in Portugal. Yonder, in that land across the ocean discovered by Cabral, where the thrush sings and the Southern Cross shines, beneath that glorious sky, and where even when the sky is overcast there is plenty of heat, at Carnival schools parade, dancing sambas down the city's main boulevard, bedecked with glass beads that look like diamonds, sequins that glitter like precious stones, clothes that may not be made from silk or satin but cover bodies as if they were plumes and feathers, with parrots, birds of paradise, and peacocks swaying on their heads, and the samba, the samba, that tremor in one's soul. Even Ricardo Reis, serious by nature, often felt a repressed Dionysian turmoil stirring within. Only the fear of his own body prevented him from throwing himself into that wild frenzy, we never know how such things will end. In Lisbon there are no such risks, the sky remains as before, drizzling, but cheer up, not so wet as to spoil the parade which is about to descend the Avenida da Liberdade, flanked on either side by the familiar hordes of poor families from the nearby neighborhoods. True, chairs can be rented by those who can afford them, but there will be few

customers. Daubed with multicolored figures, the floats creak, sway above people laughing and making faces. Masqueraders both ugly and pretty throw streamers into the crowd, and little bags of corn and beans, which can maim when they hit their target, and the crowd retaliates with diminished enthusiasm. Some open carriages go past, carrying a supply of umbrellas. Young ladies and their beaux wave from their carriages and throw confetti at each other. Merry pranks such as these are also played among the spectators, for example take this girl watching the procession and this youth creeping up behind her with a handful of confetti. He presses it to her lips, rubs vigorously, then takes advantage of her surprise to fondle her as best he can, the poor girl coughs and sputters while he goes off laughing, these are flirtations in the Portuguese tradition, some marriages even begin like this and turn out to be happy. Atomizers are used to squirt water at people's necks or in their faces. They are still called perfume sprayers, the name remaining from the days when one used them to inflict gentle violence in drawing rooms, later they descended to the streets, and you are fortunate if the water is not from some sewer, as has been known to happen. Though soon bored with this tawdry procession, Ricardo Reis stayed, he had nothing more important to do. Twice there was a drizzle and once a downpour, yet there are those who continue to sing the praises of the Portuguese climate, I'm not saying the climate isn't good, but it's not good for carnival parades. By late afternoon, the procession over, the sky cleared, but too late. The floats and carriages went on to their destination, there they will remain to dry out until Tuesday, their faded paint will be touched up, their festoons hung to dry, but the masqueraders, although drenched from head to foot, continue their merrymaking in the streets and squares, alleyways and crossroads. What cannot be committed out in the open they pursue under some staircase, where things can be done more quickly and cheaply. The flesh is weak, the wine helps, the day of ashes and oblivion doesn't come till Wednesday. Ricardo Reis feels slightly feverish, perhaps he has caught a cold watching the procession go past, perhaps melancholy can bring on a fever, nausea, delirium, but he is not that far gone yet. A hopelessly drunk old man in a mask came up to him, armed with a large wooden cutlass and club, striking the one against the other, making an uproar and ambiguously pleading, Punch me in the belly. He hurled himself on the poet, his bulging stomach padded with a cushion or a roll of cloth, and the crowd hooted with laughter at the sight of the gentleman in a hat and raincoat dodging an old clown dressed in a two-cornered hat, a silk jacket, breeches, and hose, Punch me in the belly. What the man really wanted was money for wine. When Ricardo Reis gave him some coins, the old drunk broke into a grotesque little dance, striking his cutlass against his club, before reeling off, followed by a trail of urchins, the acolytes of this expedition. In a little carriage resembling a pram sat an enormous man with his legs sticking out, his face painted, a baby's bonnet stuck on his head, a bib around his neck. He pretended to sob, or else was genuinely sobbing, until the ugly brute who was playing nanny pushed a feeding bottle filled with red wine into his mouth. This he sucked avidly, to the amusement and delight of the assembled crowd, from which a youth suddenly came running, quick as a flash, fondled the nanny's enormous false breasts, then scampered off, while the nanny yelled after him in a hoarse voice, unmistakably male, Come back here you son of a bitch, come and fondle this, and

as he shouted he exposed something that caused all the women to avert their eyes once they had taken a good look. At what, Well, nothing too obscene, the nanny was wearing a dress that came down below the knee, and what protruded from under the dress he grabbed with both hands. Innocent horseplay, this is Carnival in Portugal. A man walks past in an overcoat. Unknown to him he has a sign stuck to his back, a paper dangling from a safety pin, Beast of burden for sale, no one has asked the price so far, even though they taunt him as they pass, Are you such a beast that you don't feel your burden. They amuse themselves teasing. Finally suspicious, he puts his hand behind his back, pulls away the sign, and tears it up in a rage. These same pranks are played on us year after year, and we always react as if it were something new. Ricardo Reis feels safe, knowing how difficult it is to stick a pin into a raincoat, but threats come from all sides. A broom attached to a cord suddenly descends from an upper story, knocking his hat to the ground, and he can hear the two girls who live above shrieking with laughter, Carnival time is fun time, they cry in unison, and the argument is so overwhelming that Ricardo Reis simply retrieves his hat, now covered with mud, and goes silently on his way. It is time he was getting back to the hotel. Fortunately there are the children, they walk about holding on to their mother, aunt, or grandmother, they show off their masks, enjoy being admired, for them there is no greater happiness than going around in disguise. They attend the matinees, fill the parquets and galleries of a bizarre world, utter bedlam, they trip in their long balloon-shaped skirts, their feet hurt, they twist their mouths and milk teeth to grip their pipe, their mustache and sideburns smear, there is surely nothing nicer in this world than children. There they go, the little innocents, carrying their gauze satchels filled with paper streamers, their cheeks painted red or white, wearing pirate eye patches, we do not know if they are dressed as they wish or are simply playing a role devised by the adults who selected and paid for these rented costumes, these Dutch boys, rustics, washerwomen, mariners, fado singers, grand dames, serving maids, soldiers, fairies, army officers, flamenco dancers, poultry vendors, pierrots, train engineers, girls from Ovar in traditional costume, pages, scholars in cap and gown, peasant girls from Aveiro, policemen, harlequins, carpenters, pirates, cowboys, lion tamers, Cossack riders, florists, bears, Gypsies, sailors, shepherds, nurses, later they will be photographed and appear in tomorrow's newspapers. Some of the little masqueraders who visited the newspaper office obliged the photographer by removing the domino they wore over their costume, even the mysterious domino of Columbine, to show their faces so that their grandmothers might boast with ecstasy, That's my little granddaughter. With a pair of scissors she will lovingly cut out the photograph, it will go into her box of souvenirs, that green one there in the shape of a little trunk, which will break open when it falls onto the pebbles on the quayside. Today we laugh, but the time will come when we will want to weep. It is almost night, Ricardo Reis is dragging his feet, it could be weariness, melancholy, that fever he suspected. Feeling a sudden chill in his back, he is tempted to hail a taxi, but the hotel is now near, In ten minutes I'll be tucked in bed, I'll skip dinner, he murmured to himself, and at this very moment there appeared a group of pretend-mourners approaching from the Rua do Carmo, the men all dressed as women, with the exception of the four pallbearers, who bore on their shoulders the coffin, on top

of which lay a man representing a corpse, jawbound and hands clasped. Now that the rain had stopped, they were venturing out into the street with their mummary. Ah my beloved husband whom I shall see no more, one of the louts, swathed in crepe, cried out in falsetto. Several others played the part of little orphans, Ah dear Papa whom we so greatly miss. Their cronies circled them begging alms from the bystanders for the funeral expenses, The poor man died three days ago and the corpse is beginning to smell something awful. Which was true, someone must have cracked open a bottle of hydrogen sulfide, corpses do not normally smell like rotten eggs but this was the nearest thing they could find. Ricardo Reis gave them a few coins, just as well he was carrying small change, and was about to proceed up the Chiado when he was struck by a strange figure in the procession, despite its being the most logical of all, namely Death, for this was a funeral even if only a mock one. The man was clad in close-fitting black fabric, probably tricot, and over this material were traced out all his bones from head to foot. The craze for fancy costumes often reaches extremes. Ricardo Reis began to shiver again, but this time he knew why, Could it be Fernando Pessoa, that's absurd, he murmured, he would never do such a thing, and even if he were so inclined, he would never keep company with such rabble. Before a mirror, yes, he might stand, that is certainly possible, and dressed thus he might be able to see himself. Muttering this or merely thinking it, Ricardo Reis approached the man to take a closer look, he had the height, the build of Fernando Pessoa, and although he looked slimmer, it might have been because of the close-fitting costume he was wearing. The fellow gave him a quick glance and moved to the back of the procession. Ricardo Reis pursued him, saw him ascend the Calçada do Sacramento, a terrifying sight, nothing but bones in the fading light, as if the man had painted himself with phosphorescent paint, and as he rushed away he appeared to leave a luminous trail. He crossed the Largo do Carmo, turned and ran past the gloomy and deserted Rua da Oliveira, but Ricardo Reis could see him distinctly, neither near nor far, a walking skeleton, a skeleton like the one he had studied in the Faculty of Medicine, the heel bone, the tibia and fibula, femur, ilium, spinal column, rib cage, the shoulder blades like wings incapable of growing, the cervicals supporting the cranium, pallid and lunar. Those who encountered him called out, Hey, Death, hey scarecrow, but the masquerader neither replied nor looked back, he rushed straight on, at a rapid pace, climbed the Escadinhas do Duque two steps at a time, an agile fellow, surely not Fernando Pessoa, who despite his British upbringing was never one for physical exertion. Nor is Ricardo Reis, who could be excused as a product of Jesuit teaching. But the skeleton halted at the top of the stairs, looked down as if to give him time to catch up, then crossed the square to enter the Travessa da Queimada. Where is wretched Death leading me, and I, why am I following him. Then, for the first time, he wondered if the masquerader was in fact a man. It could be a woman, or neither woman nor man, simply Death. It's a man, he thought, on seeing the figure enter a tavern to be greeted with cheers and applause, Look at the masquerade, look at Death. Watching carefully, he saw the skeleton drinking a glass of wine at the bar, head thrown back. Its chest was flat, this was no woman. The masquerader came toward him, and Ricardo Reis had no time to retreat, he broke into a run but the other caught up with him on the corner. The teeth were real, the gums moist

with saliva, but the voice was not that of a man, it was that of a woman, or something in between, Tell me, you gawping idiot, who do you think you're following, are you a queer by any chance, or just in a hurry to die. No sir, from a distance I thought I recognized you as a friend of mine, but from your voice I can see I'm mistaken. How do you know I'm not shamming, and the voice now sounded quite different. Please excuse me, said Ricardo Reis, and the masquerader replied in a voice now resembling that of Fernando Pessoa, Go to hell you shit, and he turned away and disappeared into the gathering night. As the little girls with the broom said, Carnival time is fun time. It was raining again.

He spent the night in a fever, slept badly. Before stretching out on the bed, exhausted, he took two aspirins and put the thermometer under his armpit. His temperature was over a hundred, it was to be expected, influenza, he thought to himself. He fell asleep, woke up, dreamed of vast plains bathed in sunlight, flowing rivers meandering among trees, ships that solemnly drifted with the current, remote, alien, himself sailing in all of them, multiplied, divided, waving to himself like someone saying farewell or eager for an encounter. The ships entered a lagoon or estuary, tranquil, still water, they did not stir, there could have been ten of them, or twenty, or more, without sail or oar, within calling distance, but the sailors were all speaking at the same time. Since they were saying the same words they could not hear one another, and finally the ships began to sink, the chorus of voices died away. Dreaming, Ricardo Reis tried to capture those final words, thought that he had succeeded, but as the last ship went to the bottom, the syllables, disconnected, gurgling in the water, came to the surface. Sonorous yet meaningless, the drowned words carried no farewell, pledge, or testament, and even if they had, there was no longer anyone to hear them. Asleep or awake, he debated, had the masquerader really been Fernando Pessoa. First he decided yes, then rejected what was obvious for the sake of what was profound. The next time they met, he would ask. But would he receive a truthful answer. Reis, surely you cannot be serious, can you imagine me going around disguised as Death the way they did in medieval times, a dead man does not cut capers, he is sober, prudent, aware of his condition, discreet, he loathes the absolute nakedness to which he is reduced as a skeleton, therefore when he appears, either he appears as I do now, wearing the smart suit he was dressed in for burial, or, when he wants to give someone a fright, he wraps himself in his shroud, which is a thing that I as a man of some breeding and refinement would never do, I trust you will agree. I needn't have bothered asking him, Ricardo Reis muttered. He switched on the light, opened *The God of the Labyrinth*, read a page and a half, saw that it dealt with two men playing chess but could not tell whether they were playing or conversing. The letters became blurred and he laid the book aside. He was back in his apartment in Rio de Janeiro, from his window he could see planes in the distance dropping bombs over Urea and Praia Vermelha, smoke rising in great black coils, but no sound could be heard, perhaps he had grown deaf or had never possessed any sense of hearing and was therefore unable to imagine, even with the aid of sight, the roar of grenades, the discordant chatter of gunfire, the cries of the wounded. He woke up bathed in sweat. The hotel was submerged in the deep silence of night, the guests all fast asleep, even the Spanish refugees, should anyone suddenly rouse them and ask, Where are you, they would reply, I'm in Madrid, I'm in Caceres, deceived by the comfort of their beds. At the top of the building Lydia is probably asleep. Some nights she descends, others she does not, their meetings are now arranged beforehand, it is with the utmost circumspection that she comes to his room in the middle of the night. The excitement of the first weeks has waned, as is only natural, nothing fades more rapidly than passion, yes passion, even in these ill-matched liaisons passion has some role. It is wise to allay suspicions, if there are any, to stop harmful gossip, if any is circulating, to avoid public scandal at all costs, let us hope Pimentawent no further than malicious insinuations. True, there could be other

reasons for the waning, biological for instance, such as Lydia menstruating, or as the English put it having her period, or to quote a popular saying, The Redcoats have reached the straits, that irrigation canal of the female body, its crimson discharge. He woke, then woke a second time. The light, ashen, cold, dull, as yet more night than day, filtered through the lowered blinds, the windowpanes, the curtains, it traced out the heavy drapes not properly closed, it covered the polished surfaces of the furniture with the most subtle opalescence. The frozen room dawned like a gray landscape, and the hibernating animals, cautious Sybarites, were pleased, for there has been no news of any having died in their sleep. Ricardo Reis took his temperature once more. Still feverish, he started coughing, I've caught a bad flu this time and no doubt about it. The day, so slow in coming, suddenly arrived like a door thrown open, the murmur of the hotel merging with that of the city. This was Monday, Carnival, another day, in what room or grave will the skeleton of Bairro Alto be waking up or still be sleeping, perhaps he has not even undressed but went to bed in his costume, he too sleeps alone, poor fellow. Any living woman would run screaming in terror if such a bony arm were to embrace her under the sheets, even if it were her lover's, We count for nothing, we are less than futile. As these lines came to mind, Ricardo Reis recited them in a murmur, then thought to himself, I must get up, a cold or flu only requires precaution, little if any medication. But he continued to doze. Opening his eyes, he repeated, I must get up. He had to wash, shave, he detested the white hairs on his face, but it was much later than he imagined, he had not looked at the clock. Someone was knocking at his door, it was Lydia bringing his breakfast. Pulling his dressing gown around his shoulders, his slippers coming off, still half asleep, he went to open the door. Seeing that he still hadn't washed, hadn't combed his hair, Lydia thought at first that he must have turned in late, perhaps he went to a dance hall chasing after women. Would you like me to come back later, she asked. As he staggered back to bed, seized by a sudden longing to be treated and nursed like a child, he replied, I am ill, which was not what she had asked. She put the tray on the table and approached the bed, and quite spontaneously put her hand on his forehead, You have a fever. Not a doctor for nothing, Ricardo Reis did not need to be told this, but hearing her say it made him feel sorry for himself. He placed a hand over Lydia's and closed his eyes, If there are only these two tears, I will be able to keep them back, he thought, holding Lydia's work-roughened, almost coarse hand, so different from the hands of Chloe, Neaera, and that other Lydia, and from the tapered fingers, manicured nails, and soft palms of Marcenda. From Marcenda's one living hand, I should say, because her left hand is anticipated death. It must be influenza, but I'm getting up, Oh no, you mustn't, you will end up with pneumonia, I'm the doctor here, Lydia, I know what I have to do, there is no need for me to stay in bed playing the invalid when all I heed is someone who will go to the pharmacist to fetch two or three medicines. Don't you worry, I'll go, or send Pimenta, but you mustn't get out of bed, eat your breakfast before it gets cold, then I can tidy up and air your room. With these words she eased Ricardo Reis into a sitting position, adjusted his pillow, brought the tray, poured some milk into his coffee, added sugar, cut the slices of toast in half, handed him the marmalade, blushing with happiness, a woman can feel happy just watching the man she loves prostrate on a bed of suffering. She looks

at him with such a gleam in her eyes, or could it be worry and concern, that she herself appears to be feverish, one more example of the common phenomenon whereby different causes can produce the same effect. Ricardo Reis allowed himself to be tucked in, pampered, stroked gently by Lydia's fingers as if she were anointing him, whether the first anointing or the last it is difficult to say. Finishing his coffee, he felt deliciously languid. Open the closet for me, there is a black suitcase at the back on the right, bring it here, many thanks. From the suitcase he extracted a prescription pad with a printed heading, Ricardo Reis, general practitioner, Rua do Ouvidor, Rio de Janeiro. When he first bought this pad, he could not have imagined that he would be using it so far away, such is life, without any stability, or with the kind of stability that always has some surprise in store. He scribbled a few lines and instructed, You mustn't go to the pharmacy unless you are asked, give this prescription to Senhor Salvador, any orders should come from him. Bearing the prescription and the tray, she left, but not before kissing him on the forehead, such impudence, a mere servant, a hotel chambermaid, would you believe it, but perhaps she has the natural right, although no other, which he won't deny her, because this is a situation in extremis. Ricardo Reis smiled, made a vague gesture, and turned to the wall. He fell asleep at once, unconcerned about his gray scraggly hair, his sprouting beard, his skin damp and sallow after a night of fever. A man can be more ill than this and still enjoy his moment of happiness, whatever it may be, even just to imagine that he is a desert island over which a migrating bird now flies, brought and carried by the inconstant wind.

All that day and the following, Ricardo Reis did not leave his room. Salvador, who had been informed by Pimenta, paid him a visit, The entire staff wishes you a speedy recovery, Doctor. As if by some tacit agreement rather than following formal instructions, Lydia assumed all the functions of a nurse in attendance, with no qualifications other than those with which women have always been endowed, changing the bedclothes, folding the sheets back with extreme care, bringing cups of lemon tea, giving the patient his pill or a spoonful of cough syrup at the appointed hour, and the disturbing intimacies concealed from others, a back rub, mustard poultices on the patient's calves to draw the humors oppressing his head and chest to the lower extremities, and if this medication did not help, it nevertheless served an important purpose. No one was surprised that Lydia, entrusted with these duties, should spend all her time in room two hundred and one. Any inquiry as to her whereabouts received the reply, She is with the doctor. Malice did not bare its fangs, it reserved its sharpened claws for the right moment, yet there could have been nothing more innocent than Ricardo Reis reclining on the pillow, Lydia insisting he take one more spoonful of chicken broth, but he refuses, he has no appetite, he also wants to hear her plead with him, a game which would seem absurd to anyone in a blissful state of perfect health. To tell the truth, Ricardo Reis is not so ill that he is unable to feed himself, but that is not our affair. If by chance a closer form of contact occurs between them, such as his placing his hand on her bosom, they go no further, perhaps because there is a certain dignity in illness, something almost sacred, although in this religion heresies are not uncommon, outrages against dogma, excessive liberties, such as

the one taken by him but denied by her, It could do you harm. Let us praise the nurse's scruples, the lover's restraint. These are details we could dispense with, but there are others of greater relevance, such as the rains and storms which have intensified during the last two days, wreaking havoc on the ragged Shrove Tuesday procession, but to speak of them is as tiring for the narrator as for the reader. And then there are all those outside episodes that have no bearing on our story, such as that of the man who was reported missing last December and whose corpse has been found in Sintra, identified as Luis Uceda Ureña, a mystery in the criminal files which so far remains unsolved, and it looks as if we shall have to wait for the Day of Judgment, because no witness came forward at the time, so we are left with these two, guest and maid, at least until he gets over his flu or cold. Then Ricardo Reis will return to the world, Lydia to her chores, and both to those nocturnal embraces, which are brief or prolonged according to their need and the necessity for discretion. Tomorrow, Wednesday, Marcenda arrives. Ricardo Reis has not forgotten, but he discovers, and if the discovery surprises him it is in the same distracted manner, that illness has dulled his imagination. After all, life is little more than lying in bed convalescing from an illness that is incurable and recurring, with moments of respite we call health, we have to call it something in order to distinguish between the two states. Her hand dangling by her side, Marcenda will come in search of an impossible cure, with her father, the notary Sampaio, who is more hopeful of finding a mistress than a cure for his daughter. Perhaps it is because he has lost hope in a cure that he comes to unburden himself on a bosom not all that different from this bosom Ricardo Reis has just embraced, and Lydia is less reluctant now, even she, who knows nothing about medicine, can see that the doctor is feeling better.

On Wednesday morning Ricardo Reis is served a writ. Given the significance of the document, it is delivered by none other than Salvador in his capacity as manager. It comes from the Police Department for State Security and Defense, an entity whose full name was not mentioned until now because there was no opportunity, but not speaking about certain things does not mean that they do not exist, and here we have a good example. On the eve of Marcenda's arrival there appeared to be nothing more important in this world than the fact that Ricardo Reis was ill and Lydia was nursing him, meanwhile, unsuspected, a clerk was preparing the writ, that's life, old man, no one knows what tomorrow brings. Salvador shows reserve, he is not exactly frowning, his expression is one of puzzlement, that of a man who upon checking his monthly balance finds the total to be much less than what he calculated in his head. This writ has been delivered, he declares, his eyes fixed on the object of the writ as if suspiciously examining a column of figures, Where is the error, twenty-seven and five come to thirty-one when we know that they should add up to thirty-two. A writ addressed to me. Ricardo Reis has every reason to be alarmed, his only crime, and one not usually punishable by the law, if indeed it is a crime, is having received a woman into his bed in the dead of night. He is less disturbed by the document, which he still has not taken into his hand, than by Salvador's face and the hand that is almost trembling. Where does this come from. Salvador makes no reply, certain words must not be said aloud, only whispered or

conveyed by signs or read in silence as Ricardo Reis now does, Police Department for State Security and Defense. What am I supposed to do with this, he asks airily with a note of contempt, then adds appeasingly, There must be some mistake. He says this to allay Salvador's suspicions. I'll just sign here on this line acknowledging safe receipt, confirming that I will present myself on the second of March at ten o'clock in the morning, Rua Antonio Maria Cardoso. It is not far from here, first you go up to the Rua do Alecrim as far as the church on the corner, then you turn right, then right again until you come to a cinema, the Chiado Terrasse, opposite the Teatro Sao Luis, named after the King of France, ideal places for enjoying the arts of stage and screen, and the police headquarters is just a little farther on, you cannot go astray. But perhaps it is because he has gone astray so often in the past that he has been summoned. Salvador solemnly withdraws, to hand over to the police envoy the formal guarantee that the writ has been served, while Ricardo Reis, already out of bed and reclining on the sofa, reads the instructions over and over again, You are summoned to appear for questioning. But why, ye gods, if I have committed no crime, I neither borrow nor steal, I do not conspire, more opposed than ever to any such thing after reading Conspiracy, a work recommended by Coimbra, I can hear the words of Marilia, dear Papa may be arrested, and if that can happen to a father, what will happen to those who have no children. The entire hotel staff already knows that the guest in room two hundred and one, Doctor Reis, the gentleman who arrived from Brazil two months ago, has been summoned to appear at police headquarters. He must have been up to something in Brazil, or here, I shouldn't like to be in his shoes, It will be interesting to see if they release him, although if this were a case of imprisonment, the police would simply have showed up and arrested him. That same evening Ricardo Reis feels steady enough to go down early to dinner, he will see how the staff eyes him, but Lydia does not behave in this cold, distrusting manner. Salvador no sooner descends to the first floor than she bursts into the room, They tell me you've been summoned by the International Police. The poor girl is terrified. It's true, the writ is right here, but there is no need to panic, it must be something regarding my papers. I hope you're right, from what I hear you can expect nothing but trouble from that lot, my brother has told me things. I didn't know you had a brother. There was no reason to tell you, I never talk much about other people. You've never told me about yourself, You never asked, That's true, all I know about you is that you live here in the hotel, that you go out on your days off, that you are single and unattached as far as one can see, What could be better, Lydia retorted, and with these four words she wrung the heart of Ricardo Reis. It is banal to say so, but that is precisely how they affected him, they wrung his heart. She probably wasn't even aware of what she said, was only expressing her resentment, why resentment, well perhaps resentment's too strong a word, perhaps she simply wanted to state a fact, as if announcing, Oh look it's raining, but instead voiced that bitter irony found in novels, Sir, I am a simple chambermaid scarcely able to read and write, therefore if I have a life of my own, how could it possibly interest you. We could go on in this manner multiplying words, adding them to the four already spoken, What could be better. If this were a duel with swords, Ricardo Reis would already be losing blood. Lydia is about to leave, a clear indication of not having spoken at

random. Certain phrases may seem spontaneous, a thing of the moment, but God alone knows what millstone ground them, what invisible sieve filtered them, so that when pronounced they ring like the judgments of Solomon. The best one could hope for now is silence, or that one of the two interlocutors should depart, but people usually go on talking and talking, until what was for a moment definitive and irrefutable is completely lost. What did your brother tell you and what does he do, Ricardo Reis asked. Lydia turned back and began to explain, her outburst forgotten, My brother is in the navy. Which navy, He's on a warship, the Afonso de Albuquerque, Is he older or younger than you, He is just twenty-three, his name is Daniel, I don't even know your last name, My family name is Martins, On your father's side or your mother's, On my mother's side, I don't know my father's name, I never knew him, But your brother, He's my half-brother, his father died, I see. Daniel is opposed to the regime, he's told me so, Say no more unless you're sure you can trust me, Doctor, why shouldn't I trust you. Here there are two possibilities, either Ricardo Reis is an inept fencer who leaves himself exposed, or this Lydia is an Amazon with bow and arrow and broadsword. Unless we wish to consider a third possibility, that heedless of their relative strengths and weaknesses the two of them are finally speaking frankly, he seated, so entitled because convalescent, she standing though his social inferior, both of them probably surprised at how much they have to say to each other, because this is a lengthy conversation when compared with the brevity of their dialogues in the night, which are little more than the simple, primitive murmuring of bodies. Ricardo Reis has discovered that the police headquarters where he is to present himself on Monday is a place of ill repute and that its operations are even worse than its reputation, God help anyone who falls into their clutches, that place means torture, interrogation at any hour of day or night. Not that Daniel has experienced it himself, he is only repeating what others have told him, but if one believes in the proverbs, Tomorrow is another day, There are more tides than sailors, No one knows what the future will bring, then God does not reveal His intentions lest we take precautions. Besides, He manages His own affairs badly, seeing as He wasn't even able to escape His own fate. So even in the navy there are some who are dissatisfied with the regime, Ricardo Reis concluded. Lydia merely shrugged. These subversive opinions were not hers but those of Daniel, sailor, younger brother, man, for such bold statements are generally made by men. When women come to learn something, it's because they have been told, Careful what you say now, don't go blabbing, too late, but she meant well.

Ricardo Reis went down to dinner before the clock struck the hour, not particularly hungry but suddenly curious as to whether any more Spaniards had checked in or if Marcenda and her father had arrived. He spoke Marcenda's name in a low voice, and observed himself carefully, like a chemist who has mixed an acid with a base and is shaking the test tube. There is not much to see without the help of one's imagination, the salt produced was as expected, for so many thousands of years have we been mixing sentiments, acids and bases, men and women. He recalled the youthful infatuation with which he had first looked upon her, then persuaded himself that he had been moved by pity, compassion for that embittering infirmity, the limp hand, the pale, sad face. Then

followed a long dialogue before the mirror, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, no knowledge is needed, it is enough to look. What extraordinary words could these reflections exchange. But there is nothing but a repeated image, a repeated movement of lips. Perhaps a different language is spoken in the mirror, different words uttered behind this crystal surface, different meanings expressed, perhaps gestures only appear to repeat themselves like shadows in that inaccessible dimension, until finally what was spoken on this side also becomes inaccessible, lost, only a few fragments of it preserved by memory, which explains why yesterday's ideas are not today's, they were abandoned en route, in the broken mirror of memory. As he goes downstairs, Ricardo Reis feels a slight trembling in his legs. Little wonder, as influenza tends to have this effect, and we would show great ignorance of the subject if we were to suppose that such trembling could be provoked by his laborious thoughts. It is not easy to think when you are walking downstairs, try it yourself, but watch that fourth step.

At the reception desk Salvador was answering the telephone, taking notes with a pencil and saying, Very well, sir, at your service. He flashed a cold and mechanical smile, which was meant to look like preoccupation, or was the coldness instead in his unflinching stare, like that of Pimenta, who had already forgotten the generous, sometimes even excessive tips. So, you are feeling a little better, Doctor, but his gaze said, I rather fancied there was something shady in your life. Those eyes will go on saying this until Ricardo Reis has been to the police and comes back, if he ever does. Now the suspect has passed into the lounge, the conversations in Spanish are noisier than usual, it is like a hotel on Madrid's Gran Via. Any whispering to make itself heard during a pause is some modest conversation between Lusitanians, the voice of our small nation timid even on its own soil, rising to a falsetto in order to affirm timidly some familiarity, real or assumed, with the language across the border, Usted, Entonces, Muchas gracias, Pero, Vaya, Desta suerte, no one can claim to be truly Portuguese unless he speaks another language better than his own. Marcenda was not in the lounge, but Doctor Sampaio was present, engaged in conversation with two Spaniards who were explaining current political events in Spain with a graphic description of their odyssey after fleeing their homes, Gracias a Dios que vivo a tus pies llego. Joining them, Ricardo Reis sat down at one end of the larger sofa, some distance away from Doctor Sampaio. Just as well, he had no wish to enter into this Spanish cum Portuguese discussion, wanting only to know if Marcenda had arrived or had remained in Coimbra. Doctor Sampaio, showing no sign of having noticed his presence, nodded gravely as he listened to Don Alonso, redoubled his attention when Don Lorenzo came up with some forgotten detail, and never once looked over, even when Ricardo Reis, still suffering the aftereffects of influenza, had a violent fit of coughing that left him breathless and with eyes watering. Ricardo Reis then opened a newspaper and read that in Japan there had been an insurrection of army officers who were demanding that war be declared on Russia. He had first heard the news this morning, but now appraised it in greater depth. If she is here, Marcenda will be down shortly, and you will be obliged to speak to me, Doctor Sampaio, whether you wish to or not, I am anxious to see whether your eyes are as unfriendly as those of Pimenta, for no

doubt Salvador has already informed you that the police wish to question me.

The clock struck eight, the superfluous gong sounded, several guests got up and left. The conversation subsided, the two Spaniards uncrossing their legs impatiently, but Doctor Sampaio detained them with the reassurance that they would be able to live tranquilly in Portugal for as long as they wished. Portugal is an oasis of peace, here politics is no pursuit for the lower orders, that makes for a peaceful existence, the calm you witness on the streets is the calm in the souls of our people. But this was not the first time the Spaniards had listened to words of welcome and goodwill, and an empty stomach cannot be nourished on words, so they took their leave, See you soon, their families were waiting to be summoned from their rooms. Doctor Sampaio, coming face to face with Ricardo Reis, exclaimed, You've been here all this time, I didn't see you, how are things, but Ricardo Reis was fully aware that he was being watched by Pimenta, or was it Salvador, one could scarcely tell the difference between manager, notary, and porter, all three suspicious. I saw you but didn't want to intrude, I hope you had a good journey, how is your daughter. No better and no worse, that is the cross we share. One of these days you will see your perseverance rewarded, these cures take time. After this brief exchange they both fell silent, Doctor Sampaio feeling ill at ease, Ricardo Reis being ironic. The latter benevolently tossed a piece of wood onto the dying embers. By the way, I've read the book you recommended, Which book, The one about conspiracy, don't you remember, Ah yes, I suspect it made little impression. On the contrary, I found much to admire in its endorsement of nationalism, its command of idiom, the strength of its arguments, the finesse and penetration of its psychology, but above all the tribute it pays to the generous nature of womanhood, one comes away from the book purified, I truly believe that for many people in Portugal Conspiracy will be like a second baptism, a new Jordan. Ricardo Reis completed this encomium by assuming the expression of someone inwardly transfigured, which left Doctor Sampaio disconcerted by the contradiction between these words and the writ Salvador had mentioned in confidence. Oh, was as much as he could say, resisting an impulse to revive their friendship. He decided to remain aloof, to sever relations at least until this business with the police was resolved, I must go and see if my daughter is ready to come down to dinner, and he departed in haste. Ricardo Reis smiled and returned to his newspaper, determined to be the last guest to enter the dining room. Presently he heard the voice of Marcenda, Are we dining with Doctor Reis, whereupon her father said, We made no arrangement. The rest of the conversation, if any took place on the other side of the glass doors, might have gone something like this, As you can see, he is not even here, besides certain matters have been brought to my attention, it's better that we should not be seen together in public. What matters, Father. He has been summoned by the Police Department for State Security and Defense, can you imagine, between ourselves this comes as no great surprise, I had a feeling there was something there not right. By the police, Yes, the police. She retorted, But he is a doctor who only recently arrived from Brazil. All we know is that he claims to be a doctor, but he could be on the run, Really, Father, You are young, you have no experience of life, look, let's sit over there beside that Spanish

couple, they seem personable, I'd prefer to be alone with you, Father, All the tables are occupied, we must either join someone or wait, and I'd rather sit down now and hear the latest news from Spain, Very well, Father. Ricardo Reis changed his mind, decided to return to his room, requesting that dinner be sent up. I still feel a little weak, he explained, and Salvador assented with a mere nod, anxious to discourage any further intimacy. That same night, after dinner, Ricardo Reis wrote some verses, Like the stones that border flowerbeds we are placed by fate, and there we remain, nothing more than stones. Later he would see if he could expand this fragment into an ode, to continue giving that name to a form that no one knew how to sing, if it indeed was singable, and with what music, what must the Greek odes have sounded like in their time. Half an hour later, he added, Let us accomplish what we are, we possess nothing more than that, and put the sheet of paper aside, muttering, How many times have I written this with different words. He was sitting on the sofa, facing the door, silence weighing upon his shoulders like a wicked goblin, when he heard the soft shuffling of feet in the hall. It sounds like Lydia, so soon, but it was not Lydia. From under the door appeared a folded white note, advancing slowly, then brusquely pushed. Ricardo Reis realized that to attempt to open the door would be a mistake. He knew with such conviction who had written the note that he was in no hurry to get up, he sat there staring at it, already half open. It had been badly folded, doubled in haste, written with a nervous, edgy handwriting now seen for the first time. How does she manage to write, perhaps by resting a heavy object on the upper part of the sheet to keep it steady, or by using her left hand as a paperweight, both equally inert, or with the help of one of those springed clamps used in a notary's office to keep documents together. I was sorry not to see you, the note reads, but it was better so. My father is only interested in being with the Spaniards. When they informed him, the moment we arrived, about your trouble with the police, he decided to avoid being seen in your company. I am anxious to talk to you and I will never forget your help. Tomorrow between three and three-thirty I will take a stroll through the Alto de Santa Catarina, and if you wish we could meet and converse a little. A young woman from Coimbra in a furtive note agrees to meet a middle-aged doctor who has arrived from Brazil, he perhaps on the run and certainly suspect, what a tragic love affair is about to be enacted here.

The following day, Ricardo Reis lunched in the Baixa. For no particular reason he returned to the Irmãos Unidos, perhaps attracted by the name of the restaurant. He who has never had any brothers or sisters and finds himself with no friends is assailed by such longings, especially when he is feeling weak, it is not only his legs that tremble in the aftermath of influenza but also his soul, as we pointed out on another occasion. The day is overcast, a trifle chilly, Ricardo Reis slowly ascends the Rua do Carmo, gazing at the shopwindows, still too early for his meeting. He tries to remember if he was ever before in such a situation, a woman actually taking the initiative to arrange a meeting, Be in such a place at such a time, he cannot remember a similar experience, life is full of surprises. But the greatest surprise of all is that he does not feel the least bit nervous, though given all this circumspection and secrecy it would be only natural. He has the

impression of being trapped in a cloud, of not being able to focus his thoughts, perhaps he does not really believe that Marcenda will show up. He entered the Cafe Brasileira to rest his legs, he drank a coffee, listened to a conversation of a group of men, obviously men of letters, they were heaping abuse on some man or beast, Such an idiot, and another, authoritative voice intervened to explain, I received it directly from Paris, No one is arguing with you, someone said. Ricardo Reis could not tell who the remark was addressed to or its meaning, or whether the person was an idiot or not. He left, it was a quarter to three, time to be getting on his way, he crossed the square past a statue of the poet, all roads in Portugal lead to Camoes, ever-changing Camoes according to the beholder, in life his arms prepared for battle and his mind fixed on the muses, his sword is now in its scabbard, his book is closed, and his eyes blind, both of them, wounded by the pigeons and the indifferent stares of passersby. It is not yet three when Ricardo Reis arrives at the Alto de Santa Catarina. The palm trees look as if they have been pierced by the breeze coming from the sea, yet their rigid blades barely stir. He simply cannot remember if these trees were here sixteen years ago when he left for Brazil. What most certainly was not here is this huge, roughly hewn block of stone, it looks like an outcrop but is really a monument. If the furious Adamastor is here, then the Cape of Good Hope cannot be far away. Below are frigates navigating the river, a tugboat with two barges in tow, warships moored to the buoys, their prows facing the channel, a clear sign that the tide is rising. Ricardo Reis tramples the damp gravel of the narrow pathways, soft mud underfoot, there is no one here in this belvedere except for two silent old men seated on the same bench. They have probably known each other so long that they no longer have anything to say, perhaps they are waiting to see who will die first. Feeling chilly, Ricardo Reis turns up the collar of his raincoat and approaches the railing that surrounds the first slope of the hill. To think that they set sail from this river, what ship, what armada, what fleet can find the route, which route and leading where, I ask myself. I say, Reis, are you waiting for someone. The voice, biting and sardonic, is that of Fernando Pessoa. Ricardo Reis turned to the man dressed in black standing beside him and gripping the railing with his white hands. This was not what I expected when I sailed back here over the ocean waves, but yes, I am waiting for someone. You don't look at all well. I've had a bout of the flu, it was bad but soon passed. This is not the best place for someone recovering from influenza, up here you're exposed to the wind from the open sea. It's only a breeze blowing from the river, it doesn't bother me. Are you expecting some woman. Yes, a woman. Bravo, you've obviously given up those spiritual abstractions of the ideal woman, exchanged your ethereal Lydia for a Lydia one can hold in one's arms, as I saw with my own eyes back in the hotel, and now here you are waiting for another woman, playing Don Juan at your age, two women in such a short time, congratulations, at this rate you'll soon arrive at one thousand and three. Many thanks, I'm beginning to realize that the dead are worse than the elderly, once they start talking they don't know when to stop. You're right, perhaps they regret everything left unsaid when there was still time. I stand warned. However much one speaks, however much we all speak, there's no advantage in being warned, there will always be some little word we leave out. I won't ask you what it is. Very wise, by refraining from questions we can go on deluding ourselves that one day

we may know the answers. Look, Fernando, I'd rather you didn't see the person I'm waiting for. Don't fret, the worst that can happen is that she will see you from a distance talking to yourself, and who cares, everyone in love behaves like this. I am not in love. Well, I'm sorry to hear it, let me tell you that Don Juan was at least sincere, capricious but sincere, but you are like the desert, you don't even cast a shadow. It is you who cast no shadow. I beg your pardon, I can most certainly cast a shadow when I please, what I cannot do is look at myself in the mirror. Which reminds me, was that you masquerading as Death in the Carnival procession, Really, Reis, can you imagine me going around disguised as Death, like an allegory in the Middle Ages, a dead man does not cut capers, he abhors the absolute nakedness of his skeletal form, therefore when he appears, either he does as I do, putting on his best suit, the one in which he was buried, or he wraps himself up in his shroud if he's out to give someone a good fright, but as a man with a sense of decorum and who values his reputation I would never indulge in such low pranks, that much you must concede. I had a feeling that that would be your answer, and now I must ask you to leave, the person I've been waiting for is approaching. That girl there, Yes, She's quite attractive, a little too thin for my taste, This is the first time I've ever heard you pass a comment on a woman, Thou furtive satyr, Thou cunning knave. Good-bye, dear Reis, until we meet again, I leave you to woo your maiden, you've turned out to be a disappointment, seducing chambermaids, chasing after virgins, I thought rather better of you when you viewed life from a distance. Life, Fernando, is always at hand. Well, you're welcome to it if this is life. Marcenda came down between the flowerbeds bereft of flowers, and Ricardo Reis walked up to meet her. Were you talking to yourself, she asked. Yes, after a fashion, I was reciting some poetry written by a friend of mine who died a few months ago, perhaps you've heard of him. What was his name. Fernando Pessoa. The name sounds familiar but I don't remember having read his poetry. Between what I live and life, between what I appear to be and am, I slumber on a slope, a slope I will not leave. Was that what you were reciting, It was, It could have been written for me, if I've understood it properly, it is so simple. Yet it needed this man to write it, it's like all things, both good and bad, someone has to do them, take the Lusíadas for instance, do you realize that we'd never have had the Lusíadas were it not for Camoes, have you thought what our Portugal would be without them. It sounds like a word game, a riddle. Nothing could be more serious if we take it seriously, but let's talk about you, how have you been, is your hand improving. No better, I have it here in my pocket like a dead bird. You mustn't lose hope. I feel I've given up, one of these days I may make a pilgrimage to Fatima to see if an act of faith will save me. You have faith, I'm a Catholic, Practicing, Yes, I attend Mass, and I go to confession, and I take Communion, I do everything good Catholics are supposed to do. You don't sound terribly devoted, Pay no heed to what I'm saying. Ricardo Reis made no attempt to reply. Words, once uttered, remain open like doors, we nearly always enter, but sometimes we wait outside, expecting some other door to open, some other words to be uttered, these for example are as good as any, I must ask you to excuse my father's behavior, the outcome of the elections in Spain has unsettled him, he spent all of yesterday conversing with the refugees. And to make matters worse, Salvador had to go and tell him that Doctor Reis

had been served a writ by the police. We hardly know each other, your father has done nothing to require my forgiveness, I suspect it is some trifling matter, and on Monday I shall find out and answer any questions put to me, and that will be the end of it. I'm glad you're not letting it worry you. There is no reason, I have nothing to do with politics, I lived all those years in Brazil without anyone hounding me and there is even less cause for anyone to hound me here, to tell you the truth I no longer even think of myself as being Portuguese. God willing, everything will be all right. We say, God willing, but it is meaningless, because no one can read God's mind or guess His will, you must forgive my petulant mood, who am I to say such things, it's just that we are born into this world, we watch others live, then we start living too, imitating others, repeating set phrases like God willing without knowing why or to what purpose. What you say makes me feel very sad. Forgive me, I'm not being very helpful today, I've forgotten my obligations as a doctor, I should be thanking you for coming here to apologize for your father's behavior. I came because I wanted to see you and speak to you, tomorrow we go back to Coimbra, and I was afraid there might not be another opportunity. The wind has started to blow more fiercely, wrap up well. Don't worry about me, I'm afraid I chose the wrong spot for our meeting, I should have remembered that you are still convalescing. It was simply a bout of influenza, perhaps not even that, a mere chill. It will be another month before I come back to Lisbon, there will be no way of finding out what happens on Monday. I've already told you it's not important. Even so, I'd like to know, That will be difficult, Why don't you write to me, I'll leave you my address, no, better still, address your letter *poste restante*, my father might be at home when the mail is delivered. Is it worth the bother, mysterious letters posted from Lisbon under a cloak of secrecy. Don't make fun of me, I should find it very distressing to wait a whole month for any news, a word is all I ask. Agreed, if you receive no letter it will mean that I've been condemned to some dark dungeon or locked up in the highest tower in the realm, from which you must rescue me. God forbid, but now I must leave you, my father and I have an appointment to see the specialist. Using her right hand, Marcenda maneuvered her left hand out of her pocket, then stretched out both, for no good reason, the right one was all she needed to shake his hand, now both her hands are nestled in those of Ricardo Reis. The old men look on and fail to understand. I'll be in the dining room this evening, but I will only nod to your father from a distance rather than embarrass him in front of his newfound friends from Spain. I was just about to ask you this favor, That I shouldn't approach him, That you should dine downstairs, so I can see you, Marcenda, why do you want to see me, Why, I don't know. She moved off, walked up the slope, paused at the top of the hill to rest her left hand more comfortably in her pocket, then continued on her way without turning around. Ricardo Reis noticed a large steamer about to enter the channel, it was not The Highland Brigade, one ship he'd had time to get to know extremely well. The two old men were chatting. He could be her father, one of them said, They are definitely having an affair, the other replied, what I don't understand is why that fellow in black has been hanging around all this time, What fellow, That one leaning against the railing, I can't see anyone, You need glasses, And you're drunk. It was always the same with these two old men, they would start chatting, then argue, then move to separate benches, then forget

their quarrel and sit together once more. Ricardo Reis moved away from the railing, skirted the flowerbeds, followed the same route by which he had come. Looking to the left, he happened to spot a house with inscriptions on the upper story. A gust of wind shook the palm trees. The old men got to their feet. Then there was no one left on the Alto de Santa Catarina.

Anyone who says that nature is indifferent to the cares and sufferings of mankind knows little about mankind or nature. A regret, however fleeting, a headache, however mild, immediately disrupts the orbit of the stars, alters the ebb and flow of the tides, interferes with the moon's ascent, and troubles the currents in the atmosphere and the undulating clouds. Let one cent be missing from the sum collected at the last minute to settle a bill, and the winds grow violent, the sky becomes heavy, all nature commiserates with the anguished debtor. Skeptics, who make it their business to disbelieve everything, with or without proof, will say that this theory is unfounded, that it is nonsense, but what other explanation could there be for the continuous bad weather that has lasted months, perhaps years, because there have always been gales here, storms, floods, and enough has been said about the people of our nation for us to find in their misfortune sufficient reason for these unruly elements. Need we remind you of the wrath of the inhabitants of Alentejo, the outbreak of smallpox in Lebução and Fatela, or typhoid in Valbom. And what about the two hundred people who live on three floors of a building at Miragaia in Oporto, without electricity, in primitive conditions, waking each morning to shouting and screaming, the women lining up to empty their chamber pots, the rest we leave to your imagination, which ought to be put to some use. Little wonder, then, that the weather has unleashed this hurricane, with trees uprooted, roofs blown off, and telegraph poles knocked to the ground. Ricardo Reis is on his way to police headquarters, filled with anxiety, holding on to his hat lest it be carried away. If the rain should start falling in proportion to the wind that is blowing, God help us. The wind is coming from the south and at our back as we ascend the Rua do Alecrim, a blessing preferable to that bestowed by the saints, who assist only during one's descent. We have the itinerary more or less worked out, turn here at the Igreja da Encarnação, sixty paces to the next corner, you cannot go wrong. More wind, a head wind this time, which could be why he slows down, unless it is his feet refusing to walk that road. But he has an appointment and this man is punctuality personified, it is not yet ten o'clock and already he is at the door. He shows the paper they sent him, You are asked to appear, and he has appeared, hat in hand, relieved, absurd as it may seem, to be out of the wind. They send him up to the second floor, and up he goes, holding the writ like a lamp before him, without it he would not know where to put his feet. This document is a sentence that cannot be read, and he is an illiterate sent to the executioner bearing the message, Chop off my head. The illiterate may go singing, because the day has dawned in glory. Nature, too, is unable to read. When the ax separates the head from his trunk the stars will fall, too late. Told to wait, Ricardo Reis sits on a long bench, bereft, because they have taken the writ from him. He sits with other people waiting. If this were a doctor's office, they would be chatting among themselves as they waited, Something's wrong with my lungs, My trouble is my liver or maybe it's my kidneys, but no one knows what is ailing these people, who sit in silence. Were they to speak, they would say, I suddenly feel much better, may I go now. A foolish question, for as we know the best remedy for a toothache is to walk through the door when the dentist calls. Half an hour passed, and Ricardo Reis was still waiting to be called. Doors opened and closed, telephones could be heard ringing, two men paused nearby, one of them gave a loud laugh, He doesn't know what's in store for him, he said,

then they disappeared behind a curtain. Are they referring to me, Ricardo Reis asked himself with a tightening in his stomach. At least we shall find out what the charges are. He raised his hand to his waistcoat pocket to take out his watch, to see how long he had been waiting, but stopped himself halfway, he must not betray any impatience. At last a man drew back a curtain ever so slightly, beckoned him with a nod, and Ricardo Reis rushed forward, then stopped himself, held back out of an instinctive sense of dignity, if dignity has anything to do with instinct. Not rushing was the only form of refusal open to him, albeit only a pretense of refusal. He followed the man, who reeked of onion, through a long corridor with doors on either side, all firmly shut. Upon reaching the far end, his guide knocked gently on one of the doors and opened it. A man seated at a desk told the guide, Wait here, you might be needed, and turning to Ricardo Reis he pointed at a chair, Sit down. Ricardo Reis obeyed, now feeling irritated, extremely frustrated, They are doing this just to intimidate me, he thought to himself. The man behind the desk took the writ, read it slowly, as if he had never seen such a document before, then put it down carefully on the green blotting paper and looked hard at him, the look of someone making a final check to avoid any mistake. Your identification if you please, were his opening words, and those three words, If you please, made Ricardo Reis feel less nervous. It is certainly true that one can achieve a great deal simply by being polite. Ricardo Reis took his identity card from his wallet and raised himself slightly in his chair to hand it over, causing his hat to fall on the floor, which made him feel ridiculous, nervous again. The man read the card line by line, compared the photograph with the face of the man before him, took some notes, then placed the card, with the same scrupulous care, in the folder beside the writ. Maniac, thought Ricardo Reis, but said, I'm a doctor, I arrived here from Rio de Janeiro two months ago. You have been staying at the Hotel Brangança all this time, asked the man. Yes sir. On which ship did you travel. The Highland Brigade, which belongs to the Royal Mail Line, I disembarked in Lisbon on the twenty-ninth of December. Did you travel alone or accompanied, Alone, Are you married, No sir, I am not married, and I should like to know why I have been summoned here, why the police want to question me, this is the last thing I ever expected. How many years did you reside in Brazil. I went there in nineteen nineteen, why do you ask. Just answer my questions and leave the rest to me, that way we will get along fine. Very well sir. Was there some special reason for your emigrating to Brazil, I decided to emigrate, that's all, Doctors don't usually emigrate, I did, Why, couldn't you find patients here, I had any number of patients, but I wanted to see Brazil, to work there, that's all. And now you've come back, Yes, I've come back. To do what, if you haven't come back to practice medicine. How do you know I'm not practicing medicine. I know. For the moment I'm not practicing, but I'm thinking of opening an office, of putting down roots once more, after all, this is my native land. In other words, after being away for sixteen years, you suddenly felt homesick for your native land. That is so, but really I fail to see the purpose of this interrogation. It is not an interrogation, your statements, as you can see, are not even being recorded. Then why am I here. I was curious to meet this Portuguese doctor who was earning a good living in Brazil, who returned after sixteen years, who has been living in a hotel for two months and does not work. I told you I intend to resume my practice, Where, I haven't

yet started to look for a location, it is an important decision. Tell me something else, did you get to know many people in Rio de Janeiro or elsewhere in Brazil. I didn't travel much, my friends all lived in Rio, What friends, My private life is my own affair, I am under no obligation to answer such questions, otherwise I must insist upon my lawyer being present. You have a lawyer, No, but there is nothing to prevent me from hiring one. Lawyers are not permitted to enter these premises, besides, Doctor, you haven't been charged with any crime, we are simply having a little chat. But not of my choosing, and the drift of the questions being put to me suggests that this is more than a friendly chat. To return to my question, who were these friends of yours. I refuse to answer. Doctor Reis, if I were in your position, I would be more cooperative, it's in your best interest to answer, so as to avoid unnecessary complications. Portuguese, Brazilians, people who came to consult me professionally and subsequently became my friends, there's no point in my naming people you do not know. That is where you are wrong, I know a great many names, I am giving no names, Very well then, I have other means of finding out, should it prove necessary, Suit yourself. Were there any military personnel or politicians among those friends of yours. I didn't move in such circles. No one attached to the armed forces or engaged in politics. I cannot guarantee that such people might not have consulted me in my capacity as a doctor. But you did not become friendly with any of them. As it happens, no, With none of them, That's right. You were living in Rio de Janeiro when the last revolution took place, I was. Don't you find it something of a coincidence that you should return to Portugal so soon after a revolutionary conspiracy was discovered. No more than to discover that the hotel where I am staying is full of Spanish refugees after the recent elections held in Spain. Ah, so you are telling me that you fled from Brazil, That was not what I said, You compared your own situation with that of the Spaniards who have arrived in Portugal, Only to make the point that coincidences mean nothing, as I've already told you, I longed to see my native land once more. You did not return because you were afraid. Afraid of what. Of being hounded by the authorities there, for example. No one hounded me either before or after the revolution. These things sometimes take time, we didn't summon you until two months after your arrival. I'd still like to know why. Tell me something else, if the rebels had succeeded, would you have remained in Brazil. I've already told you that the reason for my return had nothing to do with either politics or revolutions, besides this was not the only revolution in Brazil during my stay there. A shrewd reply, but there are revolutions and revolutions and not all for the same cause. I am a doctor, I neither know nor wish to know anything about revolutions, I am interested only in caring for the sick. Apparently not all that interested these days. I will soon be practicing medicine once more. While living in Brazil, were you in trouble with the authorities, I am a peaceful man. And here in Portugal, have you renewed any friendships since your return, Sixteen years is long enough to forget and be forgotten. You haven't answered my question, I have no friends here. Did you ever consider becoming a Brazilian citizen, Never. Do you find Portugal much changed since you left for Brazil, I cannot answer that, I haven't been outside Lisbon. What about Lisbon itself, do you find much difference, Sixteen years have brought many changes. Don't you find more calm on the streets, Yes, I've noticed. The National

Dictatorship has set the country to work, I don't doubt it, There is patriotism, a willingness to strive for the common good, no sacrifice is too great in the national interest. The Portuguese are fortunate. You are fortunate, since you are one of us. I will not refuse what is due me when these benefits are made available, soup kitchens, I understand, are to be organized for the poor. You are surely not poor, Doctor, I may be one day, God forbid, Thank you for your concern, but when that happens, I'll go back to Brazil. Here in Portugal there is little likelihood of revolution, the last one occurred two years ago and ended disastrously for those involved. I don't know what you're talking about and have nothing to add to what I've told you already. I have no more questions. May I go now, You may, here is your identity card, oh, Victor, will you show the doctor to the door. Victor approached, said, Follow me, his breath reeking of onion. Incredible, Ricardo Reis thought to himself, so early in the day and this awful stink, the man must eat onions for breakfast. Once in the corridor, Victor told him, I could see you were out to provoke our deputy chief, just as well you found him in a good mood, Provoke him, what do you mean, You refused to answer his questions, you beat around the bush, a grave mistake, luckily our deputy chief has some respect for the medical profession. I still don't know why I was asked to come here. No need, just raise your hands to heaven and thank God it's over. Let's hope so, once and for all. That's something one never knows, but here we are, hey Antunes, the good doctor here has permission to leave the building, good-bye, Doctor, if you need anything, you know where to find me, the name is Victor. Ricardo Reis touched the guide's extended hand with the tips of his fingers, afraid that he himself would start smelling of onions, that he would be sick. But no, the wind hit him in the face, jolted him, dispelled the nausea, he found himself in the street, not sure how he got there, the door behind him closed. Before Ricardo Reis reaches the corner of the Rua da Encarnação there will be a mighty downpour. Tomorrow's newspapers will report heavy showers, an understatement for torrential and persistent rain. The pedestrians all take shelter in doorways, shaking themselves like drenched dogs. There is only one man on the sidewalk by the Teatro Sao Luis, obviously late for an appointment, he looks as worried as Ricardo Reis had been, which explains all this rain overhead. Nature might have shown her solidarity in some other fashion, for example by sending an earthquake capable of burying Victor and the deputy chief in rubble. Let them rot until the stink of onion evaporates, until they are reduced to clean bones.

When Ricardo Reis entered the hotel, water was dripping from his hat as from a gutter, his raincoat was soaking wet, he looked like a gargoyle, a grotesque figure without any of the dignity one expects in a doctor, and his dignity as a poet was lost on Salvador and Pimenta, because when the rain falls, heavenly justice, it falls on everyone. He went up to the reception desk to retrieve his key. Why, Doctor, you're drenched to the skin, the manager exclaimed, but his dubious tone betrayed his thoughts, What condition are you really in, how did the police deal with you. Or, more dramatically, I didn't expect to see you back so soon. If we address God with the familiar you, even if it is in capital letters, what is to prevent us from taking such a liberty with a hotel guest suspected of subversive activities, both past and future. Ricardo Reis simply muttered, What a deluge,

and rushed upstairs, dripping water all over the stair carpet. Lydia will be able to follow his trail, footprint by footprint, a broken twig, trampled grass, but we are daydreaming, talking as if we were in some forest, when this is only a hotel corridor leading to room two hundred and one. So, how was it, she will ask, did they treat you badly. Certainly not, Ricardo Reis will reply, what an idea, there was no problem, the police are very civilized, very polite, they invite you to have a seat. But why did they make you go there. It is apparently the normal procedure when people return after a number of years abroad, a routine check, that's all, to make sure everything is in order, to see if a person needs any assistance. You're joking, that's not what my brother told me. Yes, I'm joking, but don't worry, there was no problem, they only wanted to know why I've returned from Brazil, what I was doing there, what I plan to do here. Have they the right to ask these things. My impression is that they can ask anything they like, now be off with you, I must change before lunch. In the dining room the maître d', Afonso, for Afonso is his name, showed him to his table, keeping a distance of half a pace more than custom or etiquette required, but Ramón, who in recent days had also kept his distance and hurried off to attend to less contagious guests, took his time ladling out the soup, The smell is so appetizing, Doctor, it could awaken the dead. And he was right, after that stink of onions everything smelled good. There should be a study, Ricardo Reis reflected, about what smell we give off at any given moment and for whom, Salvador finds my smell unpleasant, Ramón now finds it tolerable, as for Lydia, her poor sense of smell deludes her into thinking I'm anointed with roses. Entering the dining room, he exchanged greetings with Don Lorenzo and Don Alonso, and also with Don Camilo, who had arrived only three days ago, but Don Camilo remained politely aloof. Whatever Ricardo Reis learns about the situation in Spain he overhears as guests converse over dinner, or he reads in the newspapers. Hotbeds of dissent, the wave of propaganda launched by Communists, anarchists, and trade unionists, which is infiltrating the working classes and has even influenced members of the army and navy. We can now understand why Ricardo Reis was summoned by the Police Department for State Security and Defense. He tries to recall the features of the deputy chief who interrogated him, but all he can see is a ring with a black stone worn on the little finger of the left hand, and the vague image of a round, pale face, like a bun that was not properly baked in the oven. He cannot make out the eyes, perhaps the man had none, perhaps he had been speaking to a blind man. Salvador appears unobtrusively in the doorway, to make sure that all is in order, especially now that the hotel has become international, and during this rapid inspection his eyes meet those of Ricardo Reis. He smiles from afar, a diplomatic gesture, what he wants to know is what happened at the police station. Don Lorenzo reads aloud for Don Alonso from *Le Jour*, a French newspaper published in Paris, he reads an article in which Oliveira Salazar, the Head of the Portuguese Government, is described as an energetic and unassuming man whose vision and judgment have brought prosperity and a sense of national pride to his country. That's what we need in Spain, remarks Don Camilo, and raising his glass of red wine he nods in the direction of Ricardo Reis, who conveys his gratitude with a similar nod but restrained, mindful of the famous battle of Aljubarrota, when Portugal's tiny army routed the Spanish forces. Satisfied, his mind at rest, Salvador

withdraws, later or perhaps tomorrow Doctor Ricardo Reis will tell him what happened in the Rua Antonio Maria Cardoso, and should he refuse or give the impression of withholding certain facts, Salvador has other means of finding out, an acquaintance of his works there, a man called Victor. If the news is reassuring, if Ricardo Reis is above suspicion, happiness will be restored, Salvador will simply have to caution him, with tact and diplomacy, to apply the utmost discretion in his dealings with Lydia, For the sake of the hotel's reputation, Doctor, at least to protect our good name, that is what he will tell him. We would take an even more favorable view of Salvador's magnanimity if we considered how much more advantageous it would be to have room two hundred and one vacated, because it is large enough to accommodate an entire family from Seville, a Spanish nobleman, for example, the Duke of Alba, the very thought makes me tremble with excitement. Finishing his lunch, Ricardo Reis nodded to the immigrants still savoring cheeses from the Serra, waved to Salvador, leaving him racked with expectation, with the moist eye of a dog begging for a bone, and went up to his room. He was anxious to write a quick note to Marcenda, poste restante, Coimbra.

It is raining out there with such a deafening noise that it seems that the rain is falling throughout the world, that as the globe turns, its waters hum in space as if on a spinning top. The dense roar of the rain fills my mind, my soul is an invisible curve drawn by the sound of the wind that blows relentless, an unbridled horse rejoicing in its freedom, hooves clattering through these doors and windows while the voile curtains, inside, sway ever so gently. A man surrounded by tall pieces of furniture is writing a letter, composing his text so that the absurd appears logical and the incoherent clear, so that weakness becomes strength, mortification dignity, and fear boldness, because what we would like to have been is as valuable as what we have been. Ah if only we had shown courage when called to account. To know this is to be halfway there, knowing this we will find the courage at the right moment to travel the other half. Ricardo Reis vacillated, debated which form of address to use. A letter is a most hazardous business, the written word allows no indecision, either distance or familiarity will emphasize the tone the letter establishes, and you end up with a relationship that is a fiction. Many an ill-fated attachment has started precisely in this way. Ricardo Reis did not even consider the possibility of addressing Marcenda as Most excellent Lady or Esteemed Madam, his concern about propriety did not go that far, but once he ruled out these conventional and therefore impersonal forms of address, he was left with a vocabulary that verged on the intimate. My dear Marcenda, for example. Why his, why dear. True, he could write Senhorita Marcenda, but Senhorita was ridiculous. After tearing up several sheets of paper, he found himself addressing her simply by her name, the way we should address everyone, that is why we were given names. Marcenda, I am writing as promised to give you my news. He stopped to think, then continued, composing the phrases, drawing them together, filling in gaps, if he did not tell the truth, or not all of it, he told one truth, the important thing is that the letter make the writer and the one who receives it happy, that both discover in it an ideal image of themselves. There had been no formal interrogation at police headquarters, nothing that could be used against him in the courts, he had

simply been summoned for a little chat, as the deputy chief had been kind enough to point out. It is true that Victor witnessed everything, but he no longer remembers the details and tomorrow will remember even less, Victor has other, more important, matters on his mind. And there are no other witnesses, there is only the letter written by Ricardo Reis, and it may soon go astray, that is altogether likely, because certain documents should not be kept. Other sources may come to light, but they will be suspect, apocryphal if feasible, and in the absence of any firm evidence we will find ourselves obliged to invent a truth, a dialogue, a Victor, a deputy chief, a wet, windy morning, a nature that sympathizes, all false and at the same time all true. Ricardo Reis finished his letter with respectful greetings, wished her good health, a forgivable commonplace, and after some hesitation told her, in a postscript, that she might not find him here on her next visit to Lisbon, because he was beginning to find life in the hotel irksome, monotonous. He must find a place of his own, open an office, The time has come to see how deep these new roots of mine can go, all of them. He was about to underline the last three words but decided to leave them as they stood, their ambiguity transparent. When I finally get around to leaving the hotel, I shall write to you at this same address in Coimbra. He reread the letter, folded the sheet of paper, sealed the envelope, then concealed it among his books. Tomorrow he will post it, today, blessed are those, with this storm, who have a roof over their heads, even if it is only that of the Hotel Brangança. Ricardo Reis went up to the window and drew back the curtains, but the rain was pouring down in one vast sheet of water and he could see little, then not even that, his breath clouded the windowpane. Under the protection of the shutters he opened the window. The Cais do Sodré was already flooding, the kiosk that sold tobacco and spirits was transformed into an island, the world had broken free of its wharf, had drifted away. Sheltered in the doorway of a tavern on the other side of the street, two men stood smoking. They had been drinking and now were rolling their cigarettes slowly, deliberately, while they discussed some metaphysical problem or other, perhaps even the rain that was keeping them from getting on with their lives. They soon disappeared into the darkness of the tavern, if they had to wait, they might as well use the opportunity and have another drink. A man dressed in black and bareheaded came to the door to contemplate the sky, then disappeared as well. Closing the window, Ricardo Reis switched off the light, stretched out wearily on the sofa, and spread a blanket over his knees. Like a silkworm in its cocoon he listened to the mournful noise of the rain. Unable to sleep, he lay with his eyes wide open, You are alone, no one knows you, be silent and pretend,, he murmured, words written in other times, despising them because they did not express loneliness, merely voiced it. And silence and pretense, these words too were not what they spoke, to be alone, my friend, is much more than a word or a voice saying it.

Later that afternoon he went down to the first floor, to give Salvador the opportunity he so craved, sooner or later he would be forced to broach the subject, so better that he choose the time and place, No, Senhor Salvador, it went extremely well, they were most courteous. The question, when it came, was phrased with great delicacy, Now then, Doctor, tell me, how did you get on this morning, did they give you a difficult time. No,

Senhor Salvador, it went extremely well, they were most courteous, all they wanted was some information regarding the Portuguese Consulate in Rio de Janeiro, where I should have been given a signed document, pure bureaucracy and nothing more. Salvador appeared to be satisfied, but he remained suspicious, as one might expect of a man who has seen so much of life, especially working in a hotel. Tomorrow he will get to the bottom of this matter, ask his acquaintance, Victor, I should know the people I have staying in my hotel, and Victor will warn him, Salvador, my friend, keep an eye on that fellow, right after the interrogation the deputy chief said, This Doctor Reis is not what he appears to be, he must be watched, no, we have no definite suspicions for the moment, only an impression, keep an eye on him, tell us if he receives any mail, So far, not a single letter, That too is strange, we must pay a visit to the post office, to see if anything is being held for him, and contacts, does he have any, Here in the hotel, none whatsoever, Well, if you see anything suspicious, just let me know. After this private conversation, the atmosphere in the hotel will once again grow tense, every member of the staff will adjust his or her sights to conform to the aim of Salvador's rifle, a constant vigilance that might well be called surveillance. Even the good-natured Ramón has become cool, Felipe mutters, there is of course one exception, as everybody knows, Lydia, poor thing. She goes around looking worried, and with good reason, today Pimenta burst out laughing, malicious fellow that he is, We haven't seen the end of this story yet. Tell me what is going on, please, she said, I won't breathe a word to a soul. There is nothing going on, Ricardo Reis told her, it is just a pile of nonsense invented by people who have nothing better to do than meddle in the affairs of others. It might be a pile of nonsense, but it can turn a person's life into a nightmare. Don't you worry, once I leave the hotel, the talk will stop. Are you going away, you didn't tell me. Sooner or later I will go, I never intended to spend the rest of my life here. Then I will never see you again, and Lydia, who was resting her head on his shoulder, shed a tear, which he felt. Now then, you mustn't cry, that's life, people meet, they part, one of these days you will marry. Bah, marry, I'm already too old, but what about you, where will you go. I will look for a place, I will find something suitable. If you want, If I want what, I could come and spend my days off with you, I have nothing else in life. Lydia, why do you like me. I don't know, perhaps because of what I said, that I have nothing else in life. You have your mother, your brother, you must have had affairs with men before this, and no doubt there will be others, you are pretty, you'll marry one day, start a family. Perhaps, but for now you are all I have. You are a likable girl, You haven't answered my question, What was that, Do you want me to come and spend my days with you when you have a place of your own, Would you like that, Of course I would, Then you must come until such time as. Until you find someone of your own station. That was not what I was going to say. When that happens, you need only say to me, Lydia, I don't want you to come anymore. Sometimes I feel I don't really know you. I'm a hotel chambermaid. But your name is Lydia, and you have a curious way of saying things. When people start talking their hearts, as I'm doing now with my head on your shoulder, the words aren't the same. I hope you find yourself a good husband someday. It would be nice, but when I listen to other women, those who say they have good husbands, it makes me wonder. You think

they're not good husbands, Not for me, What is a good husband, in your opinion, I don't know, You're hard to please. Not really, lying here without any future, I'm happy with what I have now. I will always be your friend. We don't know what tomorrow brings. And you will always be my friend. Who, me, that's something else. Explain yourself, I can't, if I could, I would be able to explain everything, You explain more than you imagine, Don't be silly, I'm not educated, You can read and write, Not very well, I can barely read and can't write without making mistakes. Ricardo Reis drew her to him and she embraced him, the conversation had gradually brought them to an inexplicable emotion akin to pain, so that what they did next was done with extreme delicacy, and we all know what that was.

During the days that followed, Ricardo Reis set about looking for lodgings. He left early each morning and returned at night, having lunched and dined out. The classified section in the *Diário de Notícias* served as his vade mecum, but he did not travel far, residential areas on the outskirts suited neither his needs nor inclinations. He would have hated to live, for example, near the Rua dos Heróis de Quionga in Moraes Soares, where apartments had been built with five or six rooms and the rent was incredibly cheap, from a hundred and sixty-five to two hundred and forty escudos a month, but they were so remote from the Baixa and had no view of the river. He was looking for furnished quarters, otherwise he would need to select furniture, linen, dishes, and without a woman at his side to advise him, because no one could possibly imagine Lydia, poor girl, going in and out of department stores with Doctor Ricardo Reis, telling him what to buy. And as for Marcenda, even if she were here and her father permitted it, what would she know about such practical matters, the only house she had ever known was her own, and it wasn't really hers at all, because strictly speaking the word mine means something made by me and for me. And these are the only two women Ricardo Reis knows, there are no others. Fernando Pessoa was exaggerating when he dubbed him Don Juan. It is not so easy, after all, to leave the hotel. Each life creates its own ties, each its own inertia, incomprehensible to any external observer and no less incomprehensible to the person observed. In a word, let us content ourselves with the little we understand of others, they will be grateful and perhaps even thank us. But Salvador does not content himself. The prolonged absences of this hotel guest, so different from the regime he previously kept, make him nervous. Salvador even considered having a word with Victor, but a qualm made him change his mind at the last moment, what if he became involved in some situation which, if badly handled, might implicate him too, or worse. He grew exceedingly attentive to Ricardo Reis, an attitude which altogether disconcerted the hotel staff, no longer sure how they were expected to behave. Forgive these prosaic details, but they also have their importance.

Such are the contradictions of life. Just recently it was reported that Luis Carlos Prestes was arrested. Let us hope the police do not arrive to ask Ricardo Reis if he knew Prestes in Brazil or if Prestes had been one of his patients. Just recently, Germany denounced the Locarno Pact and after endless threats finally occupied the Rhineland. Just

recently, a spring was inaugurated in Santa Clara amid wild excitement on the part of the inhabitants, who formerly had to get their water supply via fire pumps, and it was a lovely ceremony, two little innocents, a boy and a girl, filled two pitchers of water to much applause and cheering. Just recently, there appeared in Lisbon a famous Romanian called Manóiescu, who upon his arrival declared, The new doctrine currently spreading throughout Portugal lured me across these frontiers, I come as a respectful disciple, as a jubilant believer. Just recently, Churchill made a speech in which he said that Germany is the only nation in Europe today that does not fear war. Just recently, the Fascist party in Spain, the Falange, was banned, and its leader, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, imprisoned. Just recently, Kierkegaard's Human Despair was published. Just recently, at the Tivoli, the film Bo^ambo opened, it portrays the noble efforts of the whites to extinguish the fierce warring spirit of the primitive races. And Ricardo Reis has done nothing except look for lodgings, day after day. He is disheartened, near despair, as he leafs through the newspapers, which inform him about everything except what he wants to know, they tell him that Venizelos is dead, that Ortins de Bettencourt has said an internationalist cannot be a soldier much less a Portuguese, that it was raining yesterday, that the Reds are on the increase in Spain, that for seven and a half escudos he can buy The Letters of a Portuguese Nun, what they do not tell him is where he can find the accommodations he needs so badly. Notwithstanding Salvador's great solicitude, he is anxious to escape the stifling atmosphere of the Hotel Brangança, particularly now that he knows he will not lose Lydia by leaving. She has given her promise, has guaranteed the gratification of those desires with which we are all familiar. Ricardo Reis seems to have forgotten Fernando Pessoa, the poet's image has faded, like a photograph exposed to sunlight or a plastic funeral wreath that has lost its color. The poet himself warned him, Nine months, perhaps not even that, and he has not reappeared, perhaps he is in a bad mood or angry, or perhaps, being dead, he cannot escape the obligations of his condition. We can only speculate, we know nothing, after all, of life beyond the grave, and Ricardo Reis forgot to ask him when he had the opportunity, the living are so selfish and unfeeling. The days pass, monotonous, gray. There is news of more storms in Ribatejo, cattle swept away by floods, houses collapsing, sinking into the mud, cornfields submerged. All that is visible, on the surface of the vast lake covering the marshes by the river, are the rounded crests of weeping willows, the battered spurs of ash trees and poplars, their highest branches entwined with floating brushwood and vernal grass that was torn from its roots. When finally the waters subside, people will say, Look, the water came up to here, and no one will believe it. Ricardo Reis neither suffers nor witnesses these disasters, he reads the newspaper reports and studies the photographs. Scenes of tragedy, says the headline, and he muses on the persistent cruelty of fate, which can remove us from this world in so many ways yet takes perverse pleasure in choosing iron and fire and this endless deluge. We find Ricardo Reis reclining on a sofa in the hotel lounge, enjoying the warmth of the paraffin heater and the cozy atmosphere. Were we not endowed with the gift of reading the human heart, we would never know the sad thoughts that assail him, the misery of his neighbor some fifty, eighty kilometers away. Here I am, meditating on the cruelty of fate and the indifference of the gods, for they are

the same thing, as I hear Salvador telling Pimenta to go to the kiosk to buy a Spanish newspaper, and the unmistakable footsteps of Lydia climbing the stairs to the second floor. Distracted, I pick up the classifieds again, my current obsession, rooms to rent, carefully I go down the list with my forefinger, nervous, not wanting Salvador to catch me. Suddenly I come to a halt, Furnished rooms to let, Rua de Santa Catarina, deposit required. I can see the building as clearly as the photographs of the flood, its upper story decorated with inscriptions, it's the one I noticed that afternoon when I met Marcenda, how could I have forgotten it, I'll go there right now, but I must be calm, betray no excitement, behave naturally. Done reading the Diário de Notícias, I now fold it carefully, leave it just as I found it, not like some people who scatter the pages everywhere. I get up, say to Salvador, I'm going for a stroll, the rain has stopped, what further explanation should I give if pressed. Ricardo Reis suddenly realizes that his relationship with the hotel, or with Salvador, is that of a dependent. He looks at himself in the mirror and once more sees a pupil of the Jesuits, a rebel against the code of discipline simply because it is a code of discipline. But this is worse, because he cannot even muster the courage to say, Salvador, I'm off to look at an apartment, and if I find it suitable, I will be leaving the hotel, I'm fed up with you and Pimenta, with all of you, except Lydia, of course, who deserves something better than this place. He does not say any of this, but only, See you in a while, almost as if he were asking to be excused. Cowardice is shown not only on the battlefield or when one is confronted with a knife pointed at one's entrails. There are people whose courage wobbles like jelly, but it's not their fault, that's how they were born.

Within a few minutes Ricardo Reis had reached the Alto de Santa Catarina. Seated on the same bench were the same two old men gazing at the river. They turned around when they heard footsteps, and one remarked to the other, That's the fellow who was here three weeks ago. You mean, the other said, the one with the girl, because although many other men and women had come here, strolling past or stopping to take in the view, the old men knew perfectly well which man. It is a mistake to think that one loses one's memory with old age, that the elderly preserve only remote memories which gradually surface like submerged foliage as the swollen waters recede. There is a dreadful memory that comes with old age, the memory of the final days, the final image of the world, of life, That was how I left it, who can tell if it will remain like that, they say when they reach the other side, and these two old men will say the same, but today's image is not their last. On the front door of the building Ricardo Reis found a pinned notice. It read, Prospective viewers should apply to the agent. The address given was in the Baixa, there was still time. He ran all the way to the Rua do Calhariz, hailed a taxi, and came back accompanied by a stout gentleman, Yes sir, I am the agent, he had brought the keys. They went up, here is the apartment, spacious, adequate for a large family, furniture made of dark mahogany, an enormous bed, a tall closet, a fully furnished dining room, a sideboard, a credenza for silver or china according to one's means, an extending table, and the study paneled with maple, the desk covered with green baize like a billiard table, threadbare in one corner, and a kitchen, and a bathroom rudimentary

but adequate. Every item of furniture was bare, empty, not a single utensil, dish, or ornament, no sheets or towels, The last tenant was an old woman, a widow, who has gone to live with her children and taken all her belongings, the place is to be let with only the furniture you see here. Ricardo Reis went to one of the windows, there were no curtains, and he could see the palm trees in the square, the statue of Adamastor, the old men seated on the bench, and beyond, on the mud-polluted river, the warships with their prows turned landward. One cannot tell, watching them, if the tide is about to rise or fall. If we linger here a little longer, we will see. How much is the rent, what kind of deposit do you expect for the furniture, and within half an hour, if that, of discreet bargaining they reached an agreement. The agent was reassured that he was dealing with a gentleman of some distinction, Tomorrow, sir, if you would care to call at my office we can sign the contract, here is your key, Doctor, the apartment is yours. Ricardo Reis thanked him, insisted on leaving a deposit in excess of the usual percent. The agent wrote out a receipt then and there, he sat at the desk and took out a fountain pen overlaid with a filigree of stylized leaves and branches. In the silence of the apartment all that could be heard was the scraping of the nib on the paper and the agent breathing, wheezing a little, clearly asthmatic, Done, there you are, no, please don't disturb yourself, I can take a taxi, I assume you'll want to stay a while to get the feel of your new home, I fully understand, people become attached to their homes, the woman who lived here, poor old girl, how she wept the day she left, inconsolable, but we are often forced by circumstances, illness, widowhood, what must be, must be, we are powerless, well then, I'll expect you at my office tomorrow. Now alone, holding the key in his hand, Ricardo Reis went through the rooms again, thinking of nothing, merely looking, then went to the window. The prows of the ships pointed upstream, a sign that the tide was going out. The old men remained seated on the bench.

That same night Ricardo Reis told Lydia that he had rented an apartment. She wept a little, complained that she would no longer be able to look at him at every moment, an exaggeration on her part, words spoken in passion, because she could not look at him at every moment when they spent the night together with the light off in case anyone was spying, and during the day Lydia avoided him or addressed him with the utmost formality, a scene relished by malicious witnesses who were waiting for an opportunity to take their revenge. He comforted her, Don't cry, we will see each other on your days off, undisturbed by anyone, that's if you want to come, a question that required no answer. Of course I want to come, I already told you so, when are you thinking of moving to your apartment. The moment it's ready, there is some furniture, but no linen, no kitchen things, I don't need much to start, a few towels, sheets, blankets, then little by little I will get the rest. If the place has been closed up for some time, it will need cleaning, so I'll do it. What an idea, I can employ some woman in the neighborhood. I won't have it, you can rely on me, why go looking for someone else. You are a good girl, Pooh, I am who I am. This is one of those statements that brooks no reply. Each of us should know who he is, there has certainly been no lack of advice on that score since the time of the Greeks and Romans, Know thyself, hence our admiration for this Lydia, who does not appear to have the slightest doubt.

Next day, Ricardo Reis went out and bought two complete sets of bed linen and towels in various sizes. Fortunately the water, gas, and electricity had not been cut off by the respective companies and the accounts could remain in the name of the previous tenant, or so the agent suggested, and he agreed. He also bought some pots and pans, enamel and aluminum, a coffee pot, cups and saucers, napkins, coffee, tea, and sugar, all the things he would be likely to need for breakfast. Lunch and dinner he would have out. He enjoyed this little shopping expedition, it reminded him of his first days in Rio de Janeiro, where without any assistance he had done the same thing. Between trips to and from the shops, he wrote a short letter to Marcenda, communicating his new address, by extraordinary coincidence very near the spot where they had had their meeting. How typical of this vast world, where men, like animals, have their own territory, each his own yard or coop, his own spider's web, which is the best comparison of all. One spider spins a web as far as Oporto, another as far as Rio, but these are only supports, points of reference, mooring posts, it is in the center of the web that the spider and the fly play out their destiny. In the late afternoon Ricardo Reis took a taxi from shop to shop collecting his purchases, then bought a few pastries, some crystallized fruit, and a selection of biscuits, tea, digestive, and arrowroot. He returned to the Rua de Santa Catarina, arrived just as the two old men were descending to their homes somewhere in the neighborhood. While Ricardo Reis lifted his parcels from the taxi and carried them up, making three trips, the old men stopped and watched, and seeing the lights go on in the apartment on the third floor, they said, Look, someone is living in the apartment Dona Luísa used to occupy. They only moved away when the new tenant appeared at the window and saw them. They went off in a state of nervous excitement, which sometimes happens, and just as well, a welcome break in the monotony of existence. We think we have arrived at

the end of the road, but it is only a bend opening onto a new horizon and new wonders. From his windows bare of drapes Ricardo Reis watched the river's expanse. To get a better view he switched off the light. Gray light fell like pollen from the skies, becoming darker as it settled. Ferry boats to and from Cacilhas, their lamps already lit, plied the dingy waters alongside the warships and anchored barges. One last frigate, almost concealed behind the outline of the rooftops, is about to dock. The scene reminds you of a child's drawing. The evening is so sad that a desire to weep surges from the depths of the soul. His head resting against the windowpane, shut off from the world by a cloud of condensation as he breathes on the smooth, cold surface, he watches the contorted, defiant figure of Adamastor gradually dissolve. It was already dark when Ricardo Reis went out. He dined in a restaurant in the Rua dos Correeiros, on a mezzanine floor with a low ceiling, solitary among solitary men. Who were they, what kind of existence did they lead, what brought them to this place, chewing cod, baked hake, steak and potatoes, nearly everyone drinking red wine. More formal in their appearance than in their table manners, they rap on their glasses with their knives to summon the waiter, they pick their teeth, tooth by tooth, with fierce satisfaction, extracting some stubborn fiber with thumb and forefinger used like pliers. They belch, loosen their belts, unbutton their vests, unshoulder their suspenders. Ricardo Reis thought to himself, This is what all my meals will be like from now on, this clatter of cutlery, the voices of the waiters shouting into the kitchen, One soup, the muffled sounds of those eating, the dismal light, the grease congealed on the cold plates, the adjacent table still not cleared, wine stains on the tablecloth, bread crumbs, a cigarette butt still burning. Ah how different life is in the Hotel Bragança, even if it is not first class. Ricardo Reis suddenly feels bereft of Ramón's presence, even though he will see him again tomorrow, today is only Thursday, he is leaving the hotel on Saturday. Yet he knows that such moments of nostalgia tend to be short-lived, it is all a question of habit, you lose one habit and gain another. He has been in Lisbon less than three months and already Rio de Janeiro is like a distant memory, perhaps of some other life, not his, one of those innumerable lives. Yes, at this very moment another Ricardo Reis may be dining in Oporto or lunching in Rio de Janeiro, if not farther afield. It has not rained all day and he has been able to do his shopping with the utmost tranquillity. He is now making his way back to the hotel, there he will inform Salvador that he is leaving Saturday, just like that, I am leaving Saturday, but he feels like the adolescent who, having been refused a key to the house by his father, dares to take it without permission, trusting in the power of deeds once they have been carried out.

Salvador is still behind the reception desk but has told Pimenta that as soon as the last guest leaves the dining room he will go home, his wife is laid up with the flu. A seasonal fruit, Pimenta quips in a familiar tone, as they have known each other for many years. Salvador growls in reply, No chance of my being ill, a sibylline statement open to several interpretations. It could be the complaint of one who enjoys robust health or a warning to the powers of evil that it would be a great loss to this hotel if the manager were to fall ill. Ricardo Reis enters, wishes everyone a good evening, wonders for a

second whether he should call Salvador to one side, then decides that such secrecy would be ridiculous, to murmur, for example, Look, Senhor Salvador, it wasn't really my intention, but you know how these things are, one's circumstances change, life goes on, the point is that I've decided to leave your admirable hotel, I've found a place of my own, please don't take offense, I hope we can go on being friends. Suddenly he finds himself sweating, as if he were once more a pupil of the Jesuits kneeling at the confessional, I lied, I was envious, I had impure thoughts, I played with myself. Salvador, at the reception desk, has reciprocated his greeting and turned away to take the key from the hook. Ricardo Reis must utter these liberating words at once, before Salvador can catch him off balance or trip him up. Senhor Salvador, could I ask you to prepare my bill, I will be checking out on Saturday. No sooner did he speak in this dry manner than he felt remorseful, because Salvador, standing there with the key in his hand, was the very image of wounded surprise, the victim of an act of betrayal. This is no way to treat a hotel manager who has shown himself to be such a staunch friend. What we should have done was call him to one side and say, Look Salvador, It wasn't really my intention, but no, guests can be so ungrateful and this guest is the most ungrateful of all, he came here for sanctuary, was well treated despite his affair with one of the chambermaids, any other manager would have sent both of them packing or complained to the police. I should have heeded Victor's warning but I let my heart rule my head, everyone takes advantage of my good nature, but I swear it's the last time. If all the seconds and minutes were exactly the same, as marked on the clock, we would not always have time to explain what takes place in them, the substance they contain, but fortunately for us the episodes of greatest significance tend to occur in seconds of long duration and minutes that are spun out, which makes it possible to discuss at length and in some detail without any serious violation of the most subtle of the three dramatic unities, which is time itself. With a halting gesture Salvador handed him the key, assumed a dignified expression, addressed him in a grave, paternal tone, I hope we have given every satisfaction during your stay here, Doctor. These modest words, so professionally phrased, with their underlying acerbic note of irony, could be misunderstood as alluding to Lydia, but no, for the moment Salvador is only trying to convey his disappointment and wounded feelings. Every possible satisfaction, Senhor Salvador, Ricardo Reis assured him warmly, it is simply that I've found an apartment, I have decided to settle in Lisbon once and for all, and a man needs a place he can call his own. Ah, well, perhaps I could ask Pimenta to help you transport your luggage, if the apartment is here in Lisbon, obviously. Yes, it's in Lisbon, but I can manage, thanks just the same, I'll hire a porter. Pimenta, prompted by the manager's generous offer of his services, curious as to where Doctor Reis was moving, and aware of his employer's interest, took it upon himself to insist, Why hire a porter, Doctor, when I can carry your suitcases. Thanks for offering, Pimenta, but I can easily get a porter, and to avoid any further insistence Ricardo Reis made his little farewell speech in advance, I can assure you, Senhor Salvador, that I shall take away the happiest memories of your hotel, where I have found the service excellent, where I felt completely at home and was treated with the utmost care and solicitude, I should like to express my deep gratitude to the entire staff, without exception, for the cordiality and

affection they have shown me upon my return to my native Portugal, where I now intend to remain, to all of you my heartfelt thanks. Not all the staff were present, but that did not matter. Feeling very self-conscious, Ricardo Reis, as he spoke, found himself using words that were sure to spark sarcastic thoughts in those of his listeners who would think of Lydia at the mention of solicitude and affection. Why is it that words often make use of us, we see them approach menacingly, like an irresistible abyss, yet are unable to ward them off and end up saying precisely what we did not wish to say. Salvador replied with a few words, not that it was necessary, all he needed to say was how honored they had been to have Doctor Ricardo Reis as their guest, We were only doing our duty, and I speak for the entire staff when I say that we will miss you, Doctor, is that not so Pimenta. With this unexpected question the solemnity of the moment was dissolved, he appeared to be asking for his sentiment to be seconded, but the effect was quite the opposite, a wink, a glint of malice, If you understand what I mean, and Ricardo Reis understood, he wished them good-night and went up to his room, certain that they were discussing him behind his back, already uttering Lydia's name. What he did not suspect was that the conversation continued like this, You must find out the name of the porter he hires, I want to know where he's moving to.

The clock has certain hours which are so empty of significance, the hands appear to crawl toward infinity, the morning drags, the afternoon is neverending, the night seems eternal. This was how Ricardo Reis spent his last day in the hotel. Moved by some unconscious scruple, he decided that he should be visible all the time. Perhaps he did not want to appear ungrateful or indifferent. His departure was acknowledged by Ramón as he ladled the soup into his plate, So you are leaving us, Doctor, words which convey deep sadness when uttered as only humble servants know how to utter them. And Lydia's name was never off Salvador's lips, he summoned her for everything and for nothing, ordered her to do one thing then the opposite, he watched her every movement, expression, her eyes, seeking signs of unhappiness, tears, only natural in a woman who is about to be abandoned and knows it. Yet he had never seen her look so peaceful and composed, one would think she had no sins on her conscience, no weakness of the flesh or willful prostitution. Salvador reproached himself for not having punished such immoral conduct the moment he suspected it, or when it became public knowledge, starting with rumors in the kitchen and the storeroom. It is too late now, the guest is leaving, no point in raking up mud, especially when his conscience tells him that he himself is not entirely without blame, he knew what was going on and said nothing, he was an accomplice. I simply felt sorry for him, he arrived from Brazil, from the wilderness, without any family to receive him, so I treated him as if he were a relative. Three or four times Salvador consoled himself with this thought, then spoke aloud, When room two hundred and one is vacated, I want it cleaned from top to bottom, it has been reserved for a distinguished family from Granada. As Lydia walked away, having received these instructions, he stared at the curve of her hips. Until today he has been an exemplary manager, upright, never mixing business with pleasure, but now he has a score to settle, Either she consents or she'll be out on the street. We feel certain that this anger will go no further, most men

lose their courage at the last moment.

After lunch on Saturday, Ricardo Reis went to the Chiado, where he contracted the services of two young porters, and in order not to have them trailing after him down the Rua do Alecrim like a guard of honor, he told them what time they should come to the hotel. He waited in his room with the same sense of veering off course he experienced when he saw the mooring cables drop from The Highland Brigade to the quay in Rio de Janeiro. He is alone, seated on the sofa, Lydia will not appear, that was what they have agreed. A clatter of heavy footsteps in the corridor announces the arrival of the porters, Pimenta with them. This time Pimenta does not have to exert himself, at most he will make the same gesture Ricardo Reis and Salvador made when he first carried up the large suitcase, a helping hand underneath, a note of caution on the stairs, a word of advice, unnecessary for those who have mastered all there is to know about lifting luggage. Ricardo Reis goes to say good-bye to Salvador and leaves a generous tip for the staff, Share it among yourselves as you see fit. The manager thanks him. Some guests who happen to be present smile approvingly on the nice friendships formed in this hotel, and the Spaniards are deeply moved at the sight of such goodwill. Little wonder that their own divided land comes to mind, these are peninsular contradictions. Below, on the street, Pimenta has already asked the porters where they are taking the luggage, but the gentleman has said nothing, one of them thinks it cannot be far away, the other is not so sure. But there is no need for concern, Pimenta knows the two men, one of them even worked for the hotel, and they can always be found hanging around the Chiado. When he wants to get to the bottom of the mystery, he will not have far to go. Ricardo Reis tells him, I've left you a little token of gratitude, and Pimenta replies, Many thanks, Doctor, whenever you need any help, you can rely on me. Empty words, hypocritical words, the Frenchman who said that man has been endowed with words to hide his thoughts spoke true, still we should not make hasty judgments, what is certain is that words are the best tools we can hope for in our attempt, always frustrated, to express what we call thought. The two porters now learn where they must take the suitcases, Ricardo Reis tells them as soon as Pimenta has withdrawn, and off they go, up the street. They use the sidewalk, which is less broken. This is not a heavy load for men accustomed to moving pianos and other monstrosities with levers and ropes. Ricardo Reis walks in front, far enough ahead to avoid giving the impression that he is leading this expedition but not so far ahead as to make the porters feel they are unaccompanied. Nothing could be more delicate than these contacts between different classes. Social harmony is a question of tact, finesse, and psychology, and whether these three qualities strictly coincide with one's feelings is a problem we have given up trying to solve. Halfway up the street the porters are obliged to move to one side, and they take this opportunity to rest their load and get their breath back, because a procession of trams crammed with people with blond hair and pink complexions is coming down the road, German tourists, workers belonging to the German Labor Front. Nearly all of them are in Bavarian costume, knee breeches, shirt and shoulder straps, little hats with narrow brims. Some of the trams are open, like wheeled cages into which the rain can fall at will, the striped canvas awning giving little

protection. What must these Aryan workers be saying about our Portuguese civilization, what do these sons of so privileged a race think of the rustics who pause now to watch them pass. Look at that dark-haired gentleman in the light raincoat, and those two unshaven types dressed like tramps, hoisting the load back onto their shoulders and resuming their climb. The last of the trams go by, there were twenty-three trams altogether, if anyone had the patience to count them, heading for the Torre de Belem, the Mosteiro dos Jerónimos, and the other landmarks of Lisbon, such as Alges, Dafundo and Cruz Quebrada.

With lowered heads, because of their burden no doubt, the porters crossed the square where the statue of the epic poet stands. Ricardo Reis now followed, embarrassed at traveling so light, his hands in his pockets. He had not even brought a yellow parrot from Brazil, and perhaps just as well, for he would not have had the courage to go through these streets carrying the stupid creature on a perch, with people teasing it, Give me your claw, yellow parrot, perhaps referring, with typical Portuguese wit, to those blond Germans going past in trams. At the bottom of this road you can see the palms of the Alto de Santa Catarina between the mountains on the opposite coast. Heavy clouds appear like buxom women at their windows, a metaphor that would make Ricardo Reis, a poet for whom clouds barely exist, shrug with scorn. Fleecy clouds, racing clouds, so white and hackneyed, and if it is raining, that means Apollo has hidden his face. This is the entrance to my apartment, here is the key and there is the staircase, second landing, number two, this is where I will live. No windows opened when we arrived, no doors were ajar, it would appear that the least inquisitive inhabitants of Lisbon all live in this building, or else they are spying through peepholes, the pupils of their eyes flashing. Now in we go, the two small suitcases, the larger one, the money agreed upon is paid, the expected tip. There is a pungent odor of sweat. Whenever you need any help, boss, we're always available. They said always so earnestly that Ricardo Reis believed them, but he did not reply. A man, if he has studied, learns to be skeptical, especially since the gods are so inconstant. The only certainty, theirs from knowledge, ours from experience, is that everything comes to an end, and always soonest. As the porters left, Ricardo Reis closed the door to the landing. Then, without switching on the lights, he went through the entire apartment, his footsteps echoing on the bare floorboards. Furniture empty and smelling of old moth balls, frayed sheets of tissue paper still lining some of the drawers, fluff accumulating in corners, and near the kitchen and bathroom a strong smell from the drains, because the water was low in the cistern. Ricardo Reis opened the spigots and flushed the toilet several times. The apartment filled with noises, the running of water, the vibration of pipes, a tapping sound from the meter, then gradually silence was restored. At the rear of the building was a yard with washing hanging up to dry, small vegetable patches the color of ashes, troughs, vats made of cement, a dog kennel, rabbit hutches, and chicken coops. Looking at them, Ricardo Reis reflected on the linguistic conundrum whereby rabbits had hutches and chicken had coops, and not the other way around. He returned to the front of the apartment to look out the grimy bedroom window at the deserted street. There stood Adamastor, livid against the dull clouds, a giant

raging in silence. Some people are watching the ships, they look up from time to time as if expecting rain, and seated on the same bench, the two old men lost in conversation. Ricardo Reis smiled, Well done, they are so absorbed they did not even notice the arrival of the suitcases. He had never been one for jokes but was amused, as if he had just played a harmless trick on both of them, a friendly game. Still wearing his raincoat, as if having just dropped by for a second, a doctor's visit, as the adage cynically puts it, to make a quick inspection of the place where he might take up residence someday, he finally said aloud, like a message he must not forget, I live here, this is where I live, this is my home, this, I have no other, and suddenly he felt fear, the terror of a man who finds himself in a deep cave and pushes open a door that leads into the darkness of an even deeper cave, or to a void, an absence, nothingness, the passage to nonbeing. Removing his raincoat and jacket, he realized the apartment was cold. As if going through motions already made in another life, he unpacked methodically, his clothes, shoes, papers, books, and all those small objects, essential or nonessential, we take with us from one abode to another, the crossed threads of a cocoon. He found his dressing gown, put it on. Now he is a man settled in his own home. He turned on the lamp that hung from the ceiling, it needed a shade, tulip-shaped, spherical, conical, any of these will do so long as they eliminate the glare which is hurting his eyes. Engrossed in putting away his things, he did not notice at first that it had started to rain, but a sharp gust of wind sent the water drumming against the panes. Such weather. He went to the window. The old men, like somber insects attracted by the light, were standing on the sidewalk opposite, one tall, the other short, each armed with an umbrella, their heads upturned like praying mantises. This time they were not intimidated by the face that appeared. Only when the rain became much heavier did they proceed down the street. When they get home their wives, if they have wives, will scold them, Soaked to the skin, just look at you, you could catch pneumonia, then I'll have all the trouble of nursing you, and the old men will tell them, Someone has moved into Dona Luísa's apartment, a man who seems to be by himself, not another living soul to be seen, Imagine, a big place like that for a bachelor, what a waste of good space. You might well ask how these good women know the apartment is large. Who can tell, perhaps in the time of Dona Luísa they did some charring there. Women of that class will turn their hand to anything that comes their way if their husbands earn low wages or pocket some of it to spend on booze and whores. The unfortunate wives are forced to scrub stairs and take in washing, some even specialize, doing nothing except scrubbing stairs or laundry, and so become mistresses of their craft. They have their own little ways, taking pride in the whiteness of their sheets, the cleanliness of their stairs scrubbed with carbolic soap, and their sheets could pass for altar cloths, you could eat spilled marmalade from their doorstep without any qualms. But where is this digression leading us. Now the sky is overcast and night will soon be here. When the old men were standing on the sidewalk looking up, they appeared to bask in the full light of day, but this was simply the effect of their white beards after eight days without shaving. Not even today, Sunday, did they sit in the barber's chair or use their own razor, but tomorrow, if the weather clears up, they will be cleanshaven, their skin lined with wrinkles and alum. When we say their hair is white, we mean only lower down,

because on top they have nothing but a few sad wisps over their ears. But to return to where we left off. When they were standing there on the sidewalk, there was still daylight, although it was fast waning, so after watching the tenant on the third floor while the rain became heavier, they started walking downhill, walked on as it grew steadily darker, and by the time they reached the corner it was night. A good thing the street lamps were lit, casting pearls on the windowpanes. It must be said that these street lamps are nothing like those of the future, when the fairy Electricity with her magic wand will reach the Alto de Santa Catarina and environs and all the lamps will light up in glory at the same time. Today we have to wait until someone comes to light them, one by one. With the tip of his spill the lamplighter opens the door of the lantern, with the hook he turns the gas valve, then this son of Saint Elmo moves on, leaving signs of his passing throughout the city streets. A man bearing light, he is Halley's comet with a star-spangled trail, this is how the gods must have seen Prometheus when they looked down from on high. This particular firefly, however, is named Antonio. Ricardo Reis feels a chill across his forehead, which was pressed against the windowpane as he watched the falling rain. The lamplighter appears, then each lamp is left with its glow and aura. A pale light covers the shoulders of Adamastor, the Herculean muscles of his back glisten, perhaps from the water descending from the sky, or perhaps it is the sweat of his agony as Thetis smiles derisively and mocks him, What nymph could offer enough love to satisfy the love of a giant. Now he knows what those promises of riches were worth. Lisbon is a great murmuring silence, nothing more.

Ricardo Reis returned to his domestic chores, put away his suits, shirts, handkerchiefs, socks, item by item, as if composing a Sapphic ode, laboriously working with an awkward rhyme scheme. The color of the tie he has just hung up requires a matching suit, which he must buy. Over the mattress that belonged to Dona Luísa, certainly not the one on which she lost her virginity many years ago but the mattress where she bled giving birth to her last child, and where her dear husband, a high court judge, suffered and died, over this mattress Ricardo Reis spread sheets still smelling of newness, two fleecy blankets, a pale bedspread. He slipped the pillow and woolen bolster into their cases, doing the best he could, clumsy as any male. Eventually Lydia will appear, perhaps tomorrow, with those magical hands of hers, magical because they are the hands of a woman, to tidy up this chaos, this resigned sorrow of things badly arranged. Ricardo Reis carried the suitcases into the kitchen, hung up the towels in the ice-cold bathroom, stored his toiletries in the little wall cabinet, which had a definite mildew smell. As we have already seen, he is a man fastidious about his appearance, it is a question of personal pride. All that remains to be done now is arrange his books on those warped black bookshelves in the study and put his papers in the drawers of the wobbly black bureau. Now he feels at home, he has found his bearings, the compass rose, north, south, east, west, unless some magnetic storm comes to send this compass into a frenzy.

At half past seven the rain has not stopped. Ricardo Reis sits on the edge of the high

bed and examines the cheerless room. The window is bare of any curtains or netting. It occurs to him that the neighbors across the way might be spying, whispering among themselves, You can see everything that's going on in there. Eagerly they look forward to sights even more provocative than this one of a man sitting alone on the edge of an old-fashioned bed, his face hidden in a cloud. Ricardo Reis gets up and closes the inner shutters. Now the room is a cell, four blind walls, the door, should he open it, would lead to another door, or to a dark yawning cave, we have already used that image, it does not bear repeating. Shortly, in the Hotel Brangança, the maître d', Afonso, will strike the three blows of Vatel on that ludicrous gong, and the Portuguese and Spanish guests, nuestros hermanos, los hermanos suyos, will descend to the dining room. Salvador will smile at each in turn, Senhor Fonseca, Doctor Pascal, Madame, Don Camilo, Don Lorenzo, and the new arrival in room two hundred and one, surely the Duke of Alba or of Medinaceli, dragging his mighty sword, pressing a ducat into Lydia's outstretched hand. She curtsies, as befits a servant, and smilingly accepts a pinch in the flesh of her arm. Ramón will be bringing in the soup, today there is something special and he is not joking, from the deep tureen comes the fragrant smell of chicken, from the platters intoxicating aromas. We need not be surprised that Ricardo Reis feels his stomach rumble, it is, indeed, time for dinner. But even with the shutters closed you can hear the water from the eaves spattering on the sidewalk. Who would be so bold as to venture forth in weather like this, except for some pressing obligation, to save one's father from the gallows, for example, if one's father is still alive. The dining room of the Hotel Brangança is a lost paradise, and like any lost paradise it is sorely missed by Ricardo Reis, who would like to return but not to remain. He goes to get his parcels, the pastries and crystallized fruit, to satisfy his hunger. For drinking there is only tap water, which tastes of carboic acid. Adam and Eve must have felt just as deprived that first night after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, clearly it was raining buckets then too. As they stood in the doorway and Eve asked Adam, Would you like a biscuit, having only one, she broke it in half and gave him the larger piece. Adam munched slowly, watching Eve peck at her tiny portion, tilting her head like an inquisitive little bird. On the other side of the door now closed to them forever, without any evil intent or any prompting on the part of the serpent, she had offered him an apple. It is said that Adam only became aware of her nakedness when he bit into the apple, and that Eve, who did not have time to get dressed, remained like the lilies of the field who neither spin nor weave. Not far from the threshold of Eden they both spent the night comfortably, having eaten a biscuit for their supper, while on the other side God listened and felt sad, barred from a feast He had neither provided for nor foreseen. One day another maxim will be invented, Where man and woman join, God is, because paradise is not at all where it was said to be, it is here on earth and God will be obliged to come every time He wishes to enjoy it. But certainly not in this house. Ricardo Reis is alone. The cloying sweetness of a crystallized pear has made him feel sick, a pear, not an apple, it is indeed true that temptations are no longer what they were. He went into the bathroom to clean his sticky hands, his mouth, his teeth, he cannot bear this doceia, a word that is neither Portuguese nor Spanish but an adaptation of the Italian, it is the only word that seems appropriate at the moment.

Solitude weighs on him like night, and the night devours him like bait. Through the long narrow corridor under the greenish light that descends from the ceiling he is a marine animal with sluggish movements, a defenseless tortoise without its shell. He rummages at the desk, through the manuscripts of his poems, he called them odes and so they have remained, because everything must have a name. He reads at random and asks himself if he is their author, for he does not recognize himself in what is written, in this detached, calm, resigned person, almost godlike, for that is how gods are, composed as they assist the dead. Vaguely he muses, he must organize his life, his time, decide how he will spend his mornings, afternoons, and evenings, get to bed early and rise early, find one or two restaurants that serve simple, wholesome meals, and he must reread and revise his poems for the anthology he plans to publish at some future date, and he must find suitable premises for his practice, get to know people, travel to other parts of the country, visit Oporto, Coimbra, call on Doctor Sampaio, run into Marcenda unexpectedly in the city's Poplar Grove. He no longer thinks about his plans and objectives, he feels compassion for the invalid, then for himself, and his compassion turns to self-pity. As he sits there, he begins a poem, then suddenly remembers that he once wrote, I stand firmly upon the foundation of the poems I fashioned. Anyone who has drawn up a testament such as this cannot now say the opposite.

It is not yet ten o'clock when Ricardo Reis goes to bed. The rain is still falling. He has brought a book to bed, he chose two but then decided against *The God of the Labyrinth*. After ten pages of the Sermon for the first Sunday in Lent his ungloved hands were freezing, those ardent words were not enough to warm them, Search your house, look for the most worthless thing therein, and you will find that it is your own soul. He put the book on the bedside table, huddled up with a sudden shiver, pulled the fold of the sheet up to his mouth, and closed his eyes. He knew he ought to switch off the light, but if he did that, he would feel obliged to fall asleep and he was not ready just yet. On cold nights like this Lydia would put a hot-water bottle between the sheets, will she be doing that now for the Duke of Medinaceli, calm yourself, jealous heart, the duke was accompanied by the duchess, the nobleman who pinched Lydia's arm in passing was the other duke, the Duke of Alba. The Duke of Medinaceli is old, sick, and impotent, he carries a tin sword, swears it is the mighty Colada that belonged to Cid Campeador and was passed from father to son in the Alba dynasty. Even a Spanish grandee is capable of telling lies. Ricardo Reis had fallen asleep, he realized it when he awoke, startled, to the sound of knocking at the door. Could it be Lydia, who has cunningly slipped out of the hotel and come in all this rain to spend the night with me, foolish girl. Then he thought, I've been dreaming. And so it appeared, for he heard nothing more in the seconds that followed, Perhaps there are ghosts in this apartment, perhaps that is why they couldn't rent it, so central, so spacious. But the knocking started up again, rat-tat-tat, discreetly, so as not to disturb the neighbors. Ricardo Reis got out of bed, pulled on his slippers, wrapped his dressing gown around him, shuffled across the room into the hallway, shivering all the while, and looked at the door as if it were threatening him, Who is there. His voice sounded hoarse and faltering. Clearing his throat, he repeated the question.

The reply came in a murmur, It's me. It was no ghost, it was Fernando Pessoa, trust him to choose an awkward moment. Ricardo Reis opened the door, and it was he all right, wearing his black suit, with neither coat nor hat, yet though he was coming in off the street there was not a drop of water on him. May I come in, he asked. You've never asked my permission before, why the sudden scruple. Things have changed, you're in your own home now and, to use an English expression which I learned as a schoolboy, a man's home is his castle. Come in, I was in bed, Were you asleep, I believe I dozed off, No need to stand on ceremony with me, get back into bed, I'm only dropping by for a few minutes. Ricardo Reis slipped nimbly between the sheets, his teeth chattering with cold but also from a residue of fear. He did not take off his dressing gown. Fernando Pessoa sat in a chair, crossed his legs, clasped his hands on his knee, and looked around with a critical eye, So, this is where you've taken up residence. It would seem. I find it rather dreary. Places that have been empty for some time always give that impression. Do you mean to live here on your own. Evidently not, I only moved in today and already have a visitor. I don't count, I'm scarcely company for anyone. You counted enough for me to have to get out of bed in this cold to open the door, soon I will be giving you a key. I wouldn't know what to do with it, if I could pass through walls I would spare you the trouble. Don't give it another thought, you mustn't take my words amiss, to be frank, I'm delighted to see you, this first night is not easy. Are you frightened. I felt a little nervous when I heard knocking, I forgot that it might be you, but it wasn't fear, only loneliness. Come now, you have a long way to go before you know what loneliness is. I've always lived alone. I too, but loneliness is not living alone, loneliness is the inability to keep someone or something within us company, it is not a tree that stands alone in the middle of a plain but the distance between the deep sap and the bark, between the leaves and the roots. You're talking nonsense, the things you mention are connected, there is no loneliness there. Let us forget the tree, look inside yourself. As that other poet said, To walk alone among men. It is even worse to be alone where we ourselves are not. You are in low spirits today. I have my days, but I was speaking not of this loneliness but of another, the one that travels with us, a bearable loneliness that keeps us company, Even that loneliness, you must agree, is sometimes unbearable, we long for a presence, a voice. Sometimes that presence and that voice only serve to render it intolerable. Is this possible. It most certainly is, the other day when we met at the belvedere, do you remember, you were waiting for your mistress. I've already told you that she is not my mistress. All right then, no need to lose your temper, but she might become your mistress, you don't know what tomorrow has in store for you. I am old enough to be her father. So what. Let us change the subject, finish what you were telling me. It was apropos of your having had the flu, it reminded me of a little episode during my own illness, this recent, terminal illness. How repetitive, your sense of style has sadly deteriorated. Death too is repetitive, it is in fact the most repetitive thing of all. Go on. A doctor came to the house, I was lying in the bedroom when my sister opened the door. You mean your half-sister, life is full of half-brothers and half-sisters. What are you trying to suggest. Nothing in particular, go on. She said, Do come in Doctor, the faker is in here, the faker in question was I, as you can see, loneliness has no bounds, it is everywhere.

Have you ever felt yourself to be truly useless. Difficult to say, I don't recall ever having felt myself to be truly useful. I believe that this is the first loneliness, to feel that we are useless. Fernando Pessoa got up, half-opened the shutters, and looked out. An unpardonable oversight, he said, not to have included Adamastor in my Mensagem, such a popular giant, whose symbolic meaning is clear. Can you see him from there. Yes, poor creature, Camoes used him for declarations of love which were probably in his own soul, and for prophecies that were less than clear. To forecast shipwreck to those who sail the high seas no special gifts of divination are needed. Prophesying disaster was ever a sign of loneliness, had Thetis reciprocated the giant's love, his discourse would have been quite different. Fernando Pessoa was sitting once more, in exactly the same position. Do you intend staying long, Ricardo Reis asked him. Why. I am tired. Don't worry about me, sleep to your heart's content, unless you find my presence disturbing. What disturbs me is to see you sitting here in the cold. The cold doesn't bother me, I could sit here in my shirt sleeves, but you shouldn't be lying in bed wearing your dressing gown, I'll take it off now. Fernando Pessoa spread the dressing gown over the top cover, pulled up the blankets, straightened the fold of the sheet maternally, Now sleep. I say Fernando, do me a favor, switch off the light, I'm sure you don't mind sitting in the dark. When Fernando Pessoa found the switch, the room was plunged into darkness. Then, very slowly, the light from the street lamps insinuated itself through the chinks of the shutters, a luminous band, a tenuous, uncertain pollen gathered on the walls. Ricardo Reis closed his eyes, murmured, Good-night Fernando, and it seemed to him that a long time passed before he heard him reply, Good-night Ricardo. When he thought he had counted up to a hundred, he opened his eyes with difficulty. Fernando Pessoa was sitting in the same chair, hands clasped on one knee, the image of ultimate loneliness. Perhaps because he is without his glasses, Ricardo Reis thought, and this struck him, in his confused state, as being the most terrible of misfortunes. He awoke in the middle of the night. The rain had stopped, the world was traveling through silent space. Fernando Pessoa had not altered his position, he looked in the direction of the bed, his face expressionless, like a statue with vacant eyes. Much later, Ricardo Reis awoke again as a door banged. Fernando Pessoa was no longer there, he had left with the first light of morning.

As one has already seen in other times and other places, life has its vexations. When Ricardo Reis awoke late next morning, he sensed a presence in the room. Perhaps not quite loneliness, but silence, its half-brother. For several minutes he watched his courage desert him, it was like watching sand run through an hourglass, an overworked metaphor which nevertheless keeps recurring. One day, when we live two hundred years and ourselves become the hourglass observing the sand inside it, we will not need the metaphor, but life is too short to indulge in such thoughts, we were speaking of vexations. When Ricardo Reis went into the kitchen to light the heater and the range, he found that he had forgotten to buy matches, and since one lapse of memory tends to accompany another, he realized that he also was without a coffee strainer. It is indeed true that a man on his own is useless. The easiest and most immediate solution would be to knock on a neighbor's door, Please excuse me, senhora, I am the new tenant on the third floor, I only moved in yesterday, I was hoping to make myself some coffee, have a wash, shave, and I find I have no matches, I also am without a coffee strainer, but that is not important, I have tea, that at least I remembered, the main problem is hot water for a bath, if you could lend me a match, I'd be most grateful, forgive me for disturbing you. Since all men are brothers, or half-brothers, nothing could be more natural, he should not even have to go out into the cold stairway, they should come and ask him, Do you need any thing, I saw you moving in yesterday, everybody knows that moving is like this, if it is not the matches that are missing, the salt has been forgotten, if the soap turns up, the scrubbing brush has been lost, what are neighbors for. But Ricardo Reis did not go to seek help, and no one came to ask if he needed anything. He had no choice but to dress, put on his shoes, wrap a scarf around his neck to conceal the fact that he had not shaved, and pull his hat down over his eyes. He was irritated at his forgetfulness and even more so at having to go out in this sorry state looking for matches. First he went to the window to see what the weather was like. The sky was overcast, no sign of rain. Adamastor stands alone, it is still too early for the old men to come and watch the ships, at this hour they will be at home shaving with cold water, or perhaps their careworn wives are heating mugs of water, but only tepid, not hot, because the Portuguese male, second to none in virility, cannot bear to be pampered. Let us not forget that we are the direct descendants of those Lusitanian heroes who bathed in the frozen lakes of the Serra da Estrela, no sooner emerging than they were off to impregnate some Lusitanian maiden. From a coal merchant who runs a tavern in the lower part of the neighborhood Ricardo Reis bought matches, a half-dozen boxes lest the man find this early morning sale insufficient. In fact the coal merchant could not remember ever having made such a sale at one go, here it is still customary for people to ask their neighbors for a light. Invigorated by the cold air, comforted by his scarf and the absence of people on the street, Ricardo Reis walked up to get a view of the river and the mountains on the other side. From here the mountains looked squat, and the sun's reflection on the water appeared and disappeared as low clouds passed. He walked around the statue, trying to find the name of the sculptor. The date is engraved there, nineteen twenty-seven. Ricardo Reis has the kind of mind which is always searching for patterns of symmetry in the chaos, Eight years after my departure into exile, the statue of Adamastor was erected

on this spot, and Adamastor had been standing here for eight years when I returned to the land of my ancestors, O fatherland, it was the voices of your illustrious past that summoned me. The old men appear on the sidewalk, their cleanshaven faces marked with wrinkles and alum, an umbrella over one arm. They have left their capes unbuttoned and wear no tie, but their shirts are buttoned to the neck, not because it is Sunday, a day of respect, but out of a sense of what is fitting and dignified, however shabby their attire. Suspicious of this loitering at the statue, the old men come face to face with Ricardo Reis, they are convinced that there is something odd about the fellow, Who is he, what is he doing, how does he earn his living. Before sitting down, they place a length of folded sackcloth on the damp bench, then with the measured gestures of those who refuse to be hurried they make themselves comfortable, clear their throats loudly. The fat one produces a newspaper from the inside pocket of his cape, O Século, the newspaper that organizes charity events. They always buy it on Sunday, the fat man one week, the thin man the next. Ricardo Reis circles the statue of Adamastor a second time, a third. The old men, he sees, are becoming impatient, his restless presence makes it difficult for them to digest the news, which the fat one reads aloud to assist his own understanding and for the benefit of the thin one, who can neither read nor write. He pauses over the difficult words, but there are not too many of them, because the journalists never forget that they are writing for the masses. Ricardo Reis went over to the railing, where he pretended to ignore the old men absorbed in their paper, their murmuring, the one reading, the other listening and commenting, In Luis Uceda's wallet there was found a colored portrait of Salazar. This country is plagued with unsolved crime. A man is found dead on the road to Sintra, they say he was strangled after being put to sleep with ether, that he had been abducted, kept without food, that the crime was vile, a word that immediately shows our disapproval of crime, and now we learn that the murdered man was carrying a portrait of the wise, all-paternal dictator, to quote that French writer, whose name, recorded for posterity, is Charles Oulmont. Later on the investigation will confirm that Luis Uceda was indeed a great admirer of the eminent statesman, and it will be revealed that embossed on the leather of the aforesaid wallet was further proof of Uceda's patriotism, namely the emblem of the Republic, the armillary sphere with its castles and heraldic shields and the following inscription, Buy Portuguese Products. Ricardo Reis discreetly withdraws, leaving the old men in peace. They were so absorbed in the mystery that they did not even notice his departure.

Nothing of consequence occurred that morning. There was a little trouble with an awkward heater that had not been used for weeks, he wasted match after match before getting the flame to stay on. Nor need we dwell on his melancholy repast, a cup of tea and three small sponge cakes left over from the previous evening's supper. Nor his bath amid a cloud of steam in the deep tub which was somewhat stained. He meticulously shaved, once, twice, as if in preparation for a secret rendezvous with some woman, her identity concealed by a high collar and a veil. How he would love to inhale the scent of her soap, of her lingering eau de Cologne, until that fused with more pungent and natural smells, the compelling smell of human flesh, which quivering nostrils take in and which

leaves the breast panting, as if after a vigorous chase. The minds of poets, too, rove in this earthly fashion, stroking the bodies of women, even distant women, what is written here is a thing of the moment and of the imagination only, that mistress of great power and generosity. Ricardo Reis is ready to leave. He has no one waiting for him, and he is not going to eleven o'clock Mass to offer holy water to the Eternal Incognita. The sensible thing would be to stay at home until lunchtime. He has papers to arrange, books waiting to be read, and decisions to make, what kind of future does he want, what kind of job, where can he find the motivation to live and work, the reason. He had not intended to go out this morning, but now he must, it would be absurd to get undressed again, to admit that he got dressed to go out without being aware of what he was doing. This often happens, we take the first two steps because we are daydreaming or distracted and then have no choice but to take the third step, even when we know that it is wrong or ridiculous. Man, in the final analysis, is an irrational creature. Ricardo Reis returned to his room, thought perhaps he should make the bed before going out, he must not allow himself to become lax in his habits, but it was hardly worth the effort, he was not expecting visitors, so he settled in the chair where Fernando Pessoa had spent the night, crossed his legs as he had seen him do, clasped his hands on his knee, and tried to imagine himself dead, to contemplate the empty bed with the lifeless eyes of a statue. But there was a vein throbbing in his left temple, and the left eyelid twitched. I am alive, he murmured, then in a loud, sonorous voice he repeated, I am alive, and since there was no one there to contradict him, he was convinced. He put on his hat and went out. The old men had been joined by children playing hopscotch, jumping from chalked square to chalked square, each with its own number. This game has been given so many names, some call it monkey, others airplane, heaven and hell, roulette, also glory, but the most apt name of all would be the game of man, because that is what it looks like, the straight body, the extended arms, the upper circle forming the head or brain. The man lies on the paving stones looking up at the clouds while the children hop over him unaware of their cruelty, they will learn what it means when their time comes. Also present are some soldiers, who have arrived too early, because it is in the midafternoon that the housemaids take a stroll here if the weather is fair, otherwise their mistresses will say, Look, Maria, it is raining cats and dogs, you'd better stay in today, do a little ironing, I'll give you an extra hour on your day off, which is a whole two weeks away, a detail worth adding for those who never experienced such privileges firsthand or know nothing about the past and its customs. Ricardo Reis leaned over the upper railing. The sky had cleared a little, toward the straits there was a great strip of blue. If any steamships are due today from Rio de Janeiro, they will enter port in ideal conditions. Trusting in the signs of better weather, he started walking along the Calhariz, and descended as far as Camoes, where he felt a sudden longing to visit the Hotel Brangança, like those timid students who have graduated and are no longer obliged to attend a school which they detested on so many occasions but who continue paying visits to their former teachers and classmates, until everyone grows weary of this pilgrimage, as useless as all pilgrimages, and the institution itself begins to ignore them. What would he do at the hotel, greet Salvador and Pimenta, So you haven't forgotten us, Doctor, Have a word with Lydia. Poor girl, so nervous,

deliberately summoned to the reception desk out of malice, Come here, Doctor Reis wants to have a word with you. There was no particular reason for paying you a visit, I simply wished to thank you all for treating me so well and for giving me such excellent instruction on both the primary and secondary levels, if I failed to learn more, only my stupidity is to blame. On the sidewalk in front of the Igreja dos Mártires Ricardo Reis can smell balsam in the air, the precious exhalation of the devout women praying within. The Mass has just begun for those chosen souls who belong to a superior world. Here you can recognize, if you have a good nose, souls of worth and distinction. From the pleasant aroma one knows that the canopy over the altars is decked with pompons and tassels covered with talcum powder and that the chandler has added to the lavish candles a generous amount of patchouli. Once heated, fused, and fired with the quantum satis of incense, this ingredient inebriates the soul beyond resistance, it enraptures the senses, then the body grows weak, the face blank, ecstasy at last, Ricardo Reis doesn't know what he's missing, believing, as he does, only in dead religions, the religions of ancient Greece and Rome, for he invokes both in his poems, asking that there be gods rather than one God. He descends to the heart of the city, a familiar itinerary, the place as tranquil as a Sunday in the provinces. Not until later, after lunch, will the people of the surrounding neighborhoods come to gaze in the shop windows. They go through the week waiting for this day, entire families, the children carried in arms or led by the hand, exhausted by evening, their heels blistered because of a tight shoe, then they ask for a rice cake, and if their father is in a good mood and wishes to make a public show of his prosperity, the whole family ends up at a milk bar, large drinks all around so they can economize on the dinner. The man who goes hungry on a full belly will come to no great harm, besides he can always eat tomorrow. When it is time, Ricardo Reis goes to lunch, on this occasion to the Chave de Ouro, for a steak, to get rid of the sickening taste of all that sugar, and with so many hours to go before nightfall he buys a ticket for a movie, he will see The Volga Boatmen, a French film with Pierre Blanchard, what Volga can they possibly have invented in France. Films, like poetry, are the art of illusion, by adjusting a mirror you can transform a bog into the ocean. As he left the theater, it looked like rain, so he decided to take a taxi, and a good thing, because no sooner did he enter the apartment and hang up his hat and coat than he heard two raps coming from the iron knocker on the front door. Strange, for Fernando Pessoa to appear in daytime making such a din, a neighbor might come to her window and ask, Who's there, then start screaming her head off, Help, a spirit from the other world. If she can identify them so readily, then she must be familiar with them. He opened the window and looked out. It was Lydia, on the point of opening her umbrella as the first drops fell, what brought her here. A moment earlier he had been thinking that there was nothing more wretched than a solitary life, and now he felt annoyed that this woman was disturbing him, even though he could, if he wished, take advantage of the situation, a little erotic combat might steady his nerves and calm his thoughts. Going to the staircase to pull the wire cord, he saw that Lydia was already coming up, eager and on her guard. If there is a contradiction between these two states of mind, she had resolved it. He drew back into the doorway, cool, reserved, to the degree that being taken unawares could justify. I wasn't expecting

you, how are things, these were his words as she entered, the door closing behind her. It is amazing, to have such neighbors, now we know neither their name nor what they look like. Lydia stepped forward to receive his embrace, and he obliged, meaning only to oblige her, but the next moment he was pressing her to him, kissing her neck. He still finds it awkward to kiss her on the lips, as if she were his equal, unless they are in bed together, the supreme moment approaching and he forgets everything, but she does not as much as dare, she allows him to kiss her to his heart's content, and the rest. But not today. I only came to see if you have settled in, an expression she has picked up in the hotel trade, I only hope no one notices that I've slipped out, besides I wanted to see what the apartment looks like. He tried to lead her into the bedroom, but she broke free, I mustn't, I mustn't, her voice faltered, but her mind was made up. In other words she would have liked nothing better than to lie on that bed and receive this man, to feel his head on her shoulders, to stroke the hair on his head, but behind the reception desk at the Hotel Brangança Salvador is asking, Where the devil is Lydia. She hurries through the entire apartment as if she can hear his voice, her experienced eye sees what is needed, there are no scrubbing brushes, buckets, mops or dusters, no marbled soap, no household soap, bleach, pumice stones, no brooms or hard brushes, no toilet paper. Men are as careless as children, they sail across the world in search of a route to India, and then find they do not have, so help me, the most basic thing, what could that be, I don't know, perhaps the color of life itself. Here, all one sees is dust, fluff, threads, sometimes gray hairs, which generations go on shedding. As their sight fails, the old no longer notice. Even spiderwebs age, weighed down by dust. One day the spider dies, suspended in its aerial tomb, its body dries up, its claws shrivel, and the remains of the flies are reduced almost to nothing. No creature escapes its destiny, no creature endures to give seed, this is the solemn truth. Lydia tells him she will come to do some cleaning on Friday, she will bring what is needed, Friday is her free day. But won't you be visiting your mother. I'll send her a message, then see what can be done, I'll telephone a store nearby. You will need money to buy things. I'll use my own money and you can pay me back. What an idea, take this, it should be enough. Holy Jesus, a hundred escudos is a small fortune. I'll expect you on Friday, then, but I feel bad that you're coming to do the cleaning. You can't live in this place the way it is now. Later, I'll give you a little present, I don't want any presents, just treat me as if I were the charwoman. Everyone should be paid a fair wage, My wage is to be treated kindly. These words certainly deserve a kiss, and Ricardo Reis gives her one, this time on the lips. His hand is already on the doorknob, there appears to be nothing more to say, the contract has been signed and sealed, but without any warning Lydia blurts out, as if unable to contain herself, Senhorita Marcenda arrives tomorrow, they telephoned from Coimbra, would you like me to give her your new address. With equal haste Ricardo Reis replies, almost as if he has rehearsed this, No, please don't, pretend you don't know where I am living. Happy to be the only person entrusted with his secret, Lydia leaves, completely deceived. Descending the stairs quickly and noticing that a door on the second floor has been left ajar, because sooner or later the other tenants in the building will have to have their curiosity satisfied, she calls up for all to hear, See you on Friday, Doctor, when I come to do the cleaning, as if saying

to the neighbor, Listen carefully, dear, I'm the new tenant's charwoman, so don't you go imagining things, and she greets the woman most politely, Good evening, senhora. But the woman barely replies, gives her a mistrusting look. Charwomen are not usually so bright and breezy, they tend to be surly, dragging their leg, which has stiffened up with rheumatism or varicose veins. The neighbor watches Lydia with a sour, hostile expression, Who is this little madam, while on the landing above, Ricardo Reis has already closed the door, conscious of his duplicity and turning it over in his mind. Had he been a faithful and honest man, he would have said to Lydia, I already gave Marcenda my address in a letter I sent her poste restante lest her father become suspicious. And he would have added, baring his heart, From now on I will be staying indoors, leaving the apartment only to have my meals and then coming straight back, and I will watch the clock at all hours, for as long as Marcenda remains in Lisbon. Tomorrow, Monday, she will certainly not come, the train gets in too late, but she might come on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday. Not Friday, Lydia will be here doing the cleaning. Well, but what does that matter, the chambermaid and the girl from a good family, each in her own place, there is no danger of getting them mixed up, besides Marcenda never stays long in Lisbon, she only comes to consult the specialist, of course there is also that business of her father. Fine, but what do you expect will happen if she comes to your apartment. I don't expect anything, I only wish that she would. Do you really believe that a young woman like Marcenda, with her strict upbringing and the rigorous moral code upheld by her father, a man of the legal profession, would visit a bachelor in his own home, unaccompanied, do you think such things happen in real life. One day I asked her why she wanted to see me, and she replied that she didn't know, I find that the most hopeful reply of all. The one doesn't know, the other pleads ignorance. So it would appear, it's like Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, not that she is Eve or I Adam. As you know, Adam was only a little older than Eve, a difference of several hours or days, I don't remember precisely. Adam is all men, Eve is all women, equal, different, and essential, and each one of us is the first man and the first woman. Fortunately, though, if I am not mistaken, woman continues to be more Eve than man Adam. Do you base this on your own experience. No, I say this because for all of us it should be so. What you would have liked, Fernando, is to go back to the beginning. My name is not Fernando. Ah.

Ricardo Reis did not go out to dine. He had some tea and cakes on the large table in the living room surrounded by seven empty chairs. Under a chandelier with seven branches and two bulbs he ate three small sponge cakes, leaving one on his plate. He counted again and saw that the numbers four and six were missing. He soon found the four, the corners of the rectangular room, but for six he had to get up and look around, which resulted in eight, the empty chairs. Finally he decided that he himself would be six, he could be any number if he was truly innumerable. With a smile that expressed both irony and sorrow he shook his head and went into the bedroom muttering to himself, I believe I'm going mad. From the street below came the incessant murmur of rain running down the gutters to the low-lying neighborhoods of Boavista and Conde Barão. Searching among the pile of books that were waiting to be sorted, he fished out The God of the

Labyrinth, sat in the chair where Fernando Pessoa had sat, took one of the blankets from the bed to cover his knees, and started afresh on the opening page. The body discovered by the first chess player occupied the squares of the King and Queen and their two followers, its arms outstretched in the direction of the enemy camp. He continued to read, but even before reaching the place where he had left off last time, he began to feel drowsy. He lay down, read two more pages with effort, fell asleep between the thirty-seventh and thirty-eighth move, just as the second chess player was pondering the fate of the Bishop. He didn't remember turning off the light, but it was off when he awoke in the middle of the night, he must have got up and turned it off after all. These are things we do automatically, our body, acting on its own, avoids inconvenience whenever possible, that is why we sleep on the eve of battle or execution, and why ultimately we die when we can no longer bear the harsh light of existence.

Since he had forgotten to close the shutters, the gray light of an overcast morning filled the room. He had a long day before him, a long week, more than anything he wanted to stay in bed, under these warm blankets, let his beard grow, turn into moss, until someone came and knocked at the door, Who's there, It's Marcenda, One moment, he would cry out in excitement, within seconds make himself presentable, shaved, his hair combed, fresh from his bath, smartly dressed in clean clothes, ready to receive the expected visitor, Do come in, what a pleasant surprise. Not once but twice they came to knock at his door, first the milkman, to find out if the gentleman wished milk to be delivered every morning, then the baker, to find out if he required bread every day. Yes, he replied to both of them. In that case, sir, put the milk jug out on the doormat each evening, In that case, sir, hang the bread bag from the doorknob the night before. But who told you I had moved in here, The woman on the second floor, I see, and how would you like to be paid, Either weekly or monthly, Shall we say weekly then, That will be fine, Doctor. Ricardo Reis did not ask how they knew he was a doctor, there was no point in asking, but we heard Lydia address him as doctor when she left, and the woman downstairs was there and heard it. Provided with milk, tea, and fresh bread, Ricardo Reis enjoyed a wholesome breakfast. He had no butter or marmalade, but such bread is best savored on its own. Had Queen Marie Antoinette been served bread like this, she would not have needed to subsist on brioches. Now all that's wanting is a newspaper, but even that will soon be delivered. In his bedroom Ricardo Reis hears the cry of the newsvendor, O Século, O Notícias. He rushes to open the window, and the newspaper comes flying through the air, folded like a secret missive, moist from the ink which the weather has not allowed to dry. Greasy black smudges stain his fingers. Now each morning this carrier pigeon will tap on the windowpanes until they are opened from within. The newsvendor's cry can be heard from the far end of the street, and if the window is slow in opening, which nearly always happens, the paper is thrown up into the air, revolving like a discus, it strikes once, comes back, is thrown a second time. Ricardo Reis has already opened the window wide and received into his arms this winged messenger that brings him the world's news. He leans over the sill to say, Many thanks, Senhor Manuel, and the newsvendor replies, Until tomorrow, Doctor. But this comes later, when an arrangement

is reached, the payment this time will be monthly, as usual when dealing with reliable customers, it saves a person the effort of collecting three cents every day, a paltry sum.

Now, it is a question of waiting. On this first day, he can pass the time reading the newspapers, the evening editions too, he can reread, analyze, ponder, then work on his odes, or resume his reading of the labyrinth and its god, contemplate the sky from his window, and listen to the woman who lives on the second floor gossiping on the stairs with the woman from the fourth floor. He realizes that he will be hearing those shrill voices a great deal. And he will sleep, dozing and waking up, and leave the apartment only to have lunch, a hasty lunch at a nearby eating house on the Rua do Calhariz, then return to the newspapers he has already read, to his lukewarm odes, to the six hypotheses about the outcome of the forty-ninth move, and pass before the mirror, turning back to see if the person who passed is still there. He will decide that this silence is unbearable without a note of music, that one of these days he must buy a gramophone. To see which model will suit him best he looks through the advertisements for specific makes, Belmont, Philips, RCA, Philco, Pilot, Stewart-Warner. He takes notes, writes superheterodyne, understanding only the super in it and not even that with any certainty. Poor solitary creature, he is flabbergasted when confronted with an advertisement that promises women the perfect bosom within three to five weeks using the Parisian method, Exuber, which combines those three fundamental desiderata, Bust Raffermer, Bust Developer, and Bust Reducer. This Franglais is translated into concrete results under the supervision of Madame Hélène Duroy of the Rue de Miromesnil, which is in Paris, of course, where ravishing women firm up, develop, and reduce their busts, successively or all at the same time. Ricardo Reis examines other startling advertisements, for the restorative tonic Banacao, a wine with nutritional ingredients, for the Jowett automobile, for Pargil mouthwash, for a soap called Silver Night, for Evel wine, for the works of Mercedes Blasco, for Selva, for Saltratos Rodel, for those everpresent Letters of a Portuguese Nun, for the books of Blasco Ibanez, for Tek toothbrushes, for the pain killer Veramon, for Noiva hair dye, for Desodorol, which is rubbed into the armpits, then he returns with a sigh to the news items he has already digested, Alexander Glazunov, the composer of Stenka Razin, has died, Salazar, the all-paternal dictator, has installed canteens in the National Foundation to keep the workers happy, Germany swears that she will not withdraw her troops from the Rhineland, recent storms caused havoc in the Ribatejo, a state of war has been declared in Brazil and hundreds of people have been arrested, a quote from Hitler, Either we triumph over our destiny or we perish, and military forces were dispatched to the province of Badajoz, where thousands of workers have invaded rural estates. In the House of Commons several speakers declare that the Reich must be granted equal rights, there are new and interesting developments in the Uceda case, they have started filming The May Revolution, which tells the story of a refugee who arrives in Portugal to foment revolt, not this one, another one, and he is won over to the Nationalist cause by the daughter of the landlady at the boardinghouse where he is staying incognito. This last item Ricardo Reis read once, twice, three times, in an effort to rid himself of a faint echo buzzing deep inside his memory, but all three times

his memory failed him, and it was only when he moved on to another news story, the general strike in La Coruña, that this tenuous thought became clear and defined. It was nothing distant, it was Conspiracy, that book, that Marília, that story of another conversion to Nationalism and its ideals, apparently the tale has its most effective propagandists among the women, with such magnificent results that literature and the seventh art pay tribute to these angels of chastity and self-sacrifice who seek out the wayward if not lost souls of men. No one can resist them when they place a hand upon a shoulder or cast a chaste glance beneath a suspended tear. They don't need to issue writs, interrogate, become inscrutable like the deputy chief of police, or hover vigilantly like Victor. This feminine influence surpasses the abovementioned techniques of making firm, developing, and reducing, although it might be more correct to say that this influence initially derives from these three, as much in the literary sense as in the biological, for it includes impassioned outbursts, exaggerated metaphors, and wild associations of ideas. Holy women, angels of mercy, Portuguese nuns, daughters of Mary and pious sisters, be they in convents or in brothels, in palaces or in hovels, the daughters of some boardinghouse landlady or of a senator, what astral and telepathic messages must they exchange among themselves, so that from such varied circumstances and conditions there should result so concerted an effect, which is nothing more or less than the redemption of a man in danger of losing his soul. As the supreme reward, these women offer him sisterly friendship, or sometimes their love, even their bodies and all the other advantages a beloved spouse can provide, and this sustains a man's hope in the happiness that will come, if it comes at all, in the wake of the good angel descended from the altars on high, for ultimately, let us confess it, this is nothing other than a secondary manifestation of the Marian cult. Marília and the daughter of the landlady, both incarnations of the Most Holy Virgin, cast pitying glances and place their healing hands on physical and moral sores, working the miracle of health and political conversion. Humanity will take a great step forward when such women begin to rule. Ricardo Reis smiled as he thought these sad irreverences. There is something disagreeable about watching a man smile to himself, particularly if he is smiling into his mirror, a good thing there is a closed door between him and the rest of the world. Then he asked himself, And Marcenda, what kind of woman is Marcenda. The question is beside the point, a mere mental game for one who has no one to talk to. First he must see if she has the courage to visit him in his apartment, then she will have to explain, however reluctant, however inarticulate, why she came to this enclosed and lonely place like an enormous spiderweb at the center of which lurks a wounded tarantula.

Today is the last day of the fixed term no one has agreed upon. Ricardo Reis looks at the clock, it's just after four. The window is closed, the few clouds in the sky are high. If Marcenda fails to come, she will not have the simple excuse so common of late, I dearly wanted to come but the rain was so heavy, and although my father was out, no doubt on one of his amorous pursuits, the manager Salvador would almost certainly have asked me, Surely you are not going out, Senhorita Marcenda, in this weather. Ricardo Reis looks at his watch, it is half past four. Marcenda has not come and will not come. The light

indoors is fast disappearing, the furniture hides behind quivering shadows, one can now understand the suffering of Adamastor. The suspense grows almost unbearable, when suddenly there are two raps from the front door knocker. The building seems to tremble from top to bottom as if an earthquake were rocking the foundations. Ricardo Reis does not rush to the window, so he has no idea who will appear when he goes out onto the landing to pull the wire cord. He hears the woman upstairs open her door and say, Oh, I'm sorry, I thought it was for me, a familiar phrase handed down through generations of nosy women. It is Marcenda. Leaning over the banister, Ricardo Reis sees her. Halfway up the first flight of stairs, she looks up, anxious to make sure that the person she seeks really lives here, and she is smiling, it is a smile that has a future, unlike those reflected in a mirror, that is the difference. Ricardo Reis backs toward the door, Marcenda is climbing the last flight of stairs, only now does he notice that the light in the stairwell is off, that he is about to receive her almost in darkness, and while he vacillates, on another level of thought he wonders with surprise, How is it possible for her smile to be so radiant. When she stands before me, what should I say, I cannot ask, How have you been, nor exclaim in an even more plebeian fashion, Fancy seeing you here, nor sigh romantically, I had almost given up hope, I felt so desperate, why did you take so long. She walks in, I close the door, neither of us has said a word. Ricardo Reis takes her right hand, only to guide her into the domestic labyrinth. Into his bedroom would be improper, into the dining room would be absurd, in which of the chairs around that long table would they sit, side by side or facing, and how many would be seated there, he being innumerable, and she is certainly more than one, so let it be the study, Marcenda on one sofa, I on another. They have entered now, the ceiling light is on, also the lamp on the desk. Marcenda looks around at the heavy furniture, the two bookcases with their handful of books, the green blotting paper, then Ricardo Reis tells her, I am going to kiss you. She is silent. Slowly she supports her left elbow with her right hand, is it a protest, a plea for mercy, a surrender. She places her arm across her body like a barrier. Ricardo Reis takes a step forward, but she does not move. When he is almost touching, Marcenda releases her elbow, allows her right hand to drop, it hangs as dead as her other hand, whatever life is within her is divided between her throbbing heart and her trembling knees as she watches this man draw near. She feels a sob forming in her throat, their lips touch, Is this a kiss, she wonders. But it is only the beginning of a kiss. His mouth presses against hers, his lips open hers, this is the body's destiny, to be opened. The arms of Ricardo Reis now are around her waist and shoulders, and for the first time her bosom is in contact with a man's chest. The kiss, she realizes, is not over yet, it is inconceivable that it could ever end and the world return to its primeval innocence, she also realizes that she must do something other than stand there with her arms down. Her right hand moves up to the shoulders of Ricardo Reis, her left hand, dead or asleep, dreams, recalls the movements it once made, fingers entwining fingers, crossing behind the man's neck. She repays Ricardo Reis kiss for kiss, her hands in his hands, I knew it when I decided to come, I knew it when I left the hotel, I knew it when I climbed those stairs and saw him leaning over the banister, I knew that he would kiss me. Her right hand leaves his shoulder, slips down, weary, her left hand was never there. This is the moment when the body recoils, almost

staggers, when the kiss has reached the point where it is no longer enough. Let us separate them before the rising force compels us to proceed to the next stage, a renewed explosion of kisses, precipitate, short-lived, eager, lips no longer satisfied with lips yet constantly returning to them. Anyone with any experience knows this sequence, but not Marcenda, who is being kissed and embraced by a man for the first time in her life and suddenly finds that the longer a kiss lasts, the greater the need to repeat it, a crescendo of need that seems to have no end. Her escape lies elsewhere, in this sob in the throat, which neither swells nor finds release, a faint voice that pleads, Let me go, then adds, moved by who knows what scruples, as if afraid of having given offense, Let me sit down. Ricardo Reis leads her to the sofa, does not know what to do next, what to say, whether he should make a declaration of love or simply ask her forgiveness, whether he should kneel at her feet or remain silent, waiting for her to speak. All this strikes him as false, the only true thing was when he said, I'm going to kiss you, and did. Marcenda is seated, her left hand resting in her lap in full view, like a witness. Ricardo Reis is also seated, and they look at each other, conscious of their bodies, as if each were a great whispering shell. Marcenda tells him, Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but I knew you would kiss me. Ricardo Reis leans forward, raises her right hand to his lips, and finally speaks, I don't know whether I kissed you out of love or despair. She replies, No one has ever kissed me before, therefore I cannot tell the difference between love and despair. But at least you must know what you felt. I felt your kiss as the sea feels the wave, if these words have any meaning. I have been waiting for you all these days, asking myself what would happen if you came, I never thought that things would turn out like this, but when you walked in here, I realized that to kiss you was the only thing I could do, when I said a moment ago that I could not tell whether I had kissed you out of love or despair, if I knew then what I meant, I no longer do. So you feel no despair after all, and no love for me. Every man feels love for the woman he kisses, even if the kiss is one of despair. What reasons do you have for despair. Only one, this sense of emptiness. How can a man who has the use of both hands complain. I am not complaining, I am simply saying that a man has to experience despair before saying to a woman, as I've just said to you, I am going to kiss you. You might have said it out of love. Had it been love, I'd have kissed you without telling you beforehand. So you do not love me. I'm extremely fond of you. But that is not why we kissed each other, Well, no. What are we going to do now, after what has happened, here I am in the apartment of a man with whom I've conversed three times in my whole life, I came here to see you, to speak with you and be kissed, I don't want to think about the rest. Someday we may have to think about it, Someday perhaps, but not today. I'll get you a cup of tea, I have some cakes. Let me help you, but then I must go, my father might return to the hotel and ask where I am. Make yourself comfortable, why don't you take off your jacket. I'm fine like this.

After they drank their tea in the kitchen, Ricardo Reis showed her around the apartment, they took only a glimpse at the bedroom, then returned to the study, where Marcenda asked him, Have you started seeing patients. Not yet, I might try setting up a practice, even if only for a few hours a day, it's a question of readjusting myself. It will be

a start. That's what we all need, a start. Have the police given you any more trouble, No, and now they do not even know where I am living, If they want to, they can find out. And what about your arm. You need only look at it, I no longer hope for a cure, my father, Your father, My father thinks I should go to Fatima, he says that if I have faith, there might be a miracle,- as there have been for others. When one starts to believe in miracles, there is no longer hope. I suspect that his amorous pursuits are coming to an end, they've been going on for some time. Tell me, Marcenda, what do you believe in, At this very moment, Yes, At this very moment I believe only in the kiss you gave me. We could have another, No, Why not, Because I'm not sure that I would feel the same thing, and now I must be off, we leave early tomorrow morning. At the door, she stretched out her hand, Write to me and I'll write to you, Until next month, If my father still wishes to return, If you don't come, I'll go to Coimbra. Let me go, Ricardo, before I start asking you for another kiss. Marcenda, please stay, No. She descended the stairs rapidly without once looking up. The front door slammed. When Ricardo Reis went into the bedroom, he heard footsteps above him, then a window open. It is the neighbor on the fourth floor, she wants to see for herself what sort of woman has been visiting the new tenant, wants to see if she sways her hips, either I'm much mistaken or there is something fishy going on, and to think that this building was so peaceful and respectable.

Dialogue and passing judgment. Yesterday one came, today another one, comments the neighbor on the fourth floor. I didn't see the one yesterday, but the one who was here today is coming to clean his apartment, reports the neighbor from the second floor. She doesn't look like a charwoman to me, You're right there, I'd have taken her for a housemaid from some well-to-do family had she not come laden with packages, and carrying household soap too, I could tell by the smell, and brushes, I was here on the stair shaking my doormat when she arrived. The one who came yesterday was a youngish girl with one of those fetching hats that are all the fashion these days, but she didn't stay long. What do you make of it, Frankly, I don't know what to say, he moved in only a week ago and two women have been here already. This one came to do the cleaning, it's only natural, a man on his own needs someone to keep the place tidy. The other one could be a relative, he must have relatives. But I find it very odd, did you notice that all this week he never left the apartment except at lunchtime. Did you know he's a doctor, I knew that right away, the charwoman addressed him as doctor when she was here Sunday, Do you think he's a doctor of medicine or a lawyer, I couldn't tell you, but don't worry, when I go pay the rent, I'll ask, the agent is bound to know. It's always good to have a medical doctor in the building, you never know when we might need him. So long as he's reliable. I must see if I can catch this charwoman of his, to remind her to wash her flight of stairs once a week, these stairs have always been kept spotless, Yes, do tell her, don't let her think she can treat us like a couple of dogs. She'd better know who she's dealing with, said the neighbor from the fourth floor, thus concluding the judgment and the dialogue. The only thing left to mention is the silent scene of her slowly climbing back upstairs to her apartment, treading softly in her woven slippers. At the door of Ricardo Reis she listens carefully, putting her ear to the keyhole. She can hear the noise of running water, and the charwoman singing in a low voice.

It was a very busy day for Lydia. She put on the smock she had brought with her, tied up her hair and covered it with a kerchief, rolled up her sleeves, and set to work with enthusiasm, nimbly avoiding the playful teasing that Ricardo Reis felt was expected of him when their paths crossed, an error on his part, from a lack of experience and psychological insight, because this woman at the moment seeks no pleasure other than that of dusting, washing, and sweeping. She is so accustomed to these chores that there is really no effort involved, and so she sings, but softly lest the neighbors think that the charwoman is taking liberties on this her first day working for the doctor. When it was time for lunch, Ricardo Reis, who during the morning had been driven from the bedroom to the study, from the study to the dining room, from the dining room to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the bathroom, emerging from the bathroom only to begin all over again in reverse order, with brief respites in the two empty rooms, saw that Lydia was showing no signs of interrupting her work, so he said, with embarrassment, As you know, I have no food in the house. An awkward rendering of his thoughts. Without disguise the sentence would sound like this, I'm going out for lunch, but I can't take you with me to the restaurant, it wouldn't look right, what will you do. She would reply with exactly the same words she uses now, Lydia, at least, cannot be accused of being two-faced, Go and have

your lunch, I brought a small bowl of soup from the hotel and some stewed meat, I'll heat them up and that'll do me fine, and take your time, too, then we won't be tripping over each other's feet. She laughed as she spoke, wiped the perspiration from her face with the back of her left hand while with the other she adjusted the kerchief, which was slipping down. Ricardo Reis touched her on the shoulder, said, Well, good-bye for now, and left. He was halfway down the stairs when he heard doors open on the second and fourth floors, these were the neighbors coming to warn Lydia in chorus, Now then, dear, don't forget to wash your master's stairs, but on seeing the doctor they scurried back inside. The moment Ricardo Reis steps onto the pavement, the woman on the fourth floor will go down to the woman on the second floor and the two of them will whisper, I got such a fright, Have you ever known a tenant to go out and leave the charwoman in the apartment on her own, Very trusting, I must say, perhaps she cleaned for him at his previous place, Perhaps, senhora, perhaps, I don't deny it, but they could also be having an affair, men are such rogues, they never miss an opportunity. Away with you, he is a doctor of medicine, A doctor could still be a rogue, men are a bad lot, Mine isn't so bad, Nor mine. Until later, senhora, and don't let that hussy give us the slip, Don't you worry, she won't get past my door without being given her orders. It proved unnecessary. In the middle of the afternoon Lydia went out onto the landing armed with a brush, mop, and bucket. The woman on the fourth floor quietly watched from above as the wooden steps resounded to the blows of the heavy brush. The dirty water was mopped up and squeezed into the bucket, the bucket water was emptied three times, and the entire building filled with the clean smell of strong soap. There's no denying it, this charwoman knows her job, the neighbor on the second floor can tell at once, and she goes out of her way to speak to her on the pretext of taking in her doormat just as Lydia reaches her landing, My word, girl, you've done a splendid job on those stairs, it's nice to know we have such a reliable tenant on the third floor. The doctor insists that everything be clean and tidy, he likes to see things done properly, it makes a pleasant sight. It most certainly does. These words were spoken not by Lydia but by the neighbor on the fourth floor, who was leaning over the banister. There is something voluptuous in the contemplation of newly washed stairs, in the smell of scrubbed wood, this is a fraternity of women who take pride in their domestic chores, it is a kind of mutual absolution, even if more fleeting than the rose. Lydia wished them a good afternoon, climbed back upstairs carrying her bucket and brush, her cloth and soap, shut the door firmly behind her, and muttered, Snooty old bitches, who do they think they're bossing around. She has finished, everything is spick-and-span, Ricardo Reis can now return, pass his finger over the surfaces of the furniture like those housewives always trying to find fault, inspect every nook and cranny. Suddenly Lydia is overcome by a great sadness, a sense of desolation, not because she is tired but because she realizes, though unable to express it in words, that she has served her purpose, all that remains to be done now is await her master's arrival, he will thank her, will wish to offer compensation for her industry and diligence, she will listen with an impassive smile, receive or not receive payment, and return to the hotel. Today she did not even visit her mother in order to find out if there was any news from her brother, not that she feels remorse, but it is as if she possesses nothing of her

own. Now she changes back into her blouse and skirt, and as the perspiration cools on her body she sits on a bench in the kitchen, hands folded in her lap, waiting. She hears footsteps on the stairs, the key inserted into the lock, it is Ricardo Reis, he is in the passageway saying jocularly, This is like entering the abode of angels. Lydia gets to her feet, smiles at such flattery, suddenly feels contented, then deeply moved as he approaches with hands outstretched and open arms, Oh, don't touch me, I'm covered with sweat, I was just about to leave. Don't go yet, it's early, have a cup of coffee, I bought some cream cakes, why don't you have a bath first to freshen up. What an idea, me have a bath in your apartment, who ever heard of such a thing. It has never been heard of, but there is always a first time, do as I say. She objected no more, could not object, even if social convention decreed otherwise, because this was one of the happiest moments in her life, running the hot water, taking off her clothes, lowering herself slowly into the tub, feeling her weary limbs relax in the sensuous warmth of the water, using soap and sponge to lather her body, her legs, her thighs, her arms, her belly, her breasts, knowing that on the other side of the door a man is waiting for her. I can imagine what he is doing, what he is thinking, but if he should come in here, if he should see me, watch me sitting here naked, how shameful. Can it be shame that causes her heart to beat so fast, or is it fear. She steps from the bath. The human body always looks beautiful when it emerges glistening from water, Ricardo Reis thinks as he opens the door. Lydia, stark naked, covers her breasts and crotch with her hands, begs, Don't look at me. It is the first time she has faced him like this. Please go away, let me get dressed, she says in a low voice of embarrassment, but he smiles a smile of tenderness, desire, even mischief, and tells her, Don't put your clothes on, just dry yourself. He holds out a large towel, wraps it around her, then goes into the bedroom and removes his own clothes. The bed has just been made, the sheets smell new. Lydia enters, holding the towel tightly to conceal her body, she does not hold it like a transparent veil, but as she approaches the bed she drops it, finally courageous. This is no day for feeling cold, her body is burning inside and out, and now it is Ricardo Reis who is trembling, reaching out to her like a child. For the first time they are both naked, after waiting for so long. Spring was slow in coming but better late than never. On the floor below, perched on two high kitchen stools, one atop the other, at the risk of falling and dislocating her shoulder, the downstairs neighbor is trying to decipher the meaning of the sounds that now penetrate the ceiling. Her face is crimson with curiosity and excitement, her eyes shine with repressed depravity, this is how these women live and die, Would you believe what the doctor and that minx are up to. But who knows, perhaps they are only engaged in the honorable task of turning and beating the mattresses, though that takes some believing. When Lydia departed half an hour later, the neighbor on the second floor did not dare open her door, even daring has its limits, but contented herself with looking through the peephole with the eye of a hawk at an agile figure that swiftly passed, swathed in the odor of man as if it were armor. Ricardo Reis, in bed, closes his eyes. Now that his flesh has been gratified, he can begin to add the delicate and elusive pleasure of loneliness. He rolls over into the spot that Lydia occupied. Such a strange smell, the smell of a strange animal, but mutual, not of the one nor the other but of both. Enough, let us be silent, we do not belong here.

Day starts with morning, the week with Monday. At first light, Ricardo Reis began a long letter to Marcenda, laboriously pondering. What do we write to a woman whom we have kissed without declaring our love. To ask her forgiveness would be offensive, especially since she returned the kiss with passion. If on the other hand we did not say, upon kissing her, I love you, why should we invent the words now, at the risk of not being believed. The Romans assure us in the Latin tongue that actions speak louder than words, let us therefore consider the actions as done and the words superfluous, words are the first layer of a cocoon, frayed, tenuous, delicate. We should use words that make no promise, that seek nothing, that do not even suggest, let them protect our rear as our cowardice retreats, just like these fragmented phrases, general, noncommittal, let us savor the moment, the fleeting joy, the green restored to the budding leaves. I feel that who I am and who I was are different dreams, the years are short, life is all too brief, better that it should be so if all we possess is memory, better to remember little than much, let us fulfill what we are, we have been given nothing else. This is how the letter ends. We thought it would be so difficult to write yet out it flowed, the essential thing is not to feel too deeply what one is saying and not to think too much about what one is writing, the rest depends upon the reply. In the afternoon, as he had promised, Ricardo Reis went in search of employment as a locum tenens, two hours a day three days a week, or even once a week, to keep his hand in, even if it meant working in an office with a window looking onto a backyard. Any small consulting room would do, with old-fashioned furniture, a simple couch behind a screen for routine examinations, an adjustable desk lamp to examine a patient's coloring more closely, a spittoon for those suffering from bronchitis, a couple of prints on the wall, a frame for his diploma, a calendar that tells us how many days we still have to live. He began his search some distance away, Alcántara, Pampulha, perhaps because he had passed through those parts when he entered the straits. He inquired if there were any vacancies, he spoke to doctors he did not know and who did not know him, feeling ridiculous when he addressed them as Dear Colleague and when they spoke to him in the same way, We have a vacancy here but it is temporary, a colleague who is on leave, we expect him back next week. He tried the neighborhood around Conde Barão, then the Rossio, but all the vacancies had been filled. A good thing, too, that there is no shortage of doctors, because in Portugal we have more than six hundred thousand cases of syphilis, and the infant mortality rate is even more alarming. For every thousand infants born a hundred and fifty die. Imagine, then, what a catastrophe it would be if we did not have such excellent medical practitioners at our disposal. It must have been the hand of fate, because after searching so hard and so far afield, Ricardo Reis finally discovered, on Wednesday, a haven virtually on his own doorstep, in the Praça Camoes, and such was his good fortune that he found himself installed in an office with a window overlooking the square. True, he had only a rear view of D'Artagnan, but communication was ensured, the receipt of messages guaranteed, as became apparent when a pigeon flew from the balcony onto the poet's head. It probably whispered in his ear, with columbine malice, that he had a rival behind him, a spirit akin to his and devoted to the muses but whose hand was skilled only in the use of syringes. Ricardo Reis could have sworn he saw Camoes shrug. The post is a

temporary replacement for a colleague who specializes in diseases of the heart and lungs and whose own heart has let him down. The prognosis is not serious, but his convalescence could take three months. Ricardo Reis was no luminary in this field, we may recall that he said he was not qualified to voice any opinion about Marcenda's heart condition, but fate not only sets things in motion, it is capable of irony, and so our doctor found himself obliged to scour the bookshops in search of medical texts that might refresh his memory and bring him up to date with the latest techniques in therapeutic and preventive medicine. He called on the colleague who was convalescing, assured him that he would do everything in his power to uphold the standards of a man who was and would continue to be, for many years to come, the foremost specialist in that venerable field, and whom I shall unfailingly consult, taking advantage of your great knowledge and experience. The colleague did not find these eulogies in the least exaggerated and promised his full cooperation. They then proceeded to discuss the terms of this Aesculapian sublease, what percentage toward the administration of the clinic, the salary of the nurse under contract, the equipment and running costs, and a fixed sum for the convalescing heart specialist, whether he be ill or return to health. The remaining income is not likely to make Ricardo Reis a rich man, but he still has a fair amount of Brazilian currency in reserve. In the city there is now one more doctor practicing medicine, and since he has nothing better to do, he goes to the office on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, invariably punctual. First he waits for patients who do not appear, then, when they do appear, makes sure they do not escape, then the novelty loses its excitement and he settles into the routine of examining collapsed lungs and necrotic hearts, searching the textbooks for cures for the incurable. He scarcely ever telephones his colleague, despite his promise to visit regularly and consult with him. We all make the best of our life and prepare for death, and what a lot of work this gives us. Besides, how awkward it would be to ask, What is your opinion, colleague, I myself have the impression that the patient's heart is hanging by a thread, can you see any way out, colleague, apart from the obvious one that leads into the next world. It would be like mentioning rope in the house of a man condemned to be hanged.

No reply, so far, from Marcenda. Ricardo Reis has sent her another letter, telling her of his new life, that he is practicing medicine once more, under the borrowed credentials of a well-known specialist, I receive my patients in consulting rooms on the Praça de Luis de Camoes, within a stone's throw of my apartment and close to your hotel. With its multicolored houses Lisbon is a very small city. Ricardo Reis feels as if he is writing to someone he has never seen, to someone who lives, if she exists at all, in an unknown place, and when he reflects that this place has a name, Coimbra, which is a city he once saw with his own eyes, the thought seems as absurd as the sun rising in the west, because no matter how hard we look in that direction, we shall see the sun only dying there. The person he kissed, the memory he still preserves of that kiss gradually fades behind the mist of time. In the bookshops he can find no text capable of refreshing his memory. He finds, instead, information on cardiac and pulmonary lesions, and even so, it is often said that there are no diseases, only persons diseased. Does this mean that there

are no kisses, only persons kissed. It is true that Lydia nearly always comes when she has a free day, and judging from the external and internal evidence Lydia is a person, but enough has been said about the aversions and prejudices of Ricardo Reis. Lydia may be a person, but she is not that person.

The weather improves, the world, however, is getting worse. According to the calendar it is already spring, and new buds and leaves can be seen sprouting on the branches of the trees, but from time to time winter invades these parts. Torrential rains are unleashed, leaves and buds are swept away in the flood, until eventually the sun reappears, its presence helping us forget the misfortunes of the last harvest, the drowned ox that comes floating downstream, swollen and decaying, the shack whose walls caved in, the sudden inundation that pulls the corpses of two men into the murky sewers of the city among excrement and vermin. Death should be a simple act of withdrawal, like a supporting actor who makes a discreet exit. He is denied the privilege of a final speech when his presence is no longer required. But the world, being so vast, contains events more dramatic, it ignores these complaints we mutter with clenched teeth about the shortage of meat in Lisbon. This is not news one should broadcast or leak abroad, leave that to other nations who lack our Lusitanian sense of privacy. Consider the recent elections in Germany, at Brunswick, where the mobilized National-Socialist corps paraded through the streets with an ox carrying a placard that read, This ox casts no vote. Had this been in Portugal, we would have taken the ox to vote, then would have eaten it, fillet, loin, and belly, and used the tail to make soup. The German race is obviously very different from ours. Here, the masses clap their hands, rush to watch parades, salute in Roman style, dream of uniforms for civilians, yet they play a most humble role on the great stage of the world. All we can hope for is to be hired as extras. This explains why we never know where to put our feet or what to do with our hands when we line the streets to honor the youths that march past. An innocent babe in its mother's arms doesn't take our patriotic fervor seriously, pulling at our middle finger which is within reach. With a nation like ours it is impossible to be smug and solemn or to offer one's life on the altar of the fatherland, we should take lessons, watch how the abovementioned Germans acclaim Hitler in the Wilhelmsplatz, hear how they fervently plead, We want the Führer, we beseech you Führer, we want to see you Führer, shouting until they become hoarse, faces covered with sweat, little old women with white hair weeping tender tears, pregnant women throbbing with swollen wombs and heaving breasts, men endowed with strong muscles and wills, all shouting and applauding until the Führer comes to the window, then their hysteria knows no bounds, the multitude cries out with one voice, Heil. That's more like it. If only I had been born a German. But one need not be quite so ambitious. Without comparing them with the Germans, consider the Italians, who are already winning their war. Only a few days ago their planes flew all the way to the city of Harar and reduced everything to ashes. If a nation like Italy, known for its tarantellas and serenatas, can take such risks, why should we be hindered by the fado and the vira. Our misfortune is the lack of opportunities. We have an empire, one of the greatest, which could cover the whole of Europe and still have land left over, yet we are unable to

conquer our immediate neighbors, we cannot even win back Olivença. But where would such a bold initiative lead us. Let us wait and see how things turn out over the border, and in the meantime let us continue to receive into our homes and hotels those affluent Spaniards who have escaped the turmoil, this is traditional Portuguese hospitality, and if someday they are declared Spain's enemies, we will hand them over to the authorities, who will deal with them as they see fit, the law was made to be enforced. Among the Portuguese there is a strong desire for martyrdom, an eagerness for sacrifice and self-denial, only the other day one of our leaders said, No mother who has ever begotten a son could guide him to a loftier and nobler destiny than that of giving his life in defense of the fatherland. The bastard. We can just see him visiting maternity wards, probing the bellies of pregnant women, asking when they expect to give birth, telling them that soldiers are needed in the trenches, which trenches, never mind, there will be trenches. As we can see from these omens, the world promises no great happiness. Now Alcalá Zamora has been removed from the presidency of the Republic and the rumor is spreading that there will be a military coup in Spain. If that happens, sad times lie ahead for many people. But this is not the reason people emigrate. The Portuguese do not care whether they live in the fatherland or the outside world, the important thing is to find a place where we can eat and save a little money, whether it be Brazil, to which six hundred and six Portuguese emigrated in March, or the United States of North America, to which fifty-nine emigrated, or Argentina, to which more than sixty-five emigrated, but to all the other countries put together only two went. France is no place for Portuguese bumpkins, there one finds another kind of civilization.

Now that Easter has arrived, the government is distributing alms and provisions throughout the land, thus uniting the Roman Catholic commemoration of the sufferings and triumphs of Our Lord Jesus Christ with the temporary appeasement of protesting stomachs. The poor, not always orderly, form lines at the doors of the parish councils and almshouses, and there are already rumors that at the end of May a splendid banquet will be held on the grounds of the Jockey Club for the benefit of those left homeless by the floods in Ribatejo, unfortunates who have been going around with the seat of their pants soaking wet for many months. The organizing committee has already enlisted some of the most prominent names in Portuguese high society, one more distinguished than the next in terms of both moral and material wealth, Mayer Ulrich, Perestrello, Lavradio, Estarreja, Daun e Lorena, Infante da Camara, Alto Mearim, Mousinho de Albuquerque, Roque de Pinho, Costa Macedo, Pina, Pombal, Seabra e Cunha, the inhabitants of Ribatejo are extremely fortunate, provided they can put up with their hunger until May. In the meantime, governments, even if they are as supreme as ours, which is perfect in every respect, are showing symptoms of failing eyesight, perhaps because of too much bookwork or strain. The fact is that, situated as they are on high, they can see things clearly only at a distance, not noticing that salvation is often to be found, as it were, under one's nose, or in this case in a newspaper advertisement. There is no excuse for missing this one, because it even has a sketch of a recumbent lady in a nightgown that allows a glimpse of a magnificent bosom that probably owes something to the treatment

provided by Madame Hélène Duroy. Yet the delicious creature looks a trifle pale, not so pale as to suggest that her illness might prove fatal, we have every confidence in the doctor who is seated at her bedside, bald-headed with mustache and goatee, saying to her in tones of mild reproach, If you had taken It, you would not be so pale. He is offering her salvation in the form of a jar of Bovril. If the government paid more attention to those newspapers it scrupulously censors morning, noon, and night, sifting proposals and opinions, it would discover how simple is the solution to the problem of famine. The solution is here, it is Bovril, a jar to every Portuguese citizen, for large families a five-liter flagon, a national diet, a universal nutrient, an all-purpose remedy. If we had drunk Bovril from the outset, Dona Clotilde, we would not now be skin and bones.

Ricardo Reis gathers information, takes note of these useful remedies. He is not like the government, which insists on ruining its eyes by reading between the lines, overlooking the facts to dwell on the theories. If it is a fine morning, he goes out, a little gloomy despite Lydia's solicitude and attentiveness, to read his newspapers sitting in the sun under the protective gaze of Adamastor. As we have already seen, Luis de Camões greatly exaggerated the scowl, the tangled beard, the sunken eyes. The giant's attitude is neither menacing nor evil, it is only the suffering of unrequited love, Adamastor could not care less whether the Portuguese ships succeed in rounding the Cape. Contemplating the luminous river, Ricardo Reis recalls two lines from an old ballad, From the window of my room / watch the mullet leap. All those glints in the waves are fish leaping, restless, inebriated by the light. How true, that all bodies are beautiful as they emerge, quickly or slowly, from the water, like Lydia the other day, dripping, within arm's reach, or these fish too far away for the eye to distinguish. Seated on another bench, the two old men converse, waiting for Ricardo Reis to finish his newspaper, because he usually leaves it on the bench. The old men come here every day in the hope that the gentleman will appear in the park. Life is an inexhaustible mine of surprises, we reach an age where we have nothing else to do but watch the ships below from the Alto de Santa Catarina and suddenly we are rewarded with a news paper, sometimes for two days in succession, depending on the weather. Once Ricardo Reis actually saw one of the old men break into a nervous trot and hobble toward the bench where he had been sitting, so he did the charitable thing, offering it with his own hand and saying, The newspaper. They accepted, of course, but are resentful now that they owe him a favor. Reclining comfortably on the bench with his legs crossed, feeling the gentle warmth of the sun on his half-closed eyelids, Ricardo Reis receives news of the vast world. He learns that Mussolini has promised the imminent annihilation of the Ethiopian military forces, that Russian weapons have been sent to the Portuguese refugees in Spain, besides other funds and resources intended to establish a Union of Independent Ibero-Soviet Republics, that in the words of Lumbrales, Portugal is God's creation throughout successive generations of saints and heroes, that some four thousand five hundred workers are expected to take part in a parade organized by the Corporative Movement in northern Portugal, in their number are two thousand stevedores, one thousand six hundred and fifty coopers, two hundred bottlers, four hundred miners from Sao Pedro da Cova, four

hundred workers from the canning factories at Matosinhos, and five hundred associate members from the union organizations in Lisbon, and he learns that the Afonso de Albuquerque, a luxury steamboat, will depart for Leixões in order to attend the workers' celebration to be held there, that the clocks will be set forward by one hour, that there is a general strike in Madrid, that the newspaper O Crime is on sale today, that there has been another sighting of the Loch Ness Monster, that members of the government presided over the distribution of food to three thousand two hundred paupers in Oporto, that Ottorino Respighi, composer of The Fountains of Rome, has died. Fortunately the world has something for everyone. Ricardo Reis does not relish everything he reads, but he cannot choose the news and must accept it, whatever it is. His situation is entirely different from that of a certain old American who each morning receives a copy of The New York Times, his favorite newspaper. It is a special edition, which guards the precarious health of this senile reader who has reached the ripe age of ninety-seven, because each day it is doctored from start to finish, with nothing but good news and articles brimming with optimism, so that the poor old man will not be troubled by the world's disasters, which are likely to grow more disastrous. His private copy of the newspaper explains and proves that the economic crisis is fast disappearing, that there is no more unemployment, and that Communism in Russia is tending toward Americanism, as the Bolsheviks have been forced to recognize the virtues of the American way of life. Fair tidings, these, that are read out to John D. Rockefeller over breakfast, and after he has dismissed his secretary he will peruse with his own weary, myopic eyes the paragraphs that reassure and delight him. At long last there is peace on earth, war only when it is advantageous, dividends are stable, interest rates guaranteed. He does not have much time left to live, but when the hour comes, he will die happy, the sole inhabitant of a world privileged with a strictly individual and nontransferable happiness. The rest of mankind has to be satisfied with whatever remains. Fascinated by what he has just learned, Ricardo Reis rests this Portuguese newspaper on his lap and tries to picture old John D. opening the magic pages of printed happiness with tremulous, scrawny hands, unaware that they are telling him lies. Everyone else knows it, because the deception has been telegraphed by news agencies from continent to continent, that in the editorial offices of The New York Times orders have been issued to suppress all bad news in the special copy for John D., the household cuckold who won't even be the last to know. Such a wealthy and powerful man allowing himself to be fooled in this way. The two old men pretend to be lost in conversation, arguing at their leisure, but keep looking out of the corner of one eye, waiting for their version of The New York Times. Breakfast used to be only a crust of bread and a cup of barley coffee, but our bad news is assured now that we have a neighbor who is so rich that he can afford to leave newspapers on park benches. Ricardo Reis rises to his feet, gestures to the old men, who exclaim, Oh, thank you so much, kind sir. The fat one advances, smiling, lifts the folded paper as if from a silver tray, good as new, this is the advantage of having the skilled hands of a medical practitioner, hands as soft as those of any lady, and he returns to his bench, settling once more beside the thin man. Their reading does not begin on the first page, first we must check to see if there are reports concerning riots or outbreaks of

violence, disasters, deaths, crimes, especially, oh, how it makes one shudder, the mysterious death of Luis Uceda, still unsolved, and that dreadful business about the martyred child in the Rua Escadinhas das Olarias, number eight, ground floor.

When Ricardo Reis returns to his apartment, he discovers an envelope on the doormat, pale violet in color, bearing no indication of the sender, nor is that necessary. With some effort the smudged postmark can be deciphered as Coimbra, but even if for some inexplicable reason the name stamped there were Viseu or Castelo Branco it would make no difference, the city whence this letter really comes is called Marcenda. Soon a month will have passed since she was here in his apartment, where, if we are to believe what she said, she was kissed for the first time in her life. Yet once she returned home, not even this shock, which must have been profound, which must have shaken her to her very roots, was enough to prompt her to write a few lines, cautiously disguising her feelings, betraying them perhaps in two words brought together when her trembling hand was incapable of keeping them apart. Now she has written, to say what. Ricardo Reis holds the unopened letter in his hand, places it on the bedside table, on top of *The God of the Labyrinth*, illuminated by the soft light of the lamp. He would love to leave it there, perhaps because he has just come back, exhausted after hours of listening to the rattling of broken bellows, the tubercular lungs of the Portuguese, weary, too, of trudging through the circumscribed area of the city he constantly travels like a blindfolded mule turning a waterwheel, feeling at certain moments the menacing vertigo of time, the stickiness of the ground, the softness of the gravel. But if he doesn't open the letter now, he will never open it, he will say, if anyone should ask him, that it must have gone astray in the long journey between Coimbra and Lisbon, perhaps it dropped out of the courier's satchel as he was crossing a windy plain on horseback, sounding his bugle. It was in a violet envelope, Marcenda will tell him, envelopes of that color are not common. Then perhaps it fell among the flowers and merged with them. But someone may discover the letter and send it on, you can still find honest people who are incapable of keeping what does not belong to them. Unless someone opened and read it even though it was not addressed to him. Perhaps the words written there said exactly what he longed to hear, perhaps that person carries the letter in his pocket wherever he goes and reads it from time to time for consolation. I should find that very surprising, Marcenda replies, because the letter does not touch on such matters. I thought as much, that is why I have taken so long to open it, says Ricardo Reis. He sat on the edge of the bed and began to read. Dear friend, I received your letters with great pleasure, especially the second one in which you tell me that you have started seeing patients again, I enjoyed your first letter too, but didn't quite understand everything you wrote, or perhaps I am a little afraid of understanding, believe me, I do not wish to sound ungrateful, for you have always treated me with respect and consideration, but I cannot help asking myself what is this, what future is there, I don't mean for us but for me, I know neither what you want nor what I want, if only one's whole life could consist of certain moments, not that I've had much experience, but now I've had this one, the experience of a moment, and how I wish it were my life, but my life is my left arm which is dead and will remain dead, my life is

also the years that separate us, one of us born too late, the other much too soon, you needn't have bothered traveling all those kilometers from Brazil, the distance makes no difference, it is time that keeps us apart, but I do not want to lose your friendship, that in itself will be something to treasure, and besides there is little point in my asking for more. Ricardo Reis passed a hand across his eyes, then read on. One of these days I will come to Lisbon as usual, I will visit your office, where we can have a chat, I promise not to take up too much of your time, it is also possible that I won't come, my father has grown disheartened, he admits that there probably is no cure for me, and I believe he is telling the truth, after all, he doesn't need this excuse to visit Lisbon whenever he pleases, his latest suggestion is that we go on a pilgrimage to Fatima in May, he is the one who has faith, not I, but perhaps his faith will suffice in the eyes of God. The letter ended with words of friendship, Until we meet, dear friend, I will call you the moment I arrive. If the letter were lost among fields of flowers, if it were being blown by the wind like a huge violet petal, Ricardo Reis would now be free to rest his head on the pillow and let his imagination run, What does it say, what doesn't it say, he could imagine the nicest things possible, which is what people do when they feel the need. He closed his eyes, thought to himself, I want to sleep, insisted in a low voice, Sleep, as if hypnotizing himself, Come now, sleep, sleep, sleep, but he still held the letter with limp fingers. To give greater conviction to his pretended scorn he let it drop. Now he sleeps gently, a twitch wrinkles his forehead, a sign that he is not sleeping after all, his eyelids tremble, he is wasting his time, none of this is true. He retrieved the letter from the floor, put it in its envelope, concealed it between two books. But he must not forget to find a safer hiding place, one of these days Lydia will come to clean and discover the letter, and then what. Not that she has any rights, she has none whatsoever, if she comes here it is because she wants to, not because I ask her, but let's hope she does not stop coming. What more does Ricardo Reis want, the ungrateful man, a woman goes to bed with him willingly so he does not need to prowl abroad and risk catching a venereal disease. Some men are extremely fortunate, yet this one is still dissatisfied, because he has not received a love letter from Marcenda. All love letters are ridiculous, ridiculous to write one when death is already climbing the stairs, even more ridiculous, it suddenly becomes clear, never to have received one. Standing before the full-length closet mirror, Ricardo Reis says, You are right, I never received a love letter, a letter that spoke only of love, nor did I ever write one, these innumerable beings that exist in me watch me as I write, then my hand falls, inert, and in the end I give up writing. He took his black suitcase, the one with the medical instruments, and went to the desk, and for the next half hour wrote up the clinical histories of several new patients, then went to wash his hands. Studying himself in the mirror, he dried his hands slowly, as if he had just finished carrying out an examination, checking samples of phlegm. I look tired, he thought, and went back into the bedroom and half-opened the wooden shutters. Lydia said she would bring the curtains on her next visit, they are badly needed, the bedroom is so exposed. Darkness was closing in. A few minutes later, Ricardo Reis went out to dinner.

One day, some curious person may inquire how Ricardo Reis conducted himself at

the table, whether he slurped as he drank his soup, whether he changed hands when using knife and fork, whether he wiped his mouth before drinking or left smears on his glass, whether he made excessive use of toothpicks, whether he unbuttoned his vest at the end of a meal, and whether he checked the bill item by item. These Galician-Portuguese waiters will probably say that they never paid much attention. As you are well aware, sir, one meets all sorts, after a while we don't notice anymore, a man eats as he's been taught, but the impression made by the doctor was that of someone refined, he would come in, wish everyone good afternoon or good evening, would order immediately what he wanted, and then it was almost as if he wasn't there. Did he always eat alone, Always, but he did have one curious habit, What was that, Whenever we began to remove the setting at the opposite side of the table, he always asked us to leave it there, he said the table looked more attractive set for two, and on one occasion when I was serving him there was a strange little incident. What incident. When I poured his wine, I made the mistake of filling both glasses, his and that of the missing guest, if you see what I mean. Yes, I see, and then what happened. He said that was perfect, and from then on he always insisted that the other glass should be filled, and at the end of the meal he would drink it in one go, keeping his eyes closed as he drank. How odd. As you probably know, sir, we waiters see some curious sights. Did he do this in all the other restaurants he frequented, Ah, that I couldn't tell you, you would have to ask around. Can you recall if he ever met a friend or acquaintance, even if they did not sit at the same table. Never, he always gave the impression of someone who had just arrived from abroad, just like me when I first came here from Xunqueira de Ambia, if you get my meaning. I know exactly what you mean, we have all had that experience. Do you require anything more, sir, I must go and serve the customer over in the corner, By all means, carry on, and many thanks for the information. Ricardo Reis finished drinking the coffee he had allowed to go cold and asked for his bill. While waiting, he held the second glass, still almost full, between his two hands, raised it as if he were toasting someone sitting across from him, then, slowly, half-closing his eyes, he drank the wine. Without checking the bill, he paid, left a tip neither miserly nor excessive, the tip one might expect from a regular client, wished everyone good-evening and left. Did you see that, sir, that's how he behaves. Pausing at the edge of the sidewalk, Ricardo Reis seems undecided. The sky is overcast, the air humid, but the clouds, although lying quite low, do not appear to augur rain. There is that inevitable moment when he is assailed by memories of the Hotel Bragança. He has just finished eating his dinner, has said, Until tomorrow, Ramón, and has gone off to sit on a sofa in the lounge, his back to the mirror. Presently Salvador will come to ask if he would like more coffee, A brandy perhaps, or a liqueur, Doctor, the specialty of the hotel, and he will say no, he rarely drinks spirits. The buzzer at the bottom of the stairs has sounded, the page raises his lamp to see who is entering, it must be Marcenda, today the train from the north was very late in arriving. A tram approaches, on its illuminated destination panel it has Estrela written, and the stop, as it happens, is right here, the driver sees the gentleman standing at the edge of the sidewalk. True, the gentleman made no sign requesting the tram to stop, but an experienced driver can tell that he has been waiting. Ricardo Reis gets on. At this hour

the tram is practically empty, ping-ping, the conductor rings the bell. The journey takes some time, the tram goes up the Avenida da Liberdade, along the Rua de Alexandre Herculano, across the Praça do Brasil, and up the Rua das Amoreiras. Once at the top, it goes along the Rua de Silva Carvalho, through the Campo de Ourique to the Rua de Ferreira Borges, and there at the intersection with the Rua de Domingos Sequeira, Ricardo Reis gets out. As it is already after ten, there are not many people around and few lights are to be seen in the tall façades of the buildings. This is to be expected, the residents tend to spend most of their time in the rear of the building, the women in the kitchen washing up the last of the dishes, the children already in bed, the men yawning in front of their newspaper or trying, despite the bad reception due to atmospheric disturbances, to tune in Radio Seville, for no particular reason, perhaps simply because they never had the opportunity of going there. Ricardo Reis proceeds along the Rua de Saraiva de Carvalho in the direction of the cemetery. As he gets closer, he meets fewer and fewer people, and with some way to go, the road is already deserted. He disappears into the dark stretch between two lampposts, emerges once more into the amber light. Ahead in the shadows he can hear the sound of the keys of the local night watchman, who is starting his rounds. Ricardo Reis crosses the square toward the main gate, which is locked. The watchman looks at him from afar, then continues walking, Someone, he thinks, about to unburden his sorrow by weeping in the night, perhaps he has lost a wife or child, poor man, or his mother, probably his mother, mothers are always dying, a frail little woman and exceedingly old, who closed her eyes without seeing her son, I wonder where he is, she mused, then passed away, that is how people part. Perhaps it is because he is responsible for the tranquillity of these streets that the night watchman is given to such tender thoughts. He has no memories of his own mother. How often this happens, that we feel sorry for others, never for ourselves. Ricardo Reis goes up to the grating, touches the bars with his hands. From within, almost inaudible, comes a whispering, the breeze circling the branches of the cypress trees, poor trees, stripped bare of leaves. But the senses are deceived, the noise we hear is only the snoring of those who are asleep in those tall buildings, and in those low houses beyond the walls, strains of music, the hum of words, the woman who murmurs, I feel so tired, I'm going to lie down. That is what Ricardo Reis is saying to himself, I feel so tired. He puts his hand through the grating, but no other hand comes to shake his. Reduced to corpses, these people cannot even lift an arm.

Fernando Pessoa appeared two nights later. Ricardo Reis was returning after dining on soup, a plate of fish, bread, fruit, coffee. There are two glasses on the table. He finishes every meal, as we know, with a glass of wine, yet there is not a single waiter who can say of this customer, He was in the habit of drinking too much, he would rise from the table, almost fall over. Language owes its fascination to contradictions such as these, no one can rise and fall at the same time, yet we have seen it happen often or possibly even experienced it ourselves. But whenever Fernando Pessoa has appeared, Ricardo Reis has always been clearheaded, and he is clearheaded now as he watches the poet, whose back is turned to him, seated on the bench closest to Adamastor. That long, slender neck is unmistakable, and the sparse hair on the crown of the head. Besides, there are not many people who go around without a hat or raincoat. The weather has certainly been milder, but it still turns chilly at night. Ricardo Reis sat down beside Fernando Pessoa. In the darkness the pallor of the poet's skin, the whiteness of his shirt, is accentuated, the rest is dim, his black suit barely distinguishable from the shadow thrown by the statue. There is no one else in the park. Over on the other bank of the river, a row of flickering lights can be seen on the water, but they look like stars, they sparkle, quiver as if about to go out, but persist. I thought you would never come back, said Ricardo Reis. I came a few days ago to visit you, but at your door I saw that you were occupied with Lydia, so I left, I was never fond of tableaux vivants, Fernando Pessoa replied, and one could make out his wan smile. His hands were clasped on his knee, his expression that of someone patiently awaiting his turn to be summoned or dismissed and who speaks in the meantime because silence would be more insufferable. I never expected that you would show such enterprise as a lover, that the fickle poet who sang the praises of the three muses, Neaera, Chloe, and Lydia, should settle for one of the three in the flesh is quite an achievement, tell me, have the other two never appeared. No, nor is that surprising, they are names one rarely hears nowadays. And what about that attractive girl, so refined, the one with the paralyzed arm, did you ever get around to telling me her name. Her name is Marcenda. A pretty name, tell me, have you seen her lately. I saw her the last time she was in Lisbon, about a month ago. Are you in love with her, I don't know, And what about Lydia, do you love her, That's different, But do you love her or not. She does not deny me her body. And what does that prove. Nothing, at least not as far as love is concerned, but do stop questioning me about my private affairs, I am much more interested in knowing why you didn't come back. To put it bluntly, because I was annoyed, With me, Yes, with you as well, not because you are what you are but because you are on that side, What side, The side of the living, it is difficult for one who is alive to understand the dead. I suspect that it is just as difficult for a dead man to understand the living. The dead man has the advantage of having been alive, he is familiar with the things of this world and of the other world, too, whereas the living are incapable of learning the one fundamental truth and profiting from it. What truth is that, That one must die. Those of us who are alive know that we will die. You don't know it, no one knows it, just as I didn't when I was alive, what we do know without a shadow of a doubt is that others die. As a philosophy, that strikes me as rather trivial. Of course it's trivial, you have no idea just how trivial everything becomes when seen from this side of death. But I am on the side

of life. Then you ought to know what things on that side are significant, To be alive is significant. My dear Reis, choose your words carefully, your Lydia is alive, your Marcenda is alive, yet you know nothing about them, nor could you learn, even if they attempted to tell you, the wall that separates the living from one another is no less opaque than the wall that separates the living from the dead. For anyone who believes this, death must be a consolation after all. Not really, because death is a kind of conscience, a judge who passes judgment on everything, on both himself and life. My dear Fernando, choose your words carefully, you put yourself at great risk of being absurd. If we do not say all words, however absurd, we will never say the essential words. And you, do you now know them. I have only started to become absurd. Yet once you wrote, Neophyte, there is no death, I was mistaken, Are you saying that now because you are dead, No, I am saying it because I was once alive, but I am saying it, above all, because I will never be alive again, if you can imagine what that means, never to be alive again. It sounds like something Pero Grulho would say. We've never had a better philosopher.

Ricardo Reis looked across the river. Some lights had gone out, others, barely visible, grew even dimmer as a soft mist began to gather over the water. You said the reason you didn't come back was that you were annoyed, It's true, Annoyed with me, Not so much with you, what has annoyed me and left me feeling weary is all this going back and forth, this tug of war between memory that pulls and oblivion that pushes, a useless contest, for oblivion and forgetting always win in the end. I haven't forgotten you. Let me tell you something, on this scale you do not weigh much. Then what is this memory that continues to summon you, The memory I retain of the world, I thought you were summoned by the memory the world retains of you, What a foolish idea, my dear Reis, the world forgets, as I've already told you, the world forgets everything. Do you think you've been forgotten. The world is so forgetful that it even fails to notice the absence of what has been forgotten. There is much vanity in these words. Of course, no poet is vainer than a minor one. In that case, I must be vainer than you. Allow me to say, without wishing to flatter you, that you are not a bad poet, But not as good as you, I believe you are. After we are both dead, if by then we are still remembered, or for as long as we are still remembered, it will be interesting to see on whose side the pointer of the scale leans. We will not care in the least about weights and weighers then. Neophyte, does death exist, It does. Ricardo Reis drew his raincoat tightly around him, It's getting chilly, if you wish to accompany me home, we can converse a while longer. Aren't you expecting any visitors today. No, and you are welcome to stay, as you did the last time. Are you feeling lonely tonight. Not to the extent of being desperate for company, but only because it occurs to me that a dead man might occasionally like to sit on a chair, under a roof, in comfort. I don't remember your being so facetious, Ricardo. I'm not trying to be facetious. He got to his feet and asked, Well, are you coming. Fernando Pessoa followed him, caught up with him at the first lamppost. At the entrance they encountered a man with his nose in the air. From the way he tilted his body, as if he were about to lose his balance, he appeared to be examining the windows, he looked as if he had paused for a moment after a hard climb up that steep road. Anyone seeing him would have said to

himself, Here is one of the many night birds you come across in this city of Lisbon, not everyone goes to bed with the lamb. But when Ricardo Reis drew closer, he was overcome by a strong whiff of onion. He recognized the police informer immediately. There are smells, each worth a hundred words, smells both good and bad, smells as revealing as full-length portraits, what brings this fellow prowling here. Perhaps because he did not wish to disgrace himself in the presence of Fernando Pessoa, he took the initiative and spoke first, What brings you here at this hour of night, Senhor Victor. The other replied as best he could, having no explanation prepared at this early stage of the surveillance, A coincidence, dear Doctor, a pure coincidence, I have just been visiting a relative who lives in the Rua do Conde Barão, poor woman, she has caught pneumonia. Victor did not entirely lose face, And so, Doctor, you are no longer staying at the hotel, with this clumsy question he showed his hand. After all, one can be a guest at the Hotel Brangança and take a stroll at night on the Alto de Santa Catarina. Ricardo Reis pretended not to notice, or he really did not notice, No, I am now living here, on the third floor. Oh. This cry of regret, although brief, polluted the atmosphere with an overpowering stench, a good thing that Ricardo Reis had the wind at his back, these are mercies granted by heaven. Victor said good-bye, releasing another whiff of foul breath, I wish you good luck, Doctor, should you need anything, remember, come and speak to Victor, only the other day our deputy chief remarked that if everybody was like Doctor Reis, so honest and polite, our job would be almost a pleasure, he will be delighted when I tell him we bumped into each other. Good-night, Senhor Victor, common courtesy demanded that he say something in reply, besides, he had his reputation to consider. As Ricardo Reis crossed the street followed by Fernando Pessoa, the police informer had the impression there were two shadows on the ground. These are the effects of reflected light, an illusion, after a certain age the eyes are not capable of distinguishing between the visible and the invisible. Victor continued to loiter on the sidewalk, waiting for the light to go on on the third floor, a routine, simple confirmation, he now knew that Ricardo Reis lived there. Not much walking or interrogating had been necessary, with the help of Salvador he had tracked down the porters and with the help of the porters had located the building, people are right when they say that anyone with a tongue in his head can travel to Rome, and from the Eternal City to the Alto de Santa Catarina the distance is not great.

Comfortably settled on the sofa in the study, Fernando Pessoa asked as he crossed his legs, Who was that friend of yours. He is not a friend. Thank goodness, he stank to high heaven, I've been wearing the same suit and shirt for the last five months, I haven't even changed my underwear, and I don't smell like that, but if he's not your friend, who is he then, and that deputy chief who seems to think so highly of you. They're both members of the police force, not long ago I was called in for questioning. I thought you were a law-abiding man, incapable of upsetting the authorities, I am a law-abiding man, You must have done something to be called in for questioning, I arrived here from Brazil, that is all. I'll bet Lydia was a virgin and she went, anguished and dishonored, to lodge a formal complaint. Even if Lydia had been a virgin and I had dishonored her, it would not

be to the Department for State Security and Defense that she would have taken her complaint. Is that the department that called you in, Yes, And here I was thinking it was an offense against public morality, There is nothing wrong with my morals, they are certainly no worse than those I see around me. You never mentioned this brush with the police, There was no opportunity, you stopped coming to see me. Did they do you any harm, arrest you, charge you, No, I was only asked a few questions, who were my friends in Brazil, why did I come back here, what contacts I made in Portugal since my return. What a joke if you had told them about me. I can imagine the look on their faces if I told them that from time to time I met with the ghost of Fernando Pessoa. Excuse me, my dear Reis, but I am no ghost. What are you then, I can't tell you, a ghost comes from the other world, I simply come from the cemetery at Prazeres. Then is the dead Fernando Pessoa the same as the Fernando Pessoa who was once alive. In one sense, yes. Anyhow, it would be extremely difficult to explain these meetings of ours to the police. Did you know that I once wrote some verses attacking Salazar, Did he realize that he was the object of the satire, I don't believe he did, Tell me, Fernando, who is or what is this Salazar that fate has wished upon us. He is Portugal's dictator, protector, paternal guide, professor, gentle potentate, one quarter sacristan, one quarter seer, one quarter Sebastião, one quarter Sidónio, the best of all possible leaders, given our character and temperament. Many p's and s's. A coincidence, I was not trying for alliteration. There are certain people who have that mania, they go into rapture over repetitions, actually believing that this device brings order to the world's chaos. We must not laugh at them, they are fastidious people, like the fanatics of symmetry. The love of symmetry, my dear Fernando, comes from a vital need for balance, it keeps us from falling, Like the pole used by tightrope walkers, Precisely, but to get back to Salazar, he is much praised in the foreign press. Bah, those are articles commissioned and paid for by the contributors themselves, as I've heard people say, But the press here also waxes lyrical in singing his praises, you only need to pick up a newspaper in order to learn that our Portugal is the most prosperous and contented nation on earth, or will be very soon, and that if other nations follow our example they will prosper. That's the way the wind is blowing. I can see you don't have much faith in newspapers, I used to read them, You say that in a tone that suggests resignation, Exhaustion, rather, you know what I mean, after one makes a strenuous physical effort the muscles become slack, one feels like closing his eyes and sleeping. You are sleepy. I still feel the exhaustion I experienced in life. Death is a strange thing, Stranger still when you see it from the shore where I am standing and suddenly realize that no two deaths are alike, to be dead is not the same for everyone, in some cases a man takes with him all life's burdens. Fernando Pessoa closed his eyes and lay back on the sofa. Ricardo Reis thought he saw tears between his eyelashes, but they might have been like the two shadows seen by Victor, the effects of reflected light, for as everyone knows, the dead do not weep. That exposed face without glasses, and with a thin mustache, because the hair on one's face and body lives longer, expressed a deep sorrow, a sorrow without redress, like the hurts of childhood. Then Fernando Pessoa opened his eyes, smiled, I dreamed I was alive. An interesting illusion. What is interesting is not that a dead man should dream he is alive, after all he has known life,

he has something to dream about, but rather that a man who is alive should dream that he is dead, because he has never known death. Soon you will be telling me that life and death are the same. Precisely, my dear Reis. In the space of one day you have stated three quite different things, that there is no death, that there is death, and now that life and death are the same. There was no other way of resolving the contradiction of the first two statements. And, as he said this, Fernando Pessoa gave a knowing smile.

Ricardo Reis got to his feet, I'm going to heat some coffee, I'll be right back. Listen Ricardo, since we've been discussing the press, I'd like to hear the latest news, it's one way of rounding off our evening. For the last five months you have not been in touch with the world, there are lots of things you will find difficult to understand. You, too, must have been puzzled by certain changes when you disembarked here after an absence of sixteen years, no doubt you had to connect the threads across time, finding certain threads without knots and certain knots without threads. The newspapers are in my bedroom, I'll go and fetch them, said Ricardo Reis. He went to the kitchen, returned with a small white-enamel coffeepot, a coffee cup, spoon, and sugar bowl, which he placed on the low table between the sofas, went out again, returned with the newspapers, poured the coffee into the cup, stirred in some sugar. Obviously you are no longer able to drink, If I had an hour of existence left, I would probably exchange it this very minute for a hot cup of coffee, You give more than England's King Henry, who exchanged only his kingdom for a horse, In order not to lose his kingdom, but forget the history of England and tell me what is happening in the world of the living. Ricardo Reis drank half a cup of coffee, then opened one of the newspapers and asked, Did you know it was Hitler's birthday, he is forty-seven. I don't consider that an important item of news. That's because you aren't German, if you were, you'd be less contemptuous. What else is there of interest. It says here that Hitler reviewed a parade of thirty-three thousand soldiers in an atmosphere of veneration that was almost sacred, the very words used here, and just to give you an idea, listen to this extract from the speech made by Goebbels to mark the occasion. Read it to me. When Hitler speaks, it is as if the vault of a temple were raised over the heads of the German people, How poetic, But that is nothing compared with the words of Baldur von Schirach. Who is this von Schirach, I don't recall the name, He is the leader of the Reich's Youth Movement, And what did he have to say. Hitler is God's gift to Germany, worship for our Führer transcends all differences of creed and allegiance. Satan himself couldn't have thought up that one, worship for a man uniting what worship for God has divided. And von Schirach goes further, he declares that if German youth pledges its love for Hitler, who is its god, if German youth strives to serve him loyally, it will be obeying the commandment received from the Eternal Father. Magnificent logic, here we have a god acting on behalf of another god for his own ends, the Son as arbiter and judge of the authority of the Father, which makes National Socialism a most holy enterprise. And here in Portugal we are not doing that badly when it comes to confusing the divine with the human, it looks almost as if we are turning back to the gods of antiquity. To those of your choice. I only borrowed the names. Go on. Well, according to a solemn declaration made by the Archbishop of Mitilene, Portugal is Christ and Christ is Portugal. Is that written

there, Word for word, That Portugal is Christ and Christ is Portugal, Exactly. Fernando Pessoa reflected for a moment, then laughed, a dry chuckle like a cough, really rather unpleasant, Pity this land, pity this people. Pity this land, he repeated with real tears in his eyes, still chuckling, I thought I had gone too far when I called Portugal holy in Mensagem, it is written there, Sao Portugal, and here a prince of the Church comes and proclaims that Portugal is Christ. And that Christ is Portugal, don't forget. If that is the case, we had better find out, and soon, what virgin gave birth to us, what devil tempted us, what Judas betrayed us, what nails crucified us, what grave we lie in, what resurrection awaits us. You forgot the miracles. What greater miracle could you wish for than the simple truth that we exist, that we continue to exist, I'm not speaking about myself, obviously. The way we're going, I don't know how long we will continue to exist. But you have to admit that we are well ahead of Germany, here it is the Church itself that establishes our divinity, we could even do without this God-sent Salazar since we are Christ Himself. A pity that you died so young, my dear Fernando, because Portugal is now about to fulfill her destiny. Then let us and the world believe the words of the archbishop. No one can deny that we are doing our utmost to achieve happiness, would you now like to hear what Cardinal Cerejeira said to the seminarians. I'm not sure whether I could stand the shock. You are not a seminarian. All the more reason, but who am I to question the will of God, go ahead, read it to me. Be angelically pure, eucharistically fervent, and ardently patriotic. He said that, He did, It only remains for me to die, But you are already dead, Poor me, not even that is left. Ricardo Reis poured himself another cup of coffee. If you drink one coffee after another, you won't sleep, Fernando Pessoa warned him. Never mind, a sleepless night never did anyone harm, and sometimes it can be a help. Read me some more news. In a minute, first tell me, don't you find this latest novelty in Portugal and Germany disturbing, the political use of God. It may be disturbing but it is hardly a novelty, ever since the Hebrews promoted God to the rank of general others have followed suit, the Arabs invaded Europe to the cries of God wills it, the English enlisted God to guard their king, and the French swear that God is French. Our Gil Vicente swore that God is Portuguese. He must be right, if Christ is Por tugal, but read me some more news before I take my leave. Aren't you staying, There are certain rules I must observe, last time I broke three in a row. Do the same tonight. No. Then listen carefully, I will now read without interruption, and if you have any comments to make, save them till the end, Pope Pius I condemns the immorality of certain films, Maximino Correia has declared that Angola is more Portuguese than Portugal, because since the time of Diogo Cao the only sovereignty Angola has recognized is that of the Portuguese, in Olhão bread has been distributed to the poor in the barracks square of the National Republican Guard, there are rumors that a secret faction has been formed by the military in Spain, at a reception held at the Geographical Society to celebrate Colonial Week women prominent in high society sat cheek by jowl with the lower orders, according to the newspaper Pueblo Gallego fifty thousand Spaniards have taken refuge in Portugal, in Tavares salmon is selling at thirty-six escudos per kilo, That's much too expensive, Do you like salmon, I used to loathe it. That's all, unless you want to hear about outbreaks of disorder and violence. What time is it, Almost midnight, How time passes, Are you going, I am, Would you like me to

accompany you, For you it is still too early, Precisely, You misunderstand, what I meant is that it is too early for you to accompany me where I am going. I am only one year older than you, by the natural order of things. What is the natural order of things. That is how one usually expresses it, by the natural order of things I should have died first. As you can see, things have no natural order. Fernando Pessoa rose from the sofa, buttoned his jacket, and adjusted the knot in his tie, going by the natural order of things he would have done just the opposite, Well, I'm off now, I'll see you one of these days, and thanks for being so patient, the world is in even worse shape than when I left it, and Spain is almost certainly heading for civil war. Do you think so. If the best prophets are those who are already dead, then at least I have that advantage. Try not to make any noise when you go downstairs, on account of the neighbors. I shall descend like a feather. And don't bang the front door, Don't worry, the lid of the tomb makes no echo. Good night, Fernando, Sleep well, Ricardo.

Whether it was the effect of this somber conversation or because he had drunk too much coffee, Ricardo Reis did not sleep well. He woke up several times, and in his sleep imagined he could hear his own heart beating inside his pillow. When he awoke, he lay on his back to stop the noise, then he began to hear it again inside his chest, his rib cage, he remembered the autopsies he had witnessed and could see his living heart throbbing in anguish as if each contraction were its last. Difficult sleep returned, and finally settled into deep sleep as dawn began to break. When the paper boy arrived and threw the newspaper at his window, he made no attempt to get up. In such cases the boy climbs the stairs and leaves the paper on the doormat, the new one on top, because the others, delivered on previous days, are now used to clean the dirt off one's shoes, Sic transit notitia mundi, blessed be he who invented Latin. Standing in one corner of the doorway is the pitcher with the daily quart of milk, hanging from the doorknob is the bag of bread. Lydia will bring these things inside when she arrives after eleven o'clock, because this is her day off. She could not get away any earlier, at the last minute Salvador, as demanding and unreasonable as ever, ordered her to clean and prepare another three rooms. Nor can she stay long, she must go and visit her mother, who is all on her own, to find out if there is any news from her brother, who sailed to Oporto aboard the Afonso de Albuquerque and has returned. Hearing her come in, Ricardo Reis called out in a sleepy voice. She appeared in the doorway, still holding the key, the bread, the milk, and the newspaper in her arms, and said, Good morning, Doctor. He replied, Good morning, Lydia. This is how they greeted each other the first day they met and this is how they will go on greeting each other, she will never summon the courage to say, Good morning, Ricardo, even if he asks her to, which is not likely, he is being much too familiar as it is, receiving her in this state, unshaven, unwashed, hair uncombed, breath bad. Going to the kitchen to deposit the milk and bread, Lydia returned with the newspaper, then went off to prepare breakfast, while Ricardo Reis unfolded and opened the pages, holding them carefully by the margins so as not to dirty his fingers, lifting the paper high so as not to dirty the top fold of his sheet. These are the fussy little gestures, consciously cultivated, of a man who surrounds himself with boundaries. Opening the paper, he remembered

doing the exact same thing several hours earlier, and once more felt that Fernando Pessoa had been there a very long time ago, as if a memory so recent were really a memory from the days when Fernando Pessoa, having broken his glasses, had asked him, I say, Reis, read me the news, the more important items. The reports on the war, No, they're not worth bothering with, I'll read them tomorrow, besides they never vary. This was in June in the year nineteen sixteen, and only a few days before that Ricardo Reis had written the most ambitious of his odes, the one that begins, I have heard it said that in times gone by, when Persia. From the kitchen comes the appetizing smell of toasted bread, the muffled sounds of crockery, then Lydia's footsteps in the hallway. Quite composed this time, she carries in the tray, goes through the same professional routine, except there is no need to knock, the door is open. Without fear of appearing to take liberties she can ask this long-standing guest, So you're still in bed this morning. I didn't have a very good night, it took me forever to get to sleep, Did you stay out late, I wish I had, as it happened I was in bed before midnight, I didn't even leave the apartment. Whether Lydia believes him or not, we know that he is telling the truth. The tray rests on the guest's lap in room two hundred and one, the maid pours his coffee and milk, arranges the toast and marmalade within his reach, adjusts the position of the napkin, then informs him, I can't stay today, I'll give the place a quick tidy-up and then I'm off, I want to visit my mother, she is starting to complain that she hardly ever sees me these days, I rush in and out, she even asked me if I found myself a man and was thinking of getting married. Ricardo Reis smiles, disconcerted, not knowing how to react. We certainly do not expect him to say, You already have a man, and as for marriage, it is just as well that you brought up the subject, it is time we discussed our future. No, he simply smiles, looks at her with an expression that has suddenly become paternal. Lydia retired to the kitchen, took with her no reply, if she ever expected one. She blurted out these words unintentionally, her mother has never once mentioned either men or marriage. Ricardo Reis finished eating, pushed the tray to the foot of the bed, leaned back to read the newspaper. The grand parade organized by the corporative organizations has shown that it is not impossible to reach a fair and reasonable agreement between employers and workers. He went on reading quietly, paying little attention to the argument, in his heart of hearts he could not decide whether he agreed or disagreed. Corporatism, the adjustment of each social class to the ambiance and setting best suited to it, provides the best way of transforming modern society. With this new prescription for a heaven on earth he concluded his reading of the lead article, then turned to the foreign news, In France the first ballot in the legislative elections will be held tomorrow, the troops under the command of Badoglio are preparing to resume their advance on Addis Ababa. At this moment Lydia appeared at the door of the bedroom with her sleeves rolled up, anxious to know, Did you see the airship yesterday, What airship, The Zeppelin, it passed right over the hotel, I didn't. But he was seeing it this very minute, on the open page of the newspaper, the gigantic, Adamastorlike dirigible bearing the name and title of the man who built her, Graf Zeppelin, German count, general, and aeronaut. There it goes flying over the city of Lisbon, over the river and the houses. People stop on the sidewalk, emerge from the shops, lean out of tram windows, appear on their balconies, they cry out

to one another in order to share this wondrous sight, and a wit makes the inevitable quip, Look at the flying sausage. There's a picture here, Ricardo Reis said, and Lydia approached the bed, came so close that it seemed a shame not to embrace her hips with his free arm. She laughed, Behave, then said, It's huge, in the paper it looks even bigger than the real thing, and what about that cross stuck there at the back. They call it the gammadion or swastika. It's ugly. I can assure you there are many people who think it is the nicest cross of all, It reminds me of a spider, There were once religions in the Orient for which this cross represented happiness and salvation, Really, Yes, I'm not joking. Then why put the swastika on the tail of the Zeppelin. Because the airship is German and the swastika has now become the emblem of Germany, Of the Nazis, What do you know about the Nazis, Only what my brother has told me, Your brother who is in the Navy, Yes, Daniel, the only brother I have. Has he come back from Oporto, I haven't seen him yet, but he has, How do you know, His ship is anchored in front of the Terreiro do Paço, I would recognize it anywhere. Don't you want to come to bed, I promised my mother I would be there in time for lunch, Just for a little while, then you can go. Ricardo Reis lowered his hand to stroke the curve of her leg, lifted her skirt, reached above her garter, touched her bare skin. Lydia said, No, no, but started to weaken, her knees trembling. That was when Ricardo Reis found that his penis, for the first time in his life, was not reacting. In panic he withdrew his hand and muttered, Run the water for me, I want to take a bath. She did not understand, had started to unfasten the waistband of her skirt, to unbutton her blouse, when he repeated in a voice suddenly shrill, I must have a bath, run the water for me. He tossed the newspaper to the floor, brusquely slipped under the sheets and turned his face to the wall, almost overturning the breakfast tray. Lydia watched him in bewilderment, What have I done, she wondered. His hands, unseen by her, were trying to rouse his limp penis, they struggled in vain, one moment with violent rage, the next with despair. Sadly, Lydia withdrew, taking the tray with her, she went to wash the dishes until they sparkled like the morning sun, but first she lit the heater, started running water into the bathtub, checked the temperature as it poured from the spigot, passed wet fingers over her wet eyes. What could I have done to upset him when I was ready to get into bed with him. Misunderstandings of this nature are impossible to avoid, if only he had said to her, I cannot, I'm not in the mood, she would not have minded. Even if there was no question of coupling she would have joined him, she would have lain down beside him in silence, and comforted him until he overcame that moment of panic, perhaps she would have placed her hand on his penis, gently, without any design, simply to reassure him, Stop worrying, it's not the end of the world. They would both sleep peacefully, she having forgotten that her mother was expecting her with the lunch on the table, the mother finally saying to her sailor son, Let's have our lunch, you can no longer rely on your sister, she doesn't seem to be the same girl these days. Such are life's contradictions and injustices.

Lydia appeared at the door of the bedroom. I'll see you in a week, she said, and departed, miserable, leaving him no less miserable, she not knowing what evil she has done, he knowing full well what evil has befallen him. The sound of running water, the

smell of steam pervades the apartment. Ricardo Reis remains in bed a few more minutes, he knows that the bathtub is immense, a Mediterranean sea when full, finally he gets up, throws his dressing gown over his shoulders, and shuffles on slippered feet to the bathroom. Fortunately he cannot see himself in the mirror clouded by steam, this must be the compassion shown by mirrors at certain critical moments. Then he thinks, It's not the end of the world, this can happen to anyone, my turn had to come sooner or later. What do you think, Doctor. Don't worry, I'll give you a prescription for some new pills that ought to remedy this little problem, the important thing is not to worry, to get out and distract yourself, go see a movie, if this is truly the first time it has happened, then you can consider yourself a lucky man. Removing his clothes, Ricardo Reis ran a little cold water into that great scalding lake and immersed himself little by little, as if he were abandoning the world of air. Relaxed, his limbs were pushed to the surface, to float between two bodies of water, even his withered penis stirred, caught like uprooted seaweed on the tide, beckoning. Ricardo Reis gloomily watched, as if the thing did not belong to him, Is it mine or do I belong to it, he sought no answer, the question alone causing as much anguish as he could bear.

Three days later, Marcenda appeared at the office. She told the receptionist that she wished to be seen last, that she was not there as a patient. Tell the doctor, when all the other patients have gone, that Marcenda Sampaio is here, and she slipped a twenty-escudo note into the receptionist's pocket. The message was delivered at the opportune moment, when Ricardo Reis had already removed his white coat, almost like a cassock and barely three-quarter length, which explains why he was not and never would be a high priest of this hygienic cult, but only the sacristan responsible for emptying and washing the altar cruets, for lighting and putting out the candles, for inscribing the certificates, needless to say, of death. At times he experienced the vague regret that he had not specialized in obstetrics, not because this dealt with women's most private and precious organs but because it meant bringing children into the world, other people's children, who serve as consolation when we have no children of our own, at least none we are aware of. As an obstetrician he would feel new hearts beating as they came into the world, on occasion hold in his own hands those skinny, sticky little creatures covered with blood and mucus, tears and sweat, and hear that first cry which has no meaning or a meaning beyond our understanding. He slipped back into his dressing gown, struggled to find the sleeves, which were suddenly twisted, and tried to decide whether he should receive Marcenda at the door or wait for her behind his desk with one hand placed professionally on his vade mecum, the font of all medical knowledge, the bible of sorrows. Approaching the window that looked onto the square, the elms, the linden trees in flower, the statue of the musketeer, he chose the square as the place to receive Marcenda, if he could say to her without sounding absurd, It is spring, look how delightful, that pigeon perched on the head of Camoes, others perched on his shoulders. The only real justification for statues is to provide perches for pigeons. But social convention prevailed, Marcenda appeared at his door, Do go in, the receptionist was saying obsequiously, a woman of subtle perception, experienced in the art of discriminating

between the different social classes. Ricardo Reis forgot the elms, the linden trees, and the pigeons took flight, something must have startled them. In the Praça de Luis de Camoes shooting is prohibited throughout the year. If this woman were a pigeon, she would be unable to fly with that injured wing. How have you been, Marcenda, I'm delighted to see you, and your father, is he well. He's fine, thank you, Doctor, he was unable to come but sends his greetings. Obeying her instructions, the receptionist withdrew, closed the door behind her. Ricardo Reis continued to hold Marcenda's hand, and they remained thus, in silence, until he pointed to a chair. She sat, left hand still in her pocket. Even the receptionist, who misses nothing, would swear that the girl now in the consulting room shows no signs of any physical infirmity, in fact she is really quite attractive, a little on the thin side, perhaps, but she is so young, thinness suits her. Now then, how is your health these days, Ricardo Reis inquired. Marcenda replied, Much the same, I doubt that I will be going back to the specialist, at least not the one here in Lisbon. There are no signs of improvement, no indication of movement or that you are getting back some feeling. Nothing that encourages me. And what about your heart, That is functioning perfectly, do you wish to check it, I am not your doctor. But now that you are a heart specialist, you must have gained some knowledge, which means I can consult you. Sarcasm doesn't become you, I do my best, and that is precious little, I'm merely standing in for a colleague temporarily, as I explained in my letter. In one of your letters. Pretend you never received the other letter, that it went astray. Do you regret having written it. There is nothing more pointless in this world than regret, people who express it merely want to be forgiven, then they fall back into their weakness, for each of us, deep down, continues to take pride in his weakness. I did not regret that I went to your apartment, I do not regret it even now, and if it is a mistake to have allowed you to kiss me, to have kissed you, I still take pride in this mistake. Between us there was only a kiss, not a mortal sin. It was my first kiss, perhaps that is why I feel no remorse. No one ever kissed you before, That was my first kiss. It will soon be time to close the office, would you like to come back to the apartment, where we can talk in greater privacy. I'd rather not. We could enter the building separately, letting some time elapse in between, I won't expose you to shame. No, I'd prefer to stay here a little longer, if you can spare the time. Believe me, I wouldn't harm you, I'm really quite harmless. What does that smile mean. Nothing, only that I'm a gentle soul by nature, if you want me to spell it out, I would say that at this moment I'm at peace with the world, the waters are tranquil, that was all my smile was saying. I'd rather not go to your apartment, let's stay here and talk, pretend I am one of your patients. What's the problem, then. This smile is much better than the other one. Marcenda took her left hand from her pocket, settled it on her lap, covered it with the other hand, seemed about to say, as one confiding an ailment, Can you believe it, Doctor, fate saddled me with this arm after saddling me already with an errant heart, but instead she said, We live so far apart, there is such a difference in our ages, in our destinies. You repeat what you wrote in your letter. The truth is that I like you, Ricardo, only I cannot say to what extent. Aman, when he reaches my age, looks foolish when he starts making declarations of love. But I enjoyed reading them, and now hearing them. I am making no declaration of love, But you are. We are exchanging

greetings, sprigs of flowers, it is true that they are pretty, I mean the flowers, but they are cut, they will soon wilt, they are unaware of this and we pretend not to notice. My flowers I place in water, and will watch them until the colors fade. Then you will not watch them long. Now I am watching you. I am no flower. You are a man, I am capable of knowing the difference. A tranquil man, who sits on a riverbank watching what the current carries past, perhaps waiting for himself to be swept away. At this moment it is me that you are watching, your eyes tell me so, It is true, I see you being swept away like a branch in flower, a branch on which a bird sits warbling, Don't make me cry.

Ricardo Reis went to the window, drew back the curtain. There were no pigeons perched on the statue, instead they were flying in rapid circles above the square, a swirling vortex. Marcenda approached him, On my way here I saw a pigeon perched on the statue's arm, close to its heart. That's quite common, they prefer a sheltered spot, You cannot see the statue from here, it faces the other way. The curtain was closed once more. They moved away from the window, and Marcenda said, I must go. Ricardo Reis held her left hand, brought it to his lips, then stroked it slowly, as if he were reviving a bird numb with cold. The next moment he was kissing Marcenda on the lips and she him, a second kiss, then Ricardo Reis can feel his blood descending, thundering like a mighty cascade, into deep caverns, a metaphorical allusion to the corpora cavernosa, in other words his penis stiffens, So it wasn't dead after all, he didn't believe me when I told him not to worry. Marcenda feels it and pulls away, then embraces him again to feel it. If questioned, she would swear that was not true, foolish virgin, but their lips have not separated. At last she moaned, I must go. Her strength drained, she broke free and collapsed into a chair. Marcenda, marry me, Ricardo Reis pleaded. She looked at him, pale, and said, No, said it very slowly, who would have believed that anyone could take so long to utter so short a word, it did not take her as long to say what followed, We would not be happy. For several minutes they remained silent. For the third time Marcenda said, I must go, but this time she got up and made for the door. He followed her, tried to detain her, but she was already in the hall, the receptionist appeared at the far end, whereupon Ricardo Reis said in a loud voice, I'll see you out, which he did. They said good-bye and shook hands. He said, Give my regards to your father. She began, One day, but did not finish, someone else will finish it, who knows when and for what reason, but for now there is only this, One day. The door is closed, the receptionist asks, Do you need me, Doctor. No. Well, if you will excuse me, I'll be off, everyone has gone now, the other doctors too. I'll stay a few more minutes, I must sort out some papers. Good evening, Doctor, Good evening, Carlota, because that was her name.

Ricardo Reis returned to his office, drew back the curtain. Marcenda still had not reached the bottom of the stairs. The shadows of twilight enshrouded the square. The pigeons were nestling on the uppermost branches of the elm trees, as silent as phantoms, or else it was the shadows of the pigeons that had perched on those very branches in years gone by, or perched on the ruins that once stood here, before the ground was leveled in order to build the square and erect the statue. Now, crossing the square in the direction of the Rua do Alecrim, Marcenda turns around to see if the pigeon

is still perched on the arm of Camoes, and between the flowering branches of the linden trees she catches a glimpse of a white face behind a windowpane. If anyone witnessed these movements he would not have understood their meaning, not even Carlota, who had concealed herself under the stairs to spy, suspecting that the visitor would return to the office to converse to her heart's content with the doctor. Not at all a bad idea, but it never even occurred to Marcenda, and Ricardo Reis never got around to asking himself if that was the reason he stayed behind.

A few days later a letter arrived, the same pale violet color, the same black postmark, the unmistakable handwriting, angular because the sheet of paper is not held in place by the other hand. There is the same long hesitation before Ricardo Reis finally opens the envelope, the same jaded face, and the same words, What a fool I was to visit you, it won't happen again, we will not see each other anymore, but believe me, I will never forget you as long as I live, if things had been different, if I had been older, if this incurable arm, yes, the specialist finally admitted that there is no cure, that the sun-lamp treatment, the electric shocks, and massage were a waste of time, I suspected as much, I did not even weep, it is not myself I pity but my arm, I nurse it as if it were a child that will never leave the cradle, I stroke it as if it were a small stray animal found abandoned on the street, my poor arm, what would become of it without me, and so farewell, dear friend, my father continues to insist that I go to Fatima and I have decided to go, just to please him, if this is what he needs to ease his conscience and convince him that it is the will of God, for we can do nothing contrary to the will of God and should not try, I am not asking you to forget me, my friend, on the contrary, I hope you will think of me every day, but do not write, I will make no more visits to the poste restante, now I must close, I have said all I had to say. Marcenda does not write in this manner, she observes all the rules of syntax and punctuation, it is Ricardo Reis who jumps from line to line in search of the essential, ignoring the texture of her phrasing. The exclamation marks are his, the sudden breaks that make for eloquence, but though he read the letter a second and third time, he learned no more, because he had read everything, just as Marcenda had said everything. A man receives a sealed letter as his ship leaves port, and opens it in midocean. There is nothing except sea and sky and the deck on which he is standing, and the letter says that from now on there will be no more ports of refuge for him, no more uncharted lands to discover, no destination, nothing left for him but to navigate like the Flying Dutchman, hoist and furl the sails, man the pump, mend and sew, scrape away the rust, and wait. Still holding the letter, he goes to the window and sees Adamastor, the two old men seated in the giant's shadow, and he asks himself if his disappointment is genuine, not playacting, if he truly believed he was in love with Marcenda, if in his heart of hearts he ever really wanted to marry her, or whether all this might not be the banal effect of loneliness, the simple need to believe that there are some good things in life, love, for example, that happiness which unhappy people are continually talking about, if happiness and love are possible for our Ricardo Reis, or for Fernando Pessoa, if he were not dead. There is no doubt that Marcenda exists, this letter was clearly written by her, but Marcenda, who is she, what is there in common between the girl seen for the first time in the dining room of the Hotel Bragança, when she was a stranger to him, and this Marcenda whose name and person now fill the thoughts and feelings and words of Ricardo Reis. Marcenda is a place of anchorage. What was she then, what is she now, a wake on the surface of the sea that disappears once the ship has passed, there is still some spray, the churning of the rudder, I have passed through the spray, what thing has passed through me. Ricardo Reis reads the letter one more time, the closing paragraph, where she writes, Do not write to me, and tells himself that of course he will write, to say who knows what, he will decide later, and if she keeps her promise, then let the letter sit

at the poste restante, the important thing is to write. But then he remembers that Doctor Sampaio is well known in Coimbra, a notary is always a prominent figure in society, and post offices are staffed, as everyone knows, by many conscientious and loyal employees, so it is not at all impossible that the secret letter will find its way to his residence, or worse still, to his office, provoking outrage. He will not write. In this letter he would have put all the things he never got around to saying, not in the hope of changing the course of events but in order to make it clear that those events are so numerous that even saying everything about them will not change their course. Yet he would have liked at least to let Marcenda know that Doctor Reis, the man who kissed her and asked her to marry him, is a poet and not just an ordinary general practitioner acting as locum tenens for an indisposed specialist in diseases of the heart and lungs, and not a bad locum tenens either, despite his lack of scientific training, for there is no evidence that the mortality rate has risen since he came into the practice. Imagine Marcenda's surprise if he had said to her at the outset, Did you know, Marcenda, that I am a poet, in the casual tone of one who does not attach any great importance to his talent. Naturally she would realize that he was being modest, she would be flattered that he took her into his confidence, would look at him with romantic tenderness, How wonderful, how fortunate I am, I can now see what a difference it makes to be loved by a poet, I must ask him to read me his poems, I feel certain he will dedicate some to me, a common habit among poets, who are much given to dedications. Ricardo Reis, to avoid any eventual outbursts of jealousy, will explain that the women Marcenda finds mentioned in his poems are not real women, only lyrical abstractions, fictions, imaginary interlocutresses, if one can give the name of interlocutress to one who has no voice. A poet does not ask that his muses speak, only that they exist, Neaera, Lydia, Chloe. There's a coincidence for you, that after writing poems for so many years to an anonymous, ethereal Lydia I should come across a chambermaid with this name, only the name, in all other respects there is no resemblance whatsoever. Ricardo Reis explains, and then explains a second time, not because the matter is so very complicated but because he is apprehensive about the next step, which poem will he choose, what will Marcenda say when she hears it, what will be the expression on her face, she might ask to see with her own eyes what she has heard him read, then read the poem herself in a low voice, In a changing, uncertain confluence, as the river is formed by its waves, so contemplate your days, and if you see yourself pass as another, be silent. He reads it, reads it a second time, he sees from her face that she understands, perhaps some memory has helped her, the memory of those words he spoke in the consulting room the last time we were together, about a man who sits on a riverbank watching what the water carries past, waiting to see himself going past with the current. Clearly there is a difference between prose and poetry, that is why I understood it so well the first time and now find myself struggling to understand it. Ricardo Reis asks her, Do you like it, and she says, Oh, very much. There could scarcely be a more gratifying response, but poets are eternally dissatisfied, this one has been told everything a poet could wish to hear, God Himself would be delighted to hear such praise for the world He created, Ricardo Reis, however, looks gloomy and sad, an Adamastor who cannot wrench himself free of the marble in which he has been trapped by fraud and

deception, his flesh and bones transformed into stone, his tongue likewise. Why have you become so quiet, Marcenda asks, but he does not answer.

If these are private sorrows, Portugal, taken as a whole, is not without its joys. Two anniversaries have just been celebrated, the first was Professor Antonio de Oliveira Salazar's entrance into public life eight years ago, it seems like yesterday, how time flies, to save his country and ours from the abyss, to restore its fortunes, to provide a new political doctrine, to instill faith, enthusiasm, and confidence in the future, as the newspaper says. The other anniversary also concerns the esteemed professor, albeit the event is one of more personal joy, his and ours, namely his forty-seventh birthday, he was born the same year Hitler came into the world, only a few days separate them, there is a coincidence for you. And we are about to celebrate National Labor Day with a parade of thousands of workers in Barcelos all with their arms outstretched in Roman style, the gesture has survived from the time Braga was called Bracara Augusta, and a hundred decorated floats will depict scenes of country life, one representing the wine harvest, another the pressing of grapes, then hoeing, husking, threshing, then the kiln where they make clay cocks and fifes, then the embroideress with her lace bobbins, the fisherman with his net and oar, the miller with his donkey and sack of flour, the spinstress with her spindle and distaff, that makes ten floats and there are ninety more. Ah how the people of Portugal strive to be good and industrious, and as a reward they are well provided with entertainments, concerts given by their philharmonic band, light shows, dance exhibitions, fireworks, battles with flowers, banquets, one long continuous festival. Now, in the face of such high-spirited merrymaking we might remark, indeed it is our duty to do so, that May Day everywhere has lost its traditional meaning, if in the streets of Madrid they sing the Internationale and applaud the Revolution. It is not our fault, such excesses are not tolerated in our country. Thanks be to God, cry in chorus the fifty thousand Spaniards who have taken refuge in this oasis of peace. And now that the Left has won the elections in France and the Socialist leader Blum has declared himself ready to form a Popular Front government, we can expect another horde of refugees. Over the august forehead of Europe storm clouds gather, they are not content with riding on the haunches of the raging Spanish bull, Chanticleer now triumphs with his ardent crowing, but when all is said and done, the first corn may go to the sparrows but the pick of the harvest goes to the deserving. Let us listen attentively to Marshal Petain who despite his eighty venerable winters does not mince words. In my experience, the old man says, everything that is international is pernicious, everything that is national is beneficial and productive. One who speaks in this vein will not die without leaving his mark.

And the war in Ethiopia has ended. Mussolini made the announcement from the palace balcony, I hereby declare to the Italian people and the world that the war has ended, and in response to this powerful voice the multitudes of Rome, Milan, Naples, and all Italy acclaimed him il Duce, farmers abandoned their fields, workers left their factories, dancing and singing through the streets with patriotic fervor. Benito was telling the truth when he said that Italy had an imperial soul. From historic tombs arose the

majestic shadows of Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Vespasian, Nerva, Septimius Severus, Domitian, Caracalla, and tutti quanti, restored to their former glory after years of waiting and hoping, there they stand lined up, forming a guard of honor for the new heir, for the imposing presence of Victor Emmanuel III, proclaimed in every tongue Emperor of Italian East Africa, while Winston Churchill gives his blessing, In the present world situation, the maintenance or escalation of sanctions against Italy could result in a shameful war without bringing the slightest benefit to the Ethiopian people. So let us remain calm. Should it come, war will be war, since that is its name, but it will not be shameful, just as the war against the Abyssinians was not shameful.

Addis Ababa, such a poetic name, such a handsome race, it means New Flower. Addis Ababa is in flames, her streets covered with dead bodies, marauders are destroying homes, committing rape, looting and beheading women and children as Badoglio's troops approach. The Negus has fled to French Somalia, from where he will sail to Palestine aboard a British cruiser, and later, toward the end of the month, before a solemn gathering of the League of Nations in Geneva he will ask, What reply should I take back to my people. But after he speaks, no one replies, and before he got up to speak, he was jeered by the Italian journalists. Let us show tolerance, it is well known that nationalist fanaticism can easily dim one's intelligence, so he that is without sin, let him cast the first stone. Addis Ababa is in flames, her streets are covered with dead bodies, marauders are destroying homes, committing rape, looting and beheading women and children, as Badoglio's troops approach. Mussolini declared, This remarkable achievement has sealed the fate of Ethiopia, and the wise Marconi warned, Those who would seek to offer resistance to Italy are committing the most dangerous of follies, and Anthony Eden argued, Circumstances advise the lifting of sanctions, and The Manchester Guardian, speaking for the British Government, said, There are many reasons why colonies should be handed over to Germany, and Goebbels said, The League of Nations is a good thing but flying squadrons are better. Addis Ababa is in flames, her streets are covered with dead bodies, marauders are destroying homes, committing rape, looting, beheading women and children, as Badoglio's troops approach, Addis Ababa was in flames, homes burned, castles were sacked, bishops stripped, women raped by knights, their children pawns skewered with swords, and blood flowed in the streets. A shadow crosses the mind of Ricardo Reis. What is this, where do these words come from, the newspaper says only that Addis Ababa is in flames, that marauders are looting, committing rape, and beheading women and children as Badoglio's troops approach, the Diário de Notícias makes no mention of knights, bishops, and pawns, there is no reason to think that in Addis Ababa chess players were playing a game of chess. Ricardo Reis consulted The God of the Labyrinth on his bedside table. Here it is, on the opening page, The body discovered by the first chess player, its arms outstretched, occupies the squares of the King and Queen and their two pawns, its head is toward the enemy camp, its left hand in a white square, its right hand in a black square. In all the pages he has read there is only this one corpse, so it clearly was not along this route that the troops of Badoglio advanced. Ricardo Reis puts The God of the Labyrinth back in its place, he now knows

what he is looking for. He opens a drawer of the desk that once belonged to an Appeals Court judge, in years gone by handwritten notes relating to the Civil Code were kept in it, he takes out a folder tied with a ribbon, it contains his odes, the secret poems he never discussed with Marcenda, and manuscript pages, all first drafts, jottings, Lydia will come across them one day, at a time of irreparable loneliness. Master, placid are, the first sheet reads, and other sheets read, The gods are in exile, Crown me with roses while yet others tell, The god Pan is not dead, Apollo in his chariot has driven past, Once more, Lydia, come sit beside me on the riverbank, this is the ardent month of June, War comes, In the distance the mountains are covered with snow and sunlight, Nothing but flowers as far as the eye can see, The day's pallor is tinged with gold, Walk empty-handed, for wise is the man who contents himself with the spectacle of the world. More and more sheets of paper pass, just as the days have passed, the sea stretches level, the winds wail in secret, each thing has its season, so let there be days for renewal, let us keep this moist finger on the page, here it is, I heard how once upon a time when Persia, this is the poem, no other, this the chessboard and we the players, I Ricardo Reis, you, my reader. They are burning homes, castles have been sacked and bishops stripped, but when the ivory King is in peril who cares about the flesh and bones of sisters and mothers and children, if my flesh and bones have been turned to stone, transformed into a player playing chess. Addis Ababa means New Flower, all the rest has been said. Ricardo Reis puts away his poems, locks the drawer. Cities have fallen and people are suffering, freedom and life are ending, but you and I, let us imitate the Persians of this tale. If we jeered at the Negus like good Italians in the League of Nations, let us now croon like good Portuguese to the gentle breeze as we leave our homes. The doctor is in good spirits, the neighbor on the fourth floor remarks. Are you surprised, the one thing there is never any shortage of is patients, the neighbor from the second floor retorts. Two opinions, as the doctor from the third floor leaves the building talking to himself.

Ricardo Reis is in bed, Lydia's head resting on his right arm, their perspiring bodies covered only by a sheet. He is naked, and her chemise is above her waist. Both have forgotten, or put from their minds, the morning he was impotent and she did not know what she had done to be rejected. The neighbors, on their balconies at the rear of the building, exchange words with broad hints, emphatic gestures, much nodding and winking. They're at it again, The world is depraved, Who would believe it, They've lost all shame. These sour and envious women are unable to recapture their youth, when as little girls in short dresses they danced and sang Ring-a-ring-o' roses in the garden, ah how pretty they were in those days. Lydia is happy. A woman who goes to bed so willingly with a man is deaf to gossip, let voices slander her in hallways and courtyards, they cannot harm her, nor can hostile eyes when she bumps into those virtuous hypocrites on the stairs. Soon she will have to get out of bed and wash the dirty dishes which have accumulated, and iron the bedsheets, the shirts worn by this man who is lying beside her. Who could have told me that I would be, how shall I describe myself, his mistress. Not mistress, for no one will say of this Lydia, Did you know that she is having an affair with Ricardo Reis, or, Do you know Lydia, that woman who is the mistress of

Ricardo Reis. If anyone ever mentions her, he will say, Ricardo Reis has a really good maid, she does everything, he got a bargain there. Lydia stretches her legs, draws close to him, one last gesture of tranquil pleasure. It's hot, Ricardo Reis says, and she moves away a little, frees his arm, then sits up in bed and looks for her skirt, it is time to start doing some work. At that moment he tells her, Tomorrow I'm going to Fátima. She thought she had misunderstood, You're going where. To Fátima. I thought you didn't approve of such things. I'm going out of curiosity. I've never been there myself, my family doesn't go in much for religion. You surprise me. What Ricardo Reis meant was that it is usually people from the lower classes who believe in these devotions, but Lydia did not reply. Dressing in haste, she barely heard Ricardo Reis add, The trip will do me good, I've been cooped up here for so long, because she had other things on her mind now. Will you be away long, she asked, No, there and back, And where will you sleep, the place is so crowded, people have to sleep out in the open. I'll see when I get there, no one ever died from spending a night out of doors. Perhaps you'll bump into Senhorita Marcenda, Who, Senhorita Marcenda, she told me that she was hoping to go to Fátima sometime this month. Oh. She also said that she no longer visits the specialist in Lisbon, they've told her there is no cure, poor girl. You seem to know a great deal about Senhorita Marcenda. Very little, only that she is going to Fátima and that she won't be coming back to Lisbon anymore. Are you sorry. She was always very kind to me. I shouldn't think it likely that I will meet her among that multitude. Sometimes these things happen, look at me here in your apartment, who would ever have believed it, when you arrived from Brazil, after all, you might have gone to another hotel. Such are life's coincidences. It is fate. Do you believe in fate, There is nothing more certain than fate, Death is more certain, Death, too, is part of fate, but now I must iron your shirts and wash the dishes, and if there is still time I'll go and visit my mother, she's always complaining that she doesn't see much of me these days.

Lying back on the pillows, Ricardo Reis opened a book, not the one about Herbert Quain, which he had begun to wonder if he would ever finish, this was *O Desaparecido* by Carlos Queirós, a poet who might have been the nephew of Fernando Pessoa, had fate so ordained. A minute later he became aware that he was not reading, his eyes, rather, were fixed on the page, on a line whose meaning had suddenly become obscure. An extraordinary girl this Lydia, she says the simplest things, as if she were merely skimming the surface of more profound words which she cannot or will not utter. If I had not told her that I was going to Fatima, who knows whether she would have mentioned Marcenda, concealing her knowledge out of resentment and jealousy, emotions she betrayed back in the hotel. And these two women, the guest and the chambermaid, the rich girl and the poor servant, what did they have to discuss with each other. What if they should discuss me, neither suspecting the other, or just the reverse, playing Eve against Eve with much probing, scheming, parrying, subtle insinuations, clever silences. It is not inconceivable, on the other hand, that Marcenda simply said one day, Doctor Reis gave me a kiss, but we didn't go any further, and that Lydia simply replied, I sleep with him and I slept with him before he ever kissed me, that they then proceeded to discuss the

significance of these differences. He only kisses me when we are in bed together before and during you-know-what, never afterward. To me he said, I'm going to kiss you, but as for you-know-what, what men do to women, I am ignorant of it, because they've never done it to me. Do not worry, Senhorita Marcenda, one day you'll get married and then you'll find out what it's all about. You've experienced it, tell me, is it good. When you like the other person, And do you like him, I do. So do I, but I shall never see him again. You could marry him. If we married, perhaps I wouldn't like him anymore. As for me, I think I will always like him. The conversation did not end there, but their voices lowered to a whisper, perhaps they are confiding their intimate feelings, the weakness of women, now the talk is truly between Eve and Eve. Begone, Adam, you are not wanted here. Ricardo Reis, reading, not reading, came across a fishwife on the page, capitalized, O Fishwife, pass, I beseech you pass, flower of the race. Lord do not forgive them, for they know exactly what they are doing. The poetic discussion between this uncle and nephew would be intense. You're incorrigible, Pessoa, and you too Queirós, I'm content with what the gods in their wisdom have given me, a lucid and solemn awareness of things and human beings. He got up, put on his dressing gown, and in his slippers went to look for Lydia. In the kitchen ironing, she had removed her blouse in order to feel a little cooler. Seeing her like this, her white skin flushed with exertion, Ricardo Reis thought he owed her a kiss. He gripped her gently by her bare shoulders, drew her toward him, and without any further thought kissed her slowly, giving time to time and space to their lips, their tongues, their teeth. Lydia was breathless, he had never kissed her like this before, now she will be able to tell Marcenda if she ever sees her again, He didn't say, I'm going to kiss you, he just kissed me.

Early next morning, so early that he thought it prudent to set his alarm clock, Ricardo Reis departed for Fatima. The train pulled out of the Rossio station at five-fifty-five, but half an hour before it even arrived, the platform was crammed with passengers, people of all ages carrying baskets, sacks, blankets, demijohns, all chatting in loud voices and calling out to each other. Ricardo Reis had taken the precaution of buying a first-class, ticket, with a reserved seat, the guard obsequious with cap in hand. He had scarcely any luggage, a simple suitcase, ignoring Lydia's warning that in Fatima people slept out in the open, he would see when he arrived, there was bound to be accommodation for tourists and pilgrims of some social position. Seated comfortably by the window, Ricardo Reis contemplated the landscape, the mighty Tagus, the marshlands still flooded here and there, bulls grazing at random, frigates sailing upriver over resplendent water. After an absence of sixteen years, he had forgotten this view, and now fresh images imprinted themselves beside those restored by memory, as if it were only yesterday that he had made this journey. At the stations and signal stops en route, more and more people got on. The train is a real cattle train, there cannot have been a single empty seat in third class since it left the Rossio, and passengers are crammed into the gangways. No doubt second class has already been invaded, and soon they will start invading here, but there's no use complaining, anyone who wants peace and quiet should travel by car. After Santarem, on the long climb up to the Vale de Figueira, the train puffs along, sends up

sudden gusts of steam, wheezes under its heavy load, and goes so slowly that one could easily step off, pick some flowers on the embankment, and with three strides jump back onto the running board. Listening, Ricardo Reis learns that among the passengers traveling in this compartment only two will not alight in Fatima. The pilgrims talk of their vows, debate who has made the greatest number of pilgrimages. One claims, perhaps truthfully, perhaps lying, that in the last five years he has not missed a single pilgrimage, another says that counting this one he has made eight. So far no one has boasted that he knows Sister Lucia personally. Hearing these exchanges, Ricardo Reis is reminded of the talk in his waiting room, those depressing confidences about the orifices of the human body, where every pleasure is experienced and every misfortune can strike. At the station of Mato de Miranda, despite the fact that no passengers boarded the train, they were delayed. The noise of the engine could be heard in the distance, but here, on the bend, among the olive groves, reigned the most perfect calm. Ricardo Reis lowered his window to look outside. An elderly woman, barefoot and in dark clothes, was embracing a skinny little boy about thirteen years old and saying, My dear. Both were waiting for the train to move so they could cross the track. These two were not traveling to Fatima, the old woman had come to meet her grandson who lived in Lisbon. At last the station master blew his whistle, the locomotive hissed, went puff, puff, and slowly began to accelerate. Now the route is straight, and one could almost believe that this is a fast train. The morning air gives Ricardo Reis an appetite, and although it is much too early for lunch, people are starting to untie bundles of food. Eyes closed, he dozes, rocked by the swaying carriage, as if in a cradle. He has vivid dreams, yet when he awakes he cannot remember them. He remembers that he had no opportunity to tell Fernando Pessoa that he was going to Fatima. What will he think if he comes to the apartment and doesn't find me there, he may think I've gone back to Brazil without a word of farewell, my last farewell. Then he imagines a scene with Marcenda as the central figure, he sees her kneeling, the fingers of her right hand folded with those of her left, supporting in the air the dead weight of her withered arm. The effigy of Our Blessed Lady passes but no miracle takes place, not surprising, given Marcenda's lack of faith. She gets to her feet, resigned. Ricardo Reis sees himself approach, touch her, his middle and index finger together, on the breast, near her heart, no more is needed. Miracle, miracle, the pilgrims cry, their own woes suddenly forgotten, another's miracle is all they ask. Now they come flocking, swept along by the crowd or dragging themselves, the crippled, paralytic, consumptive, diseased, demented, blind, a multitude surrounds Ricardo Reis, beseeching another act of mercy. Behind this forest of wailing pilgrims Marcenda waves, both arms upraised, then disappears from sight. Ungrateful creature, she was healed and departed. Ricardo Reis opened his eyes, uncertain as to whether he had slept or not, and asked the passenger beside him, How much longer. We're almost there. So he had slept, and for a considerable time.

At the station in Fatima, the train emptied. Stirred by the odor of sanctity in the air, pilgrims jostled each other, there was alarm and confusion as families suddenly found themselves divided. The broad open space resembled a military encampment preparing

for a battle. Most of the pilgrims will make the twenty-kilometer journey on foot to the Cova da Iria, but some rush to join the lines for buses, these are the pilgrims with weak legs and little stamina, who tire at the slightest exertion. The sky was clear, the sun bright and warm. Ricardo Reis went off in search of a place to eat. There were plenty of street vendors selling pancakes, cheesecakes, biscuits from Caldas, dried figs, pitchers of water, fruits in season, garlands of pine kernels, peanuts, and pips and lupine seeds, but not a single restaurant worthy of the name. The few eating houses were full, the taverns were packed to the door, he will need a lot of patience before he finds himself seated in front of a knife and fork and a plate of food. Yet he benefited from the Christian spirit that permeated this place, for when they saw him so smartly turned out in his city clothes, a number of customers in the line, like good provincials, allowed him to go before them, thus Ricardo Reis was able to have his lunch sooner than he had hoped, a little fried fish with boiled potatoes dressed with oil and vinegar, then a couple of scrambled eggs. He drank wine that tasted like altar wine, ate good country bread, moist and heavy, and having thanked his hosts he went to look for transportation. The square was less crowded, ready for another trainload from the south or north, but pilgrims steadily continued to arrive on foot from remote parts. A bus gave a raucous honk, touting for passengers to fill the few remaining empty seats. Ricardo Reis, breaking into a trot, stepping over baskets and bundles of mats and blankets, managed to obtain a seat, a major struggle for a man who is trying to digest his food and is exhausted by the heat. Rattling loudly, the bus pulled away, sending up clouds of dust from the poorly paved road, and the filthy windows barely allowed one to catch a glimpse of the rolling, arid land. The driver honked without respite, sending groups of pilgrims scattering into the ditches at the side of the road, steered sharply to avoid potholes, and every few minutes spat noisily out an open window. The road swarmed with an endless column of pilgrims on foot, but there were also wagons and ox-driven carts, each advancing at its own pace. From time to time an expensive limousine with a chauffeur in livery would pass, sounding its horn, carrying elderly women dressed in black or gray or midnight blue, and corpulent gentlemen in dark suits with the circumspect air of those who have just finished counting their money only to find that it has multiplied. The occupants could be seen when the limousine was forced to slow down because of some large procession of pilgrims led by their parish priest, the priest acts as both spiritual and tour guide, and deserves our praise for making the same sacrifices as his flock, on foot like them with his hooves in the dirt. The majority of the faithful walk barefoot. Some carry open umbrellas to protect themselves from the sun, these are people with delicate heads, not of the lower orders, and prone to fits of fainting and vertigo. The hymns they sing out of tune. The shrill voices of the women sound like an endless lamentation, a weeping as yet without tears, and the men, who nearly always forget the words, sing only the rhyming syllables by way of accompaniment, in a sort of basso continuo, no more is asked of them, only that they keep up the pretense. From time to time people can be seen sitting along hedgerows under the shade of trees, gathering strength for the final stretch of the journey, taking advantage of this pause to nibble a chunk of bread and sausage, a cod fritter, a sardine fried three days ago back in their obscure village. Then they get back on the road, feeling

restored. Women carry baskets of food on their heads, some even suckle infants as they walk, and the dust descends on them all in clouds as yet another bus goes past, but they feel nothing, pay no attention, it shows what habit can do. Sweat trickles down the foreheads of monk and pilgrim, forms tiny channels in the dust, they wipe their faces with the back of their hands, worse than they thought, this is not just dirt but mud. The heat blackens their faces, yet the women do not remove the kerchiefs from their heads and the men keep on their jackets, they neither undo their shirts nor loosen their collars. This race preserves unawares the custom of the desert, which says that what protects from the cold protects also from the heat, therefore they wrap up as if to conceal themselves.

At a bend in the road a crowd has gathered under a tree, people are shouting, women are tearing their hair, and the body of a man is stretched out on the ground. The bus slows to allow the passengers to watch this spectacle, but Ricardo Reis says, or rather shouts to the driver, Stop here, let me see what has happened, I'm a doctor. Murmurs of protest can be heard, the passengers are in a hurry to reach the land of miracles, but they soon quiet down, anxious not to appear hard-hearted. Ricardo Reis got off, pushed his way through the crowd, knelt in the dust at the old man's side, and felt the artery in his neck. He is dead, he said. He need not have bothered interrupting his journey just to make this announcement. The news provoked a renewed outburst of tears, the dead man had numerous relatives, but his widow, a woman even older than the dead man, who now was no age, looked at the corpse with dry eyes, only her lips trembled as she stood there twining the fringes of her shawl. Two of the men in the crowd got on the bus, to report the death to the authorities in Fatima, who will make arrangements for the corpse to be taken away and buried in the nearest cemetery. Ricardo Reis has returned to his seat on the bus, now the object of everyone's curiosity, Fancy that, we have a doctor in our midst, who could ask for more reassuring company, even though he did nothing on this occasion but confirm a death. The two men inform those around them, He was already very sick when he got here, he should have stayed home, but he insisted on coming, he said he would hang himself from the rafters of the house if we left him behind, in the end he died far from home, no one escapes his destiny. Ricardo Reis nodded in agreement, not knowing that his head was moving. Yes sir, that's destiny, let's hope someone sticks a cross under that tree so future travelers can say a paternoster for the soul of one who died unconfessed and without receiving the last rites of the Church though he was already heading for heaven the moment he left his house. If this old man were called Lazarus and Jesus Christ appeared at the bend in the road on His way to the Cova da Iria to witness the miracles, He would understand at once what had happened, having experience in such things, and would elbow His way through all those gaping onlookers, and if anyone tried to stop Him, Jesus Christ would rebuke him, saying, Don't you know who you're talking to. Going up to the old woman who finds herself unable to weep, He would say, Leave this to me, and take two steps forward, make the sign of the Cross, remarkable prescience on His part, since we know that He has not been crucified yet, and He would cry out, Lazarus, arise and walk, whereupon Lazarus would get to his feet, another miracle. Lazarus would embrace his wife, who

could now weep at last, and everything would be as before, and when the wagon came with the stretcher bearers and the authority to take away the body, someone would be sure to ask, Why are you looking for a dead man among the living, he is not here, he has been brought back to life. But in the Cova da Iria no such miracle, hard as people tried, was ever achieved.

This is the place. The bus comes to a halt with several final blasts of exhaust, its radiator is boiling like one of hell's cauldrons, and as the passengers step out, the driver goes to unscrew the cap, protecting his hands with old rags. Clouds of steam, the sweet-smelling incense of mechanics, rise into the air in this scorching heat, little wonder that we feel delirious. Ricardo Reis joins the stream of pilgrims. He tries to imagine what the spectacle must look like seen from heaven, a swarm of ants converging from every cardinal and collateral point like a huge star. This thought, or was it the noise of an engine, made him raise his eyes to lofty heights and ethereal visions. Overhead, tracing out an enormous circle, an airplane was dropping leaflets, perhaps prayers for intoning in unison, perhaps maps showing the way to the gates of paradise, or could they be messages from our Lord God, an apology for not being with us today, in His place He has sent His Divine Son, who already worked a miracle at the bend in the road, and a good miracle it was too. The leaflets descend slowly, there is not a breath of wind. Noses in the air, the pilgrims reach out eagerly to catch them, white, yellow, green, blue. Many who cannot read, and they form the majority in this spiritual gathering, hold the leaflets, not knowing what to do with them. A man dressed in peasant attire, after deciding that Ricardo Reis looks like someone who can read, asks, What is written here, sir. Ricardo Reis tells him, It's an advertisement for Bovril. The man looks at him suspiciously, debates whether to ask him to explain what Bovril is, then folds the paper in four and puts it into his jerkin pocket. Always hold on to what is useless, you will always find a use for it.

A sea of people. Around the great concave esplanade are pitched hundreds of canvas tents under which thousands are camping, there are frying pans on open fires, dogs guarding provisions, children crying, flies getting into everything. Ricardo Reis strolls between the tents, intrigued by this courtyard of miracles, it is as large as any city. This is a Gypsy encampment, complete with wagons and mules, and the donkeys, to the delight of the horseflies, are covered with sores. Carrying his suitcase, he does not know where he is heading, he has no shelter awaiting him, not so much as a tent, and has now satisfied himself that there are no lodging houses in the vicinity, let alone hotels. And if there should be, hidden somewhere, a hospice for pilgrims, it is unlikely that it will have any spare pallets left, they will have been reserved God knows how long in advance. May the will of God Himself be done. The sun is scorching, night is still a long way off, and there are no indications that it will become any cooler. When Ricardo Reis betook himself to Fatima it was not with physical comfort in mind, he came in the hope of seeing Marcenda. His suitcase is light, containing only his razor, soap, shaving brush, a change of underwear, socks, and a pair of sturdy shoes with reinforced soles which he must change

into or he'll ruin the patent shoes he is wearing. If Marcenda is here, she will not be sitting in a tent, a notary's daughter from Coimbra deserves something better, but where will she find it. Ricardo Reis went to the hospital, a good place to start. Using his credentials as a doctor, he was allowed in, and forced his way through the rabble. Everywhere he looked, in complete confusion throughout the wards and corridors, the sick lay on stretchers and mattresses on the ground, but their relatives made far more noise than they did, keeping up an endless drone as they prayed, a drone interrupted from time to time by deep sighs, piercing cries, and pleas to the Virgin. In the infirmary there were not more than thirty beds and the sick numbered around three hundred. People lay wherever space could be found, one had to step over them, a good thing we no longer believe in the evil eye, You bewitched me, now break the spell, and the custom is to repeat the movement in reverse, if only all misfortunes could be made to disappear so easily. Marcenda is not here, nor is Ricardo Reis surprised, after all she is perfectly capable of walking on her own two feet, only her arm is crippled, and so long as she refrains from taking her hand out of her pocket, no one even notices. Outside, the heat is worse, but the sun, to his relief, does not give off a bad smell.

If such a thing is possible, the crowd is growing, as if reproducing itself by fission. Like a great black swarm of bees in pursuit of divine honey it buzzes, drones, crackles, moves in slow waves, lulled by its own size. Impossible to find anyone in this cauldron, which is not the cauldron of Pero Botelho but burns all the same. Ricardo Reis is resigned, whether he finds or doesn't find Marcenda seems of no great importance now. If fate decrees that we meet, then we will meet, even if we attempt to hide from each other. How foolish he was, to express his thoughts with these words, Marcenda, if she is here, does not know that I am here so she will not attempt to hide, therefore the chance is greater that we will meet. The airplane continues to circle overhead, the colored leaflets dance through the air, but no one pays attention now, only the new arrivals seeing them for the first time. What a pity these leaflets do not carry the much more persuasive illustration from the newspaper advertisement, the one depicting the doctor with the goatee and the ailing damsel in the negligee, If only she had taken Bovril, she would not be in this condition. Here in Fatima there are many people in much worse condition, they would surely find that miraculous jar a godsend. His face flushed, Ricardo Reis has removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, and fans himself with his hat. His legs suddenly heavy with exhaustion, he goes in search of shade. Some of his fellow pilgrims are having their siesta, worn out by the long journey and all those prayers en route, they are recovering their strength before the statue of the Virgin is brought out, before the procession of candles begins, and the long nocturnal vigil by the light of bonfires and oil lamps. He, too, dozed a little, his back against the trunk of an olive tree, the nape of his neck on soft moss. Opening his eyes, he saw patches of blue sky amid the branches and remembered the skinny boy at the train station, whose grandmother, she must have been his grandmother, called him My dear. What is the child doing at this very minute, almost certainly he has taken off his shoes, that is the first thing he does when he arrives at the village, the second is to go down to the river. His grandmother is probably

cautioning him, Don't go yet, the sun is too hot, but he does not listen and she does not expect to be heard. Boys of his age want to be free, not clinging to their mother's skirts, they throw stones at the frogs and do not think they are causing any harm, but one day they will feel remorse. Too late, because for frogs and other tiny creatures there is no resurrection. Ricardo Reis finds this all absurd, the idea that he has traveled from Lisbon like someone pursuing a mirage, knowing all the while that it was a mirage and nothing more, his sitting in the shade of an olive tree among people he does not know, waiting for nothing whatsoever, and these thoughts about a boy whom he saw for only a moment in a remote provincial train station, this sudden desire to be like him, to wipe his nose with his right arm, play in puddles, pick flowers, admiring them and forgetting them, steal fruit from the orchards, scamper away weeping when pursued by dogs, or chase girls and lift up their skirts because they don't like it or do like it but pretend they don't, and because it gives him secret pleasure. Have I ever really experienced life, Ricardo Reis murmured to himself. The pilgrim lying beside him thought the murmur was some new prayer, a prayer yet to be put to the test.

The sun goes down but the heat does not abate. In the immense square there does not appear to be room for a pin, yet the crowd continues to mill around the periphery, there is a steady, constant stream of people, on this side they are still trying to get better vantage points, they must be doing the same over there. Ricardo Reis, strolling in the immediate vicinity, suddenly becomes aware of another pilgrimage, that of beggars. He sees true beggars and false beggars, and the difference is important, a true beggar is simply a poor man who begs, while your false beggar has turned begging into a profession, it is not unknown for people to become rich this way. Both use the same techniques, the whimpering, the pleading with outstretched hand, or sometimes two hands, a theatrical tour de force which is difficult to resist, Alms for the sake of the souls of your dear departed, God will reward you, Have pity on a poor blind man, have pity on a poor blind man, and some display an ulcerated leg, an amputated arm, but not what we are searching for. It is as if the gates of hell have been opened, for only from hell could such horrors have come. And now it is the turn of those selling lottery tickets, they make such an uproar as they call out winning numbers that prayers are arrested in midflight to heaven. A man interrupts his paternoster because he has a sudden hunch about the number three thousand six hundred and ninety-four. Clutching his rosary in a distracted hand, he fondles the ticket as if weighing its potential, then shakes from his handkerchief the necessary number of escudos and resumes his prayer where he broke off, Give us this day our daily bread, words now recited with greater hope. An attack is now launched by vendors of blankets, ties, handkerchiefs, and baskets, and by the unemployed, who wear armbands and sell holy pictures. They are not really selling, first they receive alms, then they hand over the picture, it is one way of maintaining their dignity. This poor wretch is neither a true beggar nor a false beggar, he asks for alms only because he is out of work. Now here is an excellent idea, let all the unemployed wear armbands, strips of black cloth bearing bold white letters for all the world to see, Unemployed, it would make the counting of them easier and ensure that we do not forget

them. But worst of all, because they upset our spiritual peace and disturb the tranquillity of this holy place, are the hordes of hawkers. Let Ricardo Reis steer clear, otherwise they will pounce on him at once with that infernal shouting, Look, it's a bargain, Look, this has been blessed, the image of Our Blessed Lady painted on trays and statues, bunches of rosaries, crucifixes by the dozen, tiny medals, Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Ardent Hearts of Mary and three little shepherds with their hands joined in prayer and kneeling on the ground. One shepherd is a boy, but there is no evidence in either the hagiographical reports or the process of beatification that he ever lifted the skirts of little girls. The entire merchant confraternity cries out as if possessed, Woe to the trading Judas who tries with sly blandishments to steal a fellow trader's customer, whereupon the veil of the temple is torn and curses and insults rain down on the head of the treacherous rogue. Not even in Brazil can Ricardo Reis recall ever having heard such fiery rhetoric, clearly this branch of oratory has made considerable progress.

The precious gem of Catholicism sparkles with many facets, the facet of suffering for which there remains no hope other than that of returning each year, the facet of faith which in this holy place is sublime and fertile, the facet of common charity, the facet of Bovril, the facet of trading in scapulars and the like, the facet of trinkets and baubles, of printing and weaving, of eating and drinking, of lost and found, searching and finding. Ricardo Reis continues searching, but will he find. He has been to the hospital, he has explored the tents, he has gone through the open-air market in every direction, now he descends into the bustling esplanade, plunges into the dense multitude, sees their spiritual exercises, their acts of faith, their pitiful prayers, the vows they fulfill by crawling on all fours with bleeding knees, sees hands supporting a penitent woman under the armpits before she faints from pain and unbearable ecstasy, and the sick who have been brought from the hospital, their stretchers set out in rows. Between those rows the statue of Our Blessed Lady the Holy Virgin will be carried on a litter adorned with white flowers. Ricardo Reis lets his eyes wander from face to face, they search but do not find, as if he were in a dream that has no meaning, like the dream of a road that goes nowhere, of a shadow cast by no object, of a word which the air has uttered and then denied. The hymns are primitive, sol and do, sol and do, the choir is one of quavering shrill voices that constantly break off and start again. On the thirteenth of May in the Cova da Iria there is suddenly a great silence, the statue is about to make its exit from the Chapel of the Apparitions. A shudder goes through the crowd, the supernatural has come and blown over two hundred thousand heads, something is bound to happen. Gripped by mystical fervor, the sick hold out handkerchiefs, rosaries, medals, the priests take them, touch the statue with them, and return them to the supplicants, while the poor wretches implore, Our Lady of Fatima give me life, Our Lady of Fatima grant me the miracle of walking, Our Lady of Fatima help me to see, Our Lady of Fatima help me to hear, Our Lady of Fatima give me back my health, Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of Fatima. The dumb do not plead, they simply look on, if they still have eyes to see with. However hard Ricardo Reis strains, he does not hear, Our Lady of Fatima look upon this left arm of mine and cure me if you can. Thou shalt not tempt the Lord Thy God or His Holy Mother,

and if you think it over carefully you will realize that one should not ask for anything, instead one should resign oneself, that is what humility demands, because only God knows what is good for us.

The statue was brought out, carried around in procession, then it disappeared. The blind still could not see, the dumb still could not speak, the paralyzed still were paralyzed, missing limbs did not grow back, and the pains of the afflicted were not diminished. Weeping bitter tears, they accused and blamed themselves, My faith was lacking, mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. Prepared to concede a few miracles, the Virgin had left her chapel, but she found the faithful wavering, No burning bushes here, no everlasting oil lamps, this will not do, let them come back next year. The evening shadows lengthen as twilight approaches, it too at a processional pace. Little by little the sky loses the vivid blue of day, turns pearl, but over there the sun, hidden behind the trees on distant hills, explodes into crimson, orange, red, more volcano than sun, it seems incredible that this should happen in silence. Soon night will fall, campfires are lit, the vendors have stopped shouting, the beggars are counting their coins, beneath trees bodies are being nourished, knapsacks are opened, people munch stale bread, raise the cask or wineskin to their parched lips, all eat, but the food varies according to their means.

Ricardo Reis found shelter with a group of pilgrims sharing a tent. There was no discussion, they saw him standing there with a lost look on his face, a suitcase in his hand, a blanket he had bought rolled up under his arm. He in turn saw that the tent would do him nicely as long as the night did not become too cold. They told him, Make yourself comfortable. He started to say, No, thanks just the same, but they insisted, Look, our offer comes from the heart, and it was true, he realized, and joined the large group from Abrantes. This snuffling, which can be heard throughout the Cova da Iria, comes as much from chewing as from praying, because while some seek solace for their tormented souls, others satisfy the pangs of hunger, or alternate between the two. By the dying light of the campfires Ricardo Reis does not find Marcenda, nor will he see her later on during the procession of candles, nor in his sleep, when he is overcome with exhaustion, frustration, the desire to disappear from the face of the earth. He sees himself as two people, the dignified Ricardo Reis who each day washes and shaves, and this other Ricardo Reis, a vagrant with a stubble, crumpled clothes, creased shirt, hat stained with sweat, shoes covered with dust. The first asks the second to explain, please, why he has come to Fatima without any faith, with only a wild dream, And if you do see Marcenda, what will you say to her, can you imagine how absurd you would look if she appeared before you now at her father's side, or, worse still, alone, take a good look at yourself, do you really believe that a girl, even one with only one arm, would fall madly in love with a ridiculous middle-aged doctor. Ricardo Reis humbly accepts this criticism and, deeply ashamed that he is in such shabby and filthy condition, pulls the blanket over his head and goes back to sleep. Nearby, someone is snoring without a care in the world, and behind that sturdy olive tree there is murmuring that cannot be mistaken for prayers,

chuckling that scarcely suggests a choir of angels, sighs that are not provoked by spiritual ecstasy. Dawn is breaking, some early risers stretch their arms and get up to poke the fire, a new day is beginning, posing fresh trials to those who seek the fruits of paradise.

Ricardo Reis decides to leave before noon, he does not wait for the farewell ceremony in honor of the Virgin, he has said his good-byes. The airplane passed over twice, meanwhile, and dropped more leaflets advertising Bovril. The bus back has few passengers, as expected, the great exodus will come later. At the bend in the road a wooden cross has been stuck into the ground. There was no miracle after all.

Trusting in God and Our Blessed Lady from the time of Afonso Henriques to the Great War. This is the phrase that has haunted Ricardo Reis since his return from Fatima. He cannot recall whether he read it in a newspaper or book, or whether he heard it in a sermon or speech, it may even have been in the advertisement for Bovril. The words fascinate him, the expression is eloquent and calculated to rouse passions and kindle hearts, for it proves that we are a chosen people. There have been other peoples in the past and there will be other peoples in the future, but there are none that have endured as long, eight hundred years of steadfast loyalty, of constant intimacy with the heavenly powers. It is true that we were slow in creating the fifth empire, that Mussolini forged ahead of us, but the sixth empire will not elude us, nor the seventh, all we need is patience, and patience is in our nature. We are already on the right road, according to a public statement made by His Excellency the President of the Republic, General Antonio Oscar de Fragoso Carmona, in a speech that should serve as a model for all the supreme magistrates of the nation to come. In his words, Portugal is now respected throughout the world, and we should be proud to be Portuguese, a sentiment no less noble than the one that precedes it, both of them eminently quotable. We can take pride in this worldwide respect, we who navigated the high seas, even if it is only in the capacity of most loyal ally, it does not matter of whom, what matters is loyalty, without it how could we live. Ricardo Reis, who returned from Fatima tired and sunburnt, without seeing either a miracle or Marcenda, and who for three days after that did not leave his apartment, reentered the outside world through the great door of this patriotic speech by the Honorable President. Taking his newspaper with him, he went to sit in the shadow of Adamastor. The old men were there, watching and perplexed by the arrival of the ships that had come to visit this promised land so avidly discussed by other nations, numerous ships bedecked with flags, sounding their festive sirens, their crews lined up on deck saluting. Light finally dawned in the heads of these two sentinels when Ricardo Reis gave them the newspaper he had by now digested and practically memorized, Yes, it was worth waiting eight centuries to feel proud of being Portuguese. From the Alto de Santa Catarina eight centuries salute you, O mighty sea. The old men, the thin one and the fat one, wipe away a furtive tear, sorry that they cannot remain for all eternity on this belvedere to watch the ships arriving, such bliss is harder to bear than the shortness of their lives. From the bench where he is seated Ricardo Reis witnesses love play between a soldier and a housemaid, the soldier takes liberties, the housemaid wards him off with provocative little slaps. This is a day for singing alleluias, which are the evoes of those who are not Greek, the flower beds are in full bloom, all a man needs to be happy unless he is eaten by insatiable ambitions. Ricardo Reis takes stock of his own ambitions and concludes that he craves nothing, that he is content to watch the river and the passing ships, the mountains and the peace that reigns there, yet he feels no happiness inside him, only this dull insect-gnawing that never stops. It's the weather, he murmurs, then asks himself how he would be feeling now if he had met Marcenda in Fatima, if, as people often say, they had fallen into each other's arms, We shall nevermore be parted, only when I thought I had lost you did I realize just how much I love you. She would use similar words, and then they would not know what else to say, even if they were free to

run behind an olive tree and repeat for themselves the whispers, laughter, and sighs of others. Once more Ricardo Reis doubts, once more he feels the insect-gnawing in his bones. One cannot resist time, we are within it and accompany it, nothing more. Finished with the newspaper, the old men toss a coin to see who will take it home, even the one who cannot read covets this prize, as there is nothing better than newspaper for lining drawers.

When he arrived at his office that afternoon, the receptionist Carlota informed him, A letter has come for you, Doctor, I left it on your desk. Ricardo Reis felt as if a blow had been delivered to his heart or stomach. At such moments we lose all our self-possession, nor can we locate the blow, because the distance that separates the heart from the stomach is so small and there is also a diaphragm in the middle which is as much affected by the palpitations of the former as by the contractions of the latter. If God, who has learned so much over the years, were to create the human body today, He would make it much less complicated. The letter is from Marcenda, it must be, she has written to tell him that she could not travel to Fátima after all, or that she did go and saw him in the distance, even waved with her good arm, and felt despair, first because he did not see her and second because the Virgin did not heal her, Now, my love, I await you in the Quinta das Lágrimas, if you still love me. Obviously a letter from Marcenda, there it lies in the middle of the rectangular sheet of green blotting paper, the envelope pale violet. No, seen from the door it is white, an optical illusion, we are taught in school that blue and yellow make green, green and violet make white, and white and anxiety make us pale. The envelope is not violet, nor does it come from Coimbra. Ricardo Reis opened it carefully and found a small sheet of paper, on which was written, in the awful scrawl one expects from a doctor, Dear colleague, this is to let you know that I have made a good recovery and hope to resume my practice as of the beginning of next month, I wish to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude for your willingness to stand in for me during my illness, I also wish you every success in soon finding a new appointment that will permit you to put your considerable skill and experience to good use. The letter continued for several more lines, the usual formalities observed by nearly everyone when he writes letters. Ricardo Reis, rereading these clichéd phrases, appreciated his colleague's finesse, which transformed the favor he had done for Ricardo Reis into the favor Ricardo Reis had done for him, thus allowing Ricardo Reis to leave with his head held high. And he would have a reference now to show when he went to look for work, not simply a letter of recommendation but written evidence of good and loyal service, just like the one the Hotel Brangança will give to Lydia if she ever decides to leave for another job or to marry. He put on his white coat and called in the first patient. In the waiting room there are five more patients to be examined, he will not have time now to cure them, happily their conditions are not so serious that they will die on his hands in the next twelve days, before the month expires, just as well.

No sign of Lydia. This is not her day off, true, but knowing that his trip to Fatima was simply a matter of going and coming straight back, and knowing that he could have met

Marcenda there, she might at least have come to see if there was any news of her friend and confidante, to find out if Marcenda was well, if her arm had been cured. In half an hour Lydia could come to the Alto de Santa Catarina and go back, or she could call at his office, which is even closer and quicker. But she has not come, she has not asked. It was a mistake for him to have kissed her without taking her to bed, perhaps she thought that he was buying her with that kiss, if such thoughts occur to people of humble background. Alone in his apartment, Ricardo Reis leaves only to work and to dine, from his window he watches the river and the distant slopes of Montijo, the rock of Adamastor, the punctual old men, the palm trees. Occasionally he goes down to the park and reads a few pages of some book. He retires early, thinks about Fernando Pessoa, who is dead now, and about Alberto Caeiro, who disappeared in his prime and for whom there had been such high hopes, and about Alvaro de Campos, who went to Glasgow, at least that is what he said in his telegram, he will probably settle there, building ships to the end of his days or until he is pensioned off. Occasionally Ricardo Reis goes to the movies and sees *Our Daily Bread* directed by King Vidor, or *The Thirty-Nine Steps* with Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll, and he could not resist going to the Sao Luis to see *Audioscopes*, a 3-D film. As a souvenir he brought home the celluloid spectacles one has to wear, green on one side, red on the other, these spectacles are a poetic instrument to see things for which normal vision is not enough.

They say time stops for no man, that time marches on, commonplaces that are still repeated, yet there are people who chafe at the slowness with which it passes. Twenty-four hours to make a day, and at the end of the day you discover that it was not worthwhile, and the following day is the same all over again, if only we could leap over all the futile weeks in order to live one hour of fulfillment, one moment of splendor, if splendor can last that long. Ricardo Reis starts toying with the idea of returning to Brazil. The death of Fernando Pessoa, apparently, was a valid reason for crossing the Atlantic after an absence of sixteen years, for staying in Portugal, resuming his practice, writing a poem now and then, growing old, taking the place, after a fashion, of the poet who died, even if no one noticed the substitution. But now he wonders. This is not his country, if, in fact, it is anyone's. Portugal belongs only to God and Our Blessed Lady, it is a dreary, two-dimensional sketch with no relief in sight, not even with the special spectacles of *Audioscopes*. Fernando Pessoa, whether shadow or ghost, appears from time to time in order to make some ironic comment, to smile benevolently, then disappear. Ricardo Reis need not have bothered returning because of him. And Marcenda has ceased to exist, she lives in Coimbra on an unknown street, her days pass, one by one, without a cure. She may have hidden his letters in some corner of the attic, in the padding of a chair, or in a secret drawer used by her mother before her, or, even more cleverly, in the trunk of a housemaid who cannot read and is trustworthy, perhaps Marcenda reads them over and over, like one who recites a dream lest he forgets it, in vain, because in the end our dreams and what we remember of them have nothing in common. Lydia will come tomorrow because she always comes on her day off, but Lydia is the nursemaid of Anna Karenina, she is useful for keeping the house clean and for certain other needs, she

cannot fill, with the little she has to offer, the emptiness of Ricardo Reis, not even the universe would suffice, if we accept his image of himself. As of the first of June he will be unemployed, he will have to go forth once more in search of a vacancy, a locum tenens position to make the days pass more quickly. Fortunately he still has a large wad of English pound notes he has not touched, and there is the money still deposited in a Brazilian bank, these various sums would be more than enough to rent an office and build a general-medicine practice of his own, for general medicine is all most patients require. No need to dabble in diseases of the heart and lungs. He might even employ Lydia to attend the patients, intelligent and easygoing Lydia would soon learn how, with a little guidance she could improve her spelling and escape the drudgery of life as a chambermaid. But this is only the daydream of one who is passing the time in idle thought. Ricardo Reis will not seek work, no, the best thing for him to do is take The Highland Brigade back to Brazil when she makes her next voyage. He will discreetly return The God of the Labyrinth to its owner, and O'Brien will never discover how the missing book suddenly reappeared.

Lydia arrived, said good afternoon, but seemed a little cold, withdrawn, she asked no questions and he was forced to speak first, I went to Fatima. She asked, Oh, how did you like it. How should Ricardo Reis reply, as a nonbeliever he is not likely to have experienced spiritual ecstasy, on the other hand he did not go purely out of curiosity, therefore he confines himself to generalities, Lots of people, dust everywhere, I had to sleep in the open, as you warned me, fortunately the night was warm. Doctor, you are not the sort of person to be roughing it on pilgrimages. I went to see what it was like. Lydia stays in the kitchen, is now running the hot water to wash the dishes, without saying much she has made it clear that there will be no carnal pleasures today. Could the reason for this embargo be the familiar problem of menstruation, or is it some lingering resentment, or the combination of both blood and tears, two insurmountable rivers making an impassable, murky sea. He sat on a bench in the kitchen watching her as she worked, not something he was in the habit of doing, it was a gesture of goodwill, a white flag waving over the fortifications to test the mood of the enemy general. I didn't come across Doctor Sampaio and his daughter after all, which was only to be expected with such a crowd, these words are spoken casually, they hover in midair, waiting for someone to pay attention. But what kind of attention, he could be telling the truth, he could be telling a lie, such is the inadequacy, the built-in duplicity of words. A word lies, with the same word one can speak the truth, we are not what we say, we are true only if others believe us. Lydia's belief is unknown, for she simply asks, Were there any miracles. If there were, I didn't see them, and no miracles were reported in the newspapers. Poor Senhorita Marcenda, if she went there in the hope of being cured, how disappointed she must have been. She had little hope, How do you know. Lydia fixed her gaze on Ricardo Reis as quick as a startled bird. Trying to catch me, he thought to himself as he replied, When I was still staying at the hotel, Marcenda and her father were already planning a visit to Fatima. Oh, really. These are the little duels with which people wear themselves out and grow old. Better to change the subject, and this is where newspapers become

useful, they store facts in one's memory and help keep conversations going, both for the old men on the Alto de Santa Catarina and for Ricardo Reis and Lydia, because some silences are not preferable to words. What news about your brother, this is just an opening. My brother is fine, why do you ask. I was reminded of him because of something I read in the paper, a speech by a certain engineer named Nobre Guedes, I still have the paper here. I've never heard of the gentleman. Given what he has to say about sailors, I doubt that your brother would call him a gentleman. What does he say. Wait, I'll get the paper. Ricardo Reis left the kitchen, went into the study, returned with *O Século*, the text of the speech took up almost an entire page, This is the speech Nobre Guedes made on the National Radio condemning Communism, and at one point he refers to sailors. Does he say anything about my brother. He doesn't mention your brother by name, but to give you an example, he had this to say, There is in circulation an execrable leaflet known as *The Red Sailor*. What does execrable mean. Execrable means that something is evil, wretched, very bad. It means you want to curse it. Exactly, to execrate is to curse. I've seen *The Red Sailor* and it didn't make me feel like cursing. Did your brother show it to you. Yes, it was Daniel. Then your brother is a Communist. I'm not sure about that, but he's certainly in favor of Communism. What's the difference. To me he doesn't look different from other people. Do you think that if he were a Communist he would look different. I don't know, I can't explain. Well, this engineer Guedes also says that the sailors of Portugal are not red or white or blue, they are Portuguese. What, he thinks Portuguese is a color. That's very witty, anyone looking at you would say you couldn't break a plate, yet every so often you pull down a whole cupboard of plates. My hand is steady, I'm not in the habit of breaking plates, take a look, here I am washing your dishes and nothing slips from my hands. You're an extraordinary girl. This extraordinary girl is only a hotel chambermaid, but tell me, did this fellow Guedes have anything else to say about the sailors. About the sailors, no. I now remember that Daniel did mention a sailor, also Guedes, but his first name was Manuel, Manuel Guedes, and he is waiting to be sentenced, there are forty men altogether who are facing trial. Many have the name Guedes. Well, this one is Manuel. The dishes are washed and left to drain, Lydia has other chores to do, she must change the sheets, make the bed, open the window to air the room, clean the bathroom, put out fresh towels. This done, she returns to the kitchen and is drying the dishes when suddenly Ricardo Reis steals up from behind and puts his arm around her waist. She tries to avoid him, but he kisses her on the neck, causing the plate to slip from her hands, and it breaks into pieces on the floor. So you've finally broken a plate, it had to happen sooner or later, no one escapes his fate, he laughed, turning her toward him and kissing her full on the lips. She no longer resisted, but simply said, We cannot today. Now we know that the problem is physiological, the other obstacles have been overcome. It doesn't matter, he replied, it can keep until next time, and went on kissing her. Later she will have to sweep up the bits of crockery that are scattered all over the kitchen floor.

Then it was Fernando Pessoa who visited Ricardo Reis. Several days later, he appeared just before midnight, when all the neighbors were in bed. He came upstairs on

tiptoe, taking this precaution because he was never sure that he would be invisible. Sometimes people looked right through him, he could tell from their lack of expression, but on rare occasions they stared, as if there was something strange about him but they could not put their finger on it. If anyone were to tell them that this man dressed in black was a ghost, they would not believe it, we are so familiar with white sheets and tenuous ectoplasms, but a ghost, if he is not careful, can be the most solid thing in the world. So Fernando Pessoa climbed the stairs slowly and rapped on the door with the agreed signal, anxious not to cause a scene, the clatter of someone stumbling upstairs could bring a bleary-eyed neighbor out on the landing, and she would scream at the top of her voice, Help, a thief. Poor Fernando Pessoa a thief, he who has been robbed of everything, even life. In his study, trying to compose a poem, Ricardo Reis had just finished writing, Not seeing the Fates that destroy us, we forget their existence, when the silence that filled the building was broken by a gentle tap-tap. He knew immediately who it was and hastened to open the door, What a pleasant surprise, where on earth have you been. Words can be tricky, these used by Ricardo Reis suggest a note of black humor in the worst possible taste, when he knows as well as we do that Fernando Pessoa has come from in the earth and not on it, from the rustic graveyard at Prazeres, where he does not even rest in peace, because his ferocious grandmother Dionísia, also buried there, demands a detailed account of his comings and goings. I've been for a stroll, her grandson replies sourly, just as he is now replying to Ricardo Reis, but without the same irritation. The best words are those that reveal nothing. Fernando Pessoa sank to the sofa with a gesture of infinite weariness, raised his hand to his forehead as if trying to assuage a pain or drive away some cloud, then he ran his fingers down his face, uncertainly over his eyes, pressing the corners of his mouth, smoothing his mustache, stroking his pointed chin. The fingers seemed to want to remodel his features, to restore them to their original design, but the artist has picked up an eraser instead of a pencil, and it obliterates as it passes, one whole side of the face loses its outline, which is only to be expected, because almost six months have passed since Fernando Pessoa's death. I see less and less of you these days, Ricardo Reis complained. I warned you on the first day, I become more forgetful as time passes, even now, there on the Rua do Calhariz, I had to rack my brains to remember the way to your apartment. You only had to locate the statue of Adamastor. If I had thought of Adamastor I would have been even more confused, I would have started to believe myself back in Durban, eight years old again, and then I would have been twice lost, in time as well as space. Try coming here more often, that will be one way of refreshing your memory. Today I was guided by a lingering smell of onion, A smell of onion, That's right, onion, your friend, it would appear, has not given up spying on you. That is ridiculous, the police must have precious little to occupy them when they can afford to waste time with someone who is innocent of any crime and has no intention of committing one. You can never tell what is going on in the mind of a policeman, perhaps you made a good impression, perhaps Victor would like to win your friendship but realizes that you live in the world of the chosen, he in the world of the damned, and that is why he whiles away the night gazing up at your window, watching to see if there is any light, like a man madly in love. Go ahead, have your little joke at my

expense. You cannot imagine how sad one has to be to joke like this. But this constant spying is totally unjustified. I wouldn't say totally unjustified, after all is it normal for someone to be visited by a person who comes from the beyond. But no one can see you. That depends, my dear Reis, that depends, sometimes a dead man does not have the patience to be invisible, or sometimes he lacks the energy, and this does not take into account the fact that certain people among the living have eyes that can see the invisible. Surely that isn't true of Victor. Perhaps, although you must agree that one could hardly imagine a more useful ability in a policeman, by comparison Argos of the thousand eyes would be a nearsighted wretch. Ricardo Reis lifted the sheet of paper on which he had been writing, I have some lines here, I don't know how they will turn out. Read them to me. They are just a beginning, and they might even begin in a different way. Read them. Not seeing the Fates that destroy its, we forget that they exist. I like it, but as I recall, you wrote much the same thing, a thousand times and in a thousand different ways, before you left for Brazil, the tropics don't appear to have enriched your poetic genius. I have nothing more to say, I'm not like you. You will become like me, don't worry. My inspiration is what one might call internal. Inspiration is only a word. I am an Argos with nine hundred and ninety-nine eyes and all blind. A nice metaphor, which also implies that you would not be much good as a policeman. By the way, Fernando, did you ever come across a certain Antonio Ferro, Secretary for National Propaganda. Yes, we were friends, I owe it to him that I was awarded a prize of five thousand reis for Mensagem, why do you ask. You will see in a moment, I have a piece of news here, did you know that the literary prizes administered by that department were awarded several days ago. How could I have known. Forgive me, I keep forgetting that you can no longer read. Who won the prize this year, Carlos Queirós, Ah, Carlos, Did you know him, Carlos Queirós was the nephew of a woman named Ophelinha, spelled with a ph instead of an f, whom I loved for a time, we worked in the same office. I cannot imagine you falling in love. We all fall in love at least once in our lifetime, and that is what happened to me. I'm curious to know what kind of love letters you wrote. I remember them as being rather less banal than most love letters. When was this, The affair began as soon as you left for Brazil, And did it last long, Long enough for me to be able to say, like Cardinal Gonzaga, I, too, have known love. I find this hard to believe, Do you think I'm lying, Certainly not, how could you say such a thing, we have never lied to each other, when the need arose, we confined ourselves to using words that lied. What do you find so hard to believe, then. That you should have fallen in love, the fact is that as I see and know you, you are precisely the kind of person who is incapable of loving. Like Don Juan, Yes, like Don Juan, but for a different reason, Explain, In Don Juan there was an excess of lust, which had to be dispersed among the women of his desire, while your situation, as far as I can recall, was pretty much the opposite. And what about you. I am somewhere in the middle, I am ordinary, average, neither too much nor too little. In other words, the well-balanced lover, Not well balanced, it is not a question of geometry or mechanics. Are you telling me that your love life, too, is less than perfect, Love is complicated, my dear Fernando, You can't complain, you have your Lydia, Lydia is a chambermaid, And Ofélia was a typist. Instead of discussing women, we seem to be discussing their professions. And

there is also that girl you met in the park, what was her name, Marcenda, That's it, Marcenda is nothing to me. You dismiss her so roughly, it sounds like resentment. My limited experience tells me that resentment is the common attitude of men toward women. My dear Ricardo, we should have spent more time together. The empire decreed otherwise.

Fernando Pessoa got to his feet, paced awhile up and down the study, lifted the sheet of paper on which Ricardo Reis had written the lines he had read, How did you express it, Not seeing the Fates who destroy us, we forget that they exist, one would have to be blind indeed not to see how the fates destroy us day by day, as the proverb says, There are none so blind as those who will not see. Fernando Pessoa put down the sheet of paper, You were telling me about Ferro, let's get back to where we were. During the awards ceremony, Antonio Ferro observed that writers who grumble under repressive regimes, even when the repression is purely intellectual, such as that which emanates from Salazar, forget that creative output has always increased during reigns of law and order. This idea of the benefit of intellectual repression, that the Portuguese have become more creative under the surveillance of Victor, is absurd. Then you don't agree. History itself disproves what Ferro claims, you need only think of your own youth, of Orfeu, tell me if that was a reign of law and order, although your odes, my dear Reis, if one looks at them closely, might be considered a paean to law and order. I never thought of them like that. But that is what they are, human unrest is futile, the gods are wise and indifferent, and above them is fate, the supreme order to which even gods are subject. And what of men, what is their function. To challenge order, to change fate. For the better. For better or for worse, it makes no difference, the point is to keep fate from being fate. You sound like Lydia, she is always talking about fate. Fortunately when it comes to fate, one can say whatever he likes. We were speaking of Ferro. Ferro is a fool, believing that Salazar is Portugal's fate. The Messiah. Rather the parish priest who baptizes, christens, and marries us, and commends our souls to God when we die. In the name of order. Exactly, in the name of order. As I recall, when you were alive you were much less subversive. When one dies, one sees things differently, and with this irrefutable sentence I take my leave, irrefutable because you, being alive, cannot possibly dispute it. Why are you reluctant to spend the night here. The dead should not fall into the habit of living with the living, just as the living should not keep the dead with them. Humanity consists of both the living and the dead. That is true, but not altogether true, otherwise you would not only have me here, you would have the Court of Appeals judge too and all the other deceased members of his family. How do you know a Court of Appeals judge lived here, I don't remember ever having told you. It was Victor. Which Victor, mine. No, a Victor who is dead but who also has a tendency to stick his nose into the affairs of others, not even death has cured him of this obsession. Does he stink of onion. He does, but it's bearable, the smell is gradually disappearing as time passes. Farewell, Fernando. Farewell, Ricardo.

There are signs that Salazar's intellectual repression is not spreading as effectively as

intended by its prime mover. A recent episode right here on the banks of the Tagus showed its weakening influence, when the second-class dispatch boat João de Lisboa was launched with all due ceremony in the presence of our venerable Head of State. The boat is on the slipway, festooned, everything spick-and-span, the tracks greased, the wedges adjusted, the crew lined up on the quarterdeck, and His Excellency the President of the Republic, General Antonio Oscar de Fragoso Carmona, the very same who declared that Portugal is now respected throughout the world and that we should be proud to be Portuguese, arrives with his entourage, civilian and military, the latter in dress uniform, the former in tails, top hat, and striped trousers. The President, proudly stroking his handsome white mustache, proceeds with caution, perhaps on his guard not to repeat on this occasion the phrase he always uses when he is invited to open an exhibition of paintings, Very chic, very chic, most enjoyable. They are now mounting the steps to the platform, the highest dignitaries in the land, without whose presence not a single vessel can be launched, there is also a representative from the Church, the Catholic Church of course, from which advantageous blessings are expected, may it please Almighty God that this ship kill many and lose few. All present are proud to be part of this splendid occasion with its gathering of notables, curious bystanders, shipyard workers, and photographers and reporters. The bottle of sparkling wine from Bairrada awaits its moment of explosive glory, when lo and behold, the João de Lisboa begins to slip down the slipway though no one has as much as touched it. There is confusion, the President's white mustache quivers, puzzled top hats wave, and there goes the ship. As she enters the water, the crew shout hip hip hurrah according to custom, the seagulls soar, startled by the sirens of the other ships and also by the loud guffaws that echo now throughout the Ribeira de Lisboa. The shipyard workers, a particularly nasty lot, are clearly responsible for this insult, and Victor is already investigating the incident. The tide recedes, the hatchways even now give off the toxic stench of onion, the President withdraws in a rage as his entourage disperses in shame and indignation, he demands to know im-me-diately the names of those responsible for this unpardonable outrage against the dignity of our sailors not to mention the Fatherland in the person of its highest magistrate. Yes, Mr. President of the Council, says Captain Agostinho Lourenço, Victor's boss. But they cannot shake off the public ridicule, such fun, the whole of Lisbon is talking about it, even the Spaniards at the Hotel Brangança, although somewhat nervously, Cuídense ustedes, eso son artes del diablo rojo, but since these are matters concerning Lusitanian politics, they make no further comment. The dukes of Alba and Medinaceli arrange a visit to the Coliseu, an outing for the men only, to watch the terrifying, amazing wrestling contests featuring their compatriot José Pons, Count Karol Nowina a Polish nobleman, the Jewish wrestler Ab-Kaplan, the White Russian Zikoff, the Czech Stresnack, the Italian Nerone, the Belgian De Ferm, the Fleming Rick de Groot, the Englishman Rex Gable, and a certain Strouck whose nationality remains obscure, all champions extraordinaires of this other human spectacle, who have mastered the graceful art of slams and kicks, head butts and scissor holds, full nelsons and bridges. If Goebbels had to enter this ring, he would play safe and send the Luftwaffe on ahead.

It is precisely about planes and aviation that discussions are taking place in the capital now. As for the serious breach of discipline committed by certain members of the navy, we should mention in passing, since we shall not touch on the subject again, that despite Victor's investigations the culprits were not found, for no one believed that the incident of the João de Lisboa could possibly have been the work of a simple caulker or riveter. Since it is evident to everyone that the clouds of war are gathering over the skies of Europe, the Portuguese government has decided, by way of example, which is the best lesson of all, to show its citizens what they must do to protect themselves in the event of an air raid. The name of the enemy is not mentioned, but everyone assumes that it is the traditional enemy, that is, Castilian, which is now Red. The range of modern planes is still very limited, so we are not likely to be attacked by the French, and even less by the English, who in addition happen to be our allies. As for the Italians and Germans, they have given so many proofs of friendship, our nations linked by a common ideal, that we are confident they will help us one day rather than attempt to exterminate us. Therefore the government has announced in the newspapers and over the radio that on the twenty-seventh of this month, the eve of the tenth anniversary of the National Revolution, Lisbon will witness a spectacle without precedent, namely a mock air raid somewhere in the Baixa, more technically it will be a demonstration of an attack by air with the purpose of destroying the Rossio railroad station and blocking all points of access to the aforementioned station by filling the area with tear gas. First a reconnaissance plane flies over the Rossio and marks the target with a smoke signal. Certain critics say that the attack would be far more effective if the planes dropped their bombs without giving any warning, what perverted disregard for the laws of chivalry. The moment the smoke rises in the air, the defense artillery fires a shot and the appropriate sirens sound, an alarm that no one could possibly fail to hear. The police, the National Republican Guard, the Red Cross, and the fire brigade go into action immediately, the population is evacuated from those streets at greatest risk, while emergency squads rush to offer assistance and fire engines, their hoses at the ready, head for the areas where fire is most likely to break out. Meanwhile the rescue teams have been assembled, and among them is the well-known actor of stage and screen, Antonio Silva, who leads a group of volunteer firemen from Ajuda. The squadron of enemy bombers, a fleet of biplanes, can now finally advance, they are obliged to fly low because their open cockpits are exposed to the rain and wind, and then the defending machine guns and antiaircraft artillery go into action, but since this is only a mock air raid, no planes are shot down, they swoop and attack without fear of reprisal, they do not even have to make the pretense of dropping bombs, the bombs explode by themselves down here in the Praça dos Restauradores, whose patriotic name could not save it if this were a real air raid. Nor was there any salvation for an infantry division that was heading for the Rossio, it was wiped out to the last man, we cannot imagine what they hoped to accomplish at a location which the enemy had humanely warned us was to be heavily bombed. Let us hope that this lamentable episode, a shameful blot on our army's reputation, will not be hushed up and that the General Staff will be brought before the Council of War for collective and summary execution by firing squad. The emergency services are beginning to feel the

strain, stretcher bearers, nurses, and doctors selflessly struggle in the line of fire, collecting corpses, saving the wounded, the latter daubed with Mercurochrome and tincture of iodine, swathed in bandages that later will be washed and reused when there are real wounds to deal with, even if it means waiting another thirty years. Despite this heroic defense, the enemy planes launch a fresh attack, incendiary bombs land on Rossio Station, which is now devoured by flames and reduced to a pile of rubble, but our hopes of a final victory have not been entirely dashed, because there on his pedestal, bareheaded, miraculously unharmed, the statue of the king, Dom Sebastião, remains standing. Elsewhere the bombardment has caused havoc, fresh ruins now cover the old ruins of the Convento do Carmo, columns of smoke emerge from the Teatro Nacional, the casualties increase, on all sides are houses in flame, mothers scream for their little ones, children cry for their mothers, and husbands and fathers are forgotten, war is hell. In the sky overhead, the pilots, satanic, drink to the success of their mission with glasses of Fundador brandy, which also restores warmth to their frozen limbs now that the heat of the battle is waning. They make notes, draw sketches, take photographs for their dispatches, then, dipping their wings in derision, off they fly in the direction of Badajoz. We were right when we surmised that they had come from across the river Caia. The city has been transformed into a sea of flame, thousands have lost their lives, another earthquake has befallen us. Then the antiaircraft artillery fires a final shot, the sirens sound once more, and the exercise is over. The people leave their shelters and return to their homes, there are no dead or wounded, the buildings are still standing, it was all one huge joke. This, at any rate, is the program for today's spectacle.

Ricardo Reis has seen the bombardment of Urea and Praia Vermelha, but at such a distance that they might well have been mistaken for training maneuvers similar to this one, except that the next day the newspapers reported real deaths. He decides to go and take a look at the scene and the actors from the Santa Justa footbridge, keeping far enough from the center of operations to preserve the illusion of reality. But others had thought of it before him, and when Ricardo Reis arrived, there was no room on the bridge, so he started to walk down the Calçada do Carmo and found himself taking part in a pilgrimage. Had the pavement been broken and dusty, he would have thought himself on the road to Fatima, for these are all things of the spirit, airplanes,- airships, and visions. He was reminded, for some reason, of the flying machine, the giant bird of Padre Bartolomeu de Gusmão, perhaps by some association of ideas, going from today's mock exercise to the air raids on Praia Vermelha and Urea, and from them, since that was Brazil, to the flying priest and the Passarola that immortalized his name, even though Padre Bartolomeu himself never flew it, whatever people may have said or will say to the contrary. At the top of the steps that descend in two flights to the Rua do Primeiro de Dezembro, Ricardo Reis sees that a crowd has gathered in the Rossio. Surprised that the public is allowed to get so close to the bombs, he nevertheless allows himself to be swept along with the stream of avid spectators who press toward the theater of war. Entering the square, he finds that the crowd is much larger than it seemed before, and too packed for anyone to pass. But he has had time to master the wiles practiced in these parts, and

says as he goes, Excuse me, please, I'm a doctor. Thanks to this strategy, a lie though it is the truth, he succeeds in reaching the front lines, where he can see everything. So far no airplanes have been sighted, but the police are nervous, in the cleared areas in front of the theater and the railroad station the commanding officers issue orders, an official State automobile passes, inside are the Minister of the Interior and members of his family, including women. Other members of the entourage follow in the car behind. They will watch the exercise from the windows of the Hotel Avenida Palace. Suddenly the warning shot is fired, the anguished sirens wail, the pigeons in the Rossio soar in a flock, flapping. Something has gone wrong with the plan, excessive haste, perhaps, on the part of novices, the enemy plane was supposed to drop a smoke signal first, then the sirens were to begin their mournful chorus and the antiaircraft guns their firing. What does it matter, the day will come when bombs fall ten thousand kilometers away and we know exactly what the future holds for us. Finally the plane appears, the multitude sways, they raise their arms, There she is, there she is. A cavernous roar, an explosion, and a dense cloud of smoke rises into the sky, there is great excitement, anxiety makes people's voices hoarse, the doctors put their stethoscopes to their ears, the nurses prepare their syringes, the stretcher bearers, in their impatience, drag the stretchers on the ground. In the distance now you can hear the hum of the engines of the flying fortresses. As the moment approaches, the more timid of the spectators begin to wonder if this is not in earnest after all, some hurriedly retreat and huddle in doorways to avoid being hit by shrapnel, but the majority stay put, and once it has been confirmed that the bombs are harmless, the crowd doubles. Shells explode, the soldiers slip on their gas masks, there are not enough masks for everyone, but the important thing is to give an impression of real warfare, we know immediately who will die and who will be saved from this attack with chemical weapons, because the time has not yet come for all to perish. There is smoke everywhere, the spectators cough and sneeze, behind the Teatro Nacional erupts a turbulent black volcano, the theater itself seems to be on fire. But it is difficult to take any of this seriously. The police drive back the people in front, they are in the way of the rescue teams, while the wounded, on stretchers, forget the dramatic role assigned them and giggle like idiots, perhaps the gas they inhaled was laughing gas. Even the stretcher bearers have to stop to wipe away tears of laughter. To cap it all, just as the imaginary peril reaches its climax, a municipal road sweeper arrives on the scene with his pushcart and broom and starts sweeping up the bits of paper strewn along the gutter. He lifts the litter with his shovel, empties it into his trash can, and moves on. Oblivious of the uproar, of the people running in every direction, he enters clouds of smoke and reemerges unscathed, he does not even look up to see the Spanish planes. Once is usually enough, twice is often too much, but history is indifferent to the fine points of literary composition, which explains why she now causes a postman to appear with his bag of mail, tranquilly crossing the square. How many people must be anxiously awaiting his arrival, a letter from Coimbra may come today, a message saying, Tomorrow I shall be in your arms. This postman, aware of his responsibilities, is not one to waste time on spectacles in the street. Ricardo Reis is the only man of learning in the crowd, the only one who can see a Lisbon road sweeper and a postman and think of that famous youth in Paris who sold his

cakes in the street while the enraged mob stormed the Bastille. There is really no difference between us Portuguese and the civilized world, we too have our alienated heroes, self-absorbed poets, road sweepers who tirelessly sweep, and postmen who cross the square without remembering that the letter from Coimbra should be delivered to that gentleman over there. But there's no letter from Coimbra, he says as the road sweeper sweeps and the pastry seller cries out, Cheesecakes from Sintra.

A few days later, Ricardo Reis narrated what he had seen, described the airplanes, the smoke, the deafening noise of the anti-aircraft artillery, the volleys of the machine guns, and Lydia listened attentively, sorry to have missed the fun. She laughed, Oh how funny, the business with the road sweeper, when suddenly she remembered that she also had something to tell, Do you know who escaped. She did not wait for Ricardo Reis to answer but went on, Manuel Guedes, the sailor I mentioned the other day, do you remember. Yes, I remember, but where did he escape. As he was being taken before the tribunal, and Lydia laughed with gusto. Ricardo Reis simply smiled. This country is going to the dogs, ships that launch themselves prematurely, prisoners who escape, and road sweepers, but what can one expect from a road sweeper. But Lydia was very pleased that Manuel Guedes had managed to escape.

Invisible, the cicadas sing in the palm trees on the Alto de Santa Catarina. Adamastor is deafened by their strident chorus, which scarcely merits the sweet name of music, but the question of music depends a great deal on who is listening. The enamored giant would not have heard them as he paced the shore waiting for the procuress Doris to arrive and arrange the much desired encounter, for the sea was singing then and the beloved voice of Thetis hovered over the waters, as is usually said of the spirit of God. But it is the male cicada that sings, rubbing his wings furiously to produce this obsessive, relentless sound, like a marble cutter's screech upon striking some harder vein inside the stone. It is stifling hot. In Fatima the sun had been a burning ember, but then for days the sky was overcast, it even drizzled. In the lowlands, the flood has finally subsided, all that remains of that vast inland sea are small pools of scummy water which the sun is gradually drying up. In the morning, when the air is still fresh, the old men bring their umbrellas, but the heat now has grown oppressive, so the umbrellas serve as parasols, which leads us to conclude that the usefulness of an object is more important than the names we give it, yet in the final analysis, like it or not, we always come back to words. The ships enter and leave with their flags, smokestacks, antlike sailors, deafening sirens. A sailor, after hearing that din so often during storms at sea, ends up learning to speak on equal terms with the deity of the deep. These two old men have never been to sea, but their blood does not chill when they hear that mighty roar, mighty though muffled by distance, it is deeper down that they quake, as if there were ships sailing through the channels of their veins, ships lost in the darkness of their bodies, amid the gigantic bones of the world. As the heat becomes sultry, the old men retrace their steps, it is time for lunch and those time-honored hours of siesta in the shade of their own homes. When the heat abates, they will return to the Alto to sit on the same bench, but with their umbrellas open, because the protection of the trees, as we know, is unreliable, the sun only has to descend a little and the shade of the palm trees is gone. These old men will die without learning that palm trees are not trees, incredible, that people can be so ignorant. But, as in the case of umbrella and parasol, it is of no importance that a palm tree is not a tree, what matters is the shade it gives, and if we were to ask that gentleman, the doctor who comes here every afternoon, whether a palm tree is a tree or not, he would have to go home to consult his encyclopedia of botany, unless he left it behind in Brazil. Most likely all he knows about the vegetable world is the skimp imagery with which he adorns his poems, flowers in general, a few laurels because they date from mythological times, some trees bearing no name but tree, vines and sunflowers, the rushes that tremble in the current, the ivy of oblivion, the lilies, and the roses, the roses. The old men converse freely with Ricardo Reis, but when he leaves his apartment it does not cross his mind to ask them, Did you know that a palm tree is not a tree. And because they are so sure of what they think they know, it will never occur to them to ask him, Doctor, is the palm tree a tree. One day they will go their separate ways and the fundamental question of whether the palm tree is a tree because it resembles a tree, or whether this passing shadow we cast on the ground is life because it resembles life, will remain unanswered.

Ricardo Reis has got into the habit of rising late. He has learned to suppress any

desire to eat in the morning. The opulent trays Lydia used to bring to his room at the Hotel Brangança now seem to belong to someone else's past. He sleeps late, wakes up and goes back to sleep again, he studies his own sleeping, and after numerous attempts has succeeded in fixing his mind on a single dream, always the same dream, about one who dreams that he does not wish to conceal one dream with another, like erasing telltale footprints. It is simple, all you have to do is drag the branch of a tree behind you, leaving only scattered leaves and pieces of twig, which soon wither and merge with the dust. When he gets up, it is time for lunch. Washing, shaving, dressing are mechanical acts in which the mind barely participates. This face covered with lather is a mask that could fit any man's face, and when the razor little by little reveals what is underneath, Ricardo Reis is intrigued by what he sees, and disturbed, as if afraid that some evil might emerge. He examines himself carefully in the mirror, comparing this face with the different, unknown face he once had. He tells himself that as long as he shaves every day, sees every day these eyes, this mouth, this nose, this chin, these pale cheeks, these crumpled, absurd appendages called ears, that such a change is impossible, and yet he feels certain he spent years in some place without mirrors, because today he looks and does not recognize himself. Often, going out to lunch, he encounters the old men coming down the street, they greet him, Good afternoon, Doctor, and he replies, Good afternoon, though he does not know their names, they might as well be trees or palms. When he feels inclined, he goes to a movie, but usually he returns to his apartment after lunch. The park is deserted in the fierce glare of the sun, the river's shimmering gleam dazzles the eyes, and Adamastor, embedded in rock, is about to send forth a mighty cry, enraged at the face the sculptor gave him, aggrieved for reasons we have known ever since Camoes's epic. Like the old men, Ricardo Reis takes refuge in the shade of his dwelling, where little by little the former mustiness has returned. Lydia opens all the windows when she comes, but it doesn't help, the smell seems to emanate from the furniture, from the very walls, the contest is definitely unequal, and Lydia comes less frequently these days. Toward evening, with the first breeze, Ricardo Reis goes and sits on a bench in the park, neither too close nor too far from the old men. Giving them his morning newspaper when he is done with it is his only act of charity. He does not offer them food, they have not asked for any, although they have not asked for these printed sheets of news either, you can decide which act of generosity would be the greater if both were made. If we asked Ricardo Reis what he does at home, alone all that time, he would simply shrug, perhaps he has forgotten that he did some reading, wrote a little poetry, wandered down corridors, spent some time at the rear of the building looking into the courtyard below, the clotheslines, white sheets, towels, and the hen coops, and the cats sleeping on the walls in the shade. There are no dogs, but, then, there are no possessions that need guarding. Then he went back to his reading, to his poetry, writing, rewriting, or tearing up when the poem was not worth keeping. Then he waited for the heat to abate, for the first breeze of the evening. As he was going downstairs, the neighbor on the second floor appeared on the landing. Time had softened the malicious gossip, there was no longer the same interest, the entire building had been restored to harmony and amiable coexistence. Well now, is your husband feeling better, he inquired,

and the neighbor replied, Thanks to you, Doctor, your help was an act of providence, a miracle. That is what we are all seeking, acts of providence and miracles, and is it not a miracle to have a doctor living next door who can come to our assistance when we have a pain in the tummy. Has he emptied his bowels. He got rid of the whole load, thanks be to God, Doctor. Such is life, the hand that writes the prescription for the laxative also writes the sublime or at least acceptable line, You have sun if there is sun, flowers if there are flowers, and good fortune if fortune smiles.

The old men read the newspaper. We already know that one of them is illiterate, he is therefore more generous when it comes to making comments, his opinions are a way of balancing the scale. If one man knows, the other explains. I say, this story about Loon Six Hundred is really very funny, I've known him for years, I knew him when he drove a tram, he was always crashing into carts and wagons, he loved it, they put him in jail thirty-eight times and finally sacked him, he was incorrigible, but the cart drivers were partly to blame, they go at a snail's pace, never hurry, and there was Loon Six Hundred stamping on the bell with the heel of his boot, foaming at the mouth until he could stand it no longer, so he rammed them, bang, and there was a fight, and the police came and marched everybody off to jail, but now Loon Six Hundred drives a cart too and fights with the tram drivers, his former colleagues, because they treat him the way he used to treat the cart drivers, as the old saying goes, As ye sow. Thus concluded the old man who could not read, with an aphorism, which had a medicinal, binding effect on his speech. Ricardo Reis was seated on the same bench, a rare occurrence, but today all the others were occupied. Aware that the old man's monologue was for his benefit, he asked, This nickname Loon Six Hundred, how did he get it. Whereupon the illiterate replied, Six hundred was his number when he worked for the tram company and people called him Loon because of his behavior. I see. When the old men went back to their reading, Ricardo Reis allowed his thoughts to wander, What nickname would suit me, perhaps Doctor Bard, Back-from-Brazil, the Spiritualist, Jack the Ode Maker, Chess Player, Casanova of Chambermaids. Suddenly the old man who was reading said, Orphan of Fortune, the nickname of a petty thief, a pickpocket caught in the act. Why not Orphan of Fortune for Ricardo Reis and Ricardo Reis for the pickpocket, a criminal could have his name, names do not choose destinies. The old men love to read about the colorful dramas of everyday life, the cases of fraud, disorderly conduct, acts of violence or despair, dark deeds in the night, crimes of passion, an abandoned fetus, a car crash, a calf born with two heads, a bitch that suckles cats, at least this bitch is not like Ugolina who ate her young. Their conversation now turns to Micas Saloia whose real name is Maria Conceição and who has received one hundred and sixty prison sentences for theft besides being exiled to Africa several times. Then there was Judite Meleças the bogus countess from Castelo Melhor who cheated a lieutenant of the National Republican Guard out of two contos and fifty reis, a sum of money that will seem rather paltry fifty years from now but in these lean times it is almost a fortune, as the women of Benavente, who work from dawn to dusk for ten thousand reis, can testify. The rest is less interesting. As announced, a gala day was held at the Jockey Club with thousands of guests, we need

not be surprised that so many attended, we know how the Portuguese love celebrations, particularly celebrations organized on behalf of the flood victims of Ribatejo, among whom is Micas da Borda d'Agua from Benavente, who will receive her share of the forty-five thousand seven hundred and fifty-three escudos and five and a half centavos collected, although some accounting still has to be done, because there are a few not inconsiderable invoices outstanding, and tax bills. But the high standard and elegant presentation of the events on the program made it all worthwhile, the band of the National Republican Guard gave a concert, two troops of horsemen from the same guard staged a carousel and charge, patrols from the Cavalry School of Torres Novas demonstrated various maneuvers, there was a display of cowboy skills, the rounding up and throwing of steers from Ribatejo, and nuestros hermanos were represented, cattle drovers from Seville and Badajoz come expressly to take part in the festivities. In order to have a chat with them and hear the latest from Spain, the dukes of Alba and Medinaceli, guests at the Hotel Bragança, descended into the arena, a fine example of peninsular solidarity on their part, there is nothing like being a Spanish grandee in Portugal.

News from the rest of the world has not changed a great deal, the strikes continue in France, where there are now about five hundred thousand workers on strike, the government headed by Albert Sarraut is expected to resign and be succeeded by a new ministry which Léon Blum will organize, and the impression will be created, at least temporarily, that the demonstrators are satisfied. As for Spain, the drovers from Seville and Badajoz converse with the dukes, Here we are respected more than grandees of Portugal, Then remain here with us and we shall drive cattle together. In Spain, as we were saying, the strikers are sprouting up like mushrooms and Largo Caballero warns that until the working classes are protected by the law, outbreaks of violence can be expected, and if he says that, a man who supports the working classes, it must be true, therefore we must prepare ourselves for the worst. Better late than never, on the other hand there's no point closing the stable door after the horse has bolted, look at the British, they abandoned the Ethiopians to their fate and now applaud their Emperor, if you ask me, my dear fellow, this is nothing but one great swindle. The old men on the Alto de Santa Catarina chat pleasantly on, though the doctor has returned to his apartment, they talk about animals, about the white wolf that appeared in Riodades, near Sao João da Pesqueira, and that the local inhabitants call Pombo, and about the lioness Nadia that mauled the fakir Blacaman's leg in the Teatro Coliseu in full view of the audience, thus proving that circus artists really do put their lives at risk. If Ricardo Reis had not left so soon he could have taken this opportunity to tell them the story of the bitch Ugolina, completing the triumvirate of wild beasts, the wolf still at large, the lioness whose dose of drugs will have to be increased, the bitch, who eats her children, Pombo, Nadia, Ugolina, animals have nicknames as well as men.

Early one morning, as Ricardo Reis lies dozing, very early indeed considering his indolence of late, he hears the warships on the Tagus firing salvos, twenty-one solemn booms at regular intervals, making the windowpanes rattle. He thought another war had

broken out, then remembered what he had read the previous day, this is the tenth of June, Portugal's National Holiday commemorating our forefathers and affirming our dedication to the achievements of the future. Half-asleep, he wondered whether he had the energy to jump out of these grubby sheets and throw the windows wide open to let the heroically echoing salutes enter unimpeded and disperse the shadows from his apartment, the mildew, the insidious smell of must. But while he was turning this over in his mind and debating with himself, the last vibrations fell away. Once more a great silence descended upon the Alto de Santa Catarina, but Ricardo Reis did not notice, he had closed his eyes and gone back to sleep. Such is a life badly managed, we sleep when we should be on our guard, we depart when we should be arriving, we close the window when we should leave it open. In the afternoon, returning from lunch, he saw bunches of flowers at the foot of the statue of Camoes, homage from the Federation of Patriots to the epic poet, the great bard of the nation's valor, that all may know that we have shaken off the enfeebling and degrading melancholy we suffered in the sixteenth century. Today, believe me, we are a very happy people. As soon as darkness falls we will switch on floodlights here in the square and Senhor Camoes will be lit up, what am I saying, he will be completely transformed by the dazzling splendor. True, he is blind in the right eye, but he can still see with his left, and if he finds the light too strong let him speak up, we can easily dim the intensity to twilight, to the original gloom that we have by now grown so accustomed to. Had Ricardo Reis gone out this evening, he would have met Fernando Pessoa in the Praça de Luis de Camoes, seated on one of those benches as if enjoying the breeze. Both families and solitary souls have come in search of the same refreshment, and there is so much light, it is almost like day, faces glow as if touched by ecstasy, one can understand why this day is called the Feast of the Nation. To mark the occasion, Fernando Pessoa tries to recite, in his mind, the poem from Mensagem that is dedicated to Camoes, and it takes him some time to realize that there is no such poem. Can this be possible. Only by looking it up can he be certain. From Ulysses to Dom Sebastião not a single hero escaped him, not even the prophets Bandarra and Vieira, yet apparently he failed even to mention the One-Eyed Bard. This omission causes Fernando Pessoa's hands to tremble, his conscious asks, Why, his unconscious can provide no explanation, then Luis de Camoes smiles, his bronzed mouth has the knowing expression of one who died long ago, It was envy, my dear Pessoa, but forget it, don't torment yourself so, here nothing has importance, the day will come when they disown you a hundred times, another day will come when you wish to be disowned a hundred times. At this very moment, in his third-floor apartment on the Rua de Santa Catarina, Ricardo Reis is trying to write a poem to Marcenda so that posterity will not say she passed in vain, Already impatient for the summer, I also weep for its flowers, knowing they must fade. This will be the first part of the ode, so far no one would guess that he speaks of Marcenda, but poets often begin at the horizon, for that is the shortest path to the heart. Half an hour later, or an hour later, or more, because when it comes to writing poetry time either drags or races, the middle part has taken form, it is not the lament it first seemed, rather the acceptance of that which has no remedy, Having crossed the inevitable threshold of each year, I begin to see before me the flowerless valley, the

rumbling abyss. It is dawn, the entire city sleeps, and the floodlights on the statue of Camoes, because with no onlookers they now serve no purpose, have gone out. Fernando Pessoa returns home, says, I'm back, Grandmother, and at that precise moment the poem completes itself, with difficulty, a semicolon was reluctantly inserted, Ricardo Reis long resisted it, did not want it, but it won, And I pick the rose because fortune picks Marcenda, and cherish it, let it wither on my breast and not on the vast diurnal curving bosom of the globe. Ricardo Reis lay fully dressed on the bed, his left hand resting on the sheet of paper, if he should pass now from sleep to death, people will mistake it for his will, a letter of farewell, they will not know what to make of it even after they read it, for whoever heard of a woman called Marcenda. Such a name comes from another planet, Blimunda too is an example, a mysterious name waiting to be used by an unknown woman. At least a woman named Marcenda has been found, but she lives far away.

Here beside him on this same bed was Lydia, when they felt the earth move. The tremor was brief but shook the building from top to bottom before it passed, sending the neighbors onto the stairs in hysterics and causing the chandelier to swing like a pendulum. Gripped by terror, those voices sounded obscene. The entire city, perhaps with the terrible memory of other earthquakes still embedded in its stones, waited in suspense, in the unbearable silence that follows the tremor, when one cannot think but asks himself, Will the tremor return, Will I die. Ricardo Reis and Lydia stayed in bed. They were naked, lying on their backs like statues without even a sheet covering them. Death, had it come, would have found them submissive, satisfied, still breathing heavily, wet with sweat and intimate secretions, their hearts pounding, because their bodies had separated only a few minutes ago, as full of life as possible. Suddenly the bed shudders, the furniture rocks, the floor and ceiling creak, this is not the vertiginous final moment of orgasm, it is the earth roaring from its depths. We are going to die, Lydia said, yet she did not clutch the man beside her as one might have expected. Women as a rule are like this, it is the men who say in terror, It's nothing, stay calm, it has passed, words spoken to reassure themselves, not others. Trembling with fear, Ricardo Reis said this too, and he was right, the tremor passed, the neighbors shouting on the stairs gradually calmed, but the discussion continued, one of them went down to the street, another went to her window, both watching the general uproar. As peace is gradually restored, Lydia turns to Ricardo Reis and he to her, the arm of each over the body of each, and he repeats, It was nothing, and she smiles, but her smile has a different meaning, she is clearly not thinking about the tremor. They lie looking at each other yet so distant from each other, so apart in their thoughts, as we now see when suddenly she confides, I think I'm pregnant, I'm ten days late. The student of medicine has been taught the mysteries of the human body, he knows therefore how the spermatozoa swim upstream inside the woman until they reach the source of life, from books he learns these things and sees them confirmed in practice, yet look how stunned he is, as stunned as an ignorant Adam who cannot fathom how this could have happened however much Eve explains. He tries to gain time, What did you say. I'm ten days late, I think I'm pregnant. Once again, of the two she is the more composed. For the past week, every day, every second, she has thought of nothing

else, perhaps she thought of this even a moment ago when she said, We are going to die. One wonders whether Ricardo Reis was included in that plural. He expects her to ask a question, for example, What should I do, but she remains silent, concealing her pubis with a slight bending of the knees. There is no visible sign of pregnancy, unless we can decipher what her eyes are saying, fixed on some personal horizon, if eyes possess such a thing. Ricardo Reis searches for the right words but all he finds within himself is indifference, as if, though aware that he is obliged to help solve the problem, he does not feel implicated in its cause. Rather, he sees himself in the role of the doctor to whom a patient has blurted out her guilty secret, Ah, Doctor, what is to become of me, I am pregnant and this could not have happened at a worse moment. The doctor does not tell her, Have an abortion, don't be a fool. On the contrary, he puts on a grave air, If you and your husband have taken no precautions, in all probability you are pregnant, but let's wait a few more days, you could simply be late, sometimes that happens. But Ricardo Reis cannot speak with such neutrality, he is the father, for there is no evidence that in the last few months Lydia has slept with any man but him, still the father is at a loss for words. Finally, feeling his way with the utmost caution, weighing every phrase, he distributes the blame, We were careless, this had to happen sooner or later. But Lydia does not ask, What care should I have taken. He never withdrew at the critical moment, never used those rubber caps, but this does not worry her, she simply says, I'm pregnant. After all, it happens to nearly every woman, becoming pregnant is no earthquake. Ricardo Reis makes a decision, he must know her intentions, there is no point in evading the issue any longer, Are you thinking of having the child. Just as well that there is no one eavesdropping, otherwise Ricardo Reis would find himself accused of suggesting an abortion, but before the witnesses have been heard and the judge passes sentence, Lydia steps forward and declares, I am going to have the baby. For the first time, Ricardo Reis feels a finger touch his heart. It is not pain he experiences, or a twitch or chill, but a sensation like no other, like the first handshake of men from two different planets, both human beings yet completely alien to each other. What is an embryo of ten days, Ricardo Reis asks himself, and can find no answer. In his years as a doctor he has seen cells multiply through a microscope, he has seen detailed illustrations in books, but now he sees nothing but this silent, somber, unmarried woman, a hotel chambermaid by profession, Lydia, her breasts and belly exposed, only her pubis shyly hidden as if keeping a secret. He pulled her to him, and she yielded like someone finally taking refuge from the world, suddenly blushing and overjoyed and pleading like a timid bride, You aren't angry with me. What an idea, why should I be angry. These words are not sincere, because a great anger now surges inside Ricardo Reis, I've got myself into a fine mess, he is thinking, if she doesn't have an abortion, I'll end up with a child on my hands, I'll have to acknowledge it as mine, I am morally obliged, what a mess, I never thought anything like this would happen to me. Snuggling up closer, Lydia wanted him to hold her tight, because it felt good, and casually she uttered these incredible words, If you don't want to acknowledge the child, I don't mind, the child can be illegitimate, like me. Ricardo Reis felt his eyes fill with tears, some tears of shame, some of pity, if anyone can tell the difference, and in a sudden impulse, sincere at last, he embraced and kissed her.

Imagine, he kissed her long and on the lips, relieved of this tremendous burden. There are such moments in life, we think we are experiencing passion and it is merely a rush of gratitude. But sensuality pays little attention to these subtleties, within seconds Lydia and Ricardo Reis are copulating, moaning and sighing, they need not worry now, the child has already been conceived.

These are days of bliss. On vacation from her job at the hotel, Lydia spends nearly all her time with Ricardo Reis and goes home only to sleep at her mother's house, out of propriety, to avoid gossip among the neighbors, who notwithstanding the good relations established ever since the doctor offered some medical advice, continue to comment slyly on these disgraceful associations between master and servant, all too common in this Lisbon of ours no matter how carefully disguised. Someone of greater moral fastidiousness might insinuate that people can also do during the day what they normally do at night, but another could reply that during the day there is no time, because of the great spring cleaning done in houses every Easter after the long winter, which explains why the doctor's charwoman comes early each morning and leaves almost at dusk, and work she does, for all to see and hear, with feather duster and cloth, scrub brush and broom. Sometimes the windows are closed and there is a sudden silence, but is it not natural for a person to rest between one chore and another, to untie the kerchief on her head, to loosen her clothes, to groan from a new and sweet exertion. The apartment is celebrating Resurrection Saturday and Easter Sunday by the grace and labor of this humble servant who passes her hands over things and leaves them spotless and gleaming, not even in the days of Dona Luisa and the Appeals Court Judge, with a regiment of maids to do the shopping and the cooking, did these walls and furniture shine with such luster, blessed be Lydia among women. Marcenda, were she living here as the legitimate mistress of the household, could not compete, not even with two good hands. A few days ago the place smelled of mildew, dust, must, blocked drains, and now light penetrates the most remote corners, makes all the glass look like crystal, polishes every surface, the ceiling itself becomes starlit with reflections when the sun enters the windows, a celestial abode, a diamond within a diamond, and it was through menial housework that this sublime transformation was achieved. Perhaps also the abode is celestial because of the frequency with which Lydia and Ricardo Reis make love, such is their pleasure in giving and taking, I cannot think what has come over these two that they are suddenly so demanding and so generous with their favors. Could it be the summer that is heating their blood, could it be the presence of that tiny ferment in her womb, the ferment is nothing in this world as yet, yet already it has some influence in governing it.

But now Lydia's vacation is over and everything returns to normal, she will come, as before, once a week on her day off. Now, even when the sun finds an open window, the light is different, weaker, and the sieve of time has started once more to sift the impalpable dust that makes outlines fade and blurs features. When Ricardo Reis turns down the bedcover at night, he barely sees the pillow where he will rest his head, and in

the morning he cannot rise without first identifying himself with his own hands, line by line, what he can still find of himself, like a fingerprint partially obliterated by a large scar. One night Fernando Pessoa, who does not always appear when he is needed, knocked on his door. I was beginning to think I'd never see you again, Ricardo Reis told him. I haven't been out much of late, I get lost so easily, like a forgetful old woman, the only thing that saves me is the mental picture I still have of the statue of Camoes, working from there, I can usually get my bearings. Let's hope they don't remove him, given this latest mania of removing things, you should see what's happening on the Avenida da Liberdade, they have stripped it bare. I haven't been back there, I know nothing about it. They have removed or are about to remove the statue of Pinheiro Chagas, and that of a certain José Luis Monteiro, whom I've never heard of. Nor I, but as for Pinheiro Chagas, they have done the right thing. Be quiet, you don't know what awaits you. They will never erect a statue to commemorate me, only if they have no shame, I'm not one for statues. I couldn't agree more, there can be nothing more depressing than having a statue as part of one's destiny, let them raise statues to military leaders and politicians, who like that sort of thing, we are men of words only and words cannot be set in bronze and stone, they are words, nothing more, look at Camões, where are his words. That is why they made him a fop at court. A D'Artagnan. With a sword at his side, any puppet looks good, I'm sure I would cut a ridiculous figure. Don't upset yourself, you might escape this curse, and if you don't, like Rigoletto, you can always hope that they will pull your statue down one day, as in the case of Pinheiro Chagas, and transfer it to a quiet spot or store it in some warehouse, it is happening all the time, some people are even demanding that the statue of Chiado be removed. Chiado too, what do they have against Chiado. They say he was a scurrilous buffoon and is not fit for the elegant site where his statue stands. On the contrary, Chiado could not stand in a better place, one cannot imagine Camoes without Chiado, besides they lived in the same century, if there is anything that needs changing it is the position in which they put the friar, he should be turned to face the epic poet with hand outstretched, not a begging hand but an offering, giving hand. Camoes needs nothing from Chiado. Camoes is no longer alive, therefore we have no idea what he needs or doesn't need. Ricardo Reis went to the kitchen to get some coffee, returned to the study, sat opposite Fernando Pessoa, and said, It always feels strange not being able to offer you a cup of coffee. Pour another cup and put it in front of me, I'll keep you company while you drink. I cannot get used to the idea that you do not exist. Seven months have passed already, enough time to engender a life, but you know more about that than I do, you are a doctor. Is there some veiled hint in that last remark. What veiled hint should I make. I'm not sure. You are touchy today. Perhaps it's this business of removing statues, this proof of how fickle human loyalties can be, the Discus Thrower is another example. What discus thrower, The one on the Avenida, Now I remember, that naked youth pretending to be Greek, Well, he too has been removed. But why. They said he looked effeminate, they spoke of moral health and protecting the eyes of the city's inhabitants from shameful displays of nudity. If the youth was not exaggerated in any of his physical proportions, what harm was he doing. Those so-called proportions, although neither exaggerated nor excessive, were more than sufficient to

illustrate certain details of the male anatomy. But I thought they said the youth looked effeminate, is that not what they said. Yes. Then surely he offended because he was found wanting, not because there was too much of him. I am only repeating as best I can the rumors circulating in the city. My dear Reis, are the Portuguese gradually taking leave of their senses. If you who lived here ask this question, how can a man who lived abroad for so many years be expected to answer it.

Ricardo Reis, finishing his coffee, now debated whether or not to read the poem he had dedicated to Marcenda, the one beginning, Already impatient for the summer. When finally he made up his mind and began to rise from the sofa, Fernando Pessoa pleaded with him with a sadly vacant smile, pleaded, Distract me, you must have other scandals to confide. Whereupon Ricardo Reis, without needing to pause for thought, announced in seven words the biggest scandal of all, I am about to become a father. Fernando Pessoa looked at him in astonishment, then burst out laughing, he could not believe it, You're joking. Ricardo Reis said somewhat stiffly, I am not joking, besides I fail to understand your surprise, if a man regularly sleeps with a woman, in all likelihood she will conceive, that is what happened in my case. Who is the mother, your Lydia or your Marcenda, or is there a third woman, with you one never knows. There is no third woman, and I did not marry Marcenda. Ah, so you would have a child with Marcenda only if you were married to her. Well, obviously, you know the stria morality observed in traditional families. And chambermaids have no such scruples. Sometimes they do. True, remember when Alvaro de Campos told us how he was mocked by a hotel chambermaid. Not in that sense. In what sense, then. A hotel chambermaid is also a woman. The things one learns after one is dead. You don't know Lydia. My dear Reis, I shall always treat the matter of your child with the greatest respect, nay, veneration, but having never been a father myself, I know not how to translate these metaphysical feelings into the tedious reality of everyday life. Stop being ironic. Your sudden paternity must have dulled your senses, otherwise you would perceive that there is nothing ironic in what I am saying. Irony there most certainly is, though it may go under the guise of something else. Irony, rather, is the disguise. A disguise for what. Perhaps for grief. Don't tell me that it grieves you never to have had a child. Who knows. Have you regrets. I am the most regretting of persons and today do not even have the heart to deny it. You regret that you regret. That habit I had to give up when I died, there are certain things on this side that are not permitted. Fernando Pessoa stroked his mustache and asked, Are you still thinking of going back to Brazil. There are days when I seem to be back there already, and there are days when I have the impression that I was never there at all. You are floating, in other words, in midocean, neither here nor there. Like the rest of the Portuguese. But this gives you an excellent opportunity to make a new life for yourself, with a wife and child. I have no intention of marrying Lydia, and I still haven't decided whether I will acknowledge the child as mine. If you will allow me to express an opinion, my dear Reis, you are a cad. Perhaps, but Alvaro de Campos took loans he never repaid, He was a cad too, You never really got along with him, I never really got along with you, We never really understood each other, That was inevitable, since each of us was a multitude of different people. What I do not

understand is this high moral tone of yours, this conservatism. A dead man by definition is a conservative, he cannot bear any tampering with order. You once fulminated against order. Now I fulminate on its behalf. If you were alive and found yourself in my shoes, with an unwanted child, its mother from a lower class, you would have the doubts I have. The very same. The doubts of a cad. That's right, dear Reis, of a cad. I may be a cad, but I have no intention of abandoning Lydia. Perhaps because she is making things easy for you. True enough, she told me there was no need for me to acknowledge the child as mine. Why are women like this, Not all of them, Agreed, but only women can be like this. Anyone listening to you would think you had a great deal of experience with women. The only experience I have is that of a spectator, an observer. No, one has to sleep with them, make them pregnant, even if it ends in abortion, one has to see them when they are sad and happy, laughing and weeping, silent and talkative, one has to watch them when they do not know that they are being watched. And what does an experienced man see at such moments? An enigma, a labyrinth, a charade. I was always good at charades, But a disaster when it came to women, My dear Reis, that is not kind, Forgive me, my nerves are humming like a tele phone wire in a strong wind. You are forgiven. I have no job and no interest in looking for one, I spend my days sitting here in my apartment, sitting in some restaurant, or on a bench in the park, as if I had nothing to do but sit and wait for death. Let the child be born. It isn't up to me, and a child wouldn't solve anything, I feel that it does not belong to me. You think someone else might be the father. No, I'm certain I'm the father, that's not the problem, the problem is that only the mother truly exists, the father is an accident. A necessary accident. Undoubtedly, but dispensable once the necessity has been provided, so dispensable that he could die at once, like a praying mantis. You are as frightened of women as I was, Perhaps even more. Did you ever hear from Marcenda again, Not a word, but I wrote a poem to her several days ago, Are you serious, Well, to be frank, it's only a poem in which her name appears, would you like me to read it to you. No. Why not. I know your poetry by heart, both the poems you have written and the poems you will write, the only novelty would be the name Marcenda. Now it is your turn to be unkind. Nor can I ask to be forgiven on the grounds that my nerves are bad, go ahead, then, and read me the poem. Already impatient for the summer. And the second line could be, I also weep for its flowers. That's right. As you can see, we know everything about each other, or at least I about you, Is there anything that belongs only to me, Probably not. After Fernando Pessoa left, Ricardo Reis drank what remained of the coffee in his cup, it was cold but tasted good.

A few days later the newspapers reported that twenty-five Hitler Youth students from Hamburg, visiting our country in order to study and promote National-Socialist ideals, were guests of honor at the Teacher Training College. After an extensive tour of the Exhibition to Mark the Tenth Anniversary of the National Revolution, they wrote the following in the Roll of Honor, We are nobody. This meant, as the clerk on duty hastened to explain, that the people are indeed nobody if not guided by the elite, the cream, the flower, the chosen few of our society. Note that the word chosen derives from choice which implies election, for we would have our people guided by the chosen few if they

can choose them, whereas to be guided by a flower or by a cream is ridiculous, at least in the Portuguese language, so let us use the French word elite until such time as we find something better in German. Perhaps with this in mind the creation of the Portuguese Youth Movement has been decreed, in October its activities will start in earnest, the Movement will have a membership of two hundred thousand youths, the flower or cream of our youth, from which, hopefully, the elite will emerge, destined to govern us when the present regime comes to an end. If Lydia's child is born and survives, in a few years' time he will be able to take part in parades, enroll in the junior ranks of the Portuguese Youth Movement, don the green and khaki uniform, display on his belt the letter'S, which stands for Serve and Salazar, or Serve Salazar, therefore a double'S, SS, extending his right arm in Roman-style salute. And Marcenda, with her aristocratic background, will enroll in the Women's Organization for National Education, she too will raise her right arm, since it is only the left that is paralyzed. To show how our patriotic youth is shaping up, representatives of the Portuguese Youth Movement will travel to Berlin in uniform, let us hope they will have an opportunity to repeat that celebrated phrase, We are nobody. They will also attend the Olympic Games, where, needless to say, they will make a splendid impression, these proud and comely youths, the glory of the Lusitanian race, the mirror of our future, a blossoming tree that extends its branches in Roman salute. My son, Lydia tells Ricardo Reis, will have nothing to do with such a farce, and with these words we could start an argument that would last ten years, if we live that long.

Victor is nervous. This mission is one of enormous responsibility, not to be compared with the routine job of tailing suspects, bribing hotel managers, interrogating porters who spill the beans immediately. He puts his right hand to his hip to feel the reassuring presence of his pistol, then takes from the inside pocket of his jacket, very slowly, with the tip of his fingers, a peppermint lozenge. He unwraps it with infinite care, because in the silence of the night the sound of rustling paper can be heard ten paces away, this is unwise of him, an infringement of security regulations, but the smell of onion, perhaps because of his nervousness, has become intense and there is the danger that at the critical moment his prey might flee, being downwind of him. Hidden behind tree trunks, concealed in doorways, Victor's henchmen are waiting for the signal, they gaze steadily at the window from which filters an almost invisible thread of light, the fact that the inside shutters are closed in this heat is itself an indication of conspiracy. One of Victor's henchmen hefts the crowbar with which he will prize open the door, another slips the fingers of his left hand into an iron knuckle-duster, both men, much experienced, will leave a trail of shattered hinges and broken jaws. On the sidewalk opposite stands another policeman, behaving like an innocent passerby or rather a law-abiding citizen returning home to this building, but he does not rap with the knocker for his wife to come and open up, What kept you so late. In less than fifteen seconds the door is opened just as effectively by crowbar, the first obstacle overcome. The policeman waits on the staircase, his job is to listen carefully, to give warning if he hears anything, to let Victor know, for Victor is the brains behind this operation. In the doorway the shadowy form of the policeman appears, he lights a cigarette, which means that all is well, no suspicions have been aroused on the floor they have surrounded. Victor spits out the peppermint, he is afraid of choking at the height of the action, should there be hand-to-hand combat, he breathes through his mouth, relishes the freshness of the peppermint, he no longer seems the same Victor. But he has barely taken three steps before that telltale effluvium again rises from his stomach, its one advantage, considerable, is that the henchmen, following their leader, will not lose him. Only two remain behind, watching the window for any attempt to escape, in which case they have been given orders to shoot without first calling out. The squad of six men ascends Indian file, like a procession of ants, in the total silence, and the air grows close and electric with tension. The men have all become so nervous, they do not even notice their chief's stench, you could almost say that everything now smells the same. Having reached the landing, they begin to wonder if there is really anyone in the building, the silence is so deep that the entire world appears to be asleep. If Victor's information were not so reliable, he would give everyone orders to return to the usual snooping, shadowing of suspects, asking questions, paying for answers. Inside the apartment someone coughs. The tip-off has been confirmed. Victor aims his flashlight at the door, like a wise cobra the cleft crowbar advances, introduces its fangs between the jamb and the door, and waits. Now it is Victor's turn, with his knuckle-duster he strikes the door with the four blows of destiny, yells, Police, the crowbar gives the first wrench, the jamb splinters, the lock grates, inside there is uproar, chairs overturned, the sound of rapid footsteps, voices. No one move, Victor shouts in a commanding voice, his nervousness gone, and suddenly the lights go on on all the landings. The neighbors,

wanting to join the fun, dare not enter the stage but have illuminated it. Someone must have opened a window, because three shots can be heard from the street. Changing position, the crowbar tries the crack at the lower hinge, the door splits from top to bottom, gapes open, and with two mighty kicks the henchmen bring it to the ground. The door first crashes against the facing wall of the corridor, then collapses sideways, making a large gash in the plaster. A great silence has descended on the apartment, there is no escaping now. Victor advances with pistol in hand, Nobody move. Flanked by two henchmen, he enters the room, which looks onto the street, the window is open and outside, below, the men are keeping watch, while here in the room are four men on their feet, their hands in the air, their heads lowered, defeated. Victor smiles with satisfaction, You are all under arrest, you are all under arrest. He gathers up some papers, which lie scattered on the table, orders the search to begin, calls the policeman over, the one with the knuckle-duster who is looking very sorry for himself because there was no resistance and thus no chance to land a single blow, and tells him to go to the back and see if anyone escaped. They hear him call out from the kitchen hatch, then from the fire escape, to his colleagues who were covering the other exits, Did you see anyone escape. They replied that one escaped, in the report tomorrow it will be written that a man was seen climbing over the walls of the courtyard or jumping from rooftop to rooftop, the versions will vary. The policeman with the knuckle-duster returns, looking very sour, Victor does not need to be told, he starts bellowing, livid with rage, the last trace of peppermint gone, What a bunch of idiots. And when he sees that the arrested men cannot suppress a smile of triumph, however wan, he realizes that it was none other than the ringleader who gave them the slip, now he is foaming at the mouth, uttering dire threats, demanding to know the fugitive's name, his destination, Speak or you all die. His henchmen aim their pistols, the one with the knuckle-duster raises his arm, fist clenched, then the director says, Cut. Still beside himself with rage, Victor cannot calm down, for him this is no laughing matter, ten men needed to capture five, and they allowed the ringleader, the brains behind the conspiracy, to give them the slip, but the producer intervenes good-naturedly, the filming has gone so well that there is no need for a retake, Forget it, don't let it upset you, if we had caught him, that would have been the end of the film. But dear Senhor Lopes Ribeiro, the police are made to look such fools, the corps is brought into disrepute, seven men sent to kill a spider and the spider escapes in the end, that is to say the fly, because we are the spider. Let it escape, there is no lack of spiders' webs in the world, from some you escape, in others you die. The fugitive will find shelter in a boardinghouse under an assumed name, thinking he is safe, he has no idea that his spider will be the daughter of the landlady, according to the script a very serious young woman, a dedicated nationalist who will regenerate his heart and mind. Women are a powerful force, real saints, and the producer is clearly an intelligent man. They are engaged in this conversation when the cameraman, a German newly arrived from Germany, approaches, and the producer understands him, for the man practically speaks Portuguese, A gross plan of the Polizei. Victor too understands, gets into position, the cameraman's assistant claps the boards, bang, May Revolution second take, or some other phrase in a similar jargon, and Victor, brandishing his pistol, reappears at the door

with a menacing and derisive smirk, You're all under arrest, you're all under arrest. If he now shouts it with less force, it's to avoid choking on the peppermint lozenge he has just popped into his mouth in order to purify the air. The cameraman declares himself satisfied, Auf Wiedersehen, ich habe keine Zeit zu verlieren, es ist schon Zemlich spät, Good-bye, I've no time to waste, it's getting late. Turning to the producer, Es ist Punkt Mitternacht, It is midnight on the dot, to which Lopes Ribeiro replies, Machen Sie bitte das Licht aus, Turn off the light. The translation is supplied because our German is still rudimentary. Victor has already descended with his squad, who lead their captives away handcuffed, so conscious of their duty as policemen that they take even this masquerade seriously, an arrest is an arrest even if it is only make-believe.

Other raids are being planned. Meanwhile Portugal prays and sings, because this is a time of festivities and pilgrimages, for much chanting of mystical psalms, for fireworks and wine, folk dances from Minho and open-air concerts, processions of angels with snow-white wings and floats carrying religious figures. All this under a blazing sky, heaven's reply to those long days of miserable winter, but heaven will continue to send us scattered showers and thunderstorms, because they too are the fruits of the season. And at the Teatro de Sao Luís, Tomás Alcaide is singing in Rigoletto, Manon, and Tosca, and the League of Nations has decided once and for all to lift the sanctions against Italy, and the English are objecting to the flight of the zeppelin Hindenburg over factories and other strategic locations in Britain, and people are still saying that the German annexation of the Free City of Danzig is imminent, but that need not concern us, because only a sharp eye and the finger of an experienced cartographer would be able to find that tiny dot and barbaric word on the map, and the world will certainly not come to an end on that account. When all is said and done, the peace and quiet of our own hearth and home is not helped by interfering in the affairs of our neighbors. They make their own lives, let them unmake them. A rumor has been circulating, for example, that General Sanjurjo plans to enter Spain covertly to head a monarchist movement, though he tells the press that he has no intention of leaving Portugal, he and his entire family live in Monte Estoril in the villa Santa Leocádia, with a view of the sea and his conscience at rest. Some of us might say to him, Go, save your country, while others might say, Leave well enough alone, don't get involved in these problems. Because are we not all obliged to be good hosts, as we were with the dukes of Alba and Medinaceli, who not a moment too soon found refuge at the Hotel Brangança, where they say they intend to remain for some time. Unless all this is nothing more than another police raid with the script already written, the cameraman at the ready, and everyone waiting for the director to say, Action.

Ricardo Reis reads the newspapers. He remains unperturbed by the world news that reaches him, perhaps because of his temperament, or perhaps because he believes in the popular superstition which says that the more one cries doom, the less doom occurs. If this is true, then man should embrace pessimism as the surest road to happiness, and perhaps by persevering in his fear of death he may attain immortality. Ricardo Reis is not

John D. Rockefeller, the newspaper he buys is the same as all the other newspapers the boy carries in his satchel or displays on the sidewalk. The world's threats are universal, like the sun, but Ricardo Reis takes shelter under his own shadow, What I do not wish to know does not exist, the only real problem is how to play the queen's knight. But reading the newspapers, he forces himself to worry a little, Europe is seething and perhaps will boil over, and there is no place for a poet to rest his head. The two old men, on the other hand, are very excited, so much so that they have decided to make the great sacrifice of buying a newspaper every day, one will buy it one day, the other the next, they can no longer wait until late afternoon. When Ricardo Reis appeared in the park to perform his customary act of charity, they were able to respond with the arrogance of the pauper who is ungrateful at heart, We already have a newspaper. They unfolded the large pages with noisy ostentation, proving yet again that one cannot trust people.

Having reverted, after Lydia's vacation, to his habit of sleeping practically until lunchtime, Ricardo Reis must have been the last person in Lisbon to learn of the military coup in Spain. Bleary-eyed, he went to pick the morning newspaper off his doormat and returned to his bedroom yawning. Ah, the pretense of calling the tedium of life serenity. When his eyes met the headline, Military coup on Spanish mainland, he was overcome by vertigo, a feeling of hurtling through the air. He should have foreseen this. The Spanish army, the guardian of the nation's virtues and traditions, was about to speak with the voice of military force, the merchants would be expelled from the temple, the altar of the Fatherland would be rebuilt, and the immortal glory of Spain, which a few of her degenerate sons had brought into decline, would be restored. On an inside page Ricardo Reis came across the text of a telegram which had been intercepted, In Madrid there are fears of a Fascist revolution. The adjective bothered him. Granted, the telegram comes from the Spanish capital where the left-wing government is installed, and one expects them to use such language, but it would be much clearer if they said, for example, that the monarchists have struck a blow against the republicans. That way, Ricardo Reis would know where the line is drawn, for he himself is a monarchist, as we may recall or should remind ourselves. But General Sanjurjo has issued a formal denial of that rumor circulating in Lisbon that he was planning to head a monarchist movement in Spain, so Ricardo Reis need not take sides, this battle, if it should become a battle, is not his, the disagreement is between republicans and republicans. Today the newspaper has printed all the news at its disposal, tomorrow it may tell us that the revolution has failed, that the rebels have been vanquished, that peace reigns throughout Spain. Ricardo Reis does not know whether this would cause him relief or distress. When he goes out for lunch, he pays close attention to people's faces, to what they are saying, there is tension in the air but the tension is kept under control, perhaps because there is still little news, or perhaps because people are keeping their feelings to themselves. Between his apartment and the restaurant he sees some expressions of triumph, a few of gloom, and realizes that it is not a question of a skirmish between republicans and monarchists.

We now have a fuller picture of what happened. The insurrection began in Spanish

Morocco and its leader appears to be General Franco. Here in Lisbon, General Sanjurjo has declared that he is on the side of his comrades in arms but repeats that he does not wish to play an active role. Any child can see that the situation in Spain is serious. Within forty-eight hours the government headed by Casares Quiroga fell, Martinez Barrio was entrusted with forming a government, Martinez Barrio resigned, and now we have a cabinet formed by Giral, we'll see how long that lasts. The military boasts that the revolution has triumphed, if things progress in this way the days of Red domination in Spain are numbered. Even if the abovementioned child does not read, he will know the truth of this statement just by looking at the size of the headlines and at the bold exuberance of typefaces, which will spill over into the small lettering of the editorials within the next few days. Then tragedy struck. General Sanjurjo, en route to take his seat on the military directorate of the revolution, met a horrible death. His airplane, either because it was carrying too many passengers or because there was insufficient power in the engine, if that does not amount to the same thing, was unable to climb and collided with a few trees and then a wall, in full view of the Spaniards who had come to watch the takeoff. Under an implacable sun both plane and general burned in one great bonfire. The lucky pilot, Ansaldo by name, got away with nothing more serious than minor bruises and burns. The general had sworn he had no intention of leaving Portugal, but we must understand that deception is the very substance of politics, though God may not approve of it. Perhaps this was divine punishment, because everyone knows that God does not castigate with sticks and stones but tends to favor fire. Now, while General Queipo de Llano is proclaiming military dictatorship throughout Spain, vigil is being kept over the corpse of General Sanjurjo, also known as the Marqués de Riff, in the Igreja de Santo Antonio do Estoril. When we say the corpse, we mean what is left of it, a charred stump, a man so corpulent in life now reduced in death to sad ashes, his tiny coffin could be that of an infant. How true it is that we are nothing in this world, yet no matter how often we repeat these words and though we see them confirmed every day, they are always hard to accept. Members of the Spanish Falange form a guard of honor for the great warlord, wearing their full uniform of blue shirt, black trousers, a dagger in a leather belt. Where did these people come from, I ask myself, because they were certainly not dispatched in haste from Morocco to attend the solemn funeral rites. But the abovementioned illiterate child could tell us, and the Pueblo Gallego reports, that there are fifty thousand Spaniards in Portugal. Obviously besides a change of underwear they packed their black trousers and blue shirts and daggers, little dreaming that they would wear their uniforms in public and in such sad circumstances. But on these faces marked by a virile grief there is also a gleam of triumph, for death is the eternal bride whose arms welcome the man of valor, death is an unblemished virgin and she prefers Spaniards among all men, especially if they are soldiers. Tomorrow, when the mortal remains of General Sanjurjo are transported on a horse-drawn gun carriage, the news will hover overhead, like angels bringing fair tidings, that motorized columns are advancing on Madrid, that the siege has been consummated, that the final assault will be made in a matter of hours. People are saying that there is no longer any government in the capital, they also say, contradicting themselves, that the government in the capital has authorized members of the Popular

Front to take whatever arms and ammunition they need. But this is only the death rattle of the demon, the day is at hand when the Virgin of Pilar will crush the serpent beneath her immaculate feet and the crescent moon will soar above the graveyards of iniquity. Thousands of Moroccan troops have already landed in southern Spain, and with their help we shall restore the empire of the cross and rosary over the odious symbol of the hammer and sickle. The regeneration of Europe is making giant strides, first there was Italy, then Portugal, then Germany, and now Spain, this is the good land, this the best seed, tomorrow we reap the harvest. As the German students wrote, We are nobody, and those same words were muttered by the slaves to each other as they built the pyramids, We are nobody, the masons and drovers of Mafra, We are nobody, the inhabitants of Alentejo bitten by the cat infected by rabies, We are nobody, the recipients of the alms distributed by charitable organizations and relief agencies, We are nobody, those flood victims of Ribatejo for whose benefit a gala day was held at the Jockey Club, We are nobody, the national unions which paraded in May with their arms outstretched, We are nobody. Perhaps the day will come when we will all be somebody, this is not a quote, it is merely a feeling.

To Lydia, who is also nobody, Ricardo Reis speaks of the events in the neighboring nation. She tells him that the Spaniards in the hotel celebrated the latest news with a great party, not even the general's tragic death dampened their spirits, and now not an evening passes without bottles of French champagne, Salvador is as happy as a clam, Pimenta talks in Castilian to the manner born, and Ramón and Felipe could not contain their joy upon learning that General Franco is Galician, a native of El Ferrol. Only the other day someone had the idea of hoisting a Spanish flag on the hotel verandah to mark the Hispano-Portuguese alliance. And you, Ricardo Reis asked, what do you think of Spain, of what is happening there. I am not educated, you are the one who ought to know, Doctor, with all the books you've read to get where you are today, the higher one goes, the farther one can see. Therefore the moon shines on every lake. Doctor, you say the prettiest things. The situation in Spain had been going from bad to worse to utter chaos, it was about time someone came along to put an end to all the squabbling, the only hope was for the army to step in, just as happened here, it's the same everywhere. I know nothing about these things, but my brother says. I already know what your brother says. How can you know, Doctor, you and my brother are such different people. What does he say then. He says that the military will not win because all the people will be against it. Let me assure you, Lydia, that the people are never all on one side, but I'm curious to know what you mean when you say the people. The people are like me, a hotel chambermaid who has a revolutionary brother and sleeps with a doctor who is against revolutions. Who taught you to say these things. When I open my mouth to speak, the words are already there, it's just a matter of letting them come out. Generally, one thinks before he speaks. Well perhaps in my case it is like having a baby, which grows without our noticing it and is born when the time comes. How have you been feeling lately. If it weren't for missing my periods, I wouldn't believe I was pregnant. You are still determined, then, to have the child, My baby boy, Your baby boy, Yes, and I am

not likely to change my mind, Think about it carefully, But I don't think. With these words Lydia gave a contented laugh, and Ricardo Reis was left without a reply. He drew her to him, kissed her on the forehead, then on the corner of her mouth, then on her neck, the bed was not far and soon both serving maid and doctor were on it. No more was said about her sailor brother. Spain is at the other end of the world.

Les beaux esprits se rencontrent, as the French say, a remarkably subtle race. Ricardo Reis speaks of the need to preserve order, and in an interview given to the Portuguese newspaper O Século General Francisco Franco has just declared, We desire order in our nation. This prompted the newspaper to print in bold letters, The Spanish Army's Task of Redemption, thus showing how numerous those beaux esprits are, if not indeed innumerable. A few days later, the newspaper raises the question, When will a First International of Order be organized against the Third International of Disorder. The beaux esprits are already giving their reply, the initiative is under way, Moroccan soldiers continue to land, a governing junta has been set up in Burgos, and there is a rumor that within a matter of hours the final confrontation will take place between the army and the forces of Madrid. As for the fact that the population of Badajoz has taken up arms to resist the military advance, we should not attribute any special importance to that, it provides only an interesting footnote to our discussion about what the people are or are not. Men, women, and children armed themselves with rifles, swords, cudgels, scythes, revolvers, daggers, and hatchets, whatever came to hand, perhaps this is the way the people arm themselves, but the philosophical question of what the people are, if you will forgive my presumption, remains a moot point.

The wave swells and gathers. In Portugal, volunteers are flocking to enroll in the Portuguese Youth Movement, these are patriotic youths who decided not to wait for the inevitable conscription. With a hopeful hand and neat lettering, under the benevolent gaze of their fathers, they sign the letter and vigorously march to the post office, or, trembling with civic pride, they deliver the letter personally to the doorman at the Ministry of National Education. Only their respect for religion prevents them from declaring, Here is my body, here is my blood, but it is clear for all to see that they long for martyrdom. Ricardo Reis runs his eye down the lists, trying to visualize faces, postures, ways of walking that might give substance, meaning to the abstraction of these proper nouns, which are the emptiest words of all unless we put human beings inside them. In years to come, twenty, thirty, fifty years, what will these grownup men or old men, if they live that long, think of their ardent youth, when they heard or read the clarion words of the German youths who said, We are nobody, and rallied like heroes repeating, We, too, we, too, are nobody. They will use such phrases as, The foolishness of youth, A mistake made in my innocence, I had no one to turn to for advice, I have repented at leisure, My father ordered me to sign up, I sincerely believed in the movement, The uniform was so impressive, I would do it all over again, It was one way of getting on with my life, The first to enlist were much admired, A young man is so easily persuaded, so easily deceived. These and similar excuses are offered, but now one man

gets to his feet, raises his hand, requesting to be heard. Ricardo Reis nods, anxious to hear a person speak of one of the other people he once was, to hear age describing youth, and this is the speech the man made. You have to consider the individual motives, whether the step we took was taken out of ignorance or malice, whether of our own free will or because we were compelled. The judgment, of course, will vary, depending on the times and on the judge. But whether we are pardoned or condemned, our life must be weighed on the scales of the good and evil we did, let everything be taken into account, if that is possible, and let the first judge be our conscience. Perhaps we should say once again, though for a different reason, that we are nobody. At that time a certain man, loved and respected by some of us, I will say his name to spare you the trouble of guessing, Miguel de Unamuno, then rector at the University of Salamanca, no mere fourteen- or fifteen-year-old stripling like us but a venerable gentleman in his seventies, the author of such highly acclaimed books as *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, *La agonía del cristianismo*, *En torno al casticismo*, *La dignidad humana*, and many others, a guiding spirit from the first days of war, pledged his support to the ruling Junta of Burgos, exclaiming, Let us save western civilization, I am here at your disposal O sons of Spain. These sons of Spain were the insurgent troops and the Moors from Morocco, and he made a personal donation of five thousand pesetas to what was even then called the Nationalist Spanish Army. Since I cannot remember the prices of those days, I cannot say how many bullets one could buy with five thousand pesetas. Unamuno urged President Azaña to commit suicide, and a few weeks later he made further statements that were no less vehement, My greatest admiration, my deepest respect goes to those Spanish women who held the communist rabble at bay and long prevented it from seizing control of Spain. In a transport of ecstasy he called them holy women. We Portuguese have also had our share of holy women, two examples will suffice, Marília, the shining heroine of *Conspiracy*, and the innocent saint of *The May Revolution*. If the Spanish women have Unamuno to thank for their sainthood, let our Portuguese women give thanks to Senhor Tomé Vieira and Senhor Lopes Ribeiro, one day I should like to descend into hell and count for myself the holy women there. But about Miguel de Unamuno, whom we admired, no one speaks now, he is like an embarrassing wound one tries to conceal, and only his words, almost his last, spoken in reply to General Milan d'Astray, the one who shouted in that same city of Salamanca, Long live death, have been preserved for posterity. Doctor Reis will never learn what those words are, but life is too short for a man to learn everything, and so is his. Because those words were spoken, some of us reconsidered our decision. It was good that Unamuno lived long enough to see his mistake, although only to see it, because he did little to correct it, having little time left, and perhaps too he wished to preserve the tranquillity of his final days. And therefore all I ask is that you wait for our last word, or the next to last, if on that day our minds are still clear and yours is too. I am finished. Some of those present vigorously applaud this hope of salvation, but others protest, indignant at the malicious distortion of Unamuno's Nationalist doctrine, because it was only out of senility, with one foot in the grave, or pique or capriciousness, that Unamuno dared question the magnificent battle cry of the great patriot General Milan d'Astray, who only had wisdom to impart, none to receive.

Ricardo Reis does not know what Unamuno will say to the General, he is too shy to ask, or afraid to penetrate the veil of the future, How much better to pass in silence, without anticipation, this is what he once wrote, this is what he tries to achieve each day. The old soldiers leave, discussing as they go the words of Unamuno, judging those words as they themselves would like to be judged, for everyone knows that the accused, in his eyes, is always absolved.

Ricardo Reis reads the news he has already read, the call by Unamuno, the rector of Salamanca, Let us save western civilization, I am here at your disposal O sons of Spain, and the five thousand pesetas paid out of his own pocket for Franco's army, and the exhorting of Azaña to commit suicide, but he hasn't got to the holy women yet, not that we need to wait to know how he will express it. Only the other day we heard a simple Portuguese film producer say that on this side of the Pyrenees all women are saints. Ricardo Reis slowly turns the pages, distracts himself with the latest news, items that might as easily have come from there as from here, from this decade or any other, past, present, and future, weddings and baptisms for example, departures and arrivals. The problem is that we cannot choose the news we want to read, like John D. Rockefeller. He runs his eye down the classified advertisements, Apartment to let, he already has one. But wait, here is the steamer The Highland Brigade due to leave Lisbon for Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro, Santos, what news will she bring, persistent messenger, from Vigo. And it appears that all Galicia has united behind General Franco, he is after all a native son of that region. The reader, restless, turns the page and once again encounters the shield of Achilles, which he has not seen for a long time. It is the same display of pictures and captions, a prodigious mandala, a kaleidoscopic universe in which all movement, suspended, offers itself to our contemplation. At last it is possible to count the wrinkles on the face of God, more commonly known by the name of Freire the Engraver, here is his portrait with the implacable monocle, here the necktie he uses to strangle us, even though the physician says we are dying from some disease or bullet wound. Freire's wares are illustrated below, testifying to the infinite wisdom of their creator, who has lived an unblemished and honorable life and received three gold medals, the ultimate distinction conferred by the Deity, who does not however advertise in the *Diário de Notícias*. At one time, Ricardo Reis saw this advertisement as a labyrinth, now he sees it as a circle from which there is no escape or exit, like an endless desert without paths. He adds a small goatee to the portrait of Freire the Engraver and doubles the monocle into spectacles, but not even this makes Freire look like the Don Miguel de Unamuno who also became lost in a labyrinth, from which he managed to emerge, if we give credence to the Portuguese gentleman who stood up to address the assembly, only on the eve of his death, leaving us in doubt as to whether Unamuno held to those almost-last words or instead relapsed into his initial complacency if not complicity, concealing his rage, suppressing his defiance. The yes and no of Unamuno disturbs Ricardo Reis, he is divided between this present, which is common to both their lives, the two linked by news items in the press, and the obscure prophecy of the soldier-orator who, knowing the future, did not reveal everything. A shame Ricardo Reis did not have the courage to ask the man

what Don Miguel said to the general, but then he realizes that he kept silent because it had been clearly hinted that he would not be in this world on the day of that repentance, You never learn what those words are, but life is too short for a man to learn everything, and so is yours. Ricardo Reis begins to see the direction the wheel of destiny is turning. Milan d'Astray, who was in Buenos Aires, passed through Rio de Janeiro on his way to Spain, the paths of men do not vary much, and now comes sailing across the Atlantic, glowing with excitement and eager for battle. Within the next few days he will disembark at Lisbon, the ship is the Almanzora, then proceed to Seville and from there to Tetuán, where he will replace Franco. Milan d'Astray approaches Salamanca and Miguel de Unamuno, he will shout, Long live death, and then the curtain falls. The Portuguese soldier-orator again asks leave to speak, his lips move, the black sun of the future shines, but the words are inaudible, we cannot even guess what he is saying.

Ricardo Reis is anxious to discuss these matters with Fernando Pessoa, but Fernando Pessoa does not appear. Time drags like a sluggish wave, it is a sphere of molten glass on whose surface myriad glints catch one's eye and engage one's attention, while inside glows the crimson, disquieting core. Days and nights succeed each other in oppressive heat that both descends from the sky and rises from the earth. It is late afternoon before the two old men appear on the Alto de Santa Catarina, they cannot take the burning sun which surrounds the sparse shadows of the palm trees, the glare on the river is too much for their tired eyes, the shimmering air leaves them gasping for breath. Lisbon opens her spigots but there is not a drop of running water, her inhabitants have become caged birds with open beaks and drooping wings. As the city sinks into torpor, the rumor circulates that the Spanish Civil War is nearing its end, which is probable if we bear in mind that the troops of Queipo de Llano are already at the gates of Badajoz, with the divisions of the Civil Guard, which is their Foreign Legion, eager for combat. Woe to him who opposes these soldiers, so great is their desire to kill. Don Miguel sets off from home for the university, taking advantage of the fringe of shade that skirts the buildings along the route. The sun bakes the stones of Salamanca, but the worthy ancient can feel a military breeze in his face, in his contented soul he returns the greetings of his countrymen, the salutes he receives from the soldiers at headquarters or in the street, every one of them the reincarnation of El Cid Campeador, who in his day also said, Let us save western civilization. Ricardo Reis, leaving his apartment early one morning before the sun became too hot, also took advantage of the fringes of shade while waiting for a taxi to appear and take him, panting, up the Calçada da Estrela as far as Prazeres. The visitor does not need to ask the way, he has not forgotten the location or the number, four thousand three hundred and seventy-one, not the number of a door, so there is no point in knocking or inquiring, Is anyone home. If the presence of the living is not in itself enough to dislodge the secrets of the dead, these words serve no purpose. Ricardo Reis reached the railing, placed his hand on the warm stone, the sun, though still not high, has been hitting this spot since dawn. From a nearby path comes the sound of a brush sweeping, it is a widow cutting across at the far end of the road, her face hidden behind a crepe veil. There is no other sign of life. Ricardo Reis descends as far as the bend, where he pauses

to look at the river, the mouth of the sea, a most appropriate word, because it is here that the sea comes to quench its unassuageable thirst, sucking lips pressed to the land. Such an image, such a metaphor would be out of place in the austere structure of an ode, but it occurs to us in the early morning, when the mind submits to feeling.

Ricardo Reis does not turn around. He knows that Fernando Pessoa is standing beside him, this time invisible, perhaps forbidden to show himself in the flesh within the precincts of the graveyard, otherwise the place would be too crowded, the streets congested with the dead, the thought makes one want to smile. The voice of Fernando Pessoa asks, What brings you here at this early hour, my dear Reis, is the view from the Alto de Santa Catarina, where Adamastor stands, not enough for you. Ricardo Reis replies without replying, From here we can watch a Spanish general sailing to join the Civil War, are you aware that civil war has broken out in Spain. Go on. They tell me that this general, whose name is Milan d'Astray, is destined to meet Miguel de Unamuno one day, and he will exclaim, Long live death, to which there will be a reply. Go on. I would like to know the reply given by Don Miguel. How can I tell you before he gives it. It might interest you to know that the rector of Salamanca has sided with the army, which intends to overthrow the government and the regime. That is of no interest to me whatsoever. I once thought that loss of freedom might be natural and right in flourishing societies, now I do not know what to think, I was counting on you, you have let me down. The most I can do is to offer a hypothesis. What hypothesis. That your rector of Salamanca will reply by saying that there are circumstances in which to remain silent is to lie, I hear a morbid cry, Long live death, a barbarous and repugnant paradox, General Milan d'Astray is crippled, no insult intended, Cervantes was also crippled, unfortunately today in Spain there are far too many cripples, it pains me to think that General Milan d'Astray might try to start a popular psychology, a cripple who does not possess the spiritual wealth of a Cervantes usually takes consolation in the harm he can cause others. You think he will give this reply. Out of an infinite number of hypotheses, this is one. It does jibe with what the Portuguese soldier said. It is important when things jibe and make sense. What sense can there be in Marcenda's left hand. You still think of her, then. From time to time. You needn't look so far, we are all crippled.

Ricardo Reis is alone. On the lower branches of the elm trees the cicadas begin to chirr, mute but inventing their own voice. A great black vessel enters the straits, only to disappear into the shimmering reflection of the water. The panorama seems unreal.

Ricardo Reis now has another voice in his apartment. He owns a small radio, the cheapest on the market, the popular Pilot model with an ivory-colored Bakelite case, chosen because it occupies little space and can easily be transported from the bedroom to the study, the two rooms where the somnambulist who lives here spends most of his time. Had he decided to buy one before the pleasure of living in new quarters wore off, he would now possess a superheterodyne receiver with twelve vacuum tubes and enough power to rouse the neighborhood and draw a crowd beneath his window. Eager to enjoy the music and listen to the broadcasts, all the housewives in the district would be there, including the two old men, friendly and polite once more because of this latest novelty. But Ricardo Reis only wants to keep up with the news, discreetly, in privacy, the radio lowered to an intimate whisper. He does not explain to himself or try to analyze the restless feeling that brings him to the set, he does not wonder about the hidden message in that dim eye, the dying Cyclops that is the light of the minuscule dial, its expression showing neither joy nor fear nor pity. And he cannot say whether it is the victories of the revolutionary army in Spain that delight him or the resounding defeats of the forces that support the government. Some will argue that the two are the same, but they aren't, no sir, the human soul is more complicated than that. To be pleased that my enemy is beset doesn't mean that I applaud the besetter. Ricardo Reis does not investigate his inner conflict, he leaves his uneasiness alone, like one who, lacking the courage to skin a rabbit, asks another to do the job for him while he stands watching, annoyed at his own squeamishness. Standing close enough to breathe in the warmth released by the skinned flesh, a subtly pleasant smell, he conceives in his heart, or wherever such things are conceived, a loathing for the man capable of the great cruelty of skinning. How can he and I possibly belong to the same human race. Perhaps this is why we hate the hangman and refuse to eat the flesh of the scapegoat.

Lydia was delighted when she saw the radio, How pretty, how nice to be able to hear music at any hour of the day or night. An exaggeration on her part, because that time is a long way off. She is a simple soul able to rejoice at the smallest thing, unless this is a pretext to conceal her distress that Ricardo Reis has become so slovenly in his ways, no longer caring about his appearance, no longer looking after himself. She told him that the dukes of Alba and Medinaceli had left the hotel, to the great disappointment of Salvador, who cherishes a real affection for his clients, especially if they are titled, though in this case they are not, because the idea of calling Don Lorenzo and Don Alonso dukes was nothing but a joke of Ricardo Reis, which it is time to drop. He is not surprised. Now that the day of victory is approaching, they live their final moments of exile in sweet luxury, which explains why the hotels in Estoril are now frequented by what the gossip columns refer to as a select Spanish colony, with plenty of dukes and counts there on vacation. Don Lorenzo and Don Alfonso followed the scent of the aristocracy, and in their old age they will be able to tell their grandchildren, In the days when I was exiled with the Duke of Alba. For the benefit of these Spaniards the Portuguese Radio Club recently introduced a Spanish broadcaster, a woman with a voice like a soubrette in an operetta. She reads the news of the Nationalist advances in the graceful language of Cervantes. May God and

the Portuguese Radio Club pardon us this sarcasm, it is provoked by an urge to weep rather than any desire to smile, which is exactly how Lydia feels, who tries valiantly to be merry and lighthearted though weighed by her anxiety for Ricardo Reis in addition to the terrible news from Spain, terrible from her point of view, which as we have seen coincides with that of her brother Daniel. Upon hearing, on the wireless, that Badajoz has been bombarded, she begins to cry like a Mary Magdalene, strange behavior for her, considering that she has never been to Badajoz and has neither family nor possessions there that might have suffered in the bombing. Why are you crying, Lydia, Ricardo Reis asks her, but she has no reply, perhaps it was something Daniel told her, but who told him, what was his source of information. The war in Spain must be much discussed aboard the Afonso de Albuquerque, as the sailors scrub the decks and polish the brass, they pass on the latest news among themselves, nor is all the news what the newspapers and radio would have us believe. Aboard the Afonso de Albuquerque there is not much confidence in the reassurances of General Mola, who belongs to the quadrille of the matador Franco and has promised that before the month is out we shall hear him address us over Radio Madrid. That other general, Queipo de Llano, says that for Madrid it is the beginning of the end, the revolution is barely three weeks old and almost over. Rubbish, replies the sailor Daniel. But Ricardo Reis, awkwardly trying to console Lydia and dry her tears, and still hoping to win her over to his way of thinking, repeats the news he has read and heard, There you are weeping for Badajoz, don't you realize that the Communists cut an ear off one hundred and ten landowners and then defiled their womenfolk, in other words, raped the poor creatures. How do you know. I read it in the newspapers and also read, in an article written by Tomé Vieira, a journalist and the author of several books, that the Bolsheviki gouged out the eyes of an elderly priest, then poured gasoline on him and set him on fire. I don't believe that. It's in the newspapers, black on white. My brother says one shouldn't always believe what the newspapers say. I'm not in a position to go to Spain to see for myself, I have to believe that they are telling the truth, newspapers don't lie, that would be the greatest crime imaginable. Doctor, you are a learned man while I can scarcely read or write, but I've learned one thing in life, there are lots of truths and they often say different things, we won't know who is lying until the fighting starts. And what if it is true that they gouged out a priest's eyes and poured gasoline on him and burned him alive. Then it's a horrible truth, but my brother says that if the church were on the side of the poor and helped them on this earth, then the poor would be the first to give their lives for the church. And what if they cut the ears off the landowners and raped their wives. That would be another horrible truth, but my brother says that while the poor are suffering on this earth, the rich are already enjoying paradise without going to heaven. You always answer with your brother's words. And you, Doctor, always speak with the words of the newspapers. True enough.

Now there have been disturbances in Funchal and in other places on the island, with crowds looting public offices and dairy farms, and people have been killed or wounded. The situation must be serious, because two warships have been sent out, along with a

fleet of airplanes and squads of hunters with machine guns, a military force capable of waging a civil war Portuguese-style. Ricardo Reis does not fully grasp the reason for the uprising, which need not surprise either us or him, because he has only the newspapers to rely on for information. He turns on his ivory-colored Pilot radio. Perhaps the words we hear are more believable than the words we read, the only drawback is that we cannot see the announcer's face, because a look of hesitation, a sudden twitch of the mouth will betray a lie at once, let us hope that someday human inventiveness will make it possible for us, sitting in our own homes, to see the face of the announcer, then at last we will be able to tell the difference between a lie and the truth, and the era of justice will truly begin, and let us say, Amen. The arrow on the dial points to the Portuguese Radio Club, and while the tubes are heating up, Ricardo Reis rests his weary forehead on the radio case. From inside comes a warm odor that makes him feel a little giddy, a distracting sensation, then he notices that the volume knob is switched off. He turns it, at first hears only the deep hum of the carrier wave, then a pause, a sudden burst of music, the song *Cara al sol con la camisa nueva*, the anthem of the Falange for the pleasure and comfort of the select Spanish colony in the hotels of Estoril and at the Brangança. At this very moment in the casino they are having a dress rehearsal for the Night of Silver, to be presented by Erico Braga, and in the hotel lounge the guests glance suspiciously at the green-tinted mirror. The Radio Club announcer then reads a telegram sent by veteran Portuguese legionnaires who served in the fifth division of the Spanish Foreign Legion, they greet their former comrades who are taking part in the siege of Badajoz, a shiver goes up our spine as we listen to those military sentiments, the Christian fervor, the fraternity of arms, the memory of past triumphs, the hope in a bright future for the two Iberian fatherlands united in one Nationalist cause. After listening to the final news bulletin, that three thousand soldiers from Morocco have landed in Algiers, Ricardo Reis switches off the Pilot and stretches out on the bed, desperate at finding himself so alone. He is not thinking about Marcenda, it is Lydia who occupies his thoughts, probably because she is closer at hand, one might say, although there is no telephone in this apartment, and even if there were one, he could hardly call the hotel and say, Good evening, Senhor Salvador, this is Doctor Ricardo Reis speaking, do you remember me, we haven't spoken to each other in ages, I say, those were extremely happy weeks I spent in your hotel, no, no, I don't need a room, I simply wanted to speak to Lydia, could you ask her to come around to my apartment, excellent, how very kind of you to let her off for a couple of hours, I am feeling very lonely, no, it isn't for that, all I need is a little company. He gets up from the bed, gathers together the pages of the newspaper lying all over the floor and on the bedspread, and runs his eye down the list of entertainments, but nothing stirs his interest. For a moment he wishes he were blind, deaf, and dumb, thrice the cripple Fernando Pessoa says we all are, then among the news items from Spain he notices a photograph that had escaped him previously, army tanks bearing the Sacred Heart of Jesus. If this is the coat of arms they are using, then there can be no doubt that this will be a war waged without mercy. He remembers that Lydia is pregnant, with a baby boy, as she constantly tells him, and this baby boy will grow up and go to the wars that are now in the making. One war leads to another, let us do some calculations, the

baby comes into the world in March of next year, if the average age when youths go to war is twenty-three or twenty-four, what war will we have in nineteen sixty-one, and where, and why, and over what wasteland. With the eyes of imagination Ricardo Reis sees the boy riddled with bullets, dark and pale like his father but only his mother's son, for his father will not acknowledge him.

Badajoz has surrendered. Spurred by the rousing telegram from the veteran Portuguese legionnaires, the Spanish Foreign Legion achieved miraculous victories, whether at a distance or in hand-to-hand combat, and singled out for special honor were the brave Portuguese legionnaires of the new generation who were anxious to prove themselves worthy of their predecessors, one should add that it always helps to feel that one's native land is not far away. Badajoz has surrendered. Reduced to ruins by continuous bombardment, swords broken, scythes blunted, clubs and hatchets smashed, the city has surrendered. General Mola declared, The hour has come to settle accounts, and the bull ring opened its gates to receive the militiamen taken captive, then closed them, the fiesta is under way, machine guns shout ole, ole, ole, the noise is deafening in the bull ring of Badajoz, and the minotaurs dressed in cheap cotton fall on top of one another, mingling their blood in mutual transfusion. When not a single monster is left standing, the matadors will liquidate with their pistols those who were simply wounded, and if any escape this mercy, it is only to be buried alive. All that Ricardo Reis knew about this event was what he read in the Portuguese newspapers, but one newspaper accompanied its report with a photograph of the bull ring in which bodies could be seen scattered here and there, a wagon looked completely out of place, was it meant for deliveries or removals, for bulls or minotaurs. Ricardo Reis learned the rest from Lydia, who had been told by her brother, who had been told by who knows whom, perhaps it was a message from the future when all will finally be resolved. No longer crying, Lydia tells him, Two thousand lost their lives, her lips are trembling, her cheeks flushed. Ricardo Reis tries to console her, takes her by the arm, but she pulls away, not out of any rancor but simply because today she cannot bear it. Later, in the kitchen, as she is washing the dirty dishes that have accumulated, she begins to cry again, and for the first time she asks herself why she comes to this apartment. Is she the doctor's maid, his cleaner, she is certainly not his lover, because that word implies equality, no matter whether male or female, and they are not equal. Then she does not know if she is crying for the dead of Badajoz or for her own death, which is the death of feeling that she is nobody. Sitting in his study, Ricardo Reis has no idea what is going on. To take his mind off the two thousand dead, a truly incredible number, if Lydia was telling the truth, he reopened *The God of the Labyrinth*, to continue where he had left off, but could get no meaning from the words. He realized that he had forgotten the narrative, so he went back once more to the beginning, The body, discovered by the first chess player, occupied with its outstretched arms the squares of the King and Queen's pawns as well as the next two squares in the direction of the enemy camp. Reaching this point, Ricardo Reis again lost the thread, seeing the chessboard as a desert and the sprawled corpse as a young man who was no longer a young man, then he saw a circle inscribed in that huge square,

an arena strewn with bodies crucified on their native soil, and Sacred Hearts of Jesus went from one to the other making sure that there were no survivors. When Lydia walked into the study, done with her chores, Ricardo Reis was sitting with the book closed in his lap, he appeared to be sleeping and looked, caught unawares like this, almost old. She stared at him as if he were a stranger, then left without making a sound. She begins to think, I won't come back here, but she cannot be certain.

Now that General Milan d'Astray has finally arrived, another proclamation is issued from Tetuán, war without mercy, war without truce, war unto death against the Marxist vermin while observing humanitarian principles, As one can gather from the words spoken by General Franco, I have not yet occupied Madrid because I do not wish to sacrifice innocent citizens. Now here is a considerate fellow, someone who would never order the massacre of innocents as Herod did, no, he will wait until they grow up rather than have such a burden on his conscience and overcrowd heaven with angels. It is inconceivable that these fair winds from Spain should not produce similar events in Portugal. The bids have been made, the cards placed on the table and dealt, the time has come to know who is for us and who is against us, let us make the enemy show his face, betray himself by his own duplicity, and let us count as ours all who out of cowardice or greed or fear of losing the little they have seek refuge in the shade of our flag. Therefore the national unions have decided to stage a rally opposing Communism, and as soon as this news is announced, the furor that accompanies all great moments in history grips the entire community. Petitions are signed by patriotic associations, women, either individually or in various committees, demand representation, and in order to put their members into the right frame of mind, some unions hold special meetings, the union of shop assistants, for example, or master bakers, or hotel workers, and in the photographs those present can be seen saluting with stiff raised arms, each rehearsing his role as he awaits the opening ceremony. During these meetings, the manifesto of the national unions is read out and applauded, it is an impassioned declaration of their political allegiance and their confidence in the nation's destiny, as becomes clear from the following excerpts taken at random, There can be no doubt but that the national-corporative workers are Portuguese through and through and staunch Roman Catholics, The national unions call upon Salazar for drastic remedies to great evils, The national unions acknowledge private enterprise and the individual's right to acquire property as the only foundation for every social, economic, and political organization, and for social justice. Since they are struggling for the same cause and fighting the same enemy, members of the Spanish Falange speak to the entire nation on the Portuguese Radio Club, applauding Portugal for wholeheartedly joining this crusade, which actually is historically inaccurate, because everyone knows that we Portuguese have been fighting this crusade for years. But that is typical of the Spaniards, they are always ready to take over, and have to be constantly watched.

Ricardo Reis was never at a political rally in his life, an omission that must be attributed to the peculiarities of his temperament, to his upbringing, to his love of the classics, and also to a certain personal shyness, which should not surprise anyone familiar

with his verse. But this national outcry, the civil war in neighboring Spain, perhaps too the unusual venue as demonstrators begin to assemble here in the bull ring of Campo Pequeno, ignite in him a tiny flame of curiosity. What will it be like watching thousands of people gathered together to listen to speeches. What phrases will they applaud and why, how much sincerity will there be on the part of those who speak and those who listen, what will the expressions be on their faces, what gestures will be used. For one who is by nature so incurious, this is an interesting change. Ricardo Reis set out early in order to be sure to get a seat, taking a taxi to arrive more quickly. The night is warm as August draws to a close. Special trams go by, packed to overflowing, the passengers chat amiably, while a few on foot, more inflamed with Nationalist zeal, cry out, Long live the New State. There are union flags, which in the absence of any breeze the standard bearers wave vigorously to display their colors and emblems, here is a heraldic corporative still contaminated with republican traditions, there a guild, to use the word for an artisan association in an earlier age. Entering the arena, Ricardo Reis is swept along by this great torrent of humanity and finds himself among bank employees all wearing a blue armband inscribed with a crucifix and the initials SNB. It is indeed true that the virtue of patriotism pardons all sins and reconciles all contradictions, including this one, because the bankers have taken as their emblem the Cross of Christ, who in His time drove the merchants and money changers, the first branches of this tree, the first flowers of this fruit, from the temple. Just as well for them that Christ was not like the wolf in the fable, because the wolf slaughtered the gentle lambs instead of waiting for them to turn into obstinate sheep. Before, it was all much simpler, now we spend our time asking ourselves if the waters were muddy at their source or became polluted en route.

The arena is practically full, but Ricardo Reis has succeeded in finding a good spot on a bench in the sun, not that it matters today, for all is shadow and darkness. The good thing about his seat is that it is close enough to the platform to see the speakers' faces yet not so close as to prevent him from having a good view of the whole arena. Flags and union banners continue to file in, the latter are all national but many of the flags are not, and understandably, because we do not need to exaggerate the sublime symbol of the Fatherland in order to see that we are among Portuguese and, let it be said without boasting, among the best. The tiers are full, the only room left is in the center, where the banners can be seen to best advantage, which explains why there are so many down there. Acquaintances greet each other, the assembled acclaim the New State, and they are numerous, they stretch forth their arms in a frenzy, jumping up every time a new banner is carried in, saluting in Roman style. Forgive this constant repetition on their part and ours, O tempora, O mores, Viriathus and Sertorius fought so hard to expel the imperial occupiers from their country, but despite the struggle of those two heroes Rome returns in the image of her descendants, clearly the easiest domination of all is to buy men, who sometimes offer themselves so cheaply, in exchange for a strip of cloth to wear on their arms, or for the right to adopt the crooked crucifix as their emblem. A brass band plays popular tunes to help pass the time while people wait. At last the officials take their

places on the platform and the crowd goes wild with excitement, the air shakes with patriotic cries, Portugal Portugal Portugal, Salazar Salazar Salazar. Salazar is not present, he appears only at his convenience, but Portugal is here, since it is everywhere. To the right of the platform, to the chagrin of the local residents, seats which had remained empty were now taken by Fascist delegates from Italy, dressed in their black shirts and decorations, and to the left now stood the Nazi delegates from Germany, with their brown shirts and armbands bearing the swastika. They all saluted the crowd with outstretched arms, and the crowd responded, rather less disciplined but eager to learn. At this point members of the Spanish Falange made their entrance, dressed in their familiar blue shirts, their uniforms in three different colors but united by a single ideal. To a man, the crowd is on its feet, its cheers filling the air in that universal language known as roaring, and Babel is unified at last by gestures. The Germans speak no Portuguese or Castilian or Italian, the Spaniards speak no German or Italian or Portuguese, the Italians speak no Castilian or Portuguese or German, the Portuguese, however, speak Castilian extremely well, Usted if addressing someone, quanto vale if buying something, gracias if thanking someone, but when souls are in harmony one mighty shout is good enough in all languages, Death to Bolshevism. Silence is restored with some effort, the band finishes its military march with three drumbeats, and now the first speaker of the evening is introduced, Gilberto Arroteia, a shipyard worker from the Navy Arsenal, how they persuaded him remains a secret between himself and temptation. Then a second speech by Luis Pinto Coelho, who represents Portuguese youth, and one begins to see what this is all about, because with words that could hardly be more explicit he calls for the creation of a Nationalist militia. The third speaker is Fernando Homem Cristo, the fourth Abel Mesquita, both from the national unions of Setubal, the fifth is Antonio Castro Fernandes, who one day will be a government minister, and the sixth Ricardo Durão, whose strong convictions are in keeping with his rank of major. In a few weeks' time he will repeat his speech in Évora, once again in a bull ring, We are gathered here, united by the same patriotic ideal, to declare and show the government of our nation that we are loyally pledged to carry on the traditions and achievements of our Lusitanian ancestors who gave new worlds to the world and spread faith and empire, let us also declare to a fanfare of horns and trumpets that we have gathered here as one man around Salazar, this genius who has dedicated his life to the service of the Fatherland. Finally, seventh in order but first in terms of political influence, Captain Jorge Botelho Moniz from the Portuguese Radio Club reads a motion urging the government to create a civic legion that will dedicate itself entirely to the service of the Fatherland, just as Salazar has, for it is only right that we should follow his example as far as our weak ability permits. This would seem an opportune moment to cite the parable of the seven twigs which are easily broken when separate but when tied together form an unbreakable fasces. Upon hearing the word legion, the crowd rises to its feet once more, always to a man. To say legion is to say uniform, to say uniform is to say shirt, all that remains to be decided is the color, but this is not a matter we can settle here. In any case, rather than be accused of behaving like monkeys we will not choose black or brown or blue, white gets dirty very quickly, yellow is the color of despair, as for red, God forbid, and purple evokes Christ on

the road to Calvary, the only color left is green, so the gallant young men of the Portuguese Youth Movement agree that green is fine and dream of nothing else as they wait to be given their uniforms. The rally is drawing to a close, the unions have done their duty.

As one expects of the Portuguese, the crowd leaves the arena in an orderly fashion, some people still cheering but on a subdued note. The more meticulous of the standard bearers roll up their flags and slip them into protective sheaths. The main floodlights in the bull ring have been turned off and there is just enough light for the demonstrators to find their way out. Outside, special trams are filling up, there are also trucks for those who have to travel some distance, and lines waiting to board both. Ricardo Reis, though he was out in the open all through the rally, feels the need for fresh air and declines the taxis, which are snapped up at once by others. He sets out on foot to cross the entire city, walks where there is no sign of the patriotic crusade, these trams belong to other lines, the taxis doze in the squares. From Campo Pequeno to the Alto de Santa Catarina it is almost five kilometers, quite a distance for this doctor who is usually so sedentary in his ways. He arrived home with sore feet, exhausted. As he opened a window to clear the stuffiness in the room, he realized that during the long walk home he had not thought once about what he had seen and heard in the arena. He could not remember a single idea, reflection, comment, it was almost as if he had been carried on a cloud, or transformed into a cloud hovering in midair. Now he wanted to think, to turn it all over in his mind, to reach conclusions, but he tried in vain, all he could see were those black, brown, and blue shirts defending western civilization, the Greeks and Romans. What speech would Don Miguel de Unamuno have made if invited. Perhaps he would have appeared between Durão and Moniz, would have shown himself to the multitude, Here I stand before you, sons of Portugal, nation of suicides who do not cry out, Long live death, I have nothing to say to you, for I myself am old and weak and need someone to protect me. Ricardo Reis contemplates the deep night, anyone with the power of seeing signs and omens would say that something is brewing. It is very late when Ricardo Reis closes the window, and in the end all he can think is, No more political rallies for me. Starting to brush his jacket and trousers, he found himself inhaling the smell of onion, how strange, he could have sworn he had been nowhere near Victor.

The following days bring a spate of news, as if the rally at Campo Pequeno has triggered events throughout the world. A group of North American financiers informed General Franco that they were prepared to back the Spanish Nationalist Revolution, the idea must have come from the influential John D. Rockefeller, because it would be a mistake to keep him completely in the dark, The New York Times reported the military coup in Spain, taking every precaution not to injure the old man's weak heart, but there are some risks that cannot be avoided. In the dioceses near the Black Forest, the German bishops announced that the Catholic Church and the Reich will fight shoulder to shoulder against the common foe. In order not to fall behind in this show of strength, Mussolini has warned the world that he is capable of mobilizing eight million men at a moment's notice,

many of them still glowing from their victory over that other enemy of western civilization, Ethiopia. But to return to our paternal nest. In addition to the growing number of volunteers joining the Youth Movement, thousands have also enrolled in the Portuguese Legion, as it will come to be known, and the Undersecretary of the Corporations has drafted a statement in which he praises the national unions in the most eloquent terms, their patriotic initiative of holding a political rally, a crucible where Nationalist hearts are forged, now nothing stands in the way of building the New State. It has also been announced that the President of the Council is visiting military installations, touring the munitions factory at Braço de Prata, and inspecting the armaments depot of Beirolas, any subsequent visits, tours, or inspections will be duly reported.

From the newspaper Ricardo Reis learns that the Afonso de Albuquerque has sailed to Alicante to pick up refugees. He feels sadness in his heart because of his tie to the fortunes of this ship, though Lydia did not tell him that her sailor brother left for sea on a humanitarian mission. Lydia, for that matter, has not appeared lately, the dirty clothes are piling up, the dust is gathering on the furniture, and things are gradually losing their outline, as if tired of existing, which may also be the effect of eyes tired of seeing. Ricardo Reis has never felt so lonely. He sleeps nearly all day, on top of his. unmade bed or on the sofa in the study. He even fell asleep on the toilet, but only once, because he woke then with a terrible fright, dreaming that he had died on the toilet, his trousers down, a corpse with no self-respect. He wrote a long letter to Marcenda, page upon page, mining a whole archaeology of remembrance beginning with that first evening in the hotel, the words flow without interruption from memory to memory, but when he comes to the present, Ricardo Reis cannot find anything to say, to ask for, to offer. So he collected the pages, tapped them straight, flattened out some corners that had been folded over, then tore up the letter methodically, page by page, until it was reduced to pieces so small, not a single word was readable. He did not throw the pieces into the wastebasket, but waited until the early hours of the morning, when everyone was asleep, and went and threw his sad carnival shower of confetti over the park railing. The dawn breeze carried them over the rooftops, and an even stronger wind will pick them up and carry them far away, but not as far as Coimbra. Two days later he copied his poem onto a sheet of paper, Already impatient for the summer, knowing that this truth was now a lie, because he felt no impatience, only an infinite weariness. He addressed the envelope to Marcenda Sampaio, poste restante, Coimbra, if she does not claim it in six months, the letter will be destroyed. And that conscientious and prying employee we mentioned earlier, if he takes the letter to Doctor Sampaio's office, no harm will come of it. Upon arriving home, having exercised his paternal prerogative and opened the letter, the father will say to his daughter, You appear to have an unknown admirer, and Marcenda will read the poem, smiling to herself. It does not even occur to her that it is from Ricardo Reis, because he never told her he was a poet, though there are certain similarities in the handwriting.

I'm not coming back, Lydia has said, yet here she is knocking at the door. The key to the apartment is in her pocket, but she does not use it, she has her pride, she said she would not come back, it would look bad now if she used the key as if this were her own home, which it never was, and today even less so, if it is possible for something to be less than never. Ricardo Reis opens the door, concealing his surprise. Since Lydia appears to hesitate as to which room she should go to, he moves to the study, she can follow if she wishes. Her eyes are red and swollen, perhaps she has finally decided, after a great struggle with the joy of anticipated motherhood, to have an abortion, because the expression on her face doesn't seem to have been caused by the fall of Irun or the siege of San Sebastian. She says, You must excuse me, Doctor, I wasn't able to come. But immediately, in the same breath, she corrects herself, Not because of this, I just thought you didn't need me anymore. She corrects herself again, I was feeling tired of this life, and having said this, she stands there waiting. For the first time she looked straight at Ricardo Reis, and thought, Perhaps he is ill. I missed you, he said, then fell silent, he had nothing more to say. Lydia took two steps, she will start with the bedroom, make his bed, then go to the kitchen and wash the dishes, then soak his clothes in the washtub, but this is not the reason she came, although she may do all these chores later. Ricardo Reis asks her, Why don't you sit down, then says, Tell me what's wrong, and Lydia begins to sob. Is it because of the child, he asks, and she shakes her head, even manages a glance of rebuke amid her tears, before blurting out, It's because of my brother. Ricardo Reis remembers that the Afonso de Albuquerque has returned from Alicante, a port still under the control of the Spanish government, he puts two and two together and finds they make four. Has your brother deserted and stayed behind in Spain. No, he came back with the ship. So then. There's going to be a disaster, a disaster. Look, tell me what this is all about. The sailors, she stopped to dry her tears and blow her nose, are about to mutiny and sail out to sea. Who told you this. Daniel, he told me to keep it a secret but I had to talk to someone I can trust, I came here, Doctor, I have no one else to turn to, my mother has no idea. Ricardo Reis is surprised to find that he is devoid of feeling, perhaps this is fate, we know what will happen, know it is inevitable, yet we remain silent, onlookers only, watching the spectacle of the world even as we leave it. Are you sure, he asked. She nodded, tearful, waiting for the right questions, those to which a simple yes or no can be given, but such questioning requires an act of courage beyond human powers. For the want of anything better let us make do with, for example, What are their plans, surely they don't believe that their going out to sea will bring down the government. Their idea is to make for Angra do Heroísmo, free the political prisoners, take possession of the island, and then wait for riots to break out here. And if nothing happens. If there are no riots, they will go to Spain and join forces with the government. They're mad, they won't even get beyond the straits. That's what my brother said, but they refuse to listen. When is this to take place. He didn't tell me, but it will be within the next few days. And the ships, which ships are involved. The Afonso de Albuquerque, the Dao, the Bartolomeu Dias. They're mad, Ricardo Reis repeats, but he is no longer thinking about the conspiracy which has been revealed with such innocence, what he is recalling is the day of his arrival in Lisbon, the torpedo boats in the dock, their flags drenched like soggy rags, their lifeless

hulks painted a deathly gray, The Dao is that one nearest you, the porter had told him, and now the Dao was about to sail out to sea in defiance. Ricardo Reis took a deep breath, as if he himself were on the prow of the ship, the salt wind in his face, the biting spray. He repeated, They're mad. Can there be a note of hope in his voice, surely not, an absurd illusion on our part, for he cherishes no hope. But everything may turn out all right in the end, who knows, they may even abandon their plan, and if they don't, who knows, they may even make it to Angra, we will see what happens, but you must stop crying, tears won't help, the sailors may change their mind. No, Doctor, you don't know them, as sure as my name is Lydia they won't change their mind. Having spoken her name, she suddenly realized that she should not be here, I can't do any cleaning for you today, I must get back to the hotel at once, I only came to unburden myself, I hope no one has noticed I am missing. Can I do anything to help. It's those sailors who need help, with all that way to go before they reach the straits, the one thing I beg of you, on the souls of your dear ones, is to keep this a secret, even though I wasn't able to keep it myself. Don't worry, my lips are sealed. But they parted enough for a kiss of consolation, and Lydia moaned because she felt so unhappy, although one could detect another deep sound in that moan, we humans are like this, feeling many things at the same moment. As Lydia descended the stairs, Ricardo Reis, most unusual for him, went out on the landing. She looked up, he nodded, they both smiled, certain moments in life seem perfect and this was such a moment, like a page on which there was writing but is now blank again.

When Ricardo Reis went out to lunch the next day, he lingered in the park to gaze at the warships before the Terreiro do Paço. He knew little about ships in general, only that dispatch boats were bigger than torpedo boats, but at a distance they all looked exasperatingly alike. He could not tell which was the Afonso de Albuquerque and which the Bartolomeu Dias, but the Dao he knew, because the porter had told him, The Dao is the one nearest you. Lydia must have been dreaming, or her brother had frightened her with a joke, this incredible story of conspiracy and ships heading for sea. Three of them are moored along the quay, as calm as can be in the breeze, and the frigates going upriver, and the ferries for Cacilhas ceaselessly plying to and fro, and the seagulls in the cloudless blue sky, and the sun shining brightly on the expectant river. What Daniel told his sister is true after all, a poet can sense the fear that trembles in these waters. When do they leave, Within the next few days, Lydia replied, and Ricardo Reis's throat tightens and his eyes cloud with tears, this was how Adamastor's great weeping began. He is on the point of leaving when he hears voices call out in excitement, Over there, over there. They belong to the two old men, and other people are asking, Where, what is it, and children playing leapfrog interrupt their game and call out, Look at the balloon, look at the balloon. Ricardo Reis wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and saw rising into the air, on the other side of the river, an enormous airship, it must be the Graf Zeppelin or the Hindenburg, arriving to drop off mail for South America, on the rudder is a swastika in white, red, and black, like a kite launched by children into the sky, a hovering symbol that has lost its original meaning, a threat rather than a shooting star. The links between men

and symbols are curious, we need only think of St. Francis of Assisi joined by blood to the cross of Christ, and the cross of Christ on the armbands of the bank employees at the political rally, it is a miracle that a person does not get lost in this maze of associations. The Hindenburg, its engines roaring, flew over the river in the direction of the castle, then disappeared behind some houses, and the roar gradually died away. The airship is about to drop the mail at Portela de Sacavém, perhaps The Highland Brigade will then transport the letters, for in the world there are many recurring paths. The old men return to their bench, the children go back to their leapfrog, the currents of air grow still again, and Ricardo Reis is no wiser. The ships sit in the accumulating heat of the afternoon, their prows facing out to sea, the sailors must be having their lunch, today as every day, unless today is their last day. In the restaurant, Ricardo Reis filled his glass with wine, then the glass of his invisible guest, and as he raised his glass to take the first sip, he made a gesture as if offering a toast. Since we cannot look into his thoughts to see whom or what he was toasting, let us follow the example of the waiters in this establishment, who pay no attention, because this customer may be a little odd but by no means is he the oddest.

The afternoon was most agreeable. Ricardo Reis went down to the Chiado, to the Rua Nova do Almada, to observe the ships at close quarters. On the quay, and as he was crossing the Terreiro do Paço, he recalled that in all these months he had not been to the Café Martinho da Arcada. Fernando Pessoa, on the last occasion, had felt that it would be unwise to challenge the memory of those familiar walls, and somehow they had never gone back, neither of them giving it another thought. For Ricardo Reis there is some excuse, with so many years abroad the habit of going there, if ever a habit, has been broken. Nor will he go there today. Seen from the middle of the square, the ships afloat on that luminous water look like toy boats displayed in a window, on mirrors to give the effect of a fleet in harbor. But when one draws closer, one sees very little, only the sailors going back and forth on deck. At this distance they seem unreal, if they are talking we cannot hear them, and what they are thinking remains a secret. Ricardo Reis was lost in reverie, having forgotten why he came here, he was simply gazing, nothing more, when suddenly he heard a voice beside him, So you've come to see the ships, Doctor. He recognized that voice, it belonged to Victor. His first reaction was puzzlement, where was the smell, then it became clear, Victor was downwind of him. Ricardo Reis felt his heart beat faster, did Victor suspect, had the sailors' plan to mutiny been discovered. The ships and the river, he replied, but could also have mentioned the frigates and the seagulls, also that he was about to take the ferry to Cacilhas just for the pleasure of the crossing, of watching the dolphins leap, but he merely repeated, The ships and the river, and withdrew brusquely, telling himself he had acted foolishly, he should have kept up a natural conversation, if Victor knows there is something afoot, he must surely have found it suspicious to see the doctor there. Then it occurred to Ricardo Reis that he should warn Lydia, was obliged to do so. But he immediately changed his mind, What could I tell her, that I saw Victor in the Terreiro do Paço, it might have been a coincidence, even the police enjoy looking at the river, and Victor could have been off-duty, simply yielding to

the seafaring impulse that is common to all Portuguese, and spotting the doctor there, it seemed only natural to greet him, for old times' sake. Ricardo Reis passed the entrance of the Hotel Brangança, went up the Rua do Alecrim, where engraved on stone steps were the words *clínica de enfermidades de los ojos y quirúrgicas*, A. Mascaró, 1870, there is nothing that tells us whether this Mascaró graduated from a medical faculty or was a simple practitioner, in those days the rules regarding diplomas were less strict, even today they are not that strict, we need only recall that Ricardo Reis treated heart patients without any special qualifications. He followed the itinerary of the statues, Eça de Queirós, Chiado, D'Artagnan, poor Adamastor viewed from behind. Pretending that he was admiring the statues, he walked around each slowly, three times, feeling that he was playing cops and robbers, but he soon calmed down, Victor was not following him.

The afternoon passed and darkness fell. Lisbon is a tranquil city with a wide river of legendary fame. Ricardo Reis did not go out to dinner, he scrambled two eggs, folded them into a bread roll, accompanying this meager fare with a glass of wine, and even this he found difficult to swallow. On edge and restless, he went down to the park after eleven o'clock to take another look at the ships. All he could see were the mooring lights, and now he could not even tell the difference between the dispatch boats and the torpedo boats. He was the only soul on the Alto de Santa Catarina, one could no longer count Adamastor, now completely petrified, the screaming throat forever silent, the face terrifying to behold. Ricardo Reis went home, the ships won't leave in the night, because of the risk of running aground. Half-dressed, he lay on his bed, slept, woke up, and went back to sleep, calmed by the great silence throughout the apartment as the first light of day filtered in between the slats of the shutters. When he woke up, nothing had happened, and now that another day had dawned it seemed impossible that anything could happen. He felt ashamed of himself, appalled that he had removed only his shoes and jacket and tie. I'll have a bath, he decided, and was bending down to look for his slippers under the bed when he heard the first cannonade. But perhaps he was mistaken, perhaps a piece of furniture had fallen in the apartment downstairs, perhaps the landlady had fainted with a thud, but another explosion rang out, the windowpanes shook, the ships are firing on the city. He opened the window, on the street, people were in a panic, a woman shouted, God help us, it's a revolution, and ran for dear life toward the park. Ricardo Reis pulled on his shoes, slipped on his jacket, just as well that he had not taken off his clothes, almost as if he had known what would happen. The neighbors were already on the stairs, wrapped in their dressing gowns. When they saw the doctor appear, and a doctor can be relied upon to know everything, they asked in great distress, Are there people hurt, Doctor. His leaving in such haste must mean that someone has called him out to deal with an emergency. Covering their bare necks, they trail after him, standing at the entrance to the building where out of modesty they are partially concealed. When Ricardo Reis arrived at the park, a crowd had already gathered. The residents of this neighborhood are privileged, because there is no better vantagepoint in Lisbon for watching vessels enter and leave. The warships were not firing on the city, the fortress of Almada was firing on the warships. On one of them. Ricardo Reis asked, Which

ship is that. Fortunate for him, he asked someone who knew, It's the Afonso de Albuquerque. So it was the ship on which Lydia's brother was serving, the sailor Daniel, whom he had never met. He tried to picture his face, but could see only the face of Lydia. At this very moment she must be looking out of a window at the Hotel Brangança, or she has gone into the street in her maid's uniform, she is running to the Cais do Sodré, and now stands at the quay, her hands pressed to her bosom, perhaps weeping, perhaps with dry eyes and flushed cheeks, suddenly letting out a scream because the Afonso de Albuquerque has been hit by a shell, then another. Someone on the Alto de Santa Catarina is clapping his hands, at this moment the two old men appear, their lungs bursting, how did they manage to get here so quickly, living as they do at the bottom of the hill, but they would rather die than miss this, and that is certainly possible, considering the effort they have made. It all seems like a dream. Drifting slowly, the Afonso de Albuquerque has probably been struck in some vital organ, perhaps the boiler room, the rudder. The fortress of Almada continues to fire, and the Afonso de Albuquerque appears to answer, but we are not sure. From this side of the city new booms can be heard, louder, less frequent, That's the fortress of the Alto do Duque, someone remarks, they are lost now, they'll never get away. And at that very moment another ship emerges, a torpedo boat, the Dao, almost certainly the Dao, trying to shield herself with the smoke of her own stacks and skirting the southern bank in order to escape the guns of the fortress of Almada, but if she gets past Almada she will not escape the Alto do Duque. Shells explode near the shore, this is to get the range, the next volley will strike the ship, and yes, there is a direct hit. A white flag is already being unfurled on the Dao, but the firing continues, the ship begins to list, then white sheets, shrouds, funeral shrouds, the end is near, the Bartolomeu Dias will not even have time to leave her berth.

It is nine o'clock. One hundred minutes have passed since the hostilities began, the dawn mist has dispersed and the sun shines from a clear sky. They must be searching now for the men who jumped into the sea. From this belvedere there is nothing more to be seen. As the veterans explain what happened to some latecomers, Ricardo Reis sits down on a bench. The old men join him, eager to start up a conversation, but the doctor says nothing, he sits with his head lowered, as if he were the one who had tried to sail out to sea only to be caught in the net. While the adults talk, their excitement subsiding, the children start to play leapfrog and the little girls sing, I went into Celeste's garden, what did you go there to do, I went there to look for a rose. More appropriate would be the ballad from Nazaré, Don't go to sea Tonho, you might drown Tonho, ah Tonho, poor Tonho, what an unfortunate fellow you are. Lydia's brother is not Tonho, but when it comes to misfortune there is little difference. The old men, indignant, turn away when Ricardo Reis gets to his feet. He finds some comfort when he hears a woman say, out of pity, Poor souls, she is referring to the sailors but Ricardo Reis feels those words as if someone were caressing him, placing a hand on his forehead or gently stroking his hair. In his apartment he throws himself on the unmade bed, covers his eyes with his arm, and weeps freely, weeps foolish tears, because this was not his revolution, Wise is the man

who contents himself with the spectacle of the world, I must repeat that phrase a thousand times, what should all this matter to one who no longer cares who wins and who loses. Ricardo Reis gets up and puts on his tie, he is about to go out, but passing his hand over his face, he feels his stubble, he need not look in the mirror to know that there are white hairs glistening there among the black, the harbinger of old age. The dice have been thrown, the card played has been covered with the ace of trumps, no matter how fast you run you cannot save your father from the gallows, these are popular sayings to help ordinary men bear the blows of fate. Ricardo Reis, an ordinary man, sets about shaving and washing himself, while he is shaving he doesn't think, he concentrates on the razor scraping at his skin, one of these days he must sharpen the blade. It was half-past eleven when he left his apartment for the Hotel Brangança, and why not, no one should be surprised to see a former guest who stayed for almost three months, who was so dutifully served by one of the chambermaids, a chambermaid whose brother took part in the mutiny, she herself had told him, Yes, Doctor, I have a brother at sea, he is serving on the Afonso de Albuquerque, no one should be surprised that Ricardo Reis has come to make inquiries, to see if he can help, poor girl, how she must have suffered, some people are born unlucky.

The buzzer sounds much hoarser, or has his memory started to deceive him. The figurine of the page mounted on the baluster raises its extinguished globe, even in France there were such pages, but he will never find out where this page came from, there is not time to know everything. At the top of the stairs Pimenta appears, about to descend, thinking a client has arrived with luggage, then he stops, not yet recognizing who is coming up. He could have forgotten, so many faces enter and leave the life of a hotel porter, and we must take the poor lighting into account as well. But now the new arrival is so close that even though he keeps his head lowered, there is not a shadow of doubt. Well upon my word, if it isn't Doctor Reis, how are you, Doctor. Good day Pimenta, that chambermaid, what is she called again, Lydia, is she here. Ah, no, Doctor, she went out and hasn't returned, I believe her brother was involved in the mutiny. Pimenta has barely finished speaking when Salvador appears on the landing, pretending to be surprised, Why Doctor, how delighted I am to see you back. Pimenta tells him what he already knows, The doctor would like to speak to Lydia. Ah, Lydia isn't here, but if I could be of any assistance. She had spoken to me about a brother who was serving in the navy, I only came to see if I could offer my services as a doctor. I understand, Doctor Reis, but Lydia went out as soon as the shooting began and she hasn't returned. Salvador always smiles when he is giving information, he makes a good manager, and let us repeat once more, the last time, that he has cause for complaint against this former guest, who slept with one of the chambermaids and perhaps still does, and who now turns up, playing the innocent, if he thinks he is deceiving the manager, he is much mistaken. Do you know where she might have gone, Ricardo Reis asked. She must be around somewhere, she could have gone to the Naval Ministry, or to her mother's house, or to the police station, because the police are always involved in such matters, but do not trouble yourself, Doctor, I will tell her that Doctor Reis was here, and she is sure to go looking for you.

Salvador gave another smile, like one who has set a trap and can already see his prey caught by the leg, but Ricardo Reis answered, Yes, do tell her to come and see me, here is my home address, and he wrote the futile directions on a sheet of paper. Annoyed at this response, Salvador stopped smiling, but Ricardo Reis never learned what he was about to say, because two Spaniards came down from the second floor, engaged in heated discussion. One of them asked, Señor Salvador los ha. llevado el diablo a los marineros. Yes, Don Camilo, the devil has taken them. Good, the hour has come to say Arriba España, Viva Portugal, Arriba, exclaimed Don Camilo, and Pimenta added on behalf of the Fatherland, Viva. As Ricardo Reis went downstairs, the buzzer sounded, there had once been a bell here, but the guests complained, they said it was like the bell at the gates of a cemetery.

Lydia did not come that afternoon. Ricardo Reis went out to buy the late edition of a newspaper. He scanned the headlines on the front page, then turned to the double center page. At the bottom, Twelve Sailors Killed, and their names and ages followed, Daniel Martins, twenty-three years of age. Ricardo Reis stopped in the middle of the street, holding the newspaper wide open, submerged in silence. The city has come to a standstill, or walks on tiptoe, its forefinger pressed to sealed lips, suddenly there was a deafening noise, the horn of an automobile, a quarrel between two lottery-ticket vendors, a child crying because his mother had cuffed his ear, Any more of that and I'll give you a good hiding. Lydia was not waiting for him, nor was there any indication that she had called. It is almost night. The newspaper reports that the arrested men were taken before the district attorney, then to Mitra, and that the bodies of the dead, some of whom still have to be identified, are in the morgue. Lydia must be searching for her brother, or else she is at her mother's house, both women weeping over this great and irreparable calamity.

A knock at the door. Ricardo Reis ran to open it, his open arms ready to embrace the tearful Lydia, but it was Fernando Pessoa, Ah, it's you. Were you expecting someone else. If you know what has happened, you must realize that yes, I am, Lydia, I believe I told you once, had a brother in the Navy. Is he dead, Yes, he is dead. They were in the bedroom, Fernando Pessoa seated at the foot of the bed, Ricardo Reis in a chair, the room now in total darkness. Half an hour passed in this way, and they heard a clock chiming on the floor above. How strange, Ricardo Reis thought to himself, I don't remember ever having heard that clock before, or perhaps I heard it once and then put it out of my mind. Fernando Pessoa sat with his hands on one knee, his fingers clasped, his head lowered, without stirring he said, I came to tell you that we will not see each other again. Why not. My time is up, do you remember my telling you that I had only a few months left. Yes, I remember. Well, that is the reason, those months have come to an end. Ricardo Reis tightened the knot in his tie, got to his feet, put on his jacket. He went to the bedside table, took The God of the Labyrinth and put it under his arm. Let's go then, he said, Where are you going, With you. You should stay here and wait for Lydia. I know I should. To console her after the loss of her brother. I can do nothing for her. And

the book, what do you want that for. Despite the time granted me, I never managed to finish it, You won't have time, I will have all the time I could possibly want. You are deceiving yourself, reading is the first faculty one loses, remember. Ricardo Reis opened the book, saw meaningless marks, black scribbles, a page of blotches. The faculty has already left me, he said, but no matter, IU take the book with me just the same. But why. I relieve the world of one enigma. As they left the apartment, Fernando Pessoa told him, You forgot your hat. You know better than I do that hats aren't worn where we're going. On the sidewalk opposite the park, they watched the pale lights flicker on the river, the ominous shadows of the mountains. Let's go then, said Fernando Pessoa. Let's go, agreed Ricardo Reis. Adamastor did not turn around to look, perhaps afraid that if he did, he might let out finally his mighty howl. Here, where the sea ends and the earth awaits.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JESUS CHRIST

Translated from the Portuguese by Giovanni Pontiero

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P R T U S Q O

FOR PILAR

FORASMUCH AS MANY HAVE TAKEN IN HAND TO SET FORTH IN ORDER a
declaration of those things which are most surely believed among
us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning

were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.

Luke 1.1–4

Quod scripsi, scripsi.

What I have written, I have written.

Pontius Pilate

THE SUN APPEARS IN ONE OF THE UPPER CORNERS OF THE rectangle, on the left of anyone looking at the picture. Representing the sun is a man's head that sends out rays of brilliant light and sinuous flames, like a wavering compass in search of the right direction, and this head has a tearful face, contorted by spasms of pain that refuse to abate. The gaping mouth sends up a cry we shall never hear, for none of these things is real, what we are contemplating is mere paper and ink, and nothing more. Beneath the sun we see a naked man tied to a tree trunk with a cloth around his loins to cover those parts we call private, and his feet are resting on a piece of wood set crosswise, to give him support and to prevent his feet from slipping, they are held by two nails driven deep into the wood. Judging from the anguished expression on the man's face and from his eyes, which are raised to heaven, this must be the Good Thief. His ringlets are another reassuring sign, for it is well known that this is how angels and archangels wear their hair, and so it would appear that the repentant criminal is already ascending to the world of heavenly beings. Impossible to say whether the trunk is still a tree that has been arbitrarily turned into an instrument of torture while continuing to draw nourishment from the soil through its roots, inasmuch as the lower part of the picture is covered by a man with a long beard. Richly attired in loose, flowing robes, he is looking upward but not toward heaven. This solemn posture and sad countenance must belong to Joseph of Arimathaea, because the only other person who comes to mind, Simon of Cyrene, after being forced to help the condemned man carry his cross, as was the practice when these executions took place, went about his own affairs, thinking more of a business transaction that called for an urgent decision than of the sufferings of a miserable wretch about to be crucified. Joseph of Arimathaea is that affluent and good-hearted man who donated a grave for the burial of the greatest criminal of all, but this act of generosity will be to no avail when the time comes to consider his beatification, let alone canonization. All he has on his head is the turban he always wears outdoors, unlike the woman in the foreground of the picture, whose hair hangs all the way down her back as she leans forward, enhanced by the supreme glory of a halo, in her case one edged with the finest embroidery. The kneeling woman must be Mary, because, as we know, all the women gathered here have that name, with one exception, she who is also called Magdalene. Anyone viewing this picture who knows the facts of life will swear immediately that this is the woman called Magdalene, for only someone with her disreputable past would have dared appear at such a solemn occasion wearing a low-cut dress with a close-fitting bodice to emphasize her ample bosom, which inevitably draws the lewd stares of passing men and puts their souls at grave risk of being dragged to perdition. Yet the expression on her face is one of contrition, and her wilting body conveys nothing other than her sorrowing soul, which we cannot ignore, even if it is hidden by tempting flesh, for this woman could be completely naked, had the artist so chosen to portray her, and still she would deserve our respect and veneration. Mary Magdalene, if that is her name, is holding to her lips the hand of another woman, who has collapsed to the ground as if bereft of strength or mortally wounded. Her name is also Mary, second in order of appearance but undoubtedly the most important Mary of all, if the central position she occupies in the lower part of the picture has any significance. Apart from her grieving expression and limp hands, nothing

can be seen of her body, covered as it is by the copious folds of her mantle and by a tunic tied at the waist with a coarsely woven cord. She is older than the other Mary, which is reason enough, although not the only reason, why her halo should be more elaborate, at least that is what one would conclude in the absence of more precise information about the privileges of rank and seniority observed at that time. Considering, however, the enormous influence of this iconography, only an inhabitant of another planet, where no such drama has ever been enacted, could fail to know that this anguished woman is the widow of a carpenter named Joseph and the mother of numerous sons and daughters, although only one of her children was decreed by fate, or whoever governs fate, to achieve a little renown during his life and a great deal more after his death. Reclining on her left side, Mary, the mother of Jesus, rests her forearm on the hip of another woman, also kneeling and also named Mary, who might well be the real Mary Magdalene although we can neither see nor imagine the neckline of her tunic. Like the first woman in this trinity, she lets her long tresses hang loose down her back, but to all appearances they are fair, unless it is only by chance that the pen strokes are more delicate here, leaving empty spaces between the locks and thus allowing the engraver to lighten the tone. We are not trying to prove that Mary Magdalene was in fact blond, but simply point to the popular belief that women with blond hair, whether it be natural or dyed, are the most effective instruments of sin. Mary Magdalene, who, as everyone knows, was as wicked a woman as ever lived, must have been blond if we accept the opinion held, for better or worse, by half of mankind. It is not, however, because this third Mary has skin and hair fairer than the first that we suggest, despite the damning evidence of the first's exposed bosom, that the third is the Magdalene. What confirms her identity is that this third Mary, as she distractedly supports the limp arm of the mother of Jesus, is looking upward, and her enraptured gaze ascends with such power that it appears to elevate her entire being, it is a light that outshines the halo already encircling her head, a light that overpowers every thought and emotion. Only a woman who has loved as much as we believe Mary Magdalene loved could possibly have such an expression, it is she and no other, and thus we rule out the woman standing beside her. This is the fourth Mary, her hands half raised in a gesture of piety and her expression vague, she is accompanied on this side of the engraving by a youth barely adolescent, his knee bent languidly while with an affected and theatrical right hand he presents the four women playing out the poignant drama in the foreground. This is John, who looks so youthful, his hair in ringlets and his lips trembling. Like Joseph of Arimathaea, he also blocks some of the picture, his body concealing the foot of the tree on the other side, where no birds nest. All we see at the top is a second naked man hoisted into the air and bound and nailed to the wood like the first thief, but this one has smooth hair and his eyes are lowered, perhaps still capable of seeing the ground below. His thin face arouses our compassion, unlike the third thief on the other side, who even in the final throes of torment defiantly shows his face, which was not always so pale, for thieving gave him a good living. Thin and smooth haired, the second man bows to the earth that will devour him, this pathetic creature condemned to both death and hell must be the Bad Thief, an honest man when all is said and done, who, free of divine and human laws, did not pretend to believe that sudden repentance

suffices to redeem a whole life of evil. Above him, also weeping and wailing like the sun in front, the moon can be seen in the guise of a woman with the most incongruous ring in one ear, an unprecedented liberty no artist or poet is likely to repeat. Both sun and moon illuminate the earth in equal measure, but the ambience of light is circular and shadowless, causing everything on the distant horizon to stand out clearly, turrets and walls, a drawbridge across a moat whose water glistens, Gothic arches, and, on the crest of the farthest hill, the motionless sails of a windmill. Somewhat closer, in this deceptive perspective, four horsemen in armor and helmets, bearing lances, proudly parade their horses with admirable dexterity, but they appear to have come to the end of their display and are making farewell gestures to an invisible audience. The same impression of closing festivities is given by that foot soldier who is on the point of going off, carrying something in his right hand that could be a cloth, perhaps even a mantle or tunic, while two more soldiers look annoyed, frustrated, as if they had lost at gambling, although from afar it is difficult to tell what is in their minute faces. Hovering over these common soldiers and the walled city are four angels, two of them portrayed full length. They weep and mourn, with the exception of the angel who solemnly holds a goblet to the crucified man's right side in order to collect the last drop of blood from a lance wound. In this place known as Golgotha, many have met the same cruel fate and many others will follow them, but this naked man, nailed by hands and feet to a cross, the son of Joseph and Mary, named Jesus, is the only one whom posterity will remember and honor by inscribing his initials in capitals. So this is he whom Joseph of Arimathea and Mary Magdalene are gazing upon, this is he who causes the sun and moon to weep and who only a moment ago praised the Good Thief and despised the Bad Thief, failing to understand that there is no difference between them, or, if there is a difference, it lies in something else, for good and evil do not exist in themselves, each being merely the absence of the other. Shining above his head with a thousand rays brighter than those of the sun and moon put together is a placard in Roman letters proclaiming him king of the Jews, surrounded by a wounding crown of thorns like that worn, without their even knowing and with no visible sign of blood, by all who are not allowed to be sovereigns of their own bodies. Jesus, unlike the two thieves, has nowhere to rest his feet, the entire weight of his body would be supported by his hands nailed to the wood had he not life enough left in him to hold himself erect over his bent legs, but that life is nearing its end as the blood continues to flow from the abovementioned wound. Between the two wedges that keep the cross upright and that have also been driven into the dark ground, making a gaping wound there as irremediable as any human grave, we see a skull, also a shinbone and a shoulder blade, but what concerns us is the skull, for this is what Golgotha means, skull. No one knows who put these human remains here or for what purpose, perhaps it was simply a sly reminder to these poor wretches about what awaits them before they turn at last to earth, dust, and nothingness. But there are some who claim that this is Adam's skull, risen from the deep murk of ancient geological strata and, because it can not now return there, eternally condemned to behold its only possible paradise which is forever lost. Farther back, in the same field where the horsemen execute one last maneuver, a man is walking away but looking back in this direction. In

his left hand he carries a bucket, and in his right a staff. At the tip of the staff there ought to be a sponge, not easy to see from here, and the bucket, one can safely bet, contains water with vinegar. One day, and forever after, this man will be much maligned, accused of having given Jesus vinegar out of spite and contempt when he asked for water, but the truth is that he offered him vinegar and water because at that time it was one of the best ways of quenching thirst. The man walks away, does not wait for the end, he did all he could to relieve the mortal thirst of the three condemned men, making no distinction between Jesus and the thieves, because these are things of this earth, which will persist on this earth, and from them will be written the only possible history.

NIGHT IS FAR FROM OVER. HANGING FROM A NAIL NEAR THE door, an oil lamp is burning, but its flickering flame, like a small, luminous almond, barely impinges on the darkness, which fills the house from top to bottom and penetrates the farthest corners, where the shadows are so dense that they appear to form a solid mass. Joseph awoke with a fright, as if someone had roughly shaken him by the shoulder, but he must have been dreaming, because he lives alone in this house with his wife, who has not so much as stirred and is fast asleep. Not only is it unusual for him to wake in the middle of the night, but he rarely opens his eyes before daybreak, when the gray, cold morning light begins to filter through the chink in the door. How often he has thought of repairing the door, what could be easier for a carpenter than to cover the chink with a piece of wood left over from some job, but he is now so accustomed to seeing that vertical strip of light when he opens his eyes in the morning that he has reached the absurd conclusion that without it he would be trapped forever in the shadows of sleep, in the darkness of his own body and the darkness of the world. The chink in the door is as much a part of the house as the walls and ceiling, as the oven and earthen floor. In a whisper, to avoid disturbing his wife, who was still asleep, he recited words of thanksgiving, words he said each morning upon returning from the mysterious land of dreams, Thanks be to You, Almighty God, King of the Universe, who has mercifully restored my soul to life. Perhaps because he had not fully regained the power of all five senses, five unless at that time people were not yet aware there were five or, conversely, had more and were about to lose those that would serve little purpose nowadays, Joseph watched his body from a distance while it slowly was occupied by a soul making its gradual return, like trickling waters as they wend their way in rivulets and streams before penetrating the earth to feed sap into stems and leaves. Looking at Mary as she lay beside him, Joseph began to realize just how laborious this return to wakefulness could be, and a disturbing thought came to him, that this wife of his, fast asleep, was really a body without a soul, for no soul is present in a body while it sleeps, otherwise there would be no sense in our thanking God each morning for having restored our souls as we awaken. Then a voice within him asked, What thing or person inside us dreams what we dream, and then he wondered, Are dreams perhaps the soul's memories of the body, and this seemed a reasonable explanation. Mary stirred, could her soul have been near at hand, already here in the house, but she did not awaken, no doubt in the midst of some troubled dream, and after heaving a deep sigh like a broken sob she drew closer to her husband, with a sensuousness she would never have dared indulge while awake. Joseph pulled the thick, rough blanket over his shoulders and snuggled up close to Mary. He could feel her warmth, perfumed like a linen chest filled with dried herbs, gradually penetrate the fibers of his tunic and merge with the heat of his own body. Then slowly he closed his eyes, stopped thinking, and, oblivious to his soul, sank back into a deep sleep.

When he woke again, the cock was crowing. A dim, grayish light seeped through the chink in the door. Having patiently waited for the shadows of night to disperse, time was preparing the way for yet another day to reach the world. Because we no longer live in that fabulous age when the sun, to whom we owe so much, was so generous that it

halted its journey over Gibeon in order to give Joshua ample time to overcome the five kings besieging the city. Joseph sat up on his mat, drew back the sheet, and at that moment the cock crowed a second time, reminding him that there was another prayer of thanksgiving to be said. Praise be to You, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who gave the cock the intelligence to distinguish between night and day, prayed Joseph, and the cock crowed for a third time. Usually, at the first sign of daybreak all the cocks in the neighborhood would crow to one another, but today they remained silent, as if their night had not yet ended or was just beginning. Joseph looked at his wife's face, puzzled by her deep slumber, since normally the slightest noise awakened her, as if she were a bird. Some mysterious power appeared to be hovering over Mary, pressing her down without completely immobilizing her, for even in the shadows her body could be seen to tremble gently, like water rippling in the breeze. Could she be ill, he wondered, but he was distracted from this worrying thought by a sudden urge to urinate, and this, too, was unusual. He rarely felt the need to relieve himself at this early hour or with such urgency. Slipping quietly from under the sheet to avoid waking his wife, for it is written that a man should do everything possible to maintain his self-respect, he cautiously opened the creaking door and went out into the yard. At that hour of the morning everything was gray as ash. Joseph headed for the low shed where he tethered his donkey, and there he relieved himself, listening with dreamy satisfaction to the explosive sound of his urine as it spurted onto the hay scattered on the ground. The donkey turned its head, two huge eyes shining in the dark, then gave its furry ears a vigorous shake before sticking its nose back into the manger, foraging for leftovers with thick, sensuous lips. Joseph fetched the large pitcher used for washing, tipped it sideways, and let the water pour over his hands, then, drying them on his tunic, he praised God who in His infinite wisdom had endowed mankind with the essential orifices and vessels to live, for if any one of them should fail to close or open as required, the result would be death. Looking up at the sky, Joseph was overwhelmed. The sun is slow to appear, in the sky there is not even a hint of dawn's crimson, no shade of rose or cherry, nothing except clouds to be seen from where he stands, one vast roof of low clouds like tiny flattened balls of wool, all identical and the same shade of violet, which deepens and glows on the side where the sun breaks through, then across the sky is increasingly dark until it merges with what remains of the night on the other side. Joseph had never seen such a sky, although old men often spoke of portents in the skies that attested to the power of God, rainbows that covered half the celestial vault, towering ladders that connected heaven and earth, providential showers of manna, but never of this mysterious color, which might just as easily signify the beginning of the world as the end, this roof floating above the earth, made up of thousands of tiny clouds that almost touch one another and reach in all directions like the stones of a wasteland. Terror-stricken, he thought the world was ending and he was the only witness of God's final judgment, the only one. Silence reigns in heaven and on earth, no sounds can be heard from the nearby houses, not so much as a human voice, a child crying, a prayer or curse, a gust of wind, the bleat of a goat or the bark of a dog. Why are the cocks not crowing, he muttered to himself, and repeated the question anxiously, as if the cocks, crowing might be the last hope of salvation. Then the sky began to change.

Pink tinges and streaks gradually, almost imperceptibly crept into the violet on the belly of the clouds, until finally it turned red, then was gone, and without warning the sky exploded into light, many shafts of gold that pierced clouds no longer small but now formidable, enormous barges that hoisted blazing sails and plied a sky that had at last been liberated. Joseph's fear subsided, his eyes widened in astonishment and wonder, and with good reason, for he alone was witnessing this spectacle. In a loud voice he praised the Lord of all creation for the eternal majesty of the heavens, whose ineffable splendors leave men struggling with simple words of gratitude, Thanks be to You, O Lord, for this and for that and for that. As he spoke, the tumult of life, whether summoned by his voice or rushing through a door that had carelessly been left open, invaded the space previously occupied by silence, leaving it scarcely any room, a patch here and there, such as those tiny marshes that the murmuring forests engulf and hide from view. The sun rose and spread its light, a vision of unbearable beauty, two enormous hands sending into flight a shimmering bird of paradise that opened its great tail with a thousand iridescent eyes, causing a nameless bird nearby to burst into song. A gust of wind hit Joseph in the face, caught his beard and tunic, eddied around him like a tiny whirlwind moving across a desert, unless he was imagining things and this was nothing more than the blood rushing to his head, a shiver going up his spine like a tongue of fire and stirring a quite different urge.

Moving as if inside a swirling column of air, Joseph went into the house and shut the door behind him. He paused for a moment, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the dark. The lamp cast scarcely any light. Wide awake, Mary lay on her back, listening, staring into space, as if waiting. Joseph quietly approached and slowly drew back the sheet. She averted her eyes, began to lift the hem of her tunic, and 110 sooner had she pulled it to her navel than he was on top of her, his own tunic hitched to his waist. Mary's legs now were open, perhaps they had opened by themselves as she dreamed and she did not close them out of this sudden lassitude, or else from the premonition of a married woman who knows her duty. God, who is omnipresent, was there but, pure spirit that He is, was unable to see how Joseph's flesh touched Mary's, how his flesh penetrated her flesh as had been ordained, and perhaps He was not even there when the holy seed of Joseph poured into the holy womb of Mary, both holy, being the fountain and chalice of life. For in truth, there are things God Himself does not understand, even though He created them. Out in the yard, God could hear neither the gasp that escaped Joseph's lips as he came nor the low moan Mary was unable to suppress. Joseph rested on his wife's body no more than a minute, and perhaps less. Pulling down her tunic and drawing up the sheet, she covered her face with her arm. Joseph stood in the middle of the room, raised his hands, and, looking up at the ceiling, gave the most heartfelt thanksgiving of all, which is reserved for men, I thank You, Almighty God, King of the Universe, for not having made me a woman. By then, God must have already abandoned the yard, for the walls did not shake or cave in, nor did the ground part. All that could be heard was Mary saying, in that submissive voice one expects from women, Thanks be to You, O Lord, for having made me according to Your will. Now, there is no difference between these words

and those spoken to the angel Gabriel, for clearly anyone who could say, Behold the handmaiden of the Lord, do with me as You will, might just as easily have said, instead, this prayer. Then the wife of the carpenter Joseph got up from her mat, rolled it up together with that of her husband, and folded the sheet they shared in common.

JOSEPH AND MARY LIVED IN A VILLAGE CALLED NAZARETH, a place of little importance and with few inhabitants, in the region of Galilee. Their house was no different from the others, a lopsided cube made of bricks and clay and as poor as poor could be. No striking examples of imaginative architecture to be found here. To save on material, the house had been built into a hillside, which formed the rear wall and allowed easy access to the flat roof, which also served as a terrace. Joseph, as we know, was a carpenter by trade and fairly capable, although he had neither the skill nor the talent for jobs that required fine workmanship. This criticism should not be taken too seriously, for one needs time to gain experience and acquire skills, and we must not forget that Joseph is barely in his twenties and lives in a place with few resources and even fewer opportunities. Nor should a man be measured simply on the basis of his professional ability. For all his youth, this Joseph is one of the most honest and pious men of Nazareth, assiduous in attending the synagogue and prompt in carrying out his duties, and while he may not be endowed with any special powers of eloquence, he can argue and make astute observations, especially when given a chance to use some apt image or metaphor related to his work, carpentry. He does not possess, however, what one might call a creative imagination, and during his brief life will never come up with a memorable parable to be handed down to posterity, let alone one of those brilliant conceits so clearly expressed that there is nothing more to say yet so obscure and ambiguous that they intrigue scholars for years to come.

As for Mary's talents, these are even less apparent, but no more than we might expect of a sixteen-year-old girl who, although married, is still a baby, as it were, for even in those days people used such expressions. Notwithstanding her frail appearance, she works as hard as all the other women, carding, spinning, and weaving cloth, baking the family bread each morning, fetching water from the well and then carrying it up the steep slope, a large pitcher balanced on her head and another on her hip. In the late afternoon she sets off through the byways and fields of the Lord, gathering wood and cutting stubble and filling an extra basket with cow's dung and the thistles and briars that thrive on the upper slopes of Nazareth, the best thing God could ever have devised for lighting a fire or braiding a crown. It would have been easier to load everything onto a donkey's back, but Joseph needs the beast to carry his lumber. Mary goes barefoot to the well, goes barefoot into the fields, in clothes that are forever getting soiled and torn and that constantly need washing and mending, because new clothes are reserved for her husband, women like Mary making do with very little. When she attends the synagogue, she enters by the side door, as the law requires of women, and even if she finds thirty other women there, or all the women of Nazareth, or even the entire female population of Galilee, they must wait until at least ten men arrive for the service, in which the women will participate only passively. Unlike Joseph her husband, Mary is neither upright nor pious, but she is not to blame for this, the blame lies with the language she speaks if not with the men who invented it, because that language has no feminine form for the words upright and pious.

Now one fine day, four weeks after that unforgettable morning when the clouds in

the sky turned a mysterious violet, Joseph happened to be at home. The sun was about to set and he was sitting on the floor, eating his food with his fingers, as was then the custom, while Mary stood waiting for him to finish before having her own supper. Neither spoke, for he had nothing to say and she was unable to express what was on her mind. Suddenly a beggar appeared at the gate outside, a rare occurrence in this village, where people were so poor, a fact unlikely to have escaped the begging fraternity, which had a nose for places where there were pickings, and that was certainly not the case here. Nevertheless Mary ladled into a bowl a good portion of the lentils with chopped onions and mashed chickpeas set aside for her own supper, and took it out to the beggar, who sat on the ground. She did not need her husband's spoken permission, he merely nodded, for as everyone knows those were times when words were few and a simple thumbs down or up was enough to condemn a man to death or save him, as in the arenas of ancient Rome. The sunset, although quite different, was spectacular, too, with its myriad wisps of cloud scattered through the sky, rose-colored, mother-of-pearl, salmon-pink, cherry, adjectives used here on earth so that we may understand one another, for none of these colors, as far as we know, have names in heaven. The beggar must have gone without food for three days to have scraped and licked his bowl clean so quickly, and back he comes to return the bowl and express his gratitude. Mary, opening the door, finds him standing there, but somehow he looks broader and taller than before. So it must be true that there is a great difference between going hungry and just having eaten, for this man's face and eyes are glowing, his tattered clothes flap in a strange wind, blurring her vision so that his rags take on the appearance of rich raiment, a sight that must be seen to be believed. Mary put out her hands to receive the earthenware bowl, which, through some extraordinary optical illusion, perhaps due to the light of the sky, was transformed into a vessel of the purest gold. And, as the bowl passed from his hands into hers, the beggar said in resonant tones, because even the poor man's voice had changed, May the Lord bless you, good woman, and give you all the children your husband desires, and may He also protect you from my sad fate, for, alas, I have nowhere to rest my head in this wretched world. Mary held the bowl in cupped hands, one chalice held by another, as if waiting for the beggar to fill it, which is what he did. Without warning he bent down and gathered a handful of earth and, raising his arm, allowed it to trickle through his fingers while reciting in a low voice, Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, nothing begins without coming to an end, every beginning comes from an ending. Mary was puzzled and asked him, What does that mean, but the beggar simply replied, Good woman, you have a child in your womb and that is man's only destiny, to begin and end, to end and begin. How do you know I'm with child. Even before the belly swells, a child can be seen shining through its mother's eyes. If that is true, then my husband would already have seen his child in my eyes. Perhaps he does not look at you when you look at him. Who are you who knows so much without hearing it from my own lips. I am an angel, but tell no one.

Then his shining robe turned back to rags, he shriveled as if licked by fire, and this wondrous transformation took place just in time, thanks be to God, for no sooner had the beggar quietly disappeared than Joseph emerged in the doorway, his suspicions aroused

by whispering voices and Mary's absence. What else did the beggar want, he asked, and Mary, at a loss for words, could only repeat, From earth to earth, from ashes to ashes, from dust to dust, nothing begins without coming to an end, nothing ends without having a beginning. Was that what he said. Yes, and he also said that a father's child shines through its mother's eyes. Look at me. I am looking. I can see a light in your eyes, said Joseph, and Mary told him, It must be your child. As the evening sky changed from blue to the somber shades of night, the bowl began to glow with a radiance that changed Mary's face, and her eyes seemed to belong to a much older woman. Are you pregnant, Joseph finally asked her. Yes, I am, replied Mary. Why didn't you tell me sooner. I meant to tell you today, I was waiting for you to finish eating. And then the beggar turned up. That's right. What else did he have to say, for he certainly took his time. That the Lord should give me all the children you wished for. What do you have in that bowl to make it shine so. Nothing but earth. Soil is black, clay green, and sand white, of these three sand alone shines in the day, but it is night. Forgive me, I am only a woman and cannot explain these things. You say he took some earth from the ground and dropped it into the bowl, at the same time uttering the words, Earth to earth. Yes, those very words.

Joseph went to open the gate, looked right and left. No sign of him, he's vanished, he told her, and feeling reassured, Mary returned to the house, for the beggar, if he really was an angel, could only be seen if he wished. She set the bowl down on the stone slab of the hearth, took a live coal from the fire and lit the oil lamp, blowing until she raised a tiny flame. Puzzled, Joseph came inside, tried to hide his suspicions, moved with the solemnity of a patriarch, which looked odd in someone so young. Furtively he examined the bowl filled with luminous earth, his expression ironic and skeptical, but if he was trying to assert superiority, he was wasting his time, for Mary's eyes were lowered and her thoughts elsewhere. Using a small stick, Joseph poked at the earth, fascinated as he watched it darken when disturbed, only to regain its brilliance, light sparkling in all directions over the dull surface. There's a mystery here I can't fathom, either the beggar brought this earth with him and you thought he gathered it here, or there is some magic at work, for who ever saw shining earth in Nazareth. Mary remained silent. She was eating what was left of her lentils with bread dipped in oil. As she broke bread, she observed the holy law by giving thanks in the humble tone befitting a woman, Praise be to You, Adonai, Lord God and King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth. She continued eating in silence while Joseph mused at length, as if interpreting a verse from the Torah in the synagogue or a phrase from the prophets, the words Mary had spoken, words he himself spoke when breaking bread, and he tried to imagine what grain might grow out of luminous earth, what bread it would produce, and what light we would carry within us if we ate such bread. Are you sure the beggar took it from the ground, he asked Mary a second time, and Mary answered, Yes, I'm sure. Perhaps it was shining all the time. No, it wasn't shining on the ground. This should have allayed the fears of any husband, but Joseph believed, like all men at that time and in that place, that the truly wise man is on his guard against the wiles and deceptions of women. To converse little with them and pay them even less heed must be the motto of a prudent husband mindful

of the advice of Rabbi Josephat ben Yochanan, for at the hour of death each man must give account of any idle conversations he has held with his wife. Joseph asked himself whether this conversation with Mary was necessary, and having decided that it was, given the unusual nature of what had happened, he swore to himself that he would never forget the holy words of the rabbi, his namesake, for Josephat is the same as Joseph, rather than suffer remorse at the hour of death, which, God willing, will be peaceful. Then he asked himself whether he should tell the elders of the synagogue about this curious affair of the mysterious beggar and the luminous earth, and decided he should, to ease his conscience and keep the peace in his own home.

Mary finished eating. She took the bowls outside to wash them, but not the bowl used by the beggar. There are now two lights in the house, that of the oil lamp struggling valiantly against the darkness of night, and the aura from the bowl, flickering yet constant, like a sun that is slow in appearing. Seated on the floor, Mary waits for her husband to resume the conversation, but Joseph has nothing more to say to her, he is mentally rehearsing the speech he will make tomorrow before the council of elders. How frustrating it is, not to know precisely what transpired between his wife and the beggar, not to know what else they might have said to each other, but he decides to question her no further. He might as well believe the story she has now told him twice, because if she is lying, he will never know, while she will know and almost certainly be laughing at him, her mantle covering her face, just as Eve laughed at Adam, but behind his back, for in those days people did not wear mantles. One thought led to another, and Joseph soon convinced himself that the beggar had been sent by Satan. The great tempter, aware that times had changed and that people were now more cautious, was offering not one of nature's fruits but the promise of a different, luminous soil, counting once more on the credulity and weakness of women. Joseph's mind is in turmoil, but he is pleased with himself and the conclusion he has reached. Unaware of her husband's tortuous thoughts about Satan's intrigue, Mary is troubled by a strange feeling of emptiness now that she has told him of her pregnancy. Not an inner emptiness, to be sure, for she knows perfectly well that her womb, and in the strict sense of the word, is full, but an outer emptiness, as if the world has receded and become remote. She recalls, but as if evoking another life, that after supper and before unrolling the mats for the night she always had some task in hand to fill the hours, but now she feels no inclination whatever to rise from where she sits gazing at the light that glows back at her over the rim of the bowl, gazing and awaiting the birth of her child. If truth be told, her thoughts are not that clear, for thought, when all is said and done, as others and we ourselves have observed before, is like a great ball of thread coiled around itself, loose in places, taut in others, inside our head. It is impossible to know its full extent, one would have to unwind and then measure it, but however hard one tries or pretends to try, this cannot be done without assistance. One day, someone will come and tell us where to cut the cord that ties man to his navel and thought to its origin.

The following morning, after a restless night in which he was constantly disturbed by

the same nightmare, where he saw himself falling time and time again inside an enormous upturned bowl as if under a starry sky, Joseph went to the synagogue to seek the advice of the elders. His story was extraordinary, though more extraordinary than he knew because, as we know, he had not been told the whole story. Were it not for the high esteem in which he was held by the old men of Nazareth, he would have had to go home with his tail between his legs and the reproachful words of Ecclesiasticus in his ears, To trust a man hastily shows a shallow mind. And he, poor fellow, would not have had the presence of mind to reply with words from the same Ecclesiasticus, regarding the dream that had haunted him all night, What you see in a dream is but a reflection, a face in a mirror. When he finished telling his story, the elders looked at one another and then at Joseph, and the oldest man there, translating the silent mistrust of the council into a direct question, asked, Is this the truth you have spoken, whereupon the carpenter replied, The truth, the whole truth, as God is my witness. The elders then debated among themselves while Joseph waited at a discreet distance, until finally they summoned him and said that they would send three envoys to question Mary herself about this mysterious event in order to discover the identity of the beggar whom no one else had seen, by learning what he looked like, the exact words he used, and if anyone could remember seeing him beg for alms in Nazareth or provide any information about the stranger. Joseph was pleased because, although he would never admit it, he did not want to confront his wife alone. Her habit in recent days of keeping her eyes lowered was beginning to disconcert him. There was modesty in it, but also, unmistakably, something provocative, as in the look of a woman who knows more than she is prepared to disclose or wants others to notice. Verily I say unto you, the treachery of women knows no limits, especially when they feign innocence.

And so the envoys depart, Joseph leading the way, and they are Abiathar, Dothan, and Zacchaeus, names recorded here to forestall any suspicion of historical inaccuracy in the minds of those who have acquired their version of the story from other sources, a version perhaps more in accordance with tradition but not necessarily more factual. The names having been revealed and the existence of the men who used them established, there can be no remaining doubts. The unusual sight of three elders moving in solemn procession through the streets, their robes and beards caught by the breeze, soon drew the local urchins, who gathered around them and began aping their walk as children will, jeering and shouting and chasing after the envoys all the way from the synagogue to the house of Joseph, who was much put out by this boisterous parade. Attracted by the noise, women began to appear in the doorways of the neighboring houses and, sensing something amiss, they sent their children to find out what such a delegation was doing at Mary's door. To no avail, because only the elders were allowed to enter. The door was firmly closed behind them, and no woman of Nazareth, however inquisitive, learned or knows to this day what took place in the house of Joseph, the carpenter. Forced to invent something to satisfy the hunger of their curiosity, they accused the beggar, whom they had never set eyes on, of being a common thief. A great injustice, because the angel, if angel is what he was, did not steal the food he ate, and even delivered a holy prophecy

in exchange. While the two senior elders interrogated Mary, the third, the youngest, Zacchaeus, went around the immediate vicinity gathering any details people could remember about a beggar who answered the description given by the carpenter's wife, but none of the neighbors could help, No, sir, no beggar passed this way yesterday, and if he did, he didn't knock at my door, it must have been a thief passing through, who when he found someone at home pretended to be a beggar and then left in a hurry, the oldest trick in the book.

Zacchaeus arrived back at Joseph's house with nothing to report about the beggar just as Mary was repeating for the fourth time the facts we already know. She stood as if guilty of a crime, the bowl set on the ground, and inside it, constant as a throbbing heart, the strange earth. Joseph sat on one side, and the elders sat in front like a tribunal of judges. Dothan, the second of the three, said, It's not that we don't believe your story, but you're the only person who spoke to this man, if he was a man, all your husband knows is that he heard his voice, and now Zacchaeus here tells me that none of your neighbors saw him. As God is my witness, I swear I am telling the truth. The truth, perhaps, but is it the whole truth. I shall drink the water of the Lord and He will prove my innocence. The trial of bitter water is for women suspected of infidelity, but you couldn't have been unfaithful to your husband because he didn't give you enough time. Falsehood is said to be the same as infidelity. That's another kind of infidelity. My words are as true as the rest of me. Then Abiathar, the oldest of the three, told her, We shall question you no further, the Lord will reward you sevenfold for the truth you have spoken or punish you sevenfold if you have deceived us. He fell silent, then turned to Zacchaeus and Dothan and asked them, What shall we do with this bright earth, which prudence demands should not remain here, for it might be one of Satan's tricks. Dothan said, Let this earth return whence it came, let it return to its former darkness. Zacchaeus said, We know not who the beggar is, or why he chose to be seen by Mary alone, or the meaning of the earth that shines in the bowl. Dothan proposed, Let us take it into the desert and scatter it there, far from the eyes of men, that the wind may disperse it and the rain erase it. Zacchaeus said, If this earth is some divine gift, then it must not be removed, if on the other hand it forebodes evil, then let those to whom it was given bear the consequences. Abiathar asked, What do you suggest then, and Zacchaeus replied, That the bowl be buried here and covered up so that there is no contact with the natural earth, for a gift from God, even when buried, is never lost, whereas the power of evil is much diminished if hidden from sight. Abiathar asked, What do you say, Dothan, to which the latter replied, I agree with Zacchaeus, let us do as he says. Abiathar told Mary, Withdraw so that we may proceed. Where shall I go, she asked him, whereupon Joseph, agitated, said, If we are to bury the bowl, let it be somewhere away from the house, for I will never rest with a light buried underneath me. Abiathar reassured him, That can be done, then he told Mary, You remain here. The men went out into the yard, Zacchaeus carrying the bowl. The sound of a spade could soon be heard digging as Joseph briskly set to work, and a few minutes later Mary recognized the voice of Abiathar, You can stop now, the hole is deep enough. Mary peered through the chink in the door, watched her

husband cover the bowl with a curved potsherd then lower it into the hole as deep as his arm was long. He rose, grabbed his spade, filled the hole, and stamped the ground down firmly with his feet.

The men remained in the yard, conversing among themselves and gazing at the patch of fresh earth, as if they had just buried a treasure and were trying to memorize the spot. But this was not the topic of conversation, because suddenly Zacchaeus could be heard saying aloud, in a tone of playful reproach, Now then, Joseph, what kind of carpenter are you, when you can't even make a bed for your pregnant wife. The others laughed, and Joseph joined them rather than lose face by showing his annoyance. Mary saw them walk to the gate, and now, seated on the stone slab of the hearth, she was looking around the room, wondering where they could put a bed if Joseph decided to make one. She tried not to think about the earthenware bowl or the luminous earth or whether the beggar was really an angel or only some practical joker. If a woman is promised a bed for her house, she must start thinking about the best place to put it.

BETWEEN THE MONTHS OF TAMMUZ AND AB, WHEN GRAPES were gathered in the vineyards and the figs began ripening amid the dark green vine leaves, certain events took place. Some were normal and commonplace, such as a man and woman coming together in the flesh, and after a while she tells him, I am carrying your child, others quite extraordinary, such as an annunciation entrusted to a passing beggar whose only crime seems to have been that peculiar phenomenon of the bright earth, which is now safe from prying eyes thanks to Joseph's mistrust and the prudence of the elders. The dog days are fast approaching, the fields are bare, nothing but stubble and parched soil. During the oppressive hours of the day Nazareth is a village submerged in silence and solitude. Only when night descends and the stars appear can one sense the presence of a landscape or hear the music of the heavenly planets as they glide past one another. After supper Joseph sat out in the yard, to the right of the door, to get some air. How he loved to feel the fresh evening breeze on his face and beard. Mary joined him, squatting on the ground like her husband but on the other side of the door, and there they remained in silence, listening to the sounds coming from the neighboring houses, the bustle of domestic life, which they, too, would experience once they had children. May God send us a boy, Joseph had prayed throughout the day, and Mary, too, kept thinking, Let it be a boy, dear God, but she had other reasons for wanting a boy. Her belly was slow in growing bigger, weeks and months would pass before her condition became visible, and since, out of modesty and discretion, she saw little of her neighbors, there would be general surprise when she turned into a balloon overnight. Perhaps the real reason for her secretiveness was her fear that someone might connect her pregnancy with the appearance of the mysterious beggar. Such thoughts may strike us as absurd, but in moments of weariness when her mind began to stray, Mary could not help wondering how all this had come about and who was the real father of this child she carried in her womb. As everyone knows, when women are pregnant, they are given to strange cravings and flights of fancy, some of them worse than those of Mary, which we shall not betray lest we tarnish the reputation of this mother-to-be.

Time passed, the weeks dragged, the month of Elul hot as a furnace, with the scorching winds from the southern deserts stifling the atmosphere, a season when dates and figs turn to trickling honey, and the month of Tishri bringing the first rains of autumn to moisten the soil in time for tilling and sowing, and the following month of Heshvan, when olives are gathered and the days finally turn cool. Unable to make anything grand, Joseph decided to make a simple bed where Mary might at last find rest for her swollen and cumbersome body. Heavy rains fell during the last days of Kislev and throughout most of Tebet, forcing him to interrupt his work in the yard. He took advantage of the dry spells to assemble the larger pieces of wood, but usually he had to work indoors in poor light, and there he planed and polished the unfinished frame, covering the floor all around him with shavings and sawdust, which Mary would sweep up later and dispose of in the yard.

In the month of Shebat the almond trees blossomed. In the month of Adar, the feast

of Purim had already been celebrated when Roman soldiers appeared in Nazareth, a familiar sight throughout Galilee. Detachments went from village to city and from city to village, while others were dispatched into the country in Herod's kingdom, to inform the people that by order of Caesar Augustus every family domiciled in the provinces governed by the consul Publius Sulpicius Quirinus must participate in a census, which like all the others would bring the records up to date on those who had not yet paid their taxes to Rome. Without exception, every family had to register in their place of birth. Most of the people who gathered in the square to hear the proclamation did not mind the imperial edict, for as natives of Nazareth, settled for generations, they intended to register there. But some families had come from other parts of the kingdom, from Gaulinitis or Samaria, from Judaea, Peraea, or Idumaea, from here and there, from far and wide, and these began making preparations for the long journey, complaining bitterly about the perversity and greed of Rome and asking what would become of their crops, since it was almost time to harvest the flax and barley. And those who had large families, with babes in arms and elderly parents and grandparents, unless they had transportation of their own, wondered from whom they could borrow donkeys, or hire them at a reasonable price, and if there was a long and arduous journey ahead, ample supplies of food would be required, and water bags if they had to cross the desert, and mats and mantles for sleeping, and cooking utensils, and extra clothing, because the cold wet season was not yet over and they might have to spend nights out in the open.

Joseph learned about the edict only after the soldiers left to carry their glad tidings elsewhere. His next-door neighbor, Ananias, suddenly appeared in a great fluster to tell him what had happened. Fortunately for Ananias, he could register in Nazareth, nor would he be celebrating Passover in Jerusalem this year, because of the harvest, so he was spared both journeys. Ananias came to warn his neighbor, but warned him with such a smug expression, as if bearing good news. Alas, even the best of men can be two-faced, and we do not know this Ananias well enough to decide whether his is a momentary lapse from grace or if he has fallen under the influence of one of Satan's wicked angels with spare time on its hands. Joseph, hammering away at a plank of wood, at first did not hear Ananias calling him from the gate. Mary, whose ears were keener, heard a voice call, Joseph, but it was her husband who was being summoned, and who was she to tug at his sleeve and ask, Are you deaf, can't you hear someone calling you from the gate. Ananias called out even louder, the hammering stopped, and Joseph went to see what his neighbor wanted. Ananias was invited in and, after the customary greetings, inquired in the voice of one who seeks reassurance, Where are you from, Joseph, and, surprised, Joseph told him, I'm from Bethlehem of Judaea. Isn't that near Jerusalem. Yes, quite near. And are you going there to celebrate the Passover, asked Ananias, and Joseph replied, No, I've decided not to go this year, because my wife is expecting our child any day now. Oh, is that so. But why do you ask. Whereupon Ananias raised his arms to heaven and wailed mournfully, Poor Joseph, the trouble that awaits you, the aggravation, all this work to be done here and you're expected to put down your tools and travel all that way, so help me God, who sees and assists all things. Without

asking the reason for this sudden outburst, Joseph echoed his neighbor's pious sentiment, May God help me as well, to which Ananias, without lowering his voice, replied, Yes, with God all things are possible, He knows and sees all things, both in heaven and on earth, praise be to Him, but, forgive the irreverence, I'm not sure He can do much to help you this time, because you're in the hands of Caesar. What are you trying to tell me. Only that soldiers have been here to proclaim that before the month of Nisan ends, all the families of Israel must go and register in their place of birth, which in your case, dear Joseph, means quite a journey.

Before Joseph had time to react, Shua, the wife of Ananias, appeared, and going straight to Mary, who was standing in the doorway, she began commiserating in the same mournful voice, Poor child, and so delicate, what is to become of you, about to give birth any day now and forced to make the journey to who knows where. To Bethlehem of Judaea, Shua's husband informed her. Good heavens, all that way, Shua exclaimed, and in all sincerity, for once on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem she had gone to nearby Bethlehem to pray at Rachel's tomb. Mary waited for her husband to speak first. Joseph, furious that this news should come to Mary not quietly and with measured words from his own lips but blurted tactlessly by hysterical neighbors, said in a solemn voice, It's true that God doesn't always choose to wield the powers exercised by Caesar, but God has powers denied Caesar. He paused, as if to savor the profundity of what he had just said, before announcing, We shall celebrate the Passover here in Nazareth and then go to Bethlehem, and God willing shall be back in time for Mary to give birth at home, unless He decides that the child be born in the land of our ancestors. It might even be born on the road, murmured Shua, but Joseph overheard her and was quick to remind her, Many a child of Israel has been born on the road, and our child will be just one more. Ananias and his wife could only agree with the wisdom of these words. They had come to sympathize with their hapless neighbors, and to enjoy their own solicitude, only to find themselves rebuffed. But then Mary invited Shua inside to ask her advice about some wool she had to card, and Joseph, wishing to make amends for his harsh words, said to Ananias, Good neighbor, could I ask you to look after my house while I'm away, for we shall be gone for at least a month, counting the time the journey takes, then the seven days of seclusion, and more if by some misfortune the child should be a girl. Ananias promised his neighbor that he would look after the property as if it were his own, and suddenly it occurred to him to ask Joseph, Would you honor me by celebrating the Passover with my family and friends since neither you nor your wife has any relatives here in Nazareth, not after the death of Mary's parents, who were so old when she was born that people still ask themselves how Joachim could possibly have given Anne a daughter. Come now, Ananias, said Joseph, rebuking him playfully, have you forgotten how Abraham muttered into his beard in disbelief when the Lord told him He would give him offspring, and if Almighty God allowed a hundred-year-old man and a wife of ninety to conceive a child, why should my in-laws, Joachim and Anne, who were not as old as Abraham and Sarah, not do the same. Those were other times, Ananias replied, when God was ever present and manifest not just in His works. Well versed in matters of doctrine, Joseph retorted, God is time

itself, neighbor Ananias, for God time is indivisible. Ananias was left speechless, for this was not the moment to bring up the old argument about the powers, whether consubstantial or delegated, of God and Caesar. Joseph, despite his demonstration of practical theology, had not forgotten Ananias's sudden invitation to celebrate the Passover with him and his family. He did not wish, however, to accept too quickly, because as everyone knows it is a sign of good breeding to receive favors without being too effusive, otherwise the granter will think we were simply waiting to be asked. So Joseph bided his time before finally thanking Ananias for his thoughtfulness. The women reemerged from the house, Shua saying to Mary, You're an expert at carding, my girl, and Mary blushed on hearing herself praised in front of Joseph.

One pleasant memory Mary would cherish of this auspicious Passover was not having to help with the cooking or serve the men at table. The other women agreed she should be spared these chores in her condition. Don't tire yourself out, they warned her, or you'll do yourself some mischief, and they should know, because most of them were mothers with young children. All she had to do was attend to her husband, who was sitting on the floor with the other men. Bending over with some difficulty, she filled his glass and replenished his plate with unleavened bread, stewed lamb, bitter herbs, and biscuits made of ground dried locusts, a delicacy much appreciated by Ananias, for these biscuits were a family tradition. Several guests declined, doing their best to conceal their disgust and painfully aware that they were unworthy of the edifying example of those prophets in the desert who, making a virtue of necessity, ate locusts as if they were manna. As supper drew to an end, poor Mary sat apart, sweat running down her face, her great belly resting on her haunches, and she scarcely listened to the laughter, banter, stories, and continual reading from the Scriptures, feeling she might depart this world at any moment, her life hanging by the thread of one last, pure, unspoken thought. All she knew was that she was thinking without knowing what she was thinking or why she was thinking. She awoke with a start. In her dream she had seen the beggar's face loom from a great darkness, then his huge body in rags. The angel, if indeed he was an angel, had crept into her sleep unannounced, when he was furthest from her thoughts, and gazed at her intently. She sensed curiosity, but perhaps she was mistaken, he came and went so quickly, and Mary's heart now fluttered like that of a little bird. Difficult to say whether she had been startled or someone had whispered something embarrassing in her ear. The men and boys still sat on the floor while the women, hot and harried, rushed back and forth offering them more helpings, but the men were full now, and their conversation became more animated as the wine began to take effect.

Without anyone's noticing, Mary got to her feet. Night had fallen. There was no moon in the clear sky, only the twinkling stars, which sent out a kind of echo, a muffled, barely audible hum which Joseph's wife could feel on her skin and in her bones, impossible to explain, like a furtive voluptuous shiver that lingers. She crossed the yard and looked out. She could see no one. The gate was closed, but there was a vibration in the air, as if someone had just run or flown past, leaving only a fleeting sign that would leave others

baffled.

THREE DAYS LATER, AFTER PROMISING HIS CUSTOMERS THAT their jobs would be completed on his return and after making his farewells in the synagogue and entrusting the care of his house and the worldly possessions therein to his neighbor, Ananias, Joseph the carpenter set out with his wife from Nazareth and headed for Bethlehem, where they would register as Rome decreed. If the news had not yet reached heaven, because of some delay in communication or a problem with simultaneous translation, the Lord God must have been surprised to see the landscape of Israel so altered, with hordes of people traveling in all directions, when normally during the first few days after Passover people moved centrifugally, as it were, beginning their return journey from that earthly sun known as Jerusalem. Force of habit, however fallible, and divine perspicacity, the latter absolute, will undoubtedly assist Him to recognize, even from on high, that these are pilgrims slowly making their way back to their towns and villages, but what about this bewildering maze, as those obeying the profane order of Caesar travel at random across more familiar routes. Unless Caesar Augustus is unwittingly complying with the will of God, if it is true that in His divine wisdom He has ordained that Joseph and Mary should go to Bethlehem at this time. Our speculation, arbitrary and irrelevant as it may appear at first, should not be dismissed lightly, for it helps us disprove those commentators who would have us picture Joseph and Mary crossing the inhospitable desert all alone, without so much as a friendly face in sight, trusting solely in God's mercy and the protection of His angels. For no sooner does the couple reach the outskirts of Nazareth than it becomes clear that they will not be on their own. Joseph and Mary meet two large families, a veritable clan of some twenty members, including adults, grandparents, and small children. It is true that these are not all traveling to Bethlehem, one of the families is only going half the distance and will stay in a village near Ramah, the other will head south as far as Beersheba, but even if they should separate before reaching Bethlehem, because there is always the possibility that some will travel faster, the couple will join other travelers on the road, and meet those going in the opposite direction, on their way to register in Nazareth. The men walk ahead in one group, accompanied by all the boys who have reached thirteen, while the women, girls, and grandmothers of every age straggle behind, accompanied by the boys under thirteen. When they set off, the men in solemn chorus recited prayers suited to the occasion, while the women merely mumbled the words, for it is pointless raising your voice if no one is likely to listen, even though they ask for nothing and are grateful for everything.

Among the women only Mary is in an advanced state of pregnancy, and such is the strain on her that, had providence not endowed donkeys with infinite patience and stamina to match, she would long since have given up and begged the others to abandon her at the roadside to await her hour, which we know is near, but who can say when or where, for this is not a race given to making bets or predictions about when or where Joseph's son will be born, and what a sensible religion to have prohibited gambling. Until that hour comes and for as long as this anxious waiting lasts, the pregnant woman will rely less on the distracted attentions of Joseph, who is lost in conversation with the other men, than on the reliable support of the donkey, who must be wondering, if beasts of

burden are sensitive to such things, why the whip has not been much in use and why it is allowed to go at its own easy pace, the pace of its species. The women often lag behind, forcing the men, who are far ahead of them, to call a halt until the women get closer but not too close. The men prefer to give the impression that they have only paused for a rest because, although it is true that everyone may use the road, where cocks crow hens must not squawk, at most they may cackle when they lay an egg, for such are the laws of nature that govern the world in which we live. And so Mary journeys on, swaying with the gentle rhythm of her mount, a queen among women, for she alone is permitted to ride, while the other donkeys carry pack loads. To make things easier, she takes the three infants in the party onto her lap in turn, giving their mothers some relief and at the same time preparing herself for motherhood.

On the first day, they soon tired and covered only a short distance. Their legs were unaccustomed to walking for hours on end, we must not forget the number of old people and small children making this journey. The former, after a long life, have spent all their energy and can no longer pretend otherwise, the latter have not yet learned how to conserve their growing strength and wear themselves out after a brief spurt of wild activity, as if life were coming to an end and had to be enjoyed to the full while it lasted. On reaching a large village called Isreel, they stopped at the local caravansary, which they found in a state of chaos and uproar because of the heavy traffic. To tell the truth, there was more uproar than chaos here, because as one's eyes and ears adjusted, some order emerged from that multitude of people and animals within four walls, like a disturbed anthill trying to find its bearings and regroup. Despite the overcrowding, the three families had the good fortune to find shelter under an archway, where the men could huddle together on one side and the women on the other as darkness fell and all in the caravansary, people and animals, settled down for the night. But first the women had to prepare food and fill the water skins at the well, and the men had to unload the donkeys and water them after the camels finished drinking. For in two great gulps a camel can empty a trough, which must be refilled again and again to slake its thirst. After watering and feeding the donkeys, the travelers finally sat down to eat, the men first, of course. How often we need to remind ourselves that Eve was created after Adam and taken from his rib. Will we ever learn that certain things can be understood only if we take the trouble to trace them to their origins.

The men had eaten and were back in their own corner, the women were finishing off the leftovers, when Simeon, one of the most senior of the elders, who lived in Bethlehem but was obliged to register in Ramah, took advantage of the authority conferred by age and the wisdom believed to come thereof by asking Joseph what he would do if Mary, although Simeon did not mention her by name, should still be waiting to give birth when the last day of the census passed. The question was clearly academic, if such a word is apt for the time and place, insofar as only the census officials, skilled in the finer points of Roman law, would know how to deal with a pregnant woman who turned up for registration and said, We've come to register, no one having any idea whether she

carried a boy or a girl, not to mention the possibility of twins. Exemplary Jew as he was, the carpenter would never have dreamt of pointing out with simple Western logic that it was not up to those who obeyed laws to defend the defects in them, and if Rome was incapable of foreseeing certain difficulties, then she was ill served by her legislators and her interpreters of Holy Scripture. Faced with this thorny problem, then, Joseph thought long and hard, searching in his mind for a subtle argument that would convince those gathered around the bonfire of his skill in debate. After much reflection, the carpenter raised his eyes from the flickering flames and told them, If by the last day of the census my child has not yet been born, this will be a sign from God that He does not wish the Romans to know of the child's existence. Simeon replied, Such presumption, to claim to know what God does or does not wish. Joseph asked, Does God not see my ways and count all my steps. These words, which we can find in the Book of Job, implied, within the context of this discussion, that before all present or absent Joseph was protesting his humility and submission to the Lord, a sentiment wholly opposed to the diabolic presumption of which Simeon accused him when Joseph had tried to probe the inscrutable will of God. This is how the elder must have interpreted his answer, for he fell silent, waiting for Joseph to continue. The days of each man's birth and death, said Joseph, have been put under seal and guarded by angels ever since the world began, and only the Lord can break those seals, first the one and then the other, although often together, with His right and left hand, and there are times when He is so slow in breaking the seal of death that He seems almost to have forgotten the existence of certain living souls. Joseph paused for breath, then, smiling mischievously, told Simeon, Let us hope this conversation does not remind the Lord of your existence. Those present laughed into their beards, for the carpenter was not showing the respect due to an old man. Simeon, tugging nervously at his sleeve, made no attempt to hide his anger as he told Joseph, Perhaps the Lord was hasty in breaking the seal of your birth and you were born before your time, if this is how you treat your elders, who have seen more of life than you have and gained more wisdom. Whereupon Joseph replied, Listen, Simeon, you asked me what I would do if my child was not born by the last day of the census, and I couldn't answer, I'm not familiar with Roman law, and I suspect neither are you. No, I am not. Then I said, I know what you said, you don't need to repeat it. It was you who started it, accusing me of presuming to know God's will, so forgive me if I hurt your pride, but you were the first to cause offense, and as my elder and better you ought to set an example. There was a murmur of approval around the fire. The carpenter Joseph had clearly won the argument, and the others waited to see how Simeon would respond. Lacking in spirit and imagination, he peevishly said, All you had to do was answer my question respectfully, and Joseph replied, Had I given you the answer you wanted, the foolishness of your question would have been evident to all, therefore you must admit, however much it rankles, that I showed the greater respect by providing you with an opportunity to debate a thing we'd all like to know, namely, whether the Lord would ever choose to conceal His people from the eyes of the enemy. Now you speak about God's people as if they were your unborn child. Don't put words in my mouth, Simeon, words I haven't spoken and will never speak, listen instead to what should be understood in one sense and not in

another. Simeon made no attempt to reply to this, he got to his feet and took himself off to a corner along with the other men of his household, who felt obliged to accompany him because of ties of blood and kinship, although they were disappointed in the patriarch's poor showing in this verbal exchange.

The silence that followed the murmurings and whisperings of travelers settling down for the night was broken now and then by muffled conversations in the caravansary, by a shrill cry, the panting and snorting of animals, and the occasional awful bellow of a camel in heat. Then the party from Nazareth, all discord forgotten, could be heard muttering in unison the last and longest of the prayers of thanksgiving offered to the Lord at the end of the day, Praise be to You, O God, King of the Universe, who shuts our eyes without robbing them of light. Grant, O Lord, that we may sleep in peace and awaken tomorrow to a happy and tranquil life, help us to obey Your commandments. Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil. Lead us along the path of virtue and protect us from bad dreams, wicked thoughts, and mortal sickness. Spare us visions of death. Within minutes, the more just if not the more weary members of the party were fast asleep, some of them snoring unspiritually. And soon the others joined them, most with nothing more than their tunics to cover them, for only the elderly and the very young, both delicate in their own way, enjoyed the warmth and protection of a coarse blanket or threadbare mantle. Deprived of wood, the fire began to die, only a few weak flames continuing to flicker. Under the archway, the party from Nazareth slept soundly. Everyone except Mary. Unable to stretch out because of her belly, which could have been harboring a giant, she lay against some saddlebags in an effort to rest her aching back. Like the others, she had listened to Joseph arguing with old Simeon, and rejoiced in her husband's victory, as befits any wife no matter how harmless or unimportant the conflict. But she could no longer remember what the argument was about, her recollection of it already submerged in the throbbing of her body, which came and went like the tide of the sea, which she had never seen but had heard others describe, the restless ebb and flow as her child stirred in her womb. The strangest sensation, as if that living creature inside her were trying to hoist her onto its shoulders. Only Mary lay with her eyes open, shining in the shadows, still shining after the last flame had died away. No cause for wonder, for this happens to all mothers, and the wife of the carpenter Joseph was no exception, after the angel appeared to her disguised as a beggar.

Even in the caravansary there were cocks to greet the morning, but the travelers, merchants, drovers, and cameleers had to make an early start and begin preparing, before dawn, for the next leg of their journey. They loaded the animals with baggage and merchandise and made even more noise than on the previous evening. Once they have departed, the caravansary will settle down to a few hours of peace and quiet, like a brown lizard stretched out in the sun. The only remaining guests are those who have decided to rest all day, but by evening another group of travelers will start arriving, some more bedraggled than others but all of them weary, not that this has any effect on their vocal cords, because the moment they arrive, they start shouting their heads off as if

possessed by a thousand demons. Back on the road, the party from Nazareth has grown bigger, ten people have joined them, so anyone who imagines this place to be deserted is much mistaken, especially when the feast of Passover and the census coincide.

No one needed to tell Joseph to make his peace with old Simeon, not because he was in the wrong but because he had been taught to respect his elders, especially those who were paying the price for long life by losing both their brains and their influence over a younger generation. So Joseph went up to him and said, I've come to apologize for my insolence last night, I didn't mean to be disrespectful but you know what human nature is, one word leads to another, tempers are lost, and caution is thrown to the winds. Without raising his eyes, Simeon heard him out in silence, then finally spoke, You are forgiven. Hoping his friendly overture would win more from the stubborn old man, Joseph remained at his side for a fair stretch of the road. But Simeon, eyes fixed on the dust at his feet, continued to ignore him, until Joseph in exasperation decided to give up. At that very moment, seemingly roused from his thoughts, the old man placed a hand on Joseph's shoulder and said, Wait. Surprised, Joseph turned, and Simeon stopped and repeated, Wait. The others walked on, leaving the two men standing in the middle of the road, a no-man's-land between the group of men ahead and the group of women behind, which was gradually approaching. Above the women's heads, Mary could be seen swaying with the rhythm of the donkey.

They had left the valley of Isreel. Skirting great rocks, the road curved awkwardly up the first slope before penetrating the mountains of Samaria to the east, then along arid ridges before descending on the other side to the Jordan, where the burning plain stretched southward and the desert of Judaea fired and scorched the ancient scars of a land promised to the chosen few but forever uncertain to whom it should surrender. Wait, said Simeon, and the carpenter obeyed, suddenly uneasy. The women were drawing nearer. Then the old man clutched Joseph by the sleeve, and he confided, When I lay down to rest last night I had a vision. A vision. Yes, a vision, but no ordinary vision, for I could see the hidden meaning of words you yourself spoke, that if your child was still not born by the last day of the census, it would be because the Lord did not wish the Romans to learn of its existence and add its name to their list. Yes, that is what I said, but what did you see. I didn't see anything but suddenly felt that it would be better if the Romans did not learn of your child's existence, that no one should be told of it, and that if the child must be born into this world, at least let it live without torment or glory, like those men up there in front and those women bringing up the rear, let it be as anonymous as the rest of us until the hour of death and forever after. Humble carpenter as I am from Nazareth, what fate could my child possibly hope for other than the one you have just described. Alas, you are not the only one to dispose of your child's life. True, everything is in the hands of the Lord and He knows best. And so say I. But tell me about my child, what have you discovered. Nothing beyond the words you yourself uttered and which took on for me another meaning, as if on seeing an egg I could sense the chick inside. God wills what He creates and has created what He willed, my child is in His hands and

there is nothing I can do. That is indeed true, but these are days when God still shares the child with its mother. But should it turn out to be a son, it will belong to me and to God. Or to God alone. All of us belong to God. Not quite all of us, some are divided between God and Satan. How can one tell. If the law had not silenced women forever, perhaps they could reveal what we need to know, for it was woman who invented the first sin from which all the rest came. What do we need to know. Which part of woman's nature is demonic and which divine and what kind of humanity they have. I don't understand, I thought you were referring to my child. No, I was not referring to your child, I was talking about women, who generate beings such as ourselves and who may be responsible, perhaps unknowingly, for this duality in our nature, which is base and yet so noble, virtuous and yet so wicked, tranquil and yet so troubled, meek and yet so rebellious.

Joseph looked back. Mary was advancing on her donkey, a young boy in front of her and astride the saddle like a grown-up, and for a second Joseph thought he was seeing his own son and seeing Mary for the first time, at the head of this group of women. Simeon's strange words still filled his ears, but he found it hard to believe that any woman could wield so much power, especially this unassuming wife of his, who had never shown any sign of being different from other women. Turning to look at the road ahead, he suddenly remembered the episode of the beggar and the luminous earth. He began to tremble, his hair stood on end, he got goose flesh, and when he turned back to take another look at Mary, he saw, saw clearly, a tall stranger walking by her side, so tall that the man was head and shoulders above the women, this had to be the beggar whom he had missed seeing last time. Joseph looked again, and there he was, a sinister presence among those women that defied explanation. Joseph was about to ask Simeon to look, to make sure he was not imagining things, but the old man had moved on, having spoken his mind, and was now rejoining his companions to resume his position as head of his clan, a role he cannot hope to play much longer. Deprived of a witness, the carpenter looked again in his wife's direction. This time the beggar was gone.

HEADING SOUTH, THEY CROSSED THE WHOLE OF SAMARIA at great speed, with one eye on the road and the other nervously scanning their surroundings. They expected some act of hostility, of hatred, from the people living in these parts, descendants of the ancient Assyrians, renowned for their wicked deeds and heretical beliefs, who settled here during the reign of Shalmaneser, king of Nineveh, after the expulsion and dispersion of the twelve tribes. More pagan than Jewish, these people barely acknowledge the five books of Moses as sacred law, and they dare to suggest that the place chosen by God for His temple was not Jerusalem but Mount Gerizim, which lies within their domain. The expedition from Galilee traveled at a brisk pace but could not avoid spending two nights in the open in this enemy territory, with guards and patrols for fear of ambush. The treachery of the villains knew no bounds, and they were capable of refusing water even to someone of pure Hebrew stock who might be dying of thirst. Such was the anxiety of the travelers during this stretch of the journey that, contrary to custom, the men divided into two groups, one in front of the women and children and one behind, to protect them from taunts and insults, or worse. The inhabitants of Samaria, however, must have been going through a peaceful phase, because apart from resentful looks and snide remarks the party from Galilee met with no aggression, no gang of robbers descended from the nearby hills and attacked them with stones.

Shortly before reaching Ramah, those who believed with greatest fervor or who possessed a keener sense of smell swore they were inhaling the sanctified odor of Jerusalem. Here old Simeon and his companions went their separate way, for, as we mentioned earlier, they had to register in a village in this region. Giving profuse thanks to God there in the middle of the road, the travelers made their farewells. The married women filled Mary's head with a thousand and one pieces of advice, the fruits of their experience. Then they parted, some descending into the valley, where they would soon rest after four days on foot, the others making for Ramah, where they would seek shelter in a caravansary, for it would soon be dusk. At Jerusalem, the group that set out from Nazareth will also separate, most of them heading for Beersheba, which they should reach in two days, while the carpenter and his wife will go to nearby Bethlehem. Amid the confusion of embraces and farewells, Joseph called Simeon aside and, with all humility, asked him if he could remember anything more about his vision. I've already told you, it wasn't a vision. Whatever it was, I must know the destiny that awaits my child. If you don't even know your own destiny as you stand here before me asking questions, how can you expect to know the destiny of an unborn child. The eyes of the soul see further, and since yours have been opened by the Lord to certain manifestations reserved for the chosen, I thought you might have seen something where I see only darkness. You may never live to learn your son's destiny, you may, who knows, meet your own fate very shortly, but no more questions, please, stop all this probing and live for the present. And with these words Simeon placed his right hand on Joseph's head, murmured a blessing no one could hear, and rejoined his relatives and friends, who were waiting for him. In single file they made their way down a winding path to the valley, where Simeon's village nestled at the foot of the opposite slope, the houses almost

merging with the boulders that stuck out of the ground like bones. Much later, Joseph would learn that the old man died before he could register.

After spending two nights under the stars, exposed to the cold on the barren plain, with no camp fire, for that might betray their presence, the expedition from Nazareth decided to take refuge once more under the archways of a caravansary. The women helped Mary dismount from the donkey, reassuring her, Come, it'll soon be over, and the poor girl whispered back, I know, I can't have long to wait now, and what clearer proof than that great swollen belly. They made her as comfortable as possible in a quiet corner and set about preparing supper, for it was growing late and the travelers planned to eat together. That night there was no conversation, no prayers or stories around the fire, as if the proximity of Jerusalem demanded respectful silence, each man searching his heart and asking, Who is this person who resembles me yet whom I fail to recognize. This is not what they actually said, for people do not start talking to themselves like that, nor was this even in their conscious thoughts, but there can be no doubt that as we sit staring into the flames of a camp fire, our silence can be expressed only with words like these, which say everything. From where he sat, Joseph could see Mary in profile against the light of the fire. Its reddish reflection softly lit one side of her face, tracing her features in chiaroscuro, and he began to realize, with surprise, that Mary was an attractive woman, if one could say this of a person with such a childlike expression. Of course her body was swollen now, yet he could see the agile, graceful figure she would soon regain once their child was born. Without warning, as if his flesh was rebelling after all these months of enforced chastity, a wave of desire surged through his blood and left him dizzy. Mary called out in pain, but he did not go to her assistance. As if someone had doused him with cold water, the sudden memory of the man who two days ago had walked beside his wife dampened Joseph's ardor. The image of that beggar had been haunting both of them ever since Mary discovered she was pregnant, for Joseph did not doubt that the stranger had been in her thoughts throughout the nine months. He could not bring himself to ask his wife what kind of man he was or where he went when he suddenly left. The last thing he wanted was to hear her say in bewilderment, A man, what man. And were Joseph to insist, no doubt Mary would ask the other women to testify, Did any of you see a man in our group, and they would deny seeing him and shake their heads at any such suggestion, and one of them might even answer in jest, Any man who hangs around women all the time is after only one thing. But Joseph would not believe Mary's surprise and that she had not seen the beggar, whether it was man or ghost. I saw him with my own eyes as he walked beside you, he would insist, but Mary, not faltering, would say, As is written in holy law, a wife must obey her husband, so if you insist you saw a beggar walking beside me, I will not contradict you, but believe me I didn't see him. It was the same beggar. But how can you tell, if you didn't see him the first time he appeared. It could only have been him. Much more likely to have been some traveler who was walking so slowly that we all overtook him, first the men, then the women, and he was probably alongside our group when you chanced to look back. Ah, so you admit he was there. Not at all, I'm simply trying as a dutiful wife to find some

explanation that will satisfy you. Drowsy, Joseph watches Mary through half-closed eyes in the hope that he will find the truth in her face, but her face is now cast in shadow like the waning moon, her profile a vague outline in the light of the dying embers. Joseph nods, overcome by the effort of trying to understand, taking with him, as he falls asleep, the absurd idea that the beggar might be the image of his own son emerging from the future to tell him, This is what I'll look like one day, but you won't live to see it. Joseph slept with a resigned smile on his lips, a sad smile. He thought he heard Mary saying, God forbid that this beggar has nowhere to rest his head. For verily I say unto you that many things in this world could be known before it is too late, if husbands and wives would only confide in each other as husbands and wives.

Early next morning, most of the travelers who had spent the night in the caravansary left for Jerusalem, but those on foot stayed together, so that Joseph, without losing sight of his countrymen who were heading for Beersheba, accompanied his wife this time, walking alongside her as he had seen the beggar walk, or whatever he was. Joseph is convinced now that God bestowed a favor by allowing him to see his own son even before he is born, a son not wrapped in swaddling clothes, a tiny, unformed creature, smelly and bawling, but a fully grown man, taller than his father and most of the males of his race. Joseph is pleased to be taking his son's place, he is at once father and child, and this feeling is so strong that his real child, the unborn infant inside his mother's womb and heading for Jerusalem, suddenly becomes unimportant.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the pilgrims call out devoutly as the city comes into sight, rising before them like an apparition on the crest of the hill beyond the valley, a truly celestial city, the center of the universe. Sparkling in all directions under the midday sun, it is a crystal crown which will turn to purest gold at sunset and ivory in moonlight. Jerusalem, O Jerusalem. The Temple appears at that very moment, as if set there by God, and the sudden breeze that caresses the faces, hair, and clothes of the travelers could be a divine gesture, for, looking carefully at the clouds in the sky, we see a huge hand withdrawing, its fingers soiled with clay, its palm marked with the lines of life and death of every man and creature in this world, but the time has also come for us to trace the lines of life and death of God Himself. Trembling with emotion, the travelers raise their arms to heaven and raise their voices in thanksgiving, no longer in chorus, but each one lost in ecstasy, the more sober of them scarcely moving but looking up and praying with great fervor, as if they were being allowed to speak to God on equal terms. The road leads downward, and when the travelers descend into the valley and climb the next slope, which takes them to the city gates, the Temple will tower higher and higher, also the dreaded Antonia fortress, where even at this distance one can make out the shadowy forms of the Roman soldiers who stand watch on the terraces, and see the gleam of their weapons. The group from Nazareth must say good-bye here, for Mary is exhausted and would never survive the bumpy ride downhill at this fast pace, which accelerates to a headlong rush once the city walls loom into view.

And so Joseph and Mary find themselves alone on the road, she trying to recover her

strength, he impatient at the delay, now that they are so close to their destination. The sun beats down on the silent travelers. A muffled cry escapes Mary's lips. Worried, Joseph asks her, Is the pain getting worse, and she can barely say, Yes. Then an expression of disbelief creeps into her face, as though she has encountered something beyond her understanding. She certainly felt the pain in her body, but it seemed to belong to someone else. To whom, then. To the child inside her. How can she feel pain that belongs to another, and yet it could be hers, like an echo that by some strange trick of acoustics is louder than the sound that produced it. Joseph cautiously asks, Is the pain still bad, and Mary does not know how to answer. She would be lying if she said no, yet yes is not true either, so she decides to say nothing, the pain is there, she can feel it, but it is so remote that she has the impression she is watching her child suffer in her womb without being able to go to its assistance. No order has been given, Joseph has not used his whip, yet the donkey begins the steep slope leading to Jerusalem, as if looking forward to a full manger and a long rest. It does not know that there is still some way to go before reaching Bethlehem, and that, once there, things will not be so easy. Julius Caesar, for example, proclaims, Veni, vidi, vici, at the height of his glory, only to be assassinated by his own son, whose sole excuse was that he was adopted. Conflicts between fathers and sons, the inheritance of guilt, the disinheritance of kith and kin, and the sacrifice of innocents go far back in time and promise to continue in the future.

As they entered the city gates, Mary could no longer hold back her cries, now as heartrending as if a lance had pierced her. But only Joseph could hear them, such was the noise coming from the crowd, somewhat less from the animals, although between them they created a din reminiscent of a marketplace. Joseph decided, You're in no condition to go any farther, let's find an inn nearby, tomorrow I'll go on to Bethlehem alone and explain that you're giving birth, you can always register later if it's really necessary, because I know nothing about Roman law, and who can tell, perhaps only the head of the family needs to register, especially in our situation. Mary reassured him, The pain has gone, and she was telling the truth, the stabbing that caused her to cry out had become a mild throbbing, uncomfortable but bearable, rather like wearing a hairshirt. Joseph was relieved. To search for lodging in Jerusalem, with its maze of narrow streets, was a daunting task, especially now, his wife in the throes of childbirth and he as terrified as the next man at the thought of the responsibility, although he would never admit it. He thought to himself that once they reached Bethlehem, which was not much bigger than Nazareth, things would be easier, because people are friendlier in smaller communities. It doesn't matter whether Mary is no longer in pain or simply putting a brave face on things, they are on their way and will soon be in Bethlehem. The donkey receives a slap on its hindquarters, which is not so much a spur to go faster amid all this traffic and indescribable confusion as an affectionate gesture expressing Joseph's relief. Merchants cram the narrow streets, people of every race and tongue jostle one another, but the streets clear almost miraculously whenever a patrol of Roman soldiers or a procession of camels appears, the crowds disperse like the parting waters of the Red Sea. At a steady pace, the couple from Nazareth and their donkey gradually emerge from the seething

bazaar full of ignorant, insensitive people, to whom there would be no point saying, See that man over there, that's Joseph, and the woman who looks as if she is about to give birth any minute is Mary, they're on their way to register in Bethlehem. If our kind attempt to identify them goes unnoticed, it is simply because we live in a world where Josephs and Marys of every age and condition abound and can be found at every turn. This is not the only couple called Joseph and Mary expecting a baby, who knows, perhaps two infants of the same sex, preferably male, will be born at the same hour and only a road or a field of corn between them. The destinies that await these infants, however, will be different, even if we name both of them Yeshua, which is the same as Jesus. And lest we are accused of anticipating events by naming an unborn child, the fault lies with the carpenter, who some time ago made up his mind that this is the name he will give his first son.

Leaving by the southern gate, the travelers take the road to Bethlehem, glad that they will soon reach their destination and be able at long last to rest from their tiring journey. Mary's troubles, of course, are not over, for she, and she alone, still has to endure the trial of childbirth, and who knows where or when. According to Holy Scripture, Bethlehem is the location of David's house, the line from which Joseph claims descent, but with the passing of time his relatives have all died, or the carpenter has lost all contact, an unpromising situation which leads us to believe, even before we get there, that the couple will have a problem finding a place. Arriving in Bethlehem, Joseph cannot knock on the first door he comes to and say, I'd like my child to be born here, and expect to be greeted with a welcoming smile from the mistress of the house, Come in, come in, Master Joseph, the water is boiling, the mat laid out on the floor, the swaddling clothes are ready, make yourself at home. Things might have been so in a golden age, when the wolf, rather than eat the lamb, would feed on wild herbs. But this is the age of iron, cruel and unfeeling. The time for miracles has either passed or not come yet, besides, miracles, genuine miracles, whatever people say, are not such a good idea, if it means destroying the very order of things in order to improve them. Joseph is not eager to confront the problems that await him, but he considers how much worse it would be if his child was born by the roadside, and so he forces the donkey, poor beast, to go faster. Only the donkey knows how weary it feels, all God cares about are humans, and not all humans, because some of them live like donkeys or worse, and God makes no effort to help them. One of his fellow travelers told Joseph that there was a caravansary in Bethlehem, a stroke of luck that seems to be the answer to his problem. But even a humble carpenter would find it embarrassing to see his pregnant wife exposed to the morbid curiosity and wagging tongues of drovers and cameleers, and some of those fellows are as brutish as the beasts they handle, and their behavior is much more contemptible, for as men they possess the divine gift of speech, which animals are denied. Joseph finally decides to seek the advice and guidance of the elders of the synagogue, and wonders why he did not think of this sooner. Somewhat relieved, he is about to ask Mary if the pain is still there, but changes his mind and says nothing, we mustn't forget that this whole process, from the moment of impregnation to the moment

of birth, is unclean, that vile female organ, vortex and abyss, the seat of all the world's evil, an inner labyrinth of blood, discharges, gushing water, revolting afterbirth, dear God, how can You permit Your beloved children to be born in such impurity. How much better for You and us had You created them from transparent light, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, the beginning, middle, and end alike for everyone, without discrimination between aristocrats and commoners, kings and carpenters. So Joseph asks only, and with seeming indifference, as if preoccupied with more important matters, How do you feel. The question is timely, for Mary now notices something different about the pain she is experiencing, about the pain, rather, that now is experiencing her.

They had been walking for more than an hour, and Bethlehem could not be far. To their surprise, they found the road from Jerusalem deserted, with Bethlehem so close to the city one might expect to see continuous movement of people and animals. At the point where the road forked, one road to Beersheba, the other to Bethlehem, the world appeared to contract and fold over on itself. If you were to visualize the world as a person, it would be like watching a man cover his eyes with his mantle and listen to the travelers' footsteps, just as we listen to the song of birds among the branches, and that indeed is how we must appear to the birds hidden in the trees.

To the right stands the tomb of Rachel, the bride for whom Jacob waited fourteen years. After seven years' service, he was wedded to Leah and had to wait another seven years before being allowed to marry his beloved, who would die in Bethlehem giving birth to a son that Jacob named Benjamin, which means son of my right hand, but Rachel, as she lay dying, rightly called him Benoni, which means child of my sorrow, God forbid that this should be an omen. Houses now begin to appear, mud-colored like those of Nazareth, but here in Bethlehem the color of mud is paler, a mixture of yellow and gray. Mary is near collapse, her body slumping farther forward over the saddlebags with each passing moment. Joseph has come to her aid, and she puts one arm around his shoulder to steady herself. What a pity there is no one here to witness this touching scene, which is all too rare. And so they enter Bethlehem.

Despite Mary's condition, Joseph inquired if there was a caravansary nearby, thinking they might rest until the following morning. Mary was in great pain but still showed no sign of being ready to give birth. But when, on the other side of the village, they reached the caravansary, which was squalid and rowdy, part bazaar and part stable, there was not a quiet corner to be found, even though it was still early and most of the drovers and cameleers would only start arriving later. The couple turned back. Joseph left Mary beneath the shade of a fig tree in a tiny square and went off to consult the elders. There was no one in the synagogue apart from a caretaker, who called out to an urchin playing nearby and told him to accompany the stranger to one of the elders, who might be able to help. Fortune, who protects the innocent whenever she remembers them, decreed that in this latest quest Joseph should pass through the square where he had left his wife, and just in time to save her from the deadly shade of the fig tree, which was slowly killing her, an unforgivable mistake, as fig trees abound in this land and they both should have

known better. So, like condemned souls, they set off once more in search of the elder, but he had left for the countryside and was not expected home for some time. On hearing this, the carpenter summoned his courage and called out, Is there anyone here who for the love of Almighty God will offer shelter to my dear wife, who is about to give birth. All he asked was a quiet corner, they had brought their own mats. And could anyone tell him where to find a midwife in the village who could assist with the birth. Poor Joseph blushed to hear himself blurt out these private worries and concerns. The female slave standing in the doorway went back inside to report to her mistress, and reappeared after a while to tell them that they could not stay there and must look for shelter elsewhere. Since there was little chance of finding a place in the village, her mistress suggested they take refuge in one of the many caves in the nearby slopes. And what about a midwife, asked Joseph, whereupon the slave replied that if her mistress agreed and he wished, she herself could help, for she had been in service all her life and had assisted at many a birth. These are cruel times indeed, when a pregnant woman comes knocking at our door and we deny her shelter in a corner of the yard and send her off to give birth in a cave, like the bears and wolves. Something pricked our conscience, however, and, getting up from where we were sitting, we went to the door to see for ourselves this husband and wife who so desperately needed a roof over their heads. The sadness in that poor girl's face was enough to arouse our maternal instinct, so we patiently explained why we could not possibly take them in, the house was already crowded with sons and daughters, grandchildren, in-laws. As you can see, there simply isn't any room here, but our slave will take you to a cave we use as a stable. There are no animals there at present, and you should be able to make yourselves comfortable. The young couple were most grateful for our generous offer, and we withdrew, feeling we had done our best and that our conscience was clear.

With all this coming and going, walking and resting, inquiring and pleading, the deep blue sky has lost its color and the sun will soon disappear behind that mountain. The slave, Salome, for that is her name, leads the way. She carries some hot coals to make a fire, an earthenware pot to heat water, and salt to rub down the newborn infant as a precaution against infection. And since Mary has brought cloths and Joseph has a knife in his pack to cut the umbilical cord, unless Salome prefers to use her teeth, everything is ready for the birth. A stable, when all is said and done, is as good as a house, and anyone who has slept in a manger knows that it is almost as good as a cradle. And the donkey is not likely to notice any difference, for straw is the same in heaven as on earth. They reached the cave when the hovering twilight was still shedding gold on the hills. If their progress was slow, it was not because of the distance but because now that Mary had a place to rest, she could at last abandon herself to her suffering. She pleaded with them to slow down, for whenever the donkey lost its footing on a stone, she suffered agonizing pain. The waning light outside did not penetrate the darkness of the cave, but with a handful of straw, the live coals, much puffing and blowing, and some dry kindling, the slave soon had a fire blazing as bright as any dawn. Then she lit the oil lamp that was suspended from a rock jutting from the wall, and after helping Mary lie down, she went to

fetch water from the nearby wells of Solomon. On returning, she found Joseph distracted with worry, but we must not be too hard on him, for a man is not expected to be able to cope in such a crisis, at most he can hold his wife's hand and hope that everything will be all right. Mary, however, is alone. The world would crumble if a Jewish man in those days attempted any such comforting gesture. The female slave came in, whispered a few words of encouragement, then knelt between Mary's legs, for a woman's legs should be kept apart whenever something goes in or comes out. Salome has lost count of the number of children she has helped bring into the world, and poor Mary's suffering is no different from that of any other woman, for as God warned Eve after she sinned, I will greatly multiply your suffering and your conception, in sorrow you will bring forth children, and after centuries of sorrow and suffering God is not yet appeased and the agony goes on. Joseph is no longer present, not even at the entrance to the cave, he has fled rather than listen to Mary's cries, but the cries follow him, as if the very earth were screaming. The noise is such that three shepherds who were passing with their flocks approached Joseph and asked, What's going on, the earth seems to be screaming, and he told them, My wife is giving birth in that cave. They asked, You're a stranger to these parts, aren't you. Yes, we've come from Nazareth, in Galilee, to register, and no sooner did we arrive than my wife started feeling worse and now she's in labor. The fading light made it difficult to see the faces of the four men, and soon their features would completely disappear, but their voices could still be heard. Have you any food, one of the shepherds said. A little, replied Joseph, and the same voice told him, Once the child is born, let me know, and I'll bring you some sheep's milk, and then a second voice said, And I'll give you cheese. Then a long silence, and the third shepherd spoke. In a voice that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth he said, I'll bring you bread.

The son of Joseph and Mary was born, like any other child, covered with his mother's blood, dripping with mucus, and suffering in silence. He cried because they made him cry, and he will cry for this one and only reason. Wrapped in swaddling clothes, he lies in the manger with the donkey standing nearby but unlikely to bite him because the animal is tethered and cannot move far. Salome is outside burying the afterbirth when Joseph approaches. She waits until he has gone into the cave, lingering there to inhale the cool night and feeling as exhausted as if she herself had just given birth, but this is something she can only imagine, never having had children of her own.

Three men come down the slope. They are the shepherds. They enter the cave together. Mary is reclining, and her eyes are closed. Seated on a stone, Joseph rests his arm on the edge of the manger and appears to be watching over his son. The first shepherd steps forward and says, Here's the milk from my sheep, which I drew with my own hands. Opening her eyes, Mary smiles. The second shepherd steps forward and says in his turn, I myself churned the milk that made this cheese. Mary nods and smiles again. Then the third shepherd, whose massive frame seems to fill the cave, steps forward and, without so much as glancing at the newborn infant's parents, says, I kneaded this bread with my own hands and baked it in the fire that burns beneath the earth. No sooner had

he spoken than Mary recognized him.

SINCE THE WORLD BEGAN, FOR EVERY PERSON WHO IS BORN another dies. The person now close to death is King Herod, who in addition to all imaginable evils suffers from a horrible itch, which has almost driven him insane. He feels as if hundreds of thousands of ants are gnawing incessantly at his body with their tiny savage jaws. Having tried, to no avail, all the balsams known to man, remedies from Egypt and India, the royal physicians scratched their heads, or, to be more precise, were in grave danger of losing their heads, as they frantically tried ablutions and household potions, mixing with water or oil any and all herbs and powders reputed to do some good, however contrary their effect. The king, foaming at the mouth like a mad dog, beside himself with pain and fury, threatens to have them all crucified unless they can relieve his afflictions, which go beyond the unbearable burning in his skin and the convulsions that leave him exhausted and writhing on the floor, his eyes bulging from their sockets as the ants continue to multiply and gnaw beneath his robes. Worst of all is the gangrene that has set in during the last few days, and this mysterious affliction has started tongues wagging in the palace, as worms begin to ravage the genital organs of the royal person and truly devour him alive. Herod's screams echo through the halls and corridors of the palace, the eunuchs attending him are kept awake day and night, the slaves of lower rank flee in terror when they hear him approach. Dragging his body, which stinks of rot despite the perfumes sprinkled lavishly over his robes and rubbed into his dyed hair, Herod is being kept alive only by his own wrath. Carried around in a litter, accompanied by doctors and armed guards, he scours the palace from one end to another in search of traitors, whom he imagines to be lurking everywhere, an obsession he has had for some time. Without any warning he will suddenly point a finger, perhaps at the chief eunuch, accusing him of wielding too much influence, or at some stubborn Pharisee who has criticized those who disobey the law when they should be the first to respect it, there is no need to name names, and that finger was also pointed at his sons Alexander and Aristobulus, who were imprisoned and hastily sentenced to death by a tribunal of nobles convened for the purpose, what choice did the poor king have when in his delirium he saw those wicked sons advancing upon him with bared swords, when in the most terrifying nightmare of all he beheld in a mirror his own severed head. He has escaped that terrible end and can now quietly contemplate the corpses of those who a moment before were heirs to the throne, his own sons found guilty of conspiracy, misconduct, and arrogance and strangled to death.

From the murk of his troubled mind comes another nightmare to disturb the sporadic moments of sleep into which he falls from sheer exhaustion. The prophet Micah comes to haunt him, that prophet who lived at the time of Isaiah and witnessed the terrible wars that the Assyrians waged in Samaria and Judaea. Micah appears before him, denouncing the rich and powerful as befits a prophet, especially in this accursed age. Covered with the dust of battle and wearing a bloodstained tunic, Micah storms into his dream in a deafening blast from some other world. With hands of lightning he pushes open enormous bronze gates and gives solemn warning, The Lord will come down from His holy temple and tread upon the high places of the earth. Then he threatens, Woe to them that devise iniquity and work evil upon their beds, when the morning is light they practice

it because it is in the power of their hand. And he denounces those who covet fields and take them by violence, and who take houses, oppressing a man and his house, even a man and his heritage. After repeating these words night after night, Micah, as if responding to a signal, vanishes into thin air. What causes Herod to wake up in a cold sweat is not so much the terror of those prophetic cries as the agonizing thought that this nightly visitor withdraws just as he is about to reveal something more. The prophet raises his hand and parts his lips, only to disappear, leaving the king filled with foreboding. Now, as everyone knows, Herod is not likely to be intimidated by threats when he does not feel the slightest remorse for all the deaths he ordered. For this is the man who had the brother of Mariamne, whom he loved more than any other woman, burned alive, the man who ordered her grandfather strangled and finally Mariamne herself, when he accused her of adultery. It is true that he later suffered a bit of madness and called for Mariamne as if she were still alive, but he recovered from it and discovered that his mother-in-law was hatching a plot, and not for the first time, to remove him from power. Instantly this viper was dispatched to the pantheon of the family into which Herod had married, with unfortunate consequences for all concerned, because the king's three sons became heirs to the throne, Alexander and Aristobulus, whose sad end we have already mentioned, and Antipater, who soon will meet a similar fate. But we must not forget, since there is more to life than tragedy and misfortune, that Herod had no fewer than ten comely wives to pamper him and arouse his lust, although by now they could do little for him and he even less for them. Therefore the nightly apparition of an irate prophet intent on haunting the powerful king of Judaea and Samaria, Peraea and Idumaea, Galilee and Gaulanitis, Trachanitis, Auranitis, and Batanaea, would make little impression were it not for that sudden interruption of the dream that leaves him in suspense, awaiting some new threat, but what threat, and how and when.

Meanwhile, in Bethlehem, on the doorstep of Herod's palace, as it were, Joseph and his family continued to live in the cave. They did not expect to stay there long, so there was little point in looking for a house, especially at a time when accommodations were scarce and the profitable practice of renting rooms had not yet been invented. On the eighth day Joseph took his firstborn to the synagogue to be circumcised. Using a knife made of flint, with admirable skill the priest cut the wailing child's foreskin, and the fate of that foreskin is in itself worthy of a novel, from the moment it was cut, a loop of pale skin with scarcely any bleeding, to its glorious sanctification during the papacy of Paschal I, who reigned in the ninth century of Christianity. Anyone wishing to see that foreskin today need only visit the parish church of Calcata near Viterbo in Italy, where it is preserved in a reliquary for the spiritual benefit of the faithful and the amusement of curious atheists. Joseph announced that his son should be called Jesus, and this was the name inscribed in God's register after it was added to the civil register of Caesar. Far from being resigned to this outrage inflicted on his person without any appreciable spiritual benefit in return, the infant howled all the way back to the cave, where its mother, needless to say, was anxiously waiting, this being her first child. Poor little thing, poor little thing, she said soothingly, and opening her tunic, she began to nurse the child, first

on the left breast, perhaps because that was closer to her heart. Jesus, although still unaware of his name, for no more than a babe in arms, gave a deep sigh of contentment the moment he felt the gentle pressure of Mary's breast against his cheek and the moist warmth of her skin on his. As the sweet taste of his mother's milk filled his mouth, the pain and indignity of the circumcision became remote, dissipated into a formless pleasure that surfaced and went on surfacing, as if arrested at the threshold and not allowed to define itself completely. On growing up, he will forget these first sensations and find it difficult to believe he ever experienced them, which happens to all of us, wherever we may have been born and whatever our destiny. But Joseph, if we had the courage to ask him about this, and God forbid that we should commit any such indiscretion, would tell us that a father's cares are more to the point, since he now faces the problem of feeding an extra mouth, an expression no less true or apt simply because a child is fed at its mother's breast. Indeed, Joseph has reason to be worried. How are they to live until they return to Nazareth. Mary is weak and in no condition to make the long journey, and besides, she must wait until she is no longer unclean and remain in the blood of her purification for the thirty-three days following her child's circumcision. The little money they brought from Nazareth has nearly all been spent, and Joseph cannot work as a carpenter here without tools or the means to buy wood. Life at that time was hard for the poor and God could not be expected to provide for everyone. From within the cave came a sudden whimper, which soon stopped, a sign that Mary had changed the little Jesus to her right breast, but that short frustration was enough to renew the pain where the child was circumcised. Having sucked to his satisfaction, Jesus will fall asleep in his mother's arms and barely open his eyes when she settles him gently in the manger as if entrusting him to an affectionate and faithful nurse. Joseph, seated at the entrance to the cave, is still trying to decide what to do. He knows that there is no work for him here in Bethlehem, not even as an apprentice, for when he made inquiries, the answer was always the same. If I need any help I'll send for you, empty promises that do not fill a man's belly, although this race has been living off promises since it came into being.

Time and time again one has seen, even in people not particularly given to reflection, that the best way of finding a solution is to let one's thoughts drift until the right moment comes to pounce, like a tiger taking its prey by surprise. And so the false promises of the master carpenters of Bethlehem led Joseph to think about God's true promises, then about the Temple of Jerusalem, still under construction, where there must be demand for laborers, not only bricklayers and stonemasons but also carpenters even if only to square joists and plane boards, basic tasks that are well within Joseph's capabilities. The only drawback, assuming they give him a job, is the time it takes to reach the site, a good hour and a half's walk at a brisk pace, because it is uphill all the way and there is no patron saint of hill climbers to extend a helping hand, unless Joseph rides there, but that would mean finding a safe place to leave his donkey. This may be God's chosen land, but there are still plenty of rogues around if we are to believe the dire warnings of the prophet Micah. Joseph was pondering this when Mary emerged from the cave after feeding her child and settling him down to sleep. How is Jesus, his father

asked, conscious of how foolish the question sounded but unable to suppress his pride as the father of a son who already had a name. The child is fine, replied Mary, for whom the name was of no importance. She would have been just as happy to call him my child for the rest of her life, were it not for the fact that she would bear more children, and to refer to them all simply as my child would create as much confusion as in the Tower of Babel. Joseph said, allowing the words to come out as if he was thinking aloud, which is one way of not showing too much confidence, I must earn a living while we are here, yet there is no suitable work in Bethlehem. Mary said nothing, nor was she expected to speak, she was only there to listen, and her husband had already made an enormous concession by taking her into his confidence. Joseph looked at the sun, trying to decide whether there was enough time for him to go and come back. He went into the cave to fetch his mantle and pack and, on reappearing, told Mary, I'm off, trusting in God to find work for this honest artisan in His tabernacle should He deem him worthy of such an honor. Joseph threw his mantle over his left shoulder, adjusted his pack, and went off without another word.

Truly all is not gloom. Although work on the Temple was making good progress, laborers were still being hired, especially if they accepted low wages. Joseph had no difficulty passing the simple test given by the head carpenter, which should make us reflect whether our earlier disparaging comments about Joseph's professional skills might not have been unjustified. This latest recruit for the Temple site went off giving profuse thanks to God. Along the way he stopped some travelers and asked them to join him in praising the Lord, and they cheerfully obliged, for these people see one man's joy as something to be shared by all. We refer, of course, to people of humble condition. When Joseph reached the spot where Rachel is buried, a thought occurred to him which came from the heart rather than the head, namely, that this woman eager to have another child might die, if you will pardon the expression, at his hands, and before she could even get to know him. Without so much as a word or a glance, one body separates itself from another, as indifferent as the fruit that drops from a tree. Then an even sadder thought came to him, namely, that children die because their fathers beget them and their mothers bring them into the world, and he took pity on his own son, who was condemned to die although innocent. As he stood, filled with confusion and anguish, before the tomb of Jacob's beloved wife, carpenter Joseph's shoulders drooped and his head sank, and his entire body broke out in a cold sweat, and now there was no one passing on the road to whom he could turn for help. For the first time in his life he doubted whether the world had any meaning, and said in a loud voice, like one who has lost all hope, This is where I will die. Perhaps these words, in other circumstances and if spoken with the courage and conviction of those who commit suicide, words devoid of sorrow and weeping, would suffice to open the door by which we depart the land of the living. But most men are inconstant and can be distracted by a cloud on high, by a spider weaving its web, a dog chasing a butterfly, a hen scratching the soil and clucking to its chicks, or something as commonplace as a sudden itch on one's face, which one scratches, wondering, Now what was I thinking about. For this reason Rachel's tomb instantly reverted to a small,

windowless whitewashed building, a building like a discarded die forgotten because not needed for the game under way. On the stone at the entrance there are marks left by the sweaty and grimy hands of pilgrims, who have been coming here since ancient times, and the tomb is surrounded by olive trees, which were perhaps already old when Jacob chose this spot for the poor mother's last resting place and felled as many trees as were necessary to clear the ground. When all is said and done, we can confidently say that destiny exists and each man's destiny is in the hands of others. Then Joseph moved on, but not before saying a prayer suited to the time and place. He said, Praise be to You, O Lord our God and God of our forefathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, great, almighty, and wondrous God, praise be to You.

Returning to the cave, he went to look at his little son, asleep in the manger, before telling his wife that he had found work. He thought to himself, He'll die, he must die, and his heart grieved, but then he reflected that by the natural order of things he himself would die first and that his departure from the land of the living would bestow on his son a limited eternity, a contradiction in terms, an eternity that allows one to go on for a little longer when those whom we know and love no longer exist.

Joseph had been careful not to mention to the head carpenter that he would be staying only a few weeks, five at the most, enough time to take his son to the Temple to complete Mary's purification, and to pack their belongings. He said nothing rather than be turned away, which shows that the carpenter from Nazareth was not familiar with working conditions in his own country, no doubt because he thought of himself, and rightly, as his own master and took little interest in the rest of the working community, which then consisted almost entirely of casual labor. He kept careful count of the remaining days, twenty-four, twenty-three, twenty-two, and to avoid making mistakes he improvised a calendar on one of the cave walls, nineteen, drawing lines that he then erased one at a time, sixteen, watched by an admiring Mary, fourteen, thirteen, who thanked the Lord for having given her, nine, eight, seven, six, such a clever husband, who could turn his hand to anything. Joseph told her, We'll leave after we go to the Temple, for it's time I got back to my work in Nazareth, where I have customers waiting, and she tactfully suggested, rather than appear to be criticizing him, But surely we cannot leave without first thanking the woman who owns the cave and the slave who helped deliver our child and who still calls every day to see how he's coming along. Joseph made no reply. He'd never admit to having overlooked such an act of common courtesy, although he had intended to load the donkey beforehand, tie it up during the ceremony, then set off for Nazareth without wasting any time on thanks and farewells. Mary was right, it would have been ill-mannered to go away without so much as a word of gratitude, but if truth, poor thing, were to be known, Joseph was somewhat lacking in manners. To be reminded of this omission caused him to sulk and become irritable with his wife, behavior which usually served to ease his conscience and silence remorse. So they would stay on for two or three days, make their farewells as was only fit and proper, and leave the inhabitants of Bethlehem with a favorable impression of this devout family from Galilee,

courteous and dutiful, notably different when one considers the low opinion the inhabitants of Jerusalem and its environs generally have of people from Galilee.

The memorable day finally arrived when the child Jesus was carried to the Temple in the arms of his mother, who rode the patient donkey that had accompanied and assisted this family since the beginning. Joseph led the donkey by the halter, he was in a hurry to get there, anxious not to lose a whole day's work, even though their departure was imminent. The next day they were on the road as dawn dispersed the last vestiges of night. Rachel's tomb was already some distance behind. When they passed it, the façade had taken on the fiery hue of a pomegranate, so unlike its appearance at night, when it became opaque, or in the light of the moon, when it looked deathly pale. After a while the infant Jesus woke up, and had scarcely opened his eyes when his mother wrapped him for the journey, and he cried to be fed in that plaintive voice, the only voice he has so far. One day, like the rest of us, he will learn to speak with other voices, which will enable him to express other forms of hunger and experience other tears.

On the steep slopes not far from Jerusalem the family merged with the pilgrims and vendors who were flocking to the city, all intent on being the first to arrive but cautiously slowing down and curbing their excitement when they came face to face with the Roman soldiers who were moving through the crowd in pairs, or with a detachment of Herod's mercenary troops, who recruited every imaginable race, many Jews, as one might expect, but also Indumaeans, Galatians, Thracians, Germans, Gauls, and even Babylonians, who are unrivaled as archers. A carpenter who handles only peaceful weapons such as the plane, adze, mallet, or hammer, Joseph becomes filled with such fear and revulsion when he runs into these louts that he can no longer behave naturally or disguise his true feelings. He keeps his eyes lowered, and it is Mary, who has been shut away in the cave for weeks with no one to talk to apart from the female slave, it is Mary who takes a good look around, her dainty little chin held high with understandable pride, for she is holding her firstborn, a mere woman yet capable of giving children to God and her husband. She looks so radiant and happy that some Gauls, fierce, fair, with large whiskers, their weapons at the ready, smile as the family passes, their cruel hearts softened by the sight of the young mother with her first child. Smiling at this renewal of the world, they bare rotten teeth, but it's the thought that counts.

There is the Temple. Viewed at close quarters, the building gives one vertigo, a mountain of stones upon stones which no earthly power seems capable of dressing, lifting, laying, and fitting, yet there they are, joined together by their own weight, without mortar, as if the entire world were a set of building blocks. The uppermost cornices, seen from below, appear to graze the sky, like another but quite different Tower of Babel, which even God will be unable to save because it is doomed to the same destruction, confusion, and bloodshed. Voices will ask, Why, a thousand times, believing there must be an answer, but eventually they will die away, because it is better to be silent. Joseph goes off to tether the donkey in the caravansary set aside for the animals. During Passover and other religious feasts the place gets so crowded that there is not enough

room for a camel to shake the flies from its tail, but it is easier now that the last day of the census has passed and travelers have returned to their homes. In the Court of the Gentiles, however, which is bordered by colonnades on all four sides, ■with the temple precinct in the center, there is a large crowd, money changers, bird catchers, merchants trading lambs and kids, pilgrims gathered here for one reason or another, and numerous foreigners curious to visit the famous Temple built by King Herod. But the court is so spacious that anyone on the far side looks no bigger than an insect, as though Herod's architects, seeing through God's eyes, wanted to show the insignificance of men in the presence of the Almighty, especially if they happen to be Gentiles. As for the Jews, unless they have come for a leisurely stroll, their goal is the middle of the court, the center of their world, the navel of navels, the Holy of Holies. That is where the carpenter and his wife are heading, that is where Jesus is carried after his father purchases two turtledoves from the steward of the Temple, if such a title is appropriate for one who benefits from the monopoly on these religious transactions. The poor birds are ignorant of the fate that awaits them, though the smell of flesh and singed feathers lingering in the air does not deceive anyone, to say nothing of the much stronger stench of blood and excrement as oxen, dragged away to be sacrificed, foul themselves in terror. Joseph cradles the doves in the palms of his callused hands, and the poor birds, in their innocence, peck with satisfaction at his fingers, which he curves to form a cage. It is as if they were trying to tell him, We are happy with our new master. But Joseph's skin is far too rough to feel or decipher the affectionate nibbling of the two doves.

They enter by the Wooden Gate, one of thirteen entrances to the Temple. It has an inscription in Greek and Latin carved into the stonework, which reads as follows, It is forbidden for any Gentile to cross this threshold and the balustrade surrounding the Temple, trespassers will be put to death. Joseph and Mary enter, carrying Jesus between them, and in due course will make a safe exit, but the doves, as we know, must be killed according to the law before Mary's purification can be acknowledged and ratified. Any ironic or irreverent disciple of Voltaire will find it difficult to resist making the obvious remark that, things being what they are, purity can be maintained only so long as there are innocent creatures to sacrifice in this world, whether turtledoves, lambs, or others. Joseph and Mary climb the fourteen steps to the platform of the Temple. Here is the Court of the Women, on the left the storehouse for the oil and wine used in the liturgy, on the right the Chamber of the Nazirites, priests who do not belong to the tribe of Levi and who are forbidden to cut their hair, drink wine, or go near a corpse. On the opposite side, to the left and right, respectively, of the door facing this one, are the chamber where the lepers who believe themselves cured wait for the priests to come and examine them, and the storehouse where the wood is kept and inspected daily, because rotten and worm-eaten wood must not be thrown on the altar fire. Mary has not much farther to go, she still has to climb the fifteen semicircular steps leading to the Nicanor Gate, also known as the Gate Beautiful, but there she will stop, because women are not permitted to enter the Court of the Israelites, which lies beyond this gate. At the entrance, the Levites receive those who have come to offer sacrifice, but the atmosphere is less pious, unless

piety at that time had another meaning. It is not just the smoke rising from the burning fat or the smell of fresh blood and incense but also the shouting of the men, the howling, bleating, and lowing of the animals waiting to be slaughtered, and the last raucous squawk of a bird once able to sing. Mary tells the Levite in attendance that she has come for purification, and Joseph hands over the doves. For one brief moment Mary places her hands over the birds, her only gesture before the Levite and her husband turn away and disappear through the gate. She will not stir until Joseph returns, she simply steps aside so as not to obstruct the passage, and waits, holding her son in her arms.

Within the Court of the Israelites there is a furnace and a slaughterhouse. On two sizable stone slabs, larger animals such as oxen and calves are killed, also sheep, ewes, and male and female goats. There are tall pillars alongside the tables, where the carcasses are suspended from hooks set into the stonework, and here one can watch the frenzied activity as the butchers wield their knives, cleavers, axes, and handsaws, the air filled with fumes rising from the wood and the singed hides, and with the smell of blood and sweat. Anyone witnessing this scene would have to be a saint to understand how God can approve of such appalling carnage if He is, as He claims, the father of all men and beasts. Joseph has to wait outside the balustrade that separates the Court of the Israelites from that of the priests, but from where he stands he has a good view of the high altar, four times higher than the tallest man, and of the Temple proper beyond, for the arrangement is like one of those Chinese boxes with each chamber leading into another. We see the building from afar and think to ourselves, Ah, the Temple, then we enter the Court of the Gentiles and once more think, Ah, the Temple, and now the carpenter Joseph, leaning on the balustrade, looks up and says, Ah, the Temple, and he is right, there is the wide front, with its four columns set into the wall, the capitals festooned with laurel leaves in the Greek style, and the great gaping entrance, which has no door, but to enter that Temple of Temples inhabited by God would be to defy all prohibitions, to pass through the holy place called Hereal, and finally come into Debir, which is the last chamber of all, the Holy of Holies, an awesome stone chamber as empty as the universe, windowless and dark as the tomb, where the light of day has never and will never penetrate, until the hour of its destruction, when all the stones are reduced to rubble. The more remote He is, the more holy he becomes, while Joseph is merely the father of a Jewish child among many. He is about to witness the sacrifice of two innocent doves, that is, the father not the son, for the son, who is just as innocent, is in his mother's arms, perhaps thinking, if such a thing is possible at his age, that this is how the world must always be.

By the altar, which is made of massive slabs of stone untouched by tools since hewn from the quarry and set up in this vast edifice, a barefooted priest wearing a linen tunic waits for the Levite to hand over the turtledoves. He takes the first one, carries it to a corner of the altar, and with a single blow knocks the head from its body. The blood spurts everywhere. The priest sprinkles blood over the lower part of the altar and then places the decapitated bird on a dish to drain the rest of the blood. At the end of the day

he will retrieve the dead bird, for it now belongs to him. The other turtledove has the honor of being wholly sacrificed, which means it will be incinerated. The priest ascends the ramp leading to the top of the altar, where the sacred fire burns. On the righthand edge of the altar he beheads the bird, sprinkles its blood over the plinth adorned on each corner with sheeps' horns, then plucks out the entrails. No one pays any attention to what is happening, for this is a death of no consequence. Craning his neck, Joseph tries to identify, amid all the smoke and smells, the smoke and smell of his own sacrifice, when the priest, having poured salt over the bird's head and carcass, tosses the pieces into the fire. Joseph cannot be sure. Crackling in the billowing flames fueled by fat, the limp, disemboweled carcass of the little dove would not even fill a cavity of one of God's teeth. At the foot of the ramp three priests are waiting. A calf topples to the ground, felled by a cleaver, my God, my God, how fragile You have made us and how vulnerable to death. Joseph has nothing more to accomplish here, he must withdraw, collect his wife and child, and return home. Mary is pure once more, not in the strict sense of the word, because purity is something to which most human beings, and above all women, can scarcely hope to aspire. With time and a period of seclusion, her fluxes and humors have settled down, everything has returned to normal, the only difference being that there are now two doves fewer in the world and one more child, who caused their death. The family leaves the Temple by the same gate they entered, Joseph goes to fetch the donkey, and Mary, stepping on a large stone, climbs onto the animal's back while Joseph holds the child. This is not the first time, but perhaps the memory of that turtledove having its entrails plucked out causes him now to linger before handing Jesus back to his mother, as if convinced that no arms can protect his son better than his own. He accompanies his wife and child to the city gate before returning to the Temple site. He will also be here tomorrow to finish his week's work, and then, God willing, they'll be off to Nazareth with all haste.

That same night, the prophet Micah revealed what he had hitherto withheld. As King Herod, by now resigned to his tortured dreams, waited for the apparition to disappear after the usual ranting and raving, which no longer had much effect, the prophet's formidable shape suddenly grew bigger, and he uttered words he had never spoken before, It is from you, Bethlehem, so insignificant among the families of Judah, that the future ruler of Israel has come. And at that moment the king awoke. Like the deepest chord of a harp, the prophet's words continued to resound through the room. Herod lay with his eyes open, trying to fathom the meaning of this revelation, if there was indeed any meaning, and was so absorbed that he scarcely felt the ants gnawing under his skin or the worms tunneling in his entrails. The prophecy was familiar to every Jew and revealed nothing Herod did not already know. Besides, he was never one to waste his time worrying about the sayings of the prophets. What bothered him was a vague disquiet, a sense of agonizing strangeness, as if the prophet's utterance had another meaning and that somewhere in those syllables and sounds lay an imminent and fearsome threat. He tried to rid himself of this obsession and go back to sleep, but his body resisted, aching to the marrow. Thinking offered some measure of relief. Staring up

at the beams on the ceiling, where the decoration appeared to vibrate in the light of aromatic torches shielded by fire screens, King Herod searched for an answer but could find none. He then summoned the chief eunuch from among those guarding his bedside and ordered him to fetch at once from the Temple a priest bearing the Book of Micah.

This coming and going from palace to Temple and from Temple to palace went on for almost an hour. Read, ordered Herod when the priest entered the king's bedchamber, and the priest began, The word of the Lord as spoken to Micah of Maresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. He continued reading until Herod told him, Read further on, and the priest, puzzled and uncertain as to why he had been summoned, jumped to another passage, Woe to those who plot evil and lay plans for wicked deeds as they he abed, but here he stopped, horrified at this involuntary impudence, became tongue-tied, and, hoping Herod might forget what had just been said, he went on, In the end it will come to pass that the Lord's great mansion will rise above the hills. Further on, snarled Herod, impatient to get to the passage that interested him, and the priest finally came to it, But it is from you, Bethlehem, so insignificant among the families of Judah, that the future ruler of Israel will come. Herod raised his hand, Repeat that passage, he insisted, and the priest obeyed. Once more, he ordered him, and the priest read it a third time. That's enough, said the king after a prolonged silence, You may withdraw. All was now clear. The book announced a future birth, nothing else, while the ghost of Micah had come to warn him that this birth had already taken place. Your words, like those of all prophets, could not have been clearer, even when we interpret them badly. Herod thought and thought again, his expression more and more grim and menacing. He then summoned the commander of the guards and gave him an order to be carried out forthwith. When the commander returned to report, Mission fulfilled, Herod gave another command to be carried out at daybreak, now only hours away. So we shall soon know what has been ordered, unlike the priest, who was brutally assassinated by soldiers before he reached the Temple. There is reason to believe that this was the first of the two orders, so close are the likely cause and the logical effect. As for the Book of Micah, it disappeared, and imagine what a loss that would have been had there been only one copy.

A CARPENTER AMONG CARPENTERS, JOSEPH HAD FINISHED eating his lunch, and he and his companions still had some free time before the overseer gave the signal to get back to work. Joseph could sit for a while, stretch out and take a nap or indulge in pleasant thoughts, imagine himself on the open road, wandering the countryside amid the hills of Samaria or, better still, looking down from a great height on the village of Nazareth, which he sorely missed. His soul rejoiced as he told himself that this long separation would soon be over and he would be on his way with only the morning star in the sky, singing praises to the Lord who protects our homes and guides our footsteps. Startled, he opened his eyes, afraid that he had dozed off and missed the overseer's signal, but he had only been daydreaming, his companions were still there, some chatting, others taking a nap, and the jovial mood of the overseer suggested that he might give his workers the rest of the day off. The sun is overhead, sharp gusts of wind drive the smoke from the sacrificial fires in the opposite direction. In this ravine, which looks onto the site where a hippodrome is under construction, not even the gabbling of the vendors in the Temple can be heard. The machine of time appears to have come to a halt, as if it too were awaiting a signal from the mighty overseer of universal space and time. Joseph suddenly became uneasy, after feeling so happy only a moment ago. He looked around him and saw the same familiar building site, to which he had grown accustomed in recent weeks, slabs of stone and wooden planks, a thick layer of white dust everywhere, and sawdust that never seemed to dry. He tried to find some explanation for this unexpected gloom, it was probably the natural reaction of a man who had to leave his work unfinished, even if this particular job was not his responsibility and he had every reason for leaving. Rising to his feet, Joseph tried to calculate how much time was left. The overseer did not even turn to glance in his direction, so Joseph decided to take one last look at the section of the building on which he had worked, to bid farewell, as it were, to the timbers he had planed and the joists he had fitted, if they could possibly be identified, for where is the bee that can claim, This honey was made by me.

After taking a good look around, Joseph was heading back to the site when he paused for a moment to admire the city on the opposite slope, built up in stages, with stones baked to the color of bread. The overseer must have given the signal by now, but Joseph was in no hurry, he gazed at the city, waiting for who knows what. The minutes passed and nothing happened. Joseph muttered to himself, Well, I might as well get back to work, when he heard voices on the path below the spot where he was standing, and, leaning over the stone wall, he saw three soldiers. They must have been walking along the path and decided to stop for a break, two of them were resting on their lances and listening to the third man, who looked older and was probably their officer, although it was not easy to tell the difference unless you were familiar with the various uniforms and knew the significance of the many insignia, stripes, and braids denoting rank. The words, which Joseph could barely make out, sounded like a question, something like, And when will that be, and one of the younger men answered in a clear voice, At the beginning of the third hour, when everyone is indoors. Whereupon the other soldier asked, How many of us are being dispatched, only to be told, I don't know yet but enough men to surround

the village. Has an order been given to kill all of them. No, not all of them, only those under the age of three. It's difficult to tell a two-year-old from a four-year-old. And how many will that make, the second soldier wanted to know. According to the census, the officer told them, there must be around twenty-five. Joseph's eyes widened as if they could grasp this conversation better than his ears could, and he trembled from head to foot, because it was clear that these soldiers were talking about killing people. People, what people, he asked himself, bewildered and distressed, No, no, not people, or rather, people, but children. Children under the age of three, the officer in charge said, or perhaps it was one of the junior soldiers, but where, where could this be. Joseph could not very well lean over the wall and ask, Is there a war going on. He felt his legs shaking. He could hear one of the men say gravely, though with relief, How fortunate for us and our children that we don't live in Bethlehem. Does anyone know why they've chosen to kill the children of Bethlehem, one of the soldiers asked. No, the commander didn't say and I'll wager he doesn't know himself, the order came from the king, and that's all we need to know. Tracing a line on the ground with his lance, as if dividing and parceling out destiny, the other soldier said, Wretched are we who not only practice the evil that is ours by nature but must also serve as an instrument of evil for those who abuse their power. But these words went unheard by Joseph, who had stolen away from his vantage point, cautiously at first and then in a mad rush, like a frightened goat, scattering pebbles in all directions as he ran. Unfortunately, without Joseph's testimony we have reason to doubt the authenticity of this soldier's philosophical remark, both in form and content, given the obvious contradiction between the aptness of the sentiment and the humble station of the person who expressed it.

Delirious, bumping into everything, overturning fruit stalls and bird cages, even a money changer's table, and oblivious to the cries of fury from the vendors in the Temple, Joseph is concerned only that his child's life is in danger. He cannot imagine why anyone would want to do such a thing, he is desperate, he chose to father a child and now someone wants to take it from him, one desire is as valid as another, to do and undo, to tie and untie, to create and destroy. Suddenly he stops, realizing the risk he is running if he continues in this reckless flight, the Temple guards might appear and arrest him, he is surprised they have not already been alerted by the uproar. Disassembling as best he can, like a louse taking refuge in the seams of a garment, he disappears into the crowd and instantly becomes anonymous, the only difference being that he walks a little faster than others, but this is hardly noticed amid the labyrinth of people. He knows he must not run until he reaches the city gate, but he is distressed at the thought that the soldiers may already be on their way, ominously armed with lance, dagger, and unprovoked hatred. If they are traveling on horseback, he will never catch up with them, and by the time he gets there, his son will be dead, poor child, sweet little Jesus. At this moment of deepest anguish a foolish thought occurs to him, he remembers his wages, the week's wages he stands to lose, and such is the power of these vile material things that, without exactly coming to a halt, he slows down just long enough to ponder whether he can rescue both his money and his child's life. Quick as it surfaced, this unworthy thought disappears,

leaving no sense of shame, that feeling which often, but not often enough, proves our most reliable guardian angel.

Joseph finally puts the city behind him. There are no soldiers on the road for as far as the eye can reach, no crowds gathered as one might expect them to for a military parade, but the most reassuring sight of all is that of children playing innocent games, with none of the wild enthusiasm they display when flags, drums, and horns go marching by. If any soldiers had passed this way, there would be no boys in sight, they would have followed the detachment at least to the first bend in the road, as is the time-honored custom, and perhaps one child, his heart set on becoming a soldier someday, accompanied them on their mission and so learned the fate that awaited him, namely, to kill or be killed. Now Joseph can run as fast as he likes, he takes advantage of the slope, is hampered only by his tunic, which he hitches up over his knees. As in a dream, he has the agonizing sensation that his legs cannot keep up with the rest of his body, with his heart, head, and eyes, and his hands, eager to offer protection, are so painfully slow in their movement. Some people stop on the road and shake their heads disapprovingly at this undignified performance, for these people are known for their composure and noble bearing. The explanation for Joseph's extraordinary behavior in their eyes is not that he is running to save his child's life but that he is Galilean, one of a lot with no real breeding, as has often been observed. He has already passed Rachel's tomb, and that good woman could never have suspected that she would have so much cause to weep for her children, to cover the nearby hills with her cries and lamentations, to claw at her face, tear out her hair, and then beat her bare skull.

Before he comes to the first houses on the outskirts of Bethlehem, Joseph leaves the main road and goes cross-country, I am taking a shortcut, he would reply if we were to question this sudden change of direction, a route that might be shorter but is certainly much less comfortable. Taking care not to encounter any laborers at work in the fields, and hiding behind boulders whenever he sees a shepherd, Joseph makes for the cave where his wife is not expecting him at this hour and his son, fast asleep, is not expecting him at all. Halfway up the slope of the last hill, from where he can already see the dark chasm of the grotto, Joseph is assailed by a terrible thought, suppose his wife has gone to the village, taking the child with her, nothing more natural, knowing what women are, than for her to take advantage of being on her own to make a farewell visit to Salome and several families with whom she has become acquainted in recent weeks, leaving Joseph to thank the owners of the cave with all due formality. He sees himself running through the streets and knocking on every door, Is my wife here. It would be foolish to inquire anxiously. Better, Is my son here, in case some woman, carrying a child in her arms, for example, should ask, on seeing him distressed, Is something wrong. No, nothing, he would reply, Nothing at all, it's just that we have to set off at first light and we still haven't packed. The village, seen from here, with its identical roof terraces, reminds Joseph of the building site, stones scattered everywhere until the workers assemble them, one on top of another, to erect a watchtower, an obelisk to

commemorate some victory, or a wall for lamentations. A dog barks in the distance, others bark in response, but the warm evening silence continues to hover over the village like a blessing about to lose its effect, like a wisp of a cloud on the point of vanishing.

This pause was short-lived. In one last spurt the carpenter reached the entrance to the cave and called out, Mary, are you there. She called in reply, and Joseph realized that his legs were weak, probably from all the running, but also from the sheer relief of knowing his child was safe. Inside the cave Mary was chopping vegetables for the evening meal, the child asleep in the manger. Joseph collapsed on the ground but was soon back on his feet, We must leave, we must get out of this place. Mary looked at him in dismay, Are we leaving, she asked, Yes, this very minute, But you said, Be quiet and start packing while I harness the donkey. Aren't we going to eat first. No, we'll eat something on the way. But it will soon be dark and we might get lost, whereupon Joseph lost his temper, Be quiet, woman, I've already told you we're leaving, so do as I say. Tears sprang to Mary's eyes, this was the first time her husband had ever raised his voice to her. Without another word she began gathering their scant possessions. Be quick, be quick, he kept repeating as he saddled the donkey and tightened the straps and crammed whatever came to hand into the baskets, while Mary looked on dumbfounded at this husband she barely recognized. They were ready to leave, the only thing left to be done now was put out the fire with earth. Joseph signaled to his wife to wait until he took a look outside.

The ashen shadows of twilight merged heaven and earth. The sun had not yet set, but the heavy mist, while too high to obscure the surrounding fields, kept the sunlight from them. Joseph listened carefully, took a few steps, his hair on end. A scream came from the village, so shrill that it scarcely sounded human, its echo resounding from hill to hill, and it was followed by more screams and wailing, which could be heard everywhere. These were not weeping angels lamenting human misfortune, these were the voices of men and women maddened by grief beneath an empty sky. Slowly, afraid of being heard, Joseph stepped back to the cave, and collided with Mary, who had disregarded his warning. She was trembling. What are those screams, she asked, but he pushed her back inside without replying and hastily began throwing earth on the fire. What are those screams, Mary asked a second time, invisible in the darkness, and Joseph eventually answered, People are being put to death. He paused and then added in a whisper, Children, by order of Herod, his voice breaking into a dry sob, That's why I said we should leave. There was a muffled sound of clothing and hay being disturbed, Mary was lifting her child from the manger and pressing him to her bosom, Sweet little Jesus, who would want to harm you, her words drowned in tears. Be quiet, said Joseph, don't make a sound, perhaps the soldiers won't find this place, they've been ordered to kill all the children in Bethlehem under the age of three. How did you find out. I overheard it in the Temple and that's why I ran back. What do we do now. We're on the outskirts of the village, the soldiers aren't likely to look inside these caves, they've been ordered to carry out a house-to-house search, so let's hope no one reports us and we're spared. He took

another cautious look outside, the screaming had stopped, nothing could be heard now except a wailing chorus, which gradually subsided. The massacre of the innocents had ended.

The sky was still overcast. The advancing darkness and the mist overhead had erased Bethlehem from the sight of those inhabiting heaven. Joseph warned Mary, Don't move from here, I'm going out to the road to see if the soldiers have gone. Be careful, said Mary, forgetting that her husband was in no danger, only children under the age of three, unless someone else had gone out to the road with the intention of betraying him, telling the soldiers, This is Joseph, the carpenter, whose child is not yet three, a boy called Jesus, who could be the child mentioned in the prophecy, for our children cannot be destined for glory now that they are dead.

Inside the cave one could touch the darkness. Mary, who had always feared the dark, was used to having a light in the house, from either the fire or an oil lamp, or both, and the feeling, all the stronger now that she was hiding here in the earth, that fingers of darkness would reach out and touch her lips, filled her with terror. She did not want to disobey her husband or expose her child to danger by leaving the cave, but she was becoming more terrified by the minute. Soon the fear would overpower her fragile defenses of common sense, it was no good telling herself, If there was nothing in the cave before we put out the fire then why should there be anything now, although this thought gave her just enough courage to grope her way to the manger, where she settled her child, and then, carefully creeping around until she found the spot where the fire had been, she poked the ashes with a piece of firewood until a few embers appeared that had not yet completely died. Her fear vanished at once as, remembering the luminous earth, she watched this tremulous glow with crisscrossing flashes like a torch that darts over the ridge of a mountain. The image of the beggar came to her, only to be pushed aside by the urgent need to create more light in that terrifying cave. Fumbling, Mary went to the manger to fetch a handful of straw. Guided by the faint glow on the ground, she was back in an instant and soon had the oil lamp set up in a corner, where it could cast a pale but reassuring light on the nearby walls without attracting the attention of anyone outside. Mary went to her child, who continued to sleep, indifferent to fears, cares, and violent deaths. Taking him in her arms, she went and sat near the lamp and waited.

Time passed. Her child woke without fully opening his eyes, and when Mary saw he was about to cry, she opened her tunic and brought the child's avid mouth to her breast. Jesus was still feeding at his mother's breast when she heard footsteps. Her heart almost stopped beating. Could it be soldiers. But these were the footsteps of one person, and soldiers on a search normally went in pairs at least so that one could aid the other in the event of an attack. It must be Joseph, she thought, and feared he would scold her for having lit the lamp. The steps came closer, Joseph was entering the cave, but suddenly a shiver went up Mary's spine, those were not Joseph's firm, heavy steps, perhaps it was some itinerant laborer seeking shelter for the night, as had happened twice before, although Mary had not been afraid on those occasions, because it never occurred to her

that anyone, however heartless and cruel, would harm a woman with a child in her arms. She thought of the infants slaughtered in Bethlehem, some perhaps in their mothers' arms, just as Jesus lies in hers, innocent babes still sucking the milk of life as swords pierced their tender flesh, but then those assassins were soldiers, not vagrants. No, it was not Joseph, and it was not a soldier looking for an exploit he would not have to share, and it was not a laborer without work or shelter. It was the man, again in the guise of a shepherd, who had appeared to her as a beggar, claiming to be an angel, not revealing, however, whether he came from heaven or hell. At first Mary thought it could not possibly be he, but she now realized it could be no one else.

The angel said, Peace be with you, wife of Joseph, and peace be with your child, how fortunate for both of you to have found shelter in this cave, otherwise one of you would now be broken and dead and the other broken though still alive. Mary told him, I heard cries for help. The angel said, One day those cries will be raised to heaven in your name, and even before then you will hear thousands of cries beside you. Mary told him, My husband went to the road to see if the soldiers have left, he must not find you here when he comes back. The angel said, Don't worry, I'll be gone before he returns, I only came to tell you that you will not see me again for some time, that all that was decreed in heaven has come to pass, that these deaths were as inevitable as Joseph's crime. Mary asked, What crime, my husband has committed no crime, he is an honest man. The angel told her, An honest man who committed a crime, you have no idea how many honest men have committed crimes, their crimes are countless, and contrary to popular belief these are the only crimes that cannot be forgiven. Mary asked, What crime did my husband commit. The angel replied, Should I tell you, surely you don't want to share his guilt. Mary said, I swear I am innocent. The angel told her, Swear if you will, but any oath taken before me is a puff of wind that knows not where it's going. Mary pleaded, What crime have we committed. The angel replied, Herod's cruelty unsheathed those swords, but your selfishness and cowardice were the cords that bound the victims' hands and feet. Mary asked, What could I have done. The angel told her, You could not have done anything, for you found out too late, but the carpenter could have done something, he could have warned the villagers that the soldiers were coming to kill their children when there was still time for parents to gather them up and escape, to hide in the wilderness, for example, or flee to Egypt and wait for Herod's death, which is fast approaching. Mary said, Joseph didn't think. The angel retorted, No, he didn't think, but that hardly excuses him. Mary tearfully implored, Angel that you are, forgive him. The angel replied, I am not an angel who grants pardons. Mary pleaded, Forgive him. The angel was unswayed, I've already told you, there's no forgiveness for this crime, Herod will be forgiven sooner than your husband, for it is easier to forgive a villain than a deserter. Mary asked, What are we to do. The angel told her, You will live and suffer like everyone else. Mary asked, And what about my son. The angel said, A father's guilt falls on the heads of his children, and the shadow of Joseph's guilt already darkens his son's brow. Mary sighed, Wretched are we. Indeed, said the angel, and there is nothing to be done. Mary lowered her head, pressed her child closer to her bosom, as if protecting him from the promised evil, and

when she turned around, the angel had vanished. But this time there was no sound of footsteps. He must have flown away, Mary thought to herself. She got up and went to the entrance of the cave to see if there was any trace of the angel's flight through the sky or any sign of Joseph nearby.

The mist had cleared, the first stars glittered like metal, and wailing voices could still be heard from the village. Then a thought as presumptuous as spiritual pride itself blotted out the angel's dark warning and caused Mary's head to spin. Suppose her son's salvation was a sign from God, for surely the child's escape from a cruel death must mean something when so many others who perished could do nothing but wait for the opportunity to ask God himself, Why did you kill us, and be satisfied with whatever reply He might choose to give. Mary's delirium soon passed, and the thought occurred to her that she too could be holding a dead child like all those other mothers in Bethlehem, and she shed a flood of tears for the welfare and salvation of her soul. She was still weeping when Joseph returned. She heard him coming but did not stir, did not care if he rebuked her, she was crying now with the other women, all of them seated in a circle with their children on their laps awaiting resurrection. Joseph saw that she wept, understood, and said nothing.

Inside the cave, he did not appear to notice the burning oil lamp. A fine layer of ash now covered the embers, but in the center there was still a faint flicker of flame struggling to survive. As he began unloading the donkey, Joseph reassured Mary, We're no longer in danger, the soldiers have gone, we might as well spend the night here. We'll leave before dawn, avoid the main road, and take a shortcut, and where there are no roads we'll find a way somehow. Mary murmured, All those dead children, which provoked Joseph into asking brusquely, How do you know, have you counted them, and Mary continued, I even knew some of those children. You ought to be thanking God for having spared your own son. I will. And stop staring at me as if I'd committed some crime. I wasn't staring at you. Don't answer in that accusing tone of voice. Very well, I won't say another word. Good. Joseph tethered the donkey to the manger, where there was still some hay. The donkey cannot complain, it has had lots of fodder and plenty of fresh air, but it is not hungry, it is preparing itself for the arduous journey back with a full load. Mary put her child down and said, I'll get the fire going. What for. To prepare some supper. I don't want a fire in here to attract the attention of some passerby, let's eat whatever there is that doesn't need to be cooked. And so they ate.

The light from the lamp made the cave's four inhabitants look like ghosts, the donkey motionless as a statue, not eating though its nose was buried in the straw, the child dozing, the man and woman satisfying their hunger with a few dry figs. Mary laid out the mats on the sandy ground, threw a cover over them, and, as usual, waited for her husband to go to bed. First Joseph went to take another look at the night sky, all was peaceful in heaven and on earth, and no more cries or lamentations could be heard in the village. Rachel only had strength enough left to sigh and whimper inside the houses where doors and souls were tightly closed. Stretched out on his mat, Joseph felt

exhausted after all his worry and panic, and he could not even say that his wild chase had saved his son's life. The soldiers had strictly carried out their orders, Kill the children of Bethlehem, without taking any further initiative, such as searching all the caves in the vicinity to ferret out families in hiding or families making their homes there. Normally Joseph did not mind that Mary came to bed only after he had fallen asleep, but on this occasion he could not bear to think of her watching him, in her sorrow, as he lay sleeping. He told her, I do not want you waiting up, come to bed. Mary made no protest. After making sure, as usual, that the donkey was securely tethered, she lay down with a sigh on her mat, closed her eyes, and waited for sleep to come.

In the middle of the night, Joseph had a dream. He was riding down a road leading into a village, when the first houses came into view. He wore a military uniform and was armed with sword, lance, and dagger, a soldier among soldiers. The commanding officer asked him, Where do you think you're going, carpenter, to which Joseph replied, proud of being so well prepared for the mission entrusted to him, I'm off to Bethlehem to kill my son, and as he said those words, he woke with a fearsome growl, his body twitching and writhing with fear. Mary asked him in alarm, What's wrong, what happened, as Joseph kept repeating, No, no, no. Suddenly he broke into bitter sobs. Mary got up, fetched the lamp, and held it near his face, Are you ill, she asked. Covering his face with his hands, he shouted, Take that lamp away at once, woman, and still sobbing, he went to the manger to see if his child was safe. He is fine, Master Joseph, do not worry, in fact the child gives no trouble, good-natured, quiet, all he wants is to be fed and to sleep, and here he rests as peaceful as can be, oblivious to the dreadful death he has miraculously escaped, just think, to be put to death by the father who gave him life, for though death is the fate that awaits all of us, there are many ways of dying. Afraid that the dream might come back, Joseph did not lie down again. Wrapped in his mantle, he sat at the entrance to the cave, beneath an overhanging rock that formed a natural porch, and the moon above cast a black shadow over the opening, a shadow the faint glow of the oil lamp within could not dispel. Had Herod himself been carried past by his slaves, escorted by legions of barbarians thirsting for blood, he would have told them calmly, Don't bother searching this place, continue on, there is nothing here but stone and shadow, what we want is the tender flesh of newborn babes. The very thought of his dream made Joseph shiver. He wondered what it could possibly mean, for, as the heavens could testify, he had raced like a madman down that slope, a Via Dolorosa if ever there was one, he had scaled rocks and walls in his haste to rescue his child, like a good father, yet in the dream he saw himself as a fiend intent on murder. How wise the proverb that reminds us that there is no constancy in dreams. This must be the work of Satan, he decided, making a gesture to drive out evil spirits.

The piercing trill of an unseen bird filled the air, or perhaps it was a shepherd whistling, but surely not at this hour, when the flocks are asleep and only the dogs are keeping watch. Yet the night, calm and remote from all living creatures, showed that supreme indifference which we associate with the universe, or that other absolute

indifference, the indifference of emptiness, which will remain, if there is such a thing as emptiness, when all has been fulfilled. The night ignored the meaning and rational order that appear to govern the world in those moments when we can still believe the world was made to harbor us and our insanity. The terrifying dream grew unreal and absurd, was dispelled by the night, the shining moon, and the presence of his child asleep in the manger. Joseph was awake and as much in command of himself and his thoughts as any man could be, his thoughts were now charitable and peaceful, yet just as capable of monstrosity, for example his gratitude to God that his beloved child had been spared by the soldiers who had butchered so many innocents. The night that descends over carpenter Joseph descends also over the mothers of the children of Bethlehem, forgetting their fathers, and even Mary for a moment, since they do not figure here for some strange reason. The hours passed quietly, and at first light Joseph got up, went to load the donkey, and, taking advantage of the last moonlight before the sky turned clear, the whole family, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, were soon on their way back to Galilee.

Stealing from her master's house, where two infants had been killed, the slave Salome rushed to the cave that morning, convinced that the same sad fate had befallen the child she helped bring into the world. She found the place deserted, nothing remained except footprints and the donkey's hoofprints. Dying embers beneath the ashes, but no bloodstains. Gone, she said, little Jesus has escaped this first death.

EIGHT MONTHS HAD PASSED SINCE THAT HAPPY DAY WHEN Joseph arrived in Nazareth with his family safe and sound despite many dangers, the donkey less so, for it was limping slightly on its right hoof, when the news came that King Herod had died in Jericho, in one of his palaces where he took refuge to escape the rigors of the Jerusalem winter, which spares neither the weak nor the infirm. There were also rumors that the kingdom, now robbed of its mighty monarch, would be divided among three of his sons who had survived the feuding and destruction, namely, Herod Philip, who would govern the territories lying east of Galilee, Herod Antipas, who would inherit Galilee and Peraea, and Archelaus, who would rule Judaea, Samaria, and Idumaea. One day a passing muleteer with a flair for narrating tales both real and fictitious will give the people of Nazareth a graphic description of Herod's funeral, which he will swear he witnessed. The body, placed in a magnificent sarcophagus made of the purest gold and inlaid with precious stones, was transported on a gilded carriage draped with purple cloth and drawn by two white oxen. The body was also covered with a purple cloth, all that could be seen was a human shape with a crown resting where the head was. Behind followed musicians playing flutes and the professional mourners, who could not avoid the overpowering stink, and as I stood there at the roadside even I felt queasy, then came the king's guards on horseback, then foot soldiers armed with lances, swords, and daggers as if marching to war, an endless procession wending its awesome way like a serpent with no head or tail in sight. In horror I watched those soldiers marching behind a corpse but also to their own death, to that death which sooner or later knocks on every door. Time to leave, promptly comes the order to kings and vassals alike, making no distinction between the rotting body at the head of the procession and those in the rear choking on the dust of an entire army, they are still alive but heading for a place where they will remain forever. Clearly this muleteer would be more at home as an Aristotelian scholar strolling beneath the Corinthian capitals of some academy rather than prodding donkeys along the roads of Israel, sleeping in smelly caravansaries, and narrating tales to rustics such as these of Nazareth.

Among the crowd in the square in front of the synagogue was Joseph, who happened to be passing and had stopped to listen. He did not pay much attention to the descriptive details of the funeral procession, and lost interest when the poet began to strike an elegiac note, for grim experience had made the carpenter wise about that particular chord on the harp. One had only to look at him, his composure when he concealed his youth by becoming solemn and thoughtful, the bitterness that marked him with lines deeper than scars. But what is really disturbing about Joseph's face are the eyes, which are dull and expressionless except for a tiny flicker caused by insomnia. It is true that Joseph gets little sleep. Sleep is the enemy he confronts each night, as if fighting for his very life, and it is a battle he invariably loses, for even when he seems to be winning and falls asleep from sheer exhaustion, he no sooner closes his eyes than he sees a detachment of soldiers appearing on the road, with Joseph himself riding in their midst, sometimes brandishing a sword above his head, and it is just at that moment, when terror overwhelms him, that the leader of the expedition asks, Where do you think you're going, carpenter. And the poor man, who would rather not say, resists with all his might,

but the malignant spirits in the dream are too strong for him, and they prise open his mouth with hands of steel, reducing him to tears and despair as he confesses, I'm on my way to Bethlehem to kill my son. We won't ask Joseph if he remembers how many oxen pulled the carriage bearing Herod's corpse or whether they were white or dappled. As he heads for home, all he can think of are the closing phrases of the muleteer's tale, when the man described the multitude accompanying the procession, slaves, soldiers, royal guards, professional mourners, musicians, governors, princes, future kings, and all the rest of us, whoever we might be, doing nothing else in life but searching for the place where we will stay forever. If only it were so, mused Joseph, with the bitterness of one who has given up all hope. If only it were so, he repeated to himself, thinking of all those who never left their place of birth yet death went there to find them, which only proves that fate is the only real certainty. It is so easy, dear God, we need only wait for everything in life to be fulfilled to say, It was fate. Herod was fated to die in Jericho and be borne on a carriage to the fortress of Herodium, but death exempted the infants of Bethlehem from having to travel anywhere. And Joseph's journey, which in the beginning seemed part of some divine plan to save those holy innocents, turned out to be futile. The carpenter listened and said nothing, he ran off to rescue his own child, leaving the others to their fate. So now we know why Joseph cannot sleep, and when he does, it is only to awaken to a reality that will not allow him to forget his dream, even when awake he dreams the same dream night after night, and when asleep, though trying desperately to avoid it, he knows he will encounter that dream again, for it hovers on the threshold between sleep and waking and he must pass it when he enters and when he leaves. This confusion is best defined as remorse. Yet human experience and the practice of communication have shown throughout the ages that definitions are an illusion, like having a speech defect and trying to say love but unable to get the word out, or, better, having a tongue in one's head but unable to feel love.

Mary is pregnant again. No angel disguised as a beggar came knocking at the door this time to announce the child's arrival, no sudden gust of wind swept the heights of Nazareth, no luminous earth was discovered in the ground. Mary told Joseph in the simplest words, I'm with child. She did not say to him, for example, Look into my eyes and see how our second child is shining there, nor did he reply this time, Don't think I hadn't noticed, I was waiting for you to tell me. He just listened, remained silent, and eventually said, Is that so, and carried on planing a piece of wood with apparent indifference, but, then, we know that his thoughts are elsewhere. Mary also knows, since that night of torment when her husband blurted out the secret he had kept to himself, and she was not altogether surprised, she had been expecting something like this after the angel told her in the cave, You will have a thousand cries all around you. A good wife would have said to her husband, Don't fret, what's done is done, and besides, your first duty was to rescue your own child. But Mary has changed and is no longer what one would normally refer to as a good wife, perhaps because she heard the angel utter those grave words that excluded no one, I am not an angel who grants pardons. Had she been allowed to discuss these deep matters with Joseph, who was so well versed in Holy

Scripture, he might have pondered the nature of this angel who appeared from nowhere to announce that he did not grant pardons, a statement which seems superfluous, since everyone knows that the power to pardon belongs to God alone. For an angel to say that he does not grant pardons is either meaningless or much too meaningful. An angel of judgment, perhaps, might exclaim, You expect me to forgive you, what a silly idea, I did not come to forgive, I came only to punish. But angels, by definition, leaving aside those cherubim with flaming swords who were posted by the Lord to guard the path to the tree of life lest our first parents or we, their descendants, try to return to steal the fruits, angels, as we were saying, are not vigilantes entrusted with the corrupt albeit socially necessary enforcement of repression. Angels exist to make our lives easier, they protect us when we are about to fall down a well, help us cross the bridge over the precipice, pull us to safety just as we are about to be crushed by a runaway chariot or a car without brakes. An angel worthy of the name could have spared Joseph all this torment simply by appearing in a dream to the fathers of the children of Bethlehem to warn them, Gather your wife and child and flee to Egypt and stay there until I tell you to return, for Herod means to slaughter your child. In this way the children could have all been saved, Jesus hidden in the cave with his parents and the others on their way to Egypt, where they would remain until the same angel returned to tell the fathers, Arise, gather your wife and child and return to Israel, for he who tried to kill your children is dead. Thus the children would return to the places where they came from and where eventually they would meet their deaths at the appointed hour, because angels, however powerful, have their limitations, just like God. After much thought, Joseph might have reached the conclusion that the angel who appeared in the cave was an infernal creature, an agent of Satan disguised this time as a shepherd, and further proof of the weakness and gullibility of women, who can be led astray by a fallen angel. If Mary could speak, if she were less secretive and revealed the details of that strange annunciation, things would be different, Joseph would use other arguments to support his theory, most important, the fact that this so-called angel did not proclaim, I am an angel of the Lord, or, I come in the name of the Lord. He simply said, I am an angel, before adding cautiously, Keep this to yourself, as if afraid for anyone else to know. Some may argue that such details contribute nothing new to our understanding of what is an all-too-familiar story, but as far as this narrator is concerned, it is crucial to know, when interpreting past and future events, whether the angel came from heaven or from hell. Between angels of light and angels of darkness there are differences not just of form but also of essence, substance, and content, and while it is true that whoever created the former also created the latter, He subsequently attempted to correct His mistake.

Mary, like Joseph, but for different reasons, often looks distracted, her expression becomes blank, her hands drop in the middle of some task, her gestures are suddenly interrupted, she stares into the distance, not so surprising for a woman in her condition, were it not for the various thoughts that occupy her mind and that can be summed up in the following question, Why did the angel announce the birth of Jesus yet say nothing of this second child. Mary looks at her firstborn crawling on all fours as children do at that

age, she studies him and tries to perceive a special trait, some mark or sign, a star on his forehead, a sixth finger on his hand, but she sees a child like any other, who slobbers, gets dirty, and cries, the only difference being that he is her son. His hair is black like that of his parents, his irises are already losing that whitish tinge inaccurately called milky and assuming their natural, inherited color, a dark brown which gradually turns a somber green if one can so describe a color, but these features are hardly unique, important only when the child belongs to us, or, as in this case, to Mary. Within weeks he will be making his first attempts to stand up and walk, he will fall on his hands countless times, stay there staring, lifting his head with some difficulty as he hears his mother say, Come here, come here, my child. And he will begin to feel the urge to speak, sounds will form in his throat, at first he will not know what to do with them, he will get them mixed up with sounds he already knows and makes, such as gurgling and crying, until he begins to realize that they must be articulated in a different and more deliberate way, and he will move his lips as his father and mother do, until he succeeds in pronouncing his first word, perhaps da or dada or daddy, or perhaps even mummy, in any case after that little Jesus will not have to poke the forefinger of his right hand into the palm of his left hand if his mother and her neighbors ask him for the hundredth time, Where does the hen lay her egg. This is just another of those indignities to which a human being is subjected, trained like a lapdog to respond to certain sounds, a tone of voice, a whistle, or the crack of a whip. Now Jesus is able to answer that the hen can lay her egg wherever she wishes so long as she does not lay it in the palm of his hand. Mary looks at her little son, sighs, downhearted that the angel is not likely to return. You will not see me again for a while, he told her, but if he were to appear now, she would not be as intimidated as before, she would ply the angel with questions until he gave her an answer. Already a mother and expecting her second child, Mary is no innocent lamb, she has learned, to her cost, what suffering, danger, and worry mean, with all that experience on her side she can easily tip the scales to her advantage. It would not be enough for the angel to reply, May the Lord never allow you to see your child as you see me now, with nowhere to lay my head. First, the angel would have to identify this Lord in whose name he claimed to speak, secondly, convince her that he told the truth when he said he had no place to lay his head, which seemed unlikely for an angel unless he meant it only in his role as beggar, thirdly, what future did those dark, threatening words augur for her son, and finally, what was the mystery surrounding that luminous earth buried near the door, where a strange plant had grown after their return from Bethlehem, nothing but stalk and leaves, which they had given up pruning after trying to pull it up by the roots, only to have it reappear with even greater vigor. Two of the elders of the synagogue, Zacchaeus and Dothan, came to inspect the phenomenon, and although they knew little about botany, they were in agreement that the seed must have been in the mysterious soil and then sprouted at the right moment, for as Zacchaeus observed, Such is the law of the Lord of life. Once she became accustomed to this stubborn plant, Mary decided it added a festive touch at the entrance to the house, while Joseph, still suspicious, moved his carpenter's bench to another part of the yard rather than have to look at the thing. He cut it back with an ax and saw, poured boiling water over it, even scattered burning coals around the stalk, but

superstition prevented him from taking a spade and digging up the bowl of luminous earth that had been the cause of so much trouble. This was how matters stood when their second child, whom they named James, was born.

Over the next few years there were not many changes in the family, apart from the arrival of more children, including two daughters, while the parents lost the last vestiges of youth. In the case of Mary that was not surprising, for we know how childbearing, and she had borne many children, gradually saps whatever freshness and beauty a woman possesses, causing her face and body to age and wither, suffice it to say that after James came Lisa, after Lisa came Joseph, after Joseph came Judas, after Judas came Simon, then Lydia, then Justus, then Samuel, and if any more followed, they perished without trace. Children are the pride and joy of their parents, as the saying goes, and Mary did her utmost to appear contented, but after carrying for months on end all those fruits that greedily consumed her strength, she often felt impatient, resentful, but in those days it would never have occurred to her to blame Joseph, let alone Almighty God who governs the life and death of His creatures and assures us that the very hairs of our heads are counted. Joseph had little understanding of the begetting of children, apart from the practical rudiments, which reduce all enigmas to one simple fact, namely, that if a man and woman come together, he will likely impregnate her, and after nine months, or on rare occasions after seven, a child is born. Released into the female womb, the male seed, minute and invisible, transmits the new being chosen by God to continue populating the world He has created. Sometimes, however, this fails to happen, and the fact that the transmission of seed into womb is not always sufficient to create a child is further evidence of the impenetrability of God's design. Allowing the seed to spill onto the ground, as did the unfortunate Onan, whom the Lord punished with death for refusing in this way to give his brother's widow children, rules out any possibility of the woman's becoming pregnant. On the other hand, time and time again, as someone once said, the pitcher goes to the fountain until there is no more water and it comes back empty. For it was clearly God who put Isaac into the little seed that Abraham was still able to produce, and God who poured it into Sarah's womb, because she was past conceiving children. Looking at things from a theogenetic angle, as it were, we may conclude without offending logic, which must preside over everything in this and every other world, that it was God Himself who spurred Joseph to keep having intercourse with Mary, so that they might have lots of children, helping Him assuage the remorse that plagued Him ever since He permitted, or willed, without considering the consequences, the massacre of those innocent children of Bethlehem. But the strangest thing of all, and which goes to show that the ways of the Lord are not only inscrutable but also disconcerting, is that Joseph truly believed he was acting of his own accord and obeying God's will, as he made strenuous efforts to beget more and more children, to compensate for all those killed by Herod's soldiers, so that the numbers would tally in the next census. God's remorse and Joseph's were one and the same, and, if people in those days were already familiar with the expression God never sleeps, we now know that the reason He never sleeps is that He made a mistake which no man would be forgiven. With every child begotten by

Joseph, God raised His head a little higher, but He will never raise it fully, because twenty-seven infants were massacred in Bethlehem, and Joseph did not live long enough to impregnate one woman with that many children, and Mary, worn out in body and soul, could never have withstood that many pregnancies. The carpenter's house and yard, though full of children, might as well have been empty.

On reaching the age of five, Joseph's son started going to school. Each morning his mother took him to the synagogue and left him in the charge of the steward who taught beginners, and it was there in the synagogue-and-classroom that Jesus and the other little boys of Nazareth under the age of ten observed the wise man's precept, The child must be instructed in the Torah just as the ox is bred in the corral. The lesson ended at the sixth hour, which we now refer to as midday. Mary would be waiting for her child, and the poor woman was not allowed to ask him what he was learning, even this simple right was denied her, for as the wise man's maxim categorically states, Better that the law go up in flames than it be entrusted to women. Besides, if by any chance little Jesus had already been taught the true status of women in this world, including mothers, he might have given her the wrong answer, the kind of answer that reduces one to insignificance. Take Herod, for example, with all his wealth and power, yet if we were to see him now, we would not even be able to say, He is dead and rotting, because he is nothing but mold, dust, bones, and filthy rags. When Jesus arrived home, his father asked him, What did you learn today, and Jesus, having been blessed with an excellent memory, repeated word for word and without a moment's hesitation the lessons of the day. First the children were taught the letters of the alphabet, then the most important words, and finally whole sentences and passages from the Torah, which Joseph accompanied, beating out the rhythm with his right hand and slowly nodding his head. Standing aside, Mary looked on and learned things she was forbidden to ask, a clever stratagem on the part of women and practiced to perfection throughout the ages. Listening, they soon learn everything, even the difference between falsehood and truth, which is the height of wisdom. But what Mary did not understand, or understand completely, was the mysterious bond between her husband and Jesus, although even a stranger would have noticed the look of wistful tenderness on Joseph's face when he spoke to his firstborn, as if he was thinking to himself, This beloved son of mine is my sorrow. All Mary knew was that Joseph's nightmares, like a scourge on his soul, refused to go away, and were now so frequent that they became as much a habit as sleeping on the right side or waking up with thirst in the middle of the night. Mary, as a good and dutiful wife, still worried about her husband, but for her the most important thing of all was to see her son alive and well, a sign that Joseph's crime had not been too serious, otherwise the Lord would have punished him without mercy, as was His wont. Take Job, broken and leprous, yet he had always been an honest, upright, and God-fearing man. Job's misfortune was that he became involuntarily the cause of a dispute between Satan and God Himself, each clinging tenaciously to his own idea and prerogative. And yet they are surprised when a man despairs and cries out, Perish the day I was born and the night in which I was conceived, let that day turn to darkness and be erased from the calendar and that night become

sterile and void of all happiness. It is true that God compensated Job by repaying him twice as much as He had taken, but what of all those other men, in whose name no book was ever written, men deprived of everything and given nothing in return, to whom everything was promised and nothing fulfilled.

But in this carpenter's house life was peaceful, and however frugal their existence, there was always bread on the table and enough food to keep body and soul together. As for possessions, the only thing Joseph had in common with Job was the number of sons. Job had seven sons and three daughters, while Joseph had seven sons and two daughters, giving the carpenter the merit of having put one woman less into the world. However, before God doubled his possessions, Job already owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yokes of oxen, and five hundred donkeys, not to mention slaves, of which he had many, whereas Joseph has only his donkey and nothing else. And there's no denying that it is one thing to feed two mouths, then a third, even if only indirectly during the first year, and quite another to find yourself saddled with a houseful of children who need more and more food when they start growing. Since Joseph's earnings were not enough to allow him to hire an apprentice, it was only natural that he make his children work. Besides, this was his fatherly duty, for as the Talmud says, Just as a man must feed his children, he must also teach them to work, otherwise he turns his sons into good-for-nothings. And recalling the precept of the rabbis that the artisan must never think himself inferior to the greatest scholar, we can imagine how proudly Joseph began instructing his older sons one after another as they came of age, first Jesus, then James, then Joseph, then Judas, in the secret skills of the carpenter's trade, ever mindful of the ancient proverb, A child's service is little, yet he is no little fool that despises it. When Joseph returned to work after the midday meal, his sons lent him a hand, a good example of domestic economy and a way to establish a whole dynasty of carpenters for future generations, if God in His wisdom had not decreed otherwise.

AS IF THE HUMILIATION INFLICTED ON THE HEBREW RACE for more than seventy years was not enough to satisfy the shameless arrogance of the empire, Rome decided, using the division of the former kingdom of Herod as a pretext, to update the previous census. This time, however, the men would not have to register in their places of origin, and thus they were spared the damaging effect on agriculture and commerce and all the other upheavals we witnessed Joseph and his family enduring earlier. The new decree ruled that the censors go from village to village, town to town, and city to city and summon all the men, whatever their status, to the main square or other suitable open-air site, where their names, occupations, and taxable wealth would be entered into the public record under the surveillance of guards. Now, it must be said that such procedures are not viewed with favor in this part of the world, which is nothing new, for Holy Scripture narrates the unfortunate decision of King David when he ordered Joab, the leader of his army, Go through all the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba and carry out a census of the people, and since a royal command was never questioned, Joab silenced his doubts, gathered together his army, and set off to do the king's bidding. Nine months and twenty days later Joab returned to Jerusalem with the results of the census, which had been carefully tabulated and verified. There were eight hundred thousand armed soldiers in Israel and five hundred thousand in Judah. Now, we all know that God does not like anyone usurping His authority, especially when it comes to His chosen people, whom He will never allow to be ruled by any other lord or master, least of all by Rome, who bows to false gods and men, first because false gods do not really exist and secondly because of the sheer vanity of that pagan cult. But let us forget Rome for a moment and return to King David, whose heart sank the moment the leader of his army began reading the report, but it was too late, and he confessed, I have committed a grave sin, but I beg you, Lord, forgive your humble servant's folly. And next morning, a prophet named Gad, who was in a manner of speaking the king's soothsayer and his intermediary with Almighty God, came to David as he was rising and told him, The good Lord wishes to know whether you prefer three years of famine on earth, three months of persecution at the hands of your enemies, or three days of plague throughout the land. David did not inquire how many people would have to die in each case, he reckoned that in three days, even with plague, fewer would die than in three years of war or famine. So he prayed, God willing, let there be plague. And God sent a plague, and seventy thousand people died, not counting the women and children, who had not been registered. The Lord finally agreed to lift the plague in exchange for an altar, but the dead were dead, either God had forgotten them or it was not convenient to have them resurrected, since we can safely assume that innumerable inheritances and divisions of property were already being debated and contested, because there is no reason why God's chosen people should disclaim worldly goods that rightfully belong to them, whether acquired by the sweat of their brow, in litigation, or as the spoils of war. The outcome is what matters.

But before passing judgment on human and divine actions, we must also bear in mind that God, who lost no time in making David pay dearly for his mistake, now appears to be unaware of the humiliation being inflicted by Rome on His chosen children, and,

more perplexing still, He seems indifferent to this blatant lack of respect for His name and authority. When such a thing happens, that is to say, when it becomes clear that God is showing no sign of coming soon, man has no choice but to take His place, to leave home and restore order in this poor old world of ours, which belongs to God. The censors, as we said earlier, were strutting around with all the arrogance of those in power, backed by a military escort, in other words the soldiers were there to protect them from insults and assault when people started to rebel in Galilee and Judaea. Testing their strength, some protest, quietly at first, then gradually they become more aggressive and defiant, an artisan bangs on the censor's table and swears they will never get a name out of him, a merchant takes refuge in his tent with his entire family and threatens to smash everything and tear off all his clothes, a farmer sets fire to his harvest and brings a basket of ashes, saying, This is the money Israel will pay to those who offend her. Such troublemakers were arrested immediately, thrown into prison, flogged and humiliated, and since human resistance has its limits, frail creatures that we are, their courage soon failed them, the artisan shamelessly revealed his most intimate secrets, the merchant was prepared to sacrifice several daughters in addition to paying his taxes, the farmer covered himself in ashes and offered himself as a slave. The few who still resisted were put to death, while others, who had long ago learned that the only good invader is a dead one, took up arms and fled into the mountains. The arms in question were stones, slings, sticks, clubs and cudgels, a few bows and arrows, hardly enough to wage a war, and the odd sword or lance captured in brief skirmishes but unlikely to do the rebels much good, accustomed as they were, since David's reign, to the primitive weapons of placid shepherds rather than to those of trained warriors. But whether a man is Jewish or not, he takes more readily to war than to peace, especially if he finds a leader who shares his convictions. The insurrection against the Romans began when Joseph's firstborn was eleven years old, and it was led by a man called Judas, who hailed from Galilee and was therefore known as Judas the Galilean or Judas of Galilee. This simple method of naming people was common at the time, as we can see from names such as Joseph of Arimathaea, Simon of Cyrene or the Cyrenian, Mary Magdalene or Mary from Magdala. And if Joseph's son had lived and prospered, he would have been called Jesus of Nazareth or the Nazarene or perhaps something even simpler. But this is mere conjecture, we must never forget that fate is a casket like no other, open and closed at the same time. We can look inside and see all that has happened, the past transformed into fulfilled destiny, but we have no way of seeing into the future, apart from an occasional presentiment or intuition, as we find in this gospel, which could not have been written were it not for those signs and prodigies forecasting a destiny perhaps greater than life itself. But to return to what we were saying, Judas the Galilean had rebellion in his blood. His father, old Hezekiah, had participated in the popular revolts waged against Herod's presumed heirs after his death and before Rome could acknowledge the division of the kingdom and the authority of the new tetrarchs. This is beyond our understanding, for, while we are all made of the same all-too-human substance, the same flesh, bones, blood, skin and laughter, tears and sweat, some of us become cowards and others heroes, some are aggressive and others passive. The same substance used to make a

Joseph also made a Judas, and while the latter passed on to his sons the thirst for battle he had inherited from his own father, giving up a peaceful existence in order to defend God's rights, the carpenter Joseph remained at home with his nine young children and their mother, confined to his workbench in order to eke out a living and provide food for his family. For no one can tell who will triumph tomorrow, some say God, others say nobody, one hypothesis is as good as the other, because to speak of yesterday, today, and tomorrow is simply to give different names to the same illusion.

But the men of the village of Nazareth, most of them youths, who went to join the guerrilla force of Judas the Galilean, all disappeared without warning, without a trace, their families sworn to secrecy, and this silence was so strictly observed that no one would have dreamt of asking, Where's Nathanael, I haven't seen him for days, if Nathanael failed to appear at the synagogue or among the reapers in the fields, there was simply one man missing and the others carried on as if Nathanael had never existed, well, not quite, for some saw him entering the village under cover of darkness and leaving again before dawn. Although the only proof of his arrival and departure was the smile on the face of his wife. A smile can be most revealing, a woman may be standing motionless, staring into space, at the horizon, or simply at the wall in front of her, then suddenly she smiles, a pensive smile, like an image coming to the surface and playing on restless water, one would have to be blind to think that Nathanael's wife spent the night without her husband. But human nature is so perverse that some women who were never without their husband at their side began sighing as they imagined those encounters, and they hovered around Nathanael's wife like bees around a flower heavy with pollen. Mary's situation was different, with nine children to care for and a husband who spent his nights tossing and turning in anguish, often waking up the little ones and scaring them out of their wits. After a time they grew used to it, more or less, but the eldest boy, whose own dreams were disturbed by some mysterious presence, was forever waking up. In the beginning he would ask his mother, What's wrong with Father, and she would brush the question aside, reassuring him, It's only a nightmare. She could not very well tell her son, Your father dreamt he was marching with Herod's soldiers along the road to Bethlehem. Which Herod. The father of the present king. Was that why he was groaning and shouting. Yes, that's right. I can't see how being the soldier of a king who's dead can give one nightmares. Your father was never -one of Herod's soldiers, he's been a carpenter all his life. Then why does he have nightmares. People don't choose their dreams, dreams choose people, not that I've ever heard that said, but it must be so. And what about all that groaning, Mother. It's because your father dreams he's on his way to kill you. Obviously Mary could never have brought herself to say such things, revealing the cause of her husband's nightmare to Jesus, who like Abraham's son Isaac was cast in the role of the victim who escaped, yet is inexorably condemned.

One day, when he was helping his father make a door, Jesus summoned his courage and questioned him. After a long pause and without raising his eyes, Joseph told him, My son, you are aware of your duties and obligations, perform them and you will be worthy

in the eyes of God, but examine your conscience and ask yourself if there are not other duties and obligations waiting to be performed. Is this what you dream, Father. No, the fear that I might have neglected some duty, or worse, that is the cause of my dreams. What do you mean by worse. I didn't think, and the dream itself, the dream is the thought that wasn't thought when it should have been, and now it haunts me night after night and I can't forget it. And what should you have thought. Not even you have the right to ask me that question, and I have no answer to give you. They were working in the shade in the yard, for it was summer and the sun was blazing. Jesus' brothers played nearby, except for the youngest, who was indoors being fed at his mother's breast. James had also been helping, but he soon got tired and bored, little wonder, for the year between them made all the difference, Jesus will soon be old enough for more advanced religious study, he has finished his elementary schooling. In addition to his study of the Torah, the written law, he is already being initiated in the oral law, which is much more difficult and complicated. This explains why at such an early age he was able to conduct a serious conversation with his father, using words properly and debating with reflection and logic. Jesus is almost twelve, on reaching manhood he will perhaps resume this interrupted conversation, if Joseph can find the courage to confide in his son and confess his guilt, that courage which failed Abraham when he was confronted by Isaac, but for the moment Joseph is content to acknowledge and praise the power of God. There can be no doubt that God's upright handwriting bears no resemblance to the crooked lines of men. Just think of Abraham, to whom the angel appeared and said at the last minute, Lay not your hand upon the child, and think of Joseph, who failed to seize the opportunity to save the children of Bethlehem when God sent an officer and three loquacious soldiers instead of an angel to warn him. If Jesus continues as well as he has started, one day he will get around to asking why God saved Isaac and did nothing to protect those poor children, who were as innocent as Abraham's son yet were shown no mercy before the throne of the Lord. And then Jesus will be able to say to Joseph, Father, you mustn't take all the blame, and deep down, who knows, he might dare to ask, When, O Lord, will You come before mankind to acknowledge Your own mistakes.

While the carpenter Joseph and his son Jesus debated these important matters in private, the war against the Romans went on. It had been going on for more than two years, and now and then news of casualties reached Nazareth. Ephraim was killed, then Abiezer, then Naphtali, then Eleazar, but no one knew for certain where their bodies lay, between two stones on a mountain, or at the bottom of a ravine, or swept downstream by the current, or beneath the futile shade of a tree. Unable to hold a funeral for those who had died, the villagers of Nazareth eased their conscience by insisting, We neither caused nor witnessed this bloodshed. News also arrived of great victories. The Romans had been driven out of the nearby city of Sepphoris, also from vast regions of Judaea and Galilee where the enemy dared not venture now, and even in Joseph's own village no Roman soldiers had been sighted for more than a year. Who knows, perhaps this is what prompted the carpenter's neighbor, the inquisitive and obliging Ananias, whom we have not mentioned for some time, to turn up in the yard one day and whisper in Joseph's ear,

Follow me outside, and no wonder, because these houses are so tiny that it is impossible to have any privacy, everyone is crammed into one room day and night, whatever the circumstances or occasion, so that when the Day of Judgment finally comes, the Lord God should have no difficulty recognizing his own. So the request did not surprise Joseph, not even when Ananias added furtively, Let us go into the desert. Now, the desert is not simply that barren place, that vast expanse of sand or sea of burning dunes we generally picture when we read or hear the word. Desert, as understood here, can also be found in the green land of Galilee, for it means uncultivated fields, where there are no signs of human habitation or labor. Such places cease to be desert when humans arrive on the scene. But since there are only two men walking across this scrubland and Nazareth is still in sight as they head for three great boulders crowning the summit of the hill, there is no suggestion of the place's being populated, and when the men have gone, the desert will be desert again.

Ananias sits on the ground with Joseph at his side. There is the same age difference between them as there has always been, but, while time passes for everyone, the results can vary. Ananias did not look his years when we first met him, but now seems much older, though the years have also left their mark on Joseph. Ananias hesitates, the decisive manner with which he entered the carpenter's house changed once they were on the road, and Joseph has to coax him to speak without appearing to pry. We've come a long way, he remarked, giving Ananias his cue. This isn't something I could have discussed in your house or mine, explained Ananias, but now, in this remote place, they can converse freely without fear of being overheard. You once asked me to look after your house in your absence, Ananias reminded him. Yes, replied Joseph, and I deeply appreciated your help. Then Ananias continued, Now the time has come for me to ask you to look after my house while I'm gone. Are you taking your wife. No, I'm going alone. But surely if Shua is staying behind, there's no need. She'll be staying with relatives who live in a fishing village. Do you mean to tell me you're divorcing your wife. No, if I didn't divorce her when I found that she couldn't give me a son, why should I divorce her now, it's just that I will be away for a while and I'd prefer Shua to be with relatives. Will you be gone long. I don't know, much depends on how long the war lasts. What does the war have to do with your absence, asked Joseph in surprise. I'm going off to look for Judas the Galilean. What do you want from him. To ask him if he'll allow me to join his army. I don't believe it, a peace-loving man like you, Ananias, getting involved in the war against the Romans, have you forgotten what happened to Ephraim and Abiezer. And also to Naphtali and Eleazar. Precisely, so listen to the voice of reason. No, you listen to me, Joseph, and to the voice that comes from my lips, I've now reached the age at which my father died, and he achieved much more in life than this son of his who couldn't even beget children, I'm not as learned as you or likely to become an elder in the synagogue, all I have to look forward to is death, and I'm tied to a woman I don't even love. Then why not divorce her. Divorcing Shua is no problem, the problem is how to divorce myself, and that's impossible. But how much fighting can you do at your age. Don't worry, I'll go into battle as determined as if I were about to get a woman pregnant. I never heard that

expression before. Nor I, it came into my head this very minute. Very well, Ananias, you can rely on me to look after your house until you return. Should I not return and news reaches you that I've been killed, promise me you'll send for Shua so that she can claim my possessions. You have my promise. Let's return now that my mind is at peace. At peace, when you've decided to go to war, I really don't understand you. Ah, Joseph, Joseph, for how many centuries will we have to go on studying the Talmud before we begin to understand the simplest things. Why did we have to come all this way. I wanted to speak to you in the presence of witnesses. The only witnesses we need are Almighty God and this sky that covers us wherever we may be. And what about these stones. These stones are deaf and dumb and cannot bear witness. That may be so, but if you and I were to give a false account of our conversation, these stones would accuse us and go on accusing us until they turned to dust and we to nothingness. Shall we go back. Yes, let's go.

As they went, Ananias turned around several times to look at the stones, until finally they disappeared behind a hillock, then Joseph asked him, Does Shua know. Yes, she knows. And what did she have to say. At first not a word, then she told me I should have abandoned her years ago and left her to her fate. Poor Shua. Once she's with relatives, she'll forget me, and if I die in battle, she'll forget me forever, forgetting is all too easy, that is life. They entered the village, and when they arrived at the carpenter's house, which was the first of two houses on one side, Jesus, who was playing in the road with James and Judas, told them his mother was with the neighbor next door. As the two men turned away, the voice of Judas could be heard announcing solemnly, I am Judas the Galilean, whereupon Ananias looked around and said with a smile to Joseph, Take a look, there goes my leader, but before the carpenter had time to reply, the voice of Jesus could be heard saying, Then you don't belong here. Joseph felt a sword pierce his heart, as if those words were addressed to him, as if the game being played by his son was meant to convey another truth. Then he thought of the three boulders and tried, without knowing why, to imagine what life would be like if henceforth he were obliged to speak every word and perform every action in their presence, and suddenly, remembering God, he was stricken with fear. In Ananias's house they found Mary consoling a distressed Shua, who dried her tears the moment the men arrived, not because she had stopped weeping but because women know from bitter experience when to hide their tears. Hence the well-known saying, They're either laughing or weeping, but it simply is not true, because they weep quietly to themselves. But there was nothing quiet about Shua's grief, and when Ananias departed, she sobbed her heart out. One week later Shua's relatives came to fetch her. Mary accompanied her to the edge of the village, where they embraced and said good-bye. Shua was no longer weeping, but her eyes would never be dry again. Nothing can ease her sorrow or extinguish the flame that burns her tears before they surface and roll down her cheeks.

THE MONTHS PASSED, AND NEWS OF THE WAR CONTINUED to arrive, sometimes good, sometimes bad, but while the good news never went beyond vague allusions to victories that always turned out to be modest, the bad news spoke of much bloodshed and heavy losses for the rebel army of Judas the Galilean. One day news came that Eldad had been killed when the Romans made a surprise attack on a guerrilla ambush, there were many casualties, but Eldad was the only one from Nazareth to lose his life. Another day someone said he had heard from a friend, who had been told by someone else, that Varus, the Roman governor of Syria, was on his way with two legions to put an end once and for all to this intolerable insurrection that had been dragging on for three years. The statement, Varus is on his way, and the lack of any precise details spread panic among the people. They expected the dreaded insignia of war, which bore the initials SPQR, the Senate and People of Rome, to appear at any moment, heralding the arrival of a punitive force. Under this symbol and that flag, men go forth to kill one another, and the same can be said of those other well-known initials, INRI, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, but we must not anticipate events, for the dire consequences of Jesus' death will emerge only in the fullness of time. Everywhere there is talk of imminent battle, those with more faith in God predict that before the year is out, the Romans will be expelled from the Holy Land of Israel, but others, less confident, sadly shake their heads and foresee nothing but doom and destruction. And so it turned out.

Following the news that Varus's legions were advancing, nothing happened for several weeks, which allowed the rebels to intensify their attacks on the dispersed troops they were fighting, but the tactics behind this Roman passivity soon became clear, when the scouts of Judas the Galilean reported that one of the legions was heading south in a circular movement, skirting the bank of the river Jordan, then turning right at Jericho to repeat the maneuver northward, like a net cast into the water and retrieved by an experienced hand, or a lasso thrown to capture everything around. And the other legion, carrying out a similar maneuver, was now heading south. A strategy that could be described as a pincer movement, but it was more like two walls closing in simultaneously, knocking down those unable to escape, and finally crushing them. Throughout Judaea and Galilee, the legions' advance was marked with crosses, to which Judas's men had been nailed by their wrists and feet, their bones broken with hammers to hasten their death. The soldiers looted the villages and searched every house. No evidence was needed for them to arrest suspects and execute them. These unfortunates, if you will pardon the irony, had the good fortune to be crucified near their homes, so relatives could remove their bodies once they were dead. And what a sad spectacle it was, as mothers, widows, young brides, and weeping orphans watched the bruised corpses being gently lowered from the crosses, for there is nothing more pitiful for the living than the sight of an abandoned body. The crucified man was then carried to his grave to await the day of resurrection. But there were also men wounded in combat, in the mountains or in some other lonely spot, who, though still alive, were left by the soldiers in the most absolute of all deserts, that of solitary death, and there they remained, slowly burnt by the sun, exposed to birds of prey, and after a time stripped of flesh and bone, reduced to

repugnant remains without shape or form. Those questioning if not skeptical souls, who resist the facile acceptance of gospels such as these, will ask how it was possible for the Romans to crucify such a large number of Jews in vast arid regions devoid of trees, apart from the rare stunted bush on which you could barely crucify a scarecrow. But they are forgetting that the Roman army has all the professional skills and organization of a modern army. A steady supply of wooden crosses has been maintained throughout the campaign, as witnessed by all these donkeys and mules following the troops and laden with posts and crossbars, which can be assembled on the spot, and then it is simply a question of nailing the condemned man's extended arms to the crossbar, hoisting the post upright, forcing him to draw in his legs sideways, and securing his two feet, one on top of the other, with a single long nail. Any executioner attached to the legion will tell you that this operation may sound complicated, but it is in fact much more difficult to describe than to carry out.

The pessimists who predicted disaster were right. From north to south and from south to north, men, women, and children flee before the advancing legions, some because they might be accused of having collaborated with the rebels, others simply in terror, for, as we know, they are in danger of being arrested and put to death without a trial. One of these fugitives interrupted his retreat for a few moments to knock on Joseph's door with a message from Joseph's neighbor, Ananias, who had been severely wounded back in Sepphoris. Ananias wanted Joseph to know, The war is lost and there is no hope of escape, send for my wife and tell her to claim my possessions. Is that all he said, asked Joseph. Nothing more, replied the messenger. Why couldn't you have brought him here with you, when you knew you had to pass this way. In his condition he would have been a hindrance, and I had to put my family's safety first. First, perhaps, but surely not to the exclusion of everyone else. What are you trying to say, you yourself are surrounded by children, and if you remain here, that can only be because you are in no danger. There's no time to lose, be on your way and may God go with you, for without Him there is always danger. You sound like a man without faith, for you should know the Lord is everywhere. Indeed, but He often ignores us, and don't speak to me about faith after abandoning my neighbor to his fate. Well, then, why not go and rescue him yourself. That's exactly what I intend to do. This conversation took place in the middle of the afternoon. It was a fine, sunny day, with a few white clouds drifting across the sky like unmanned barges. Joseph went to untie the donkey, called his wife, and told her without further explanation, I'm off to Sepphoris to look for our neighbor, Ananias, who's been badly wounded and cannot make the journey on his own. Mary simply nodded in reply, but Jesus clung to his father and pleaded, Take me with you. Joseph looked at his son, placed his right hand on the boy's head, and told him, You stay here, I'll be back soon, if I make good time, I should be back before dawn, and he could be right, for the distance between Nazareth and Sepphoris cannot be much more than five miles, about the same distance as from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, additional proof that the world is full of coincidences. Joseph did not mount the donkey, he wanted the animal to be fresh for the return journey, firm and steady on its feet and prepared to carry a sick man gently, or, to

be precise, a wounded soldier, which is not quite the same thing.

At the foot of the hill where, almost a year before, Ananias had told him of his decision to join the rebel army of Judas the Galilean, the carpenter looked up at the three enormous boulders on the summit, which reminded him of segments of a fruit. Perched on high, they appeared to be waiting for a reply from heaven and earth to the questions posed by all the creatures of this world, even though the creatures cannot voice them, What am I, Why am I here, What other world awaits me, this one being what it is. Were Ananias to ask such questions, we could tell him that at least the boulders remain unscathed by the wind, rain, and heat, and some twenty centuries hence they will probably still be here, and twenty centuries after that, while the world changes all around them. To the first two questions, however, there is no answer.

Throngs of fugitives were to be seen on the road, with the same look of terror on their faces as on that of the messenger sent by Ananias. They looked at Joseph in amazement, and one man, taking him by the arm, inquired, Where are you going, and the carpenter replied, To Sepphoris, to rescue a friend. If you know what's good for you, you'll do no such thing. Why not. The Romans are approaching, and there is no hope of defending the city. I must go, my neighbor is like a brother and there is no one else to fetch him. Heed my advice, and with that the wise counselor went on his way, leaving Joseph standing in the middle of the road, lost in thought, wondering whether his life was worth saving and whether he despised himself. After giving the matter thought, he decided he felt quite indifferent, like someone confronting a void that is neither near nor far, and where there is nowhere to rest one's eyes, for who can focus on emptiness. Then it occurred to him that as a father he had a duty to protect his children, that he ought to return home rather than chasing after a neighbor, and Ananias was no longer even that, for he had deserted his home and sent his wife away. But Joseph's children were safe, the Romans, engaged as they were in pursuing rebels, would do them no harm. Finally reaching a conclusion, Joseph heard himself say aloud, as if he were wrestling with his thoughts, And I am not a rebel either. Without further ado he gave his animal a slap on its haunch, exclaimed, Go, donkey, and continued on.

It was late evening when he arrived at Sepphoris. The long shadows of houses and trees that could be made out at first gradually disappeared into the horizon like dark, cascading water. There were few people on the streets of the city, no women or children, only weary men laying down their awkward weapons as they stretched out, panting for breath, and it was difficult to tell whether they were exhausted from combat or from flight. Joseph asked one of them, Are the Romans approaching. The man closed his eyes, slowly reopened them, and said, They'll arrive by tomorrow, and then, averting his gaze, he told Joseph, Get away from here, take your donkey and leave this place. But I'm searching for a friend who's been wounded, Joseph explained. If you counted all who have been wounded as your friends, you'd be the wealthiest man in the world. Where are the wounded. Here, there, everywhere. But is there some place in the city where they're being nursed. Yes, behind those houses you'll find a garrison where many wounded have

been given shelter, perhaps you'll find your friend there, but hurry, for more corpses are being carried out than men brought in alive. Joseph knew the place well, he had been here often, both for work, which was plentiful in a city as rich and prosperous as Sepphoris, and for certain minor religious feasts that did not justify the long and arduous journey to Jerusalem. Finding the storehouse was easy enough, all one had to do was to follow the terrible stench of blood and pus that hung in the air, almost like a game of hide and seek, Hot, cold, hot, cold, it hurts, it doesn't, but now the pain was becoming unbearable. Joseph tethered the donkey to a long pole he found nearby and entered the storehouse, which had been converted into a dormitory. Between the mats on the floor were tiny lamps which provided hardly any light, twinkling stars against a black sky, which helped to guide one's faltering steps. Joseph walked slowly between the rows of wounded men in search of Ananias. There were other strong odors in the air, the smell of oil and wine used to heal wounds, the smell of sweat, excrement, and urine, for some of these unfortunate men were unable to move, and could not help evacuating then and there. He isn't here, Joseph thought to himself as he reached the end of the row. He retraced his steps, walking more slowly this time and looking carefully. Alas, they were all alike, with their long beards, hollow cheeks, sunken eyes, and unwashed bodies covered with sweat. Some of the wounded followed him with anxious expressions, hoping that this able-bodied man had come for them, but the momentary glimmer in their eyes soon disappeared and their long vigil, for who knows what or whom, continued. Joseph came to a halt before an elderly man with white beard and hair. It is he, he thought. Yet Ananias's appearance had changed since Joseph walked past the first time, his beard and hair, white as snow before, now looked dirty, and his eyebrows, still black, looked unnatural. The old man's eyes were closed, and he breathed heavily. In a low voice Joseph called, Ananias, then, moving closer, he repeated the name louder. Little by little, as if he were emerging from the depths of the earth, the old man's eyelids began to move, and when the eyes were fully open, there was no longer any doubt, this was Ananias, the neighbor who had abandoned his home and wife to go and fight the Romans, and here he lies with frightful abdominal wounds and stinking of rotting flesh. At first Ananias does not recognize Joseph, the poor light in this makeshift infirmary does not help, and his eyesight is poorer anyway, but he recognizes him when the carpenter repeats his name in another tone of voice, which almost holds affection. The old man's eyes fill with tears, and he says over and over, It's you, it's you, what are you doing here, what have you come here for, and he tries to raise himself on one elbow and stretch out his arm, but cannot find the strength, his body sags, his whole face twisted with pain. I came for you, said the carpenter, my donkey is tethered outside, and we can be back in Nazareth in no time at all. You shouldn't have come here, the Romans are expected any minute, I can't leave this place, I'm done for, and with trembling hands he opened his tunic. Beneath the rags soaked with wine and oil were two gaping wounds which gave off such a nauseating smell that Joseph held his breath and looked away. The old man covered himself, his arms falling to his sides, as if the effort had been too much for him, Now you know why I can't leave this place, if you tried to move me, my guts would spill out. You'll be all right with a bandage tight around your belly and if we go slowly, insisted

Joseph, unconvincingly, because it was obvious that even if he could get the old man onto the donkey's back, they would never make it to Nazareth. Ananias's eyes were shut again, and without opening them he told Joseph, You must go back, I'm warning you, the Romans will be here soon. Don't worry, they won't attack at night. Go home, go home, muttered Ananias, and in reply Joseph said, Try to get some sleep.

He watched over him all night long. Struggling to keep awake, he found himself wondering why he had come to this place, since there had never really been any deep friendship between Ananias and him. There was a considerable difference in their ages, and besides, he had always had certain reservations about Ananias and his wife, who could be nosy and meddlesome even while doing one a favor, and who always gave the impression of expecting to be paid back in kind. But he is my neighbor, Joseph thought, and could think of no better answer to silence his misgivings, he's my fellow creature, a man close to death, with his eyes already shut, as if to savor every minute of his dying, I can't abandon him now. He was sitting in the narrow space between the mat on which Ananias lay and that of a young boy who couldn't have been much older than his son Jesus, the poor lad was moaning quietly and muttering to himself, his lips cracked with fever. Joseph held his hand to comfort him, and Ananias's hand began fumbling as if reaching for a weapon to defend himself, and there the three of them remained, Joseph alive and well between two who were dying, one life between two deaths. Meanwhile the tranquil night sky sent stars and planets into orbit, and a shining white moon came floating through space from the other end of the world, shedding innocence over the whole of Galilee. It was only much later that Joseph emerged from the torpor into which he had reluctantly fallen. He awoke with a sense of relief, because this time he had not dreamed of the road to Bethlehem. Opening his eyes, he saw that Ananias, whose eyes were also open, was dead. At the last moment he had been unable to endure the vision of death, and his hand gripped Joseph's so tightly that Joseph felt his bones were being crushed. To ease the painful grip, he released his other hand, which was clasping the boy's, and noticed that the boy's fever had subsided. Joseph looked out through the open door, there was daylight, a sky in hues of sepia. Human forms stirred in the storehouse, those who could get up unaided went outside to watch the sunrise. They might well have asked one another or even the sky itself, What will this new dawn bring. One day we shall learn not to ask useless questions, but until that day comes, let us take this opportunity to ask ourselves, What will this new dawn bring. Joseph thought to himself, I may as well go, I can do nothing more here, but there was a questioning note in these words that prompted him to think, I could take his body to Nazareth, and the idea seemed so obvious that he almost convinced himself this was why he had come, to find Ananias alive and carry him back dead. The boy asked for water. Joseph held an earthenware bowl to his lips, How do you feel, he asked him. Better. At least the fever seems to have passed. Let me see if I can stand up, said the boy. Be careful, said Joseph, trying to restrain him, then another idea occurred to him. All he could do for Ananias was bury him in Nazareth, but the boy's life could still be saved if Joseph delivered him from this death house, so that one human being could be substituted, in a manner of speaking,

for another. He no longer felt compassion for Ananias, whose body now was an empty shell, his soul more remote each time Joseph looked at him. The boy appeared to sense that something good was about to happen to him, and his eyes shone, but before he could ask any questions, Joseph had already gone to bring the donkey. Blessed is the Lord who puts such splendid ideas into the heads of mankind. But the donkey was gone. All that remained was a bit of rope tied to the pole. The thief had wasted no time trying to untie the knot, using a sharp knife, he had simply cut through it.

This latest misfortune drained the strength from Joseph's body. Like one of those felled calves he had watched being sacrificed in the Temple, he dropped to his knees, covered his face with his hands, and shed all the tears that had been welling for the last thirteen years while he waited for the day he would be able to forgive himself or face the final condemnation. God does not forgive the sins He makes us commit. Joseph did not return to the storehouse, for he realized that his actions had become forever meaningless, that the world itself was meaningless. The sun was rising, but why, O Lord, were there thousands of tiny clouds scattered throughout the sky like stones in the desert. Anyone watching Joseph there, as he wiped his tears with the sleeve of his tunic, would have thought he was mourning the death of a relative found with the other wounded men in the storehouse, when the truth was that Joseph had just shed the last of his natural tears, the tears of life's sorrow.

After wandering through the city for more than an hour, hoping that he might still find the stolen animal, he was about to give up and return to Nazareth when he was arrested by Roman soldiers, who had taken Sepphoris. They asked him his name, I am Joseph, son of Eh, and then where he lived, In Nazareth, and where he was going, Back to Nazareth, and what brought him to Sepphoris, Someone told me a neighbor of mine was here, and who was this neighbor, Ananias, and had he found him, Yes, and where had he found him, In a storehouse with others, and what others might they be, Wounded men, and in which part of the city, Over in that direction. They took him to a square where a group of men were assembled, twelve or fifteen sitting on the ground, some of them wounded, and the soldiers ordered him, Join the others. Realizing that the men sitting there were rebels, he protested, I am a carpenter and a man of peace, and one of the rebels spoke up and said, We don't know this man, but the officer in charge of the prisoners refused to listen and, giving Joseph one mighty push, sent him flying to the ground, where he ended up among the others. The only place you're going is to your death, the officer told him. The double shock of this misfortune and the fate awaiting him left Joseph stunned. But once he regained his composure, he felt a great tranquillity, convinced that it was all a nightmare which would soon pass and that there was no point tormenting himself over these threats, for they would vanish the moment he opened his eyes. Then he remembered that when he dreamed of the road to Bethlehem, he was also convinced he would wake up, and he began to tremble as the cruel certainty of his fate finally dawned on him, I'm going to die, to die even though I'm innocent. He felt a hand on his shoulder, the hand of the prisoner beside him, When the commanding officer

comes, we'll explain you're not one of us, and he'll order your release. And what about the rest of you. The Romans have crucified every rebel they've captured so far, and they're not likely to treat us any better. God will save you. Surely you're forgetting that God saves souls rather than bodies. The soldiers arrived with more prisoners, in twos and threes, and then a large group of about twenty. The inhabitants of Sepphoris had gathered in the square, and there were even women and children in the crowd. A restless murmur could be heard, but no one dared move without the permission of the Roman soldiers, who were still looking for anyone who might have helped the rebels. After a while another man was dragged into the square, and the soldiers who had captured him announced, That's all for now, whereupon the officer in charge shouted, On your feet, you lot. The prisoners guessed that the commanding officer of the cohort was approaching, and the man sitting beside Joseph told him, Prepare yourself, what he meant was, Prepare yourself for release, as if one needed to prepare oneself for freedom, but if someone came, it was not the commanding officer, nor did anyone learn who it was, because the officer in charge suddenly gave an order in Latin to the soldiers. Needless to say, everything said so far by the Romans has been in Latin, because it would be unthinkable for the descendants of the she-wolf to speak in barbarian tongues, they have interpreters for that purpose, but since the conversation here was between the soldiers themselves, no translation was required. Obeying their superior's orders, the soldiers quickly rounded up the prisoners, Forward march, and the procession of condemned men made its way out of the city, with the crowd trailing behind. Forced to march with the other prisoners, Joseph had nowhere to turn for mercy. He raised his arms to heaven and called out, Save me, I'm not one of them, help me, I'm innocent, at which point a soldier prodded him from behind with the butt of a lance, almost knocking him to the ground. In despair, Joseph felt hatred for Ananias, the one who had got him into this predicament, but the feeling soon passed, giving way to emptiness. He thought to himself, There is nowhere else to go, but he was wrong, and he would soon be there. Strange as it may seem, the certainty of death calmed him. He looked around at his companions in misfortune, who seemed quite composed, some, naturally, were downcast, but others defiantly held their heads high. Most were Pharisees. Then, for the first time, Joseph remembered his children, and for one fleeting moment even his wife, but all those faces and names were too much for his tired brain. In need of sleep and food, he felt weak, could not concentrate, the only image that remained was that of Jesus, his firstborn and his final punishment. He recalled their conversation about his dream and remembered telling Jesus, It just isn't possible for you to ask me all the questions, or for me to give you all the answers, but now the time for answering questions was over.

On a stretch of high ground overlooking the city forty thick posts strong enough to take a man's weight had been erected in rows of eight. At the foot of each post lay a crossbar long enough to allow a man to spread his arms. At the sight of these instruments of torture, some of the prisoners tried to escape, but the soldiers, baring their swords, drove them back. One rebel attempted to impale himself on a sword, but to no avail, he was dragged off at once to be crucified. Then the laborious task began of

nailing the wrists of each condemned man to a crossbar before hoisting him up on the upright posts. The screams and moans could be heard throughout the countryside, and the people of Sepphoris wept before this sad spectacle, which they were obliged to watch as a warning. One by one, the crosses went up, a man hanging from each, his legs drawn in as we saw before, who knows for what reason, perhaps an order from Rome intended to make the job easier and save on materials, because one does not need to know much about crucifixions to see that a cross made to the measurements of the average man would require more work and be heavier to carry and more awkward to handle, not to mention the serious disadvantage to the victim, since the closer his feet to the ground, the easier it is to lower his body afterward, without having to use a ladder, thus allowing him to pass directly, as it were, from the arms of the cross into the arms of his family, if he has any, or of the appointed gravedigger, who will not just leave him lying there. It so happened that Joseph was the last to be crucified, and this meant he had to look on as his thirty-nine unknown companions were tortured one by one and put to death. When his turn finally came, he was resigned to his fate and no longer protested his innocence, thus missed his last opportunity to save himself, when the soldier doing the hammering said to the officer in charge, This is the man who said he was innocent. The officer paused for a moment, giving Joseph just enough time to cry out, I'm innocent, but instead Joseph chose to remain silent. The officer looked up and probably decided that the symmetry would be destroyed if the last cross was not raised, and that forty made a nice round figure, so he gave the signal, the nails were driven in, Joseph let out a scream and went on screaming, then they hoisted him up, his weight held by the nails that pierced his wrists, and there were more cries of pain as a long nail was driven through his feet. Dear God, this is the man You created, blessed be Your holy name, since it is forbidden to curse You. Suddenly, as if someone had given another signal, panic gripped the inhabitants of Sepphoris, not because of the crucifixions they had just witnessed but at the sight of flames spreading rapidly through the city, fire destroying the houses and public buildings and even the trees in the inner courtyards. Indifferent to the blaze set by their comrades, four soldiers from the cohort moved between the rows of dying men, methodically breaking their shinbones with iron rods. Sepphoris was burning wherever one looked, as the crucified men expired one after another. The carpenter named Joseph, son of Eh, was a young man in his prime, having just turned thirty-three.

WHEN THIS WAR ENDS, AND IT WILL NOT BE LONG NOW, for as we can see it is already almost over, there will be a final reckoning of those who lost their lives, so many here, so many there, some near, some farther away, and if it is true that with the passage of time the number of those killed in ambushes or open warfare loses all importance and is forgotten, those crucified, who number around two thousand, according to the most reliable statistics, will long be remembered by the people of Judaea and Galilee, even after more wars have broken out and more blood has been spilled. Two thousand crucified is a lot, but it seems even more if we imagine them set out a mile apart along a highway or encircling, for example, the country that one day will be known as Portugal, which has a perimeter more or less that length. Between the river Jordan and the sea, widows and orphans weep, an ancient custom, that is why they are widows and orphans, so that they may weep, and when the boys grow up and go to fight a new war, there will be more widows and orphans to take their place, and even if customs change, if black becomes the color of mourning instead of white, or if women wear black mantillas instead of tearing their hair out, tears of sincere grief will never change.

So far Mary is not weeping, but in her soul she has a presentiment, for her husband has not returned, and in Nazareth it is rumored that Sepphoris was burned and men were crucified. Accompanied by her eldest son, she retraces the route taken by Joseph yesterday. Very likely, at one point or other, her feet will touch the footprints left by her husband's sandals, for this is not the rainy season and there is nothing but the gentlest breeze to disturb the soil. Joseph's footprints are like the prints of a prehistoric animal that inhabited these parts in some bygone age, for we say, Only yesterday, and we might as well say, A thousand years ago, because time is not a rope one can measure from knot to knot, time is a pitched and undulating surface which only memory can make accessible. A group of villagers from Nazareth accompany Mary and Jesus, some moved by compassion, others simply curious, and there are distant relatives of Ananias, but they will return home as uncertain as they left, for since they have not found a body, he may still be alive. It never occurred to them to search the debris of the storehouse, where they might have recognized his body among the charred remains. These Nazarenes had gone half the way, when they met a detachment of soldiers that had been sent to search their village, so some turned back, worried about what might happen to their property, for one can never predict what soldiers will do when they knock on a door and find no one at home. The officer in charge asked why these villagers were on their way to Sepphoris, and they replied, We wanted to see the fire, an explanation which the officer accepted, because fires have had an irresistible attraction for mankind since the world began, there are even those who say that fire is a kind of inner call, an instinctive memory of the original fire, as if ashes somehow preserve what was burned, thus explaining, by this theory, the look of fascination in our faces as we watch a camp fire or the flickering of a candle in a dark room. If we humans were as foolhardy or daring as butterflies, moths, and other winged insects, and threw ourselves, all together, into the flames, then who knows, perhaps the blaze would be so fierce and the light so strong that God would open His eyes and be roused from His torpor, too late, of course, to recognize us, but in time to

see the impending void after we went up in smoke.

Although she had left behind a house full of children with no one to look after them, Mary refused to turn back, and she was easy in her mind, because it is not every day that soldiers invade a village and start slaughtering young children. Besides, these Romans were not only willing but even eager to see the children grow up, provided they remained servile and paid their taxes on time. Mother and son are walking along the road by themselves, because Ananias's relatives, some half dozen of them, are so busy chatting that they have fallen behind. Mary and Jesus have only words of anguish to exchange and so prefer to remain silent rather than distress each other. A strange silence hangs everywhere, no birds are singing, the wind has died down, there is nothing but the sound of footsteps, and even that withdraws, like a polite intruder who has entered an empty house by mistake. Sepphoris comes into sight suddenly as they turn a bend in the road. Several houses are still burning, thin columns of smoke rise here and there, walls are blackened, trees scorched from top to bottom, the foliage intact but the color of rust. And there on our right, the rows of crosses.

Mary started running, but they were still some distance away and she had to slow down and catch her breath. As a result of giving birth to all those children without letup, her heart is weaker. Jesus, a respectful son, would like to accompany his mother, remaining at her side, now and later, so that they can share the same joys and sorrows, but she walks so slowly, dragging her feet, At this rate, Mother, we'll never get there. She makes a gesture as if to say, You go ahead and I'll catch up. Leaving the road, Jesus sprints across the field to save time, Father, Father, he calls, hoping that his father will not be there, fearing that he will find him. He reaches the first row, some of the crucified men are still hanging from the crosses, others have already been taken down and lie waiting on the ground. Few have relatives to gather around them, for most of these rebels came from afar, part of a mixed contingent which made its last united assault and is now finally dispersed, each man left to confront alone the ineffable solitude of death. Jesus does not see his father, his heart would rejoice but his reason tells him, Wait, we haven't got to the end of the row. But in fact the end is right here. Stretched out on the ground is the father he has been seeking, there is little blood, only the open wounds on the wrists and feet, You could be sleeping, Father, but no, you are not asleep, how could you possibly sleep with your legs twisted in that position, how charitable of them to remove you from the cross, but there are so many bodies here that the good souls who removed you had no time to straighten your broken bones. The boy named Jesus kneels beside his dead father and weeps, he cannot bring himself to touch the corpse, but then grief overcomes his fear and he embraces the motionless body. Father, Father, he sobs aloud, and another cry accompanies his, What have they done to you, Joseph, it is the voice of Mary, who has arrived at last, exhausted and sobbing her heart out, for when she saw her son come to a halt in the distance, she knew what to expect. Mary's tears overflow when she sees the pitiful state of her husband's legs. We do not know what happens to life's sorrows after death, especially those last moments of suffering, it is

possible that everything ends with death, but we cannot be certain that the memory of suffering does not linger at least for several hours in this body we describe as dead, nor can we rule out the possibility that matter uses putrefaction as a last resort to rid itself of the suffering. With a tenderness she would never have permitted herself to show while her husband was alive, Mary pulled down Joseph's tunic after trying to straighten the broken legs that gave him the grotesque appearance of a puppet coming apart. Jesus helped his mother pull the tunic down over the thin shinbones, perhaps the most vulnerable part of the human body and a painful reminder of our fragile state. The feet hung sideways, and flies, drawn by the smell of blood, kept swarming around the wounds inflicted by the nail. Joseph's sandals had fallen to the ground beside the thick trunk of which he was the last fruit. Worn and covered with dust, they would have lain there forgotten if Jesus had not recovered them without thinking. As if obeying an order, and unnoticed by Mary, he tucked the sandals under his belt, a gesture of perfect symbolism, Joseph's firstborn claiming his inheritance, for certain things begin as simply as this, and even today people say, In my father's shoes I become a man.

From a discreet distance Roman soldiers kept a lookout, ready to intervene in the event of disorderly behavior among those mourning and tending to the bodies. But these people showed no sign of making trouble, they were doing nothing but praying as they went from body to body, and this took more than two hours. Rending their garments, they recited the prayer for the dead over each corpse, relatives on the left, others on the right, their voices breaking the evening silence as they chanted, Lord, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You should visit him, man is but a puff of wind, his days pass like a shadow, he lives and fails to see death and saves his soul by escaping to the tomb, man born of woman is given little time and much disquiet, he blossoms like a flower and like a flower perishes, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You should visit him. And yet, after acknowledging man's utter insignificance in the eyes of God, in tones so deep that they seemed to come from within rather than from the voices themselves, the chorus soared in exaltation to proclaim before Almighty God our unsuspected worth, Do not forget, O Lord, that You made man a little lower than the angels and have crowned him with glory and honor. When the mourners reached Joseph, whom they did not know and who was the last of the forty, they passed on quickly, but the carpenter had taken with him to the other world everything he needed. Their haste was justified, because the law does not allow the crucified to remain unburied until the following day, and the sun was already going down. Jesus, given his youth, did not have to rend his garments, he was exempt from this ceremony of mourning, but his strong, clear voice could be heard above all the others when he intoned, Blessed be the Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who created you with justice, kept you alive with justice, nourished you with justice, who with justice allowed you to know this world, and with justice will resurrect you, blessed be the Lord, who resurrects the dead. Stretched out on the ground, Joseph, if he can still feel the pain of the nails, may perhaps also hear these words, and he must know what part God's justice played in his life, now that he can no longer expect anything more from either the

one or the other. The mourners, finished praying, now had to bury their dead, but there were so many dead, and with night fast approaching it was impossible to find a fitting place for all of them, that is to say a real tomb covered with a stone, and as for wrapping the bodies in mortuary cloth or even a simple shroud, there was no hope of that. So they decided to dig a long trench to hold them, which was not the first time nor would it be the last that men were buried where they lay. Jesus too was given a spade, and he set about digging vigorously beside the grown-ups. Destiny in its wisdom decreed that Joseph be buried in a grave dug by his own son, thus fulfilling the prophecy, The son of man will bury man, while he himself remains unburied. However enigmatic these words seem at first, they merely state the obvious, for the last man, by virtue of being last, will have no one to bury him. But this will not be true of the boy who has just buried his father, the world will not end with him, and we shall be here for thousands and thousands of years in a constant succession of births and deaths, and if man has always been the implacable foe and executioner of man, all the more reason for him to go on being the gravedigger of man.

The sun has now disappeared behind the mountain. Enormous dark clouds over the valley of Jordan move slowly westward, as if pulled by this fading light that tinges their upper edges crimson. It has suddenly become cooler, and rain seems likely tonight although unusual for this time of the year. The soldiers have withdrawn, taking advantage of the waning light to return to their encampment some distance away, where their comrades-in-arms have probably arrived after carrying out a similar search in Nazareth. This is how a modern war should be fought, with the utmost coordination, not in the haphazard fashion of Judas the Galilean's rebel force, and the outcome is there for all to see, thirty-nine of his men crucified, the fortieth an innocent man who came with the best of intentions and met a miserable death. The people of Sepphoris will look among the ruins of their burnt-out city for somewhere to spend the night, and at daybreak each family will salvage what possessions they can from their former homes, then go off to make a new life for themselves elsewhere, because not only has Sepphoris been razed to the ground but Rome will make sure the city is not rebuilt for some time. Mary and Jesus are two shadows in the midst of a dark forest consisting of nothing but trunks. The mother draws her son to her bosom, two frightened souls searching as one for courage, and the dead beneath the ground, it seems, wish to detain the living. Jesus suggested to his mother, Let's spend the night in the city, but Mary told him, We cannot, your brothers and sisters are all alone and they must be famished. They could scarcely see where they were treading. After much stumbling, they finally reached the road, which in the dark stretched out like a parched riverbed. No sooner did they leave Sepphoris than it started raining, heavy drops to begin with, making a gentle sound as they hit the thick dust on the ground. The rain became more insistent, oppressive, the dust soon turned to mud, and Mary and her son had to remove their sandals to avoid losing them. They walk in silence, the mother covering her son's head with her mantle, they have nothing to say to each other, perhaps they are even thinking vaguely that Joseph is not dead after all, that when they get home, they will find him tending to the children as best he can, and

he will ask his wife, What on earth possessed you to go out without asking my permission, but the tears have welled up again in Mary's eyes, not only because of her grief but also because of this infinite weariness, this continuous, persistent rain, the grim darkness, all much too sad and black for any hope that Joseph is still alive.

One day someone will tell the widow about the miracle witnessed at the gates of Sepphoris, when the tree trunks used to crucify the prisoners took root again and sprouted new leaves, and miracle is the right word, first because the Romans were in the habit of taking the crosses with them when they left, and secondly because trunks that have been chopped top and bottom have no sap left or shoots capable of transforming a thick, bloodstained post into a living tree. The credulous attributed this wonder to the blood of the martyrs, the skeptics said it was the rain, but no one had ever heard of blood or rain reviving trees once they were made into crosses and abandoned on a mountain slope or the plain of a desert. That it had been willed by God was something no one dared suggest, not only because His will, whatever that may be, is inscrutable, but also because no one could think of any good reason why the crucified of Sepphoris should be the beneficiaries of this peculiar manifestation of divine grace, which was really more in keeping with the style of pagan gods. These trees here will survive a long time, and the day will come when this episode will be forgotten, and since mankind seeks an explanation for everything, whether it be true or false, tales and legends will be invented, containing facts to begin with, then moving gradually away from the facts, until they become pure fantasy. Then eventually the trees will die of old age or be cut down to make way for a road, a school, a house, a shopping center, or a military base, the excavators will unearth the skeletons buried for two thousand years, and the anthropologists will appear on the scene, and an expert in anatomy will examine the remains and announce to a shocked world that there is conclusive evidence that men were crucified in those days with their legs bent at the knee. And people will be unable to refute these scientific findings though they find them aesthetically deplorable.

When Mary and Jesus arrived home drenched to the skin, covered with mud, and shivering with cold, they found the children in better spirits than one might have expected, thanks to the resourcefulness of James and Lisa, who were older than the others. They remembered to light the fire when the night turned cold, and sat huddled against one another around it and tried to forget the pangs of hunger. Hearing someone knocking outside, James went to open the door. The rain poured in as their mother and brother crossed the threshold, it seemed to flood the house. The children stared, and knew their father would not be coming back when Jesus closed the door, but they said nothing until James finally asked, Where is Father. The ground slowly absorbed the water that dripped from wet clothes, and all that broke the silence was the damp wood crackling in the hearth. The children stared at their mother. James repeated the question, Where is Father. Mary opened her mouth to speak, but the word, like a hangman's noose, choked her, forcing Jesus to intervene, Father is dead, he told them, and without knowing why, perhaps as proof that Joseph was dead, he took the wet sandals from his belt and

showed them, I brought these back. The older children were already close to tears, but the sight of those forlorn sandals was too much for all of them, and the widow and her nine children were soon crying their hearts out. Not knowing which of them to comfort, she sank to her knees, exhausted, and her children gathered around her, like a cluster of grapes that did not need to be trampled to release the colorless wine of tears. Only Jesus remained standing, clasping the sandals to his bosom, musing that one day he would wear them, or this minute if he could summon the courage. One by one the children stole away from their mother, the older children tactfully leaving her to grieve, the younger ones following their example. Unable to share their mother's sorrow, they simply wept, in this respect young children are like the very old, who cry for nothing, cry even when they no longer feel or because they are incapable of feeling.

Mary knelt in the middle of the room, as if awaiting a decision or sentence. She became aware of her wet clothes, got to her feet, shivering, opened a chest, and took out an old, patched tunic that had belonged to her husband. Handing it to Jesus, she told him, Remove that wet tunic, put this on, and go sit by the fire. Then she called her two daughters, Lisa and Lydia, and made them hold up a mat to form a screen while she too changed, before starting to prepare supper with the few provisions left in the house. Jesus, in his father's tunic, sat by the fire. The tunic was too long for him at the hem and sleeves, in other circumstances his brothers would have laughed at him for looking like a scarecrow, but this was not the time for jesting, not only because they were in mourning but also because of the air of superiority that emanated from the boy, who suddenly appeared to have grown in stature, and this impression became even stronger when, slowly and deliberately, he took his father's wet sandals and held them in front of the fire. James went and sat beside Jesus and asked him in a low voice, What happened to Father. They crucified him with the other rebels, Jesus whispered. But why. Who knows, there were forty men there, and Father was one of them. Perhaps he too was a rebel. Who are you talking about. Father, of course. Impossible, he was always here at home, working at his bench. And what about the donkey, did you find it. Nowhere to be seen, alive or dead. Supper was ready, and they all sat around the common bowl and ate what little food there was. By the time they finished eating, the younger children were nodding off to sleep, their spirits still troubled but their bodies in need of rest. The boys' mats were laid out along the wall at the far end of the room. Mary told the two girls, You will sleep here with me, one on either side to avoid any jealousy. Cold air came through the gap in the door, but the house stayed warm, there was still heat coming from the fire. Huddling up against one another, the children gradually fell asleep despite their sighs. Holding back her tears, Mary waited for them to sleep, for she wished to grieve alone, her eyes were wide open as she contemplated a future without a husband and with nine mouths to feed. But unexpectedly the sorrow left her soul, and her body succumbed to fatigue, and then they were all asleep.

In the middle of the night Mary was awakened by the sound of moaning. She thought she dreamed it, but she had not been dreaming, she heard it a second time, louder.

Taking care not to disturb her daughters, she sat up and looked around her, but the light from the oil lamp did not reach the far end of the room. Which of them could it be, she wondered, but knew in her heart it was Jesus who moaned. She got up quietly, went to fetch the lamp from its nail on the door, and raising it above her head, she examined the children one by one. Jesus tossed and turned, muttering to himself as if having a nightmare, he must be dreaming about his father, a mere boy and yet he has already witnessed so much suffering, death, blood, and torture. Mary thought to rouse him, to stop this agony, but changed her mind, she did not want to know what her son was dreaming, and then she noticed he was wearing his father's sandals. She found this strange, it worried her, how foolish, quite uncalled for and so disrespectful, wearing his father's sandals on the very day of the poor man's death. Not knowing what to think, she returned to her mat. Perhaps because of those sandals, and the tunic, her son was reliving his father's fatal adventure from the day Joseph left home, and thus the boy had passed into the world of men, to which he already belonged by the law of God, he was now heir to Joseph's few possessions, a much-mended tunic and a pair of worn sandals, and his dreams, Jesus retracing his father's last steps on earth. It did not occur to Mary that her son might be dreaming about something else.

Day broke with a clear sky. It was warm and bright, and there was no sign of further rain. Mary set out early with all her sons of school age, accompanied by Jesus, who as we mentioned earlier has already finished his studies. At the synagogue she informed the elders of Joseph's death and the probable circumstances that led to his crucifixion, cautiously adding that as many of the burial rites as possible were observed, despite the haste and improvisation with which everything had to be done. Finding herself alone with Jesus as they headed home, she thought to ask him why he had decided to wear his father's sandals, but something dissuaded her at the last moment. He might be at a loss to explain, might feel embarrassed. And unlike the child who gets up in the middle of the night to steal food and is caught in the act, he could not very well make the excuse that he was feeling hungry, unless he meant a kind of hunger unknown to us. Another idea occurred to Mary. Now that her son was the head of the household, it was only right that as his mother and dependent she should show him respect, consideration, take an interest in the dream that disturbed his sleep, Were you dreaming about your father, she asked, but Jesus pretended not to hear, he turned his face away, but his mother, undeterred, repeated the question, Were you dreaming. She was taken aback when her son replied, Yes, then almost immediately said, No, his expression clouding over as if he was seeing his dead father once more. They walked on in silence. When they got home, Mary set about carding wool, thinking to herself that she should make the most of her skills and take on extra work to support her family. Meanwhile Jesus, after looking up at the sky to see if the good weather would hold, fetched his father's workbench from the shed, checked the jobs that still had to be finished, and examined the various tools. Mary was pleased to see her son taking his new responsibilities so seriously. When the younger boys returned from the synagogue and they all sat down to eat, only the most careful observer would have guessed that this family had just lost a husband and father. Jesus's

dark, twitching eyebrows betrayed anxiety, but the others, including Mary, seemed tranquil and composed, for it is written, Make bitter weeping and make passionate wailing, and let your mourning be according to his desert for one day or two, lest evil be spoken of you, and so be comforted of your sorrow, for it is also written, Give not your heart unto sorrow, put it away remembering the last end, forget it not, for there is no returning again, him you shall not profit, and will only hurt yourself. There will be a time to laugh and rejoice, as surely as one day follows another, one season another, and the best lesson of all comes from the Book of Ecclesiastes, where it is written, There is nothing better for man in this world than that he should eat, drink, and be merry even as he labors. For to the man who is virtuous in His eyes God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy. That same afternoon, Jesus and James went onto the terrace to repair the roof, which had been leaking throughout the night, and in case anyone is wondering why this minor domestic problem was not mentioned earlier, let me remind him that the death of a human being takes precedence over all else.

Night returned, and another day would soon dawn. The family supped as best they could, then settled down on their mats to sleep. Mary woke with a start in the early hours, no, it was not she who was dreaming but Jesus. It was heartbreaking to hear his moans, which awakened the older children, but it would have taken much more to rouse the little ones, who were enjoying the deep sleep of the innocent. Mary found her son tossing and turning on his mat, his arms raised as if fending off a sword or lance, but he gradually quieted down, either because his attackers had withdrawn or because his life was ebbing away. Jesus opened his eyes and wept in his mother's arms like a little child, even grown men become children again when they are frightened or upset, they do not like to admit it, poor things, but there is nothing like a good cry to relieve one's sorrow. What's wrong, my son, what troubles you, Mary asked in distress, and Jesus could not or would not answer, there was nothing childlike about those pursed lips. Tell me what you were dreaming about, insisted Mary, and trying to encourage him to speak, she asked, Did you see your father. The boy shook his head, released his arms, and fell back on his mat. Try to get some sleep, he told her, and then turning to his brothers, It's nothing, go back to sleep, I'll be all right. Mary rejoined her daughters but lay awake until morning, expecting Jesus' dream to return at any moment. She wondered what this dream could be that caused him so much anguish, but nothing more happened. It did not occur to her that her son might also be lying awake, to keep from dreaming again. What a strange coincidence, she thought, that Jesus, who had always slept peacefully, should start having nightmares immediately after his father's death, God forbid that it should be the same dream, she prayed inwardly. If her common sense assured her that dreams were neither bequeathed nor inherited, she was much deceived, because fathers do not need to confide their dreams to their sons for them to have the same dream at the same hour.

Day finally dawned, and the morning light streamed through the chink in the door. On opening her eyes, Mary saw that Jesus was no longer lying on his mat, Where can he have gone, she asked herself. She got up and went to look outside. He was sitting on a

bed of straw in the shed, his head buried in his arms. Chilled by the cool morning air and the sight of her son's solitude, she went up to him, Are you ill, she asked. The boy raised his eyes, No, I'm not ill. Then what's ailing you. It's these dreams I keep having. Dreams, you say. No, the same dream for the last two nights. Did you dream of your father on the cross. No, I already told you, I dream about my father but don't see him. You told me you weren't dreaming about him. That's because I don't see him, but he is in my dreams. And what is this dream that never stops tormenting you. Jesus did not reply immediately, he looked at his mother helplessly, and Mary felt as if a finger had touched her heart, here was her son looking like a little boy, with the wan expression of one who had not slept, but the first signs of a beard, which invited affectionate teasing, this was her firstborn, on whom she would rely for the rest of her life. Tell me everything, she pleaded, and Jesus finally spoke, I dream that I'm in a village that isn't Nazareth and that you are with me, but it's not you, because the woman who's my mother in the dream looks very different, and there are other boys my age, difficult to say how many, with women who could be their mothers, someone has assembled us in a square and we're waiting for soldiers who are coming to kill us, we can hear them on the road, they're nearer, but we can't see them, and I'm still not frightened, I know it's only a dream, then suddenly I feel sure Father is coming with the soldiers, I turn to you for protection, though you may not really be my mother, but you're no longer there, all the mothers have gone, leaving only us children, no longer boys but tiny babies, I'm lying on the ground and start to cry, and all the others are crying too, but I'm the only one whose father is accompanying the soldiers, we look at the opening into the square where we know they will enter, but there's no sign of them, we wait but nothing happens, though their footsteps are getting closer, they're here, no, not yet, then I see myself as I am now, trapped inside the infant, I struggle to get out, it's as if my hands and feet are tied, I call to you, but you're not there, I call to my father, who's coming to kill me, and that's when I woke up, both last night and the night before. As he spoke, Mary shuddered with horror, lowered her eyes in anguish, her greatest fear had been confirmed, somehow, inexplicably, Jesus had dreamed his father's dream, although it was slightly different. She heard her son ask, What was the dream father used to have every night. It was just a nightmare like any other. But what was it about. I don't know, your father never told me. Come now, Mother, don't hide the truth from your own son. It's best forgotten, not good for you to know. How do you know what's good or bad for me. Show some respect for your mother. Of course I respect you, but why hide things that concern me. Don't make me say any more. One day I asked Father why he was haunted by that dream, and he told me that I had no right to ask and that he had nothing to tell me. Well, then, why not accept your father's words. I did accept them while he was alive, but now I am a man, I've inherited his tunic, a pair of sandals, and a dream, and with these I can go out into the world, but I must know more about the dream. Perhaps it won't come back. Staring into his mother's eyes, Jesus told her, I will not insist on knowing so long as the dream does not come back, but if it does, swear to me you'll tell me everything. I swear it, replied Mary, yielding to her son's insistence and authority. From her full heart a silent plea went up to God, a prayer without words, which might have sounded as follows, O Lord, send this dream to haunt

my nights until the day I die, but I beseech You, spare my son, spare my son. Jesus warned her, Don't forget your promise. I won't forget, Mary assured him, repeating to herself, Spare my son, O Lord, spare my son.

But he was not spared. Night came, a black cock crowed at dawn, the dream returned, the head of the first horse appeared around the corner. Mary heard her son moan but did not go to comfort him. Shaking with fear and covered with sweat, Jesus knew that his mother was lying there awake and listening. What will she tell me, he wondered, while Mary for her part thought, What will I say to him, and she tried desperately to think how not to tell him everything. In the morning she was readying her sons for the synagogue when Jesus said, I'll come with you, then we can talk in the desert. Mary was so nervous, she kept dropping things as she tried to prepare some food, but the wine of affliction has been poured and now must be drunk. Once the younger children were taken to school, Mary and Jesus left the village, and in the desert they sat beneath an olive tree where no one except God, should He chance to be around, could possibly overhear their conversation. For stones, as we know, cannot speak, even if we strike them one against the other, and as for the earth below, that is where all words turn to silence. Jesus said, Now you must keep your promise, and Mary told him outright, Your father dreamt he was a soldier marching with other soldiers on their way to kill you. To kill me. Yes, to kill you. But that's my dream. I know, she told him, with a sigh of relief, It is easier than I imagined, she thought before saying aloud, Now that you know, let's go home, dreams are like clouds, they come and go, you only inherited this dream because you were so fond of your father, he didn't want to kill you, nor could he ever have done such a thing, even if the Lord Himself ordered him to do so, an angel would have stayed his hand, as happened to Abraham when he was about to sacrifice his son Isaac. Don't speak of things you know nothing of, said Jesus bluntly, and Mary realized that the bitter wine would have to be drunk to the dregs. What I do know, my son, is that the Lord's will must be done, whatever that will may be, and if He ordains one thing now and something quite different later, there's nothing we can do. As she finished speaking, Mary folded her hands in her lap and sat waiting. Jesus asked her, Will you answer all my questions. Of course, she said. When did Father start having this dream. Many years ago. How many years. From the day you were born. Did he have the dream every night. Yes, I believe he did, after a while he didn't bother calling me, people get used to nightmares. Tell me, Mother, was I born in Bethlehem of Judaea. That's right. What happened when I was born that my father should dream he was going to kill me. It didn't happen when you were born. But you just said so. The dream started some weeks later. Later than what. Herod ordered that all infants under the age of three should be slaughtered, why, I wish I knew. Did Father know. If he did, he never told me. So how did Herod's soldiers miss me. We were living in a cave on the outskirts of the village. You mean the soldiers didn't kill me because they couldn't find me. Yes. Was Father a soldier. Never. What did he do, then. He worked on the site of the Temple. I don't understand. I'm trying to answer your questions. But if the soldiers didn't find me because we lived outside the village, and if Father wasn't a soldier and therefore not guilty, and if he had no idea why Herod wanted

the infants killed. That's right, your father couldn't understand why Herod ordered the deaths of those children. Then. There's nothing more to tell, and unless you have more questions to ask, I've told you all I know. You're hiding something from me. Perhaps it's that you are blind.

Jesus said nothing more, felt his authority evaporate like moisture in the soil, and sensed the presence of an unworthy thought in his mind, still wavering but monstrous from the moment of its birth. He saw a flock of sheep crossing the slopes of the opposite hill, and both the shepherd and the sheep were the color of earth, like earth moving over earth. Surprise crept into Mary's tense face, that tall shepherd, that manner of walking, so many years later and just at this moment, was it an omen, but then she stared hard and felt less certain, for now the shepherd looked like any other shepherd from Nazareth as he led his tiny flock to pasture, the animals as halting as their owner. The thought that came to Jesus, that struggled to be spoken, until finally he blurted it, was, Father knew those children were going to be slaughtered. It was not a question, so there was no need for Mary to answer. How did he know, and this time it was a question. Your father was working on the Temple site in Jerusalem when he overheard some soldiers discussing what they'd been ordered to do. And then. He ran to save you. And then. He decided there was no need for us to flee so long as we didn't leave the cave. And then. That was all, the soldiers carried out their orders and left. And then. Then we returned to Nazareth. And when did the dream start. The first time was in the cave. Beside himself with grief, Jesus covered his face and cried out, Father murdered the children of Bethlehem. What are you saying, my son, they were murdered by Herod's soldiers. No, Father was to blame, Joseph son of Eli was to blame, because he knew those children were to be killed and did nothing to warn their parents. Once these words were spoken, all hope of consolation was lost forever. Jesus threw himself to the ground and wept. Those children were innocent, innocent, he said bitterly, incredible that a simple boy of thirteen should react so strongly when one thinks how selfish children can be at that age and how indifferent most people are to the misfortunes of others. But people are not all alike, there are exceptions for better and for worse, and this is clearly one of the best, a young boy weeping his heart out because his father did wrong so many years ago, but he could also be weeping on his own account if, as it would appear, he loved this father who was guilty. Mary put out her hand to comfort him, but Jesus drew away, Don't touch me, I am wounded. Jesus, my son. Don't call me your son, you are also guilty. Such are the hasty judgments of adolescence, because Mary was as innocent as the slaughtered infants, it is the men, as every woman knows, who make the decisions, my husband came and said, We're leaving, then changed his mind and without going into details told me, We're not leaving after all, and I even had to ask him, What is that screaming I hear outside. Mary made no attempt to defend herself. It would have been easy to prove her innocence, but she thought of her crucified husband, he too had been killed though innocent, and she realized to her shame and sorrow that she loved him even more now than when he was alive, so she said nothing, for one person's guilt can be assumed by another. She simply said, Let's go home, we have nothing more to discuss here, and her son replied, You go,

leave me by myself. There were no tracks of shepherd or sheep to be seen, the desert was truly deserted, and even the few scattered houses on the slope below looked like slabs of stone at an abandoned building site, gradually sinking into the ground. When Mary disappeared from sight into the gray depths of the valley, Jesus fell to his knees and called out, his entire body burning as if he were sweating blood, Father, Father, why have You forsaken me, because that was how the poor boy felt, forsaken, lost in the infinite solitude of another wilderness, without father, mother, brothers, or sisters, and already following a path of death. Concealed by his sheep, the shepherd sat watching him from afar.

TWO DAYS LATER, JESUS LEFT HOME. DURING THIS TIME HE said very little. Unable to sleep, he spent the nights awake. He could picture the awful massacre, the soldiers entering the houses and searching for cradles, their swords striking, stabbing the tender little bodies, mothers in despair, fathers roaring like chained bulls, and he also had a vision of himself inside a cave he had never seen before. At such moments, as if great waves were slowly engulfing him, he wished he were dead or at least no longer alive. One question that he had not asked his mother bothered him, How many children lost their lives. In his mind's eye they were piled high on top of one another, like beheaded lambs thrown into a heap and about to be cremated in a huge bonfire, and when reduced to ashes, they would go up to heaven in smoke. But since he had not asked this when his mother made her revelation, he felt he could not go to her now and say, By the way, Mother, I forgot to ask you the other day how many of those infants in Bethlehem passed on to a better life, to which she would reply, Ah, my son, try to put it out of your mind, there could not have been more than thirty, and if they died, it was the will of the Lord, for He could have prevented the massacre had He so desired. But Jesus could not stop wondering, How many. He would look at his brothers and ask himself, How many. How many bodies, he wanted to know, did it take to tip the scales against his own salvation. On the morning of the second day, he said to his mother, I can find no rest or peace of mind in this house, you stay here with my brothers, for I am going away. Mary raised her hands to heaven, horrified and close to tears, What are you saying, my eldest son, ready to abandon your widowed mother, whoever heard of such a thing, what is the world coming to, how can you think of leaving your home and family, what will become of us without you. James is only one year younger than me, he'll take my place and provide for all of you, as I did after your husband died. My husband was your father. I don't want to talk about him, I have nothing more to say, give me your blessing for the journey, but with or without it I am off. And where are you going, my son. I'm not sure, perhaps Jerusalem, perhaps Bethlehem, to see the land where I was born. But no one knows you there. Probably just as well, but tell me, Mother, what do you think would happen if anyone recognized me. Hush, your brothers might hear you. One day they too will have to know the truth. But have you thought of the risk, traveling at a time like this, with Roman soldiers on all the roads searching for the rebels of Judas the Galilean. The Romans are no worse than the soldiers who served under the late Herod, and they're not likely to kill me with their swords or nail me to a cross, after all, I've done nothing wrong, I'm innocent. So was your father and look what happened to him. Your husband may have been wrongfully crucified, but his life was not innocent. Jesus, my son, the devil's taken possession of your tongue. How do you know it isn't God. Don't take the name of the Lord in vain. Who can tell when the name of God is taken in vain, neither you nor I, God alone can tell, and I doubt whether we'll ever understand His reasons. My son, where on earth did you pick up such ideas at your age. Who knows, perhaps men are born carrying the truth inside them, but do not speak it because they're not completely sure it is the truth. You've decided, then, to leave us. Yes. Will you come back. I don't know. If that dream is troubling you, by all means go to Bethlehem, and go to the Temple in Jerusalem and consult the teachers, they will advise you and put your mind at rest, then you can come back to your mother

and brothers, who need you. I can't promise to return. But how will you survive, your poor father didn't live long enough to teach you everything he knew. Don't worry, I'll work in the fields or tend sheep or persuade some fishermen to take me out to sea with them. Wouldn't you prefer to be a shepherd. Why. I don't know, a feeling, that's all. We'll see what turns up, and now, Mother, I must be on my way. But you can't go like this, let me get you some food for the journey, we haven't much money, but take some, and take your father's pack, which fortunately he left behind. I'll take the food but not the pack. Your father didn't have leprosy. I cannot. One day you'll weep for your father and be sorry you didn't take it. I've already wept for him. You'll weep even more, and you won't be asking then what sins he committed. Jesus made no attempt to reply to these words. The older children, unaware of the conversation between him and their mother, gathered around Jesus and asked, Are you really going away, and James said, I wish I were going with you, for the boy dreamed of adventure, travel, of doing something challenging and different. You must stay here, Jesus told him, someone has to look after our widowed mother, the word widowed slipped out involuntarily and he bit his lip to suppress it, but what he couldn't suppress were his tears, because the vivid memory of his father suddenly caught him like a ray of dazzling light.

After the family had eaten together, Jesus departed. He bade his brothers farewell one by one, embraced his tearful mother, and told her, without knowing why, One way or another I shall always come back, and adjusting his pack on his shoulder, he crossed the yard and opened the gate to the street. There he stopped, as if reflecting. How often we find ourselves on the point of crossing a threshold or making a decision, when further consideration causes us to change our mind and turn back. Mary's face lit up with jubilant surprise, but her joy was short-lived. Jesus lay down his pack, stood mulling over something, then turned back, passed between his brothers without looking at them, and went into the house. When he reappeared a few moments later, he had his father's sandals in his hand. Silently, his eyes lowered as if modesty or some hidden shame prevented him from looking anyone in the eye, he put the sandals into the pack, and without another word or gesture walked off. Mary ran to the gate and her children followed, the older ones indifferent, it seemed, no one waved good-bye, because Jesus didn't look back even once. A neighbor who was passing and saw Jesus leave asked, Where's your son off to, Mary, and Mary replied, He's found work in Jerusalem and he'll be staying there for a while, a barefaced lie as we know, but this matter of telling the truth or lying is complicated, better to make no hasty moral judgments, because if one waits long enough, the truth becomes a lie and a lie becomes the truth.

That night, as everyone in the house lay asleep except for Mary, who could not help wondering how and where her son was at that hour, whether he was safe in a caravansary, or huddled under a tree, or between the rocks of some dark ravine, or, God forbid, taken prisoner by the Romans. She heard the outside gate creak, and her heart leaped, It's Jesus coming back, she thought, momentarily overcome with joy and confusion. What should I do, she was reluctant to open the gate, to appear triumphant,

to greet him with words such as, It didn't take you long to come back after giving your mother a sleepless night. That would be humiliating, better to say nothing, pretend to be asleep, let him creep in quietly, and if he lies down on his mat without even saying I'm back, tomorrow I'll pretend to be surprised that the prodigal son has returned. However brief his absence, her happiness is great, for absence too is a kind of death, the difference being that with absence there is still hope. But he's so slow in coming to the door, who knows, perhaps he changed his mind again, Mary cannot bear the suspense any longer, she will peer through the chink in the door without being seen and run back to her mat should her son decide to enter, and if he shows signs of leaving again, she'll be able to stop him. Tiptoeing on bare feet, she went to the door and looked out. The moon was bright, and the yard shone like water. A tall, dark figure, moving slowly, came toward the door, and the moment Mary saw him, she put her hands to her mouth to keep from screaming. It was not her son, it was the beggar, covered with rags as when she first saw him, but now, perhaps because of the moonlight, those rags were suddenly like sumptuous robes that stirred in the breeze. Terrified, she locked the door, What can he want from me, she muttered with trembling lips. The man who had claimed to be an angel moved to one side, was now right at the door, yet made no attempt to enter, Mary could hear him breathing, and then she heard the sound of something ripped open, as if the earth was being split to reveal an enormous abyss. The massive shadow of the angel appeared again, for a brief moment it blocked the entire countryside from her sight, and then, without so much as a glance at the house, he walked to the gate, taking with him, uprooted, the mysterious tree that had sprouted outside the door some thirteen years before, on the very spot where the bowl was buried. Between the opening and closing of the gate, the angel changed back into a beggar and disappeared behind the wall, this time in total silence, dragging the leafy branches with him as though the tree were a plumed serpent. Mary opened the door cautiously and looked out. The world was bright beneath a remote sky. Near the wall of the house was a hole where the plant had been pulled out, and from there to the gate a trail of soil sparkled like the Milky Way, if that term existed in those days. She thought about her son but without heartache now, surely no harm could come to him under such a beautiful sky, serene and unfathomable, and this moon like manna made from light, nourishing the earth's roots and springs. Her soul at peace, she crossed the yard and, fearlessly treading the stars on the ground, went to open the gate. She looked outside, saw that the trail ended a short distance away, as if the iridescence of the leaves had been extinguished or as if, another flight of fancy on the part of this woman who can no longer make the excuse that she is pregnant, the beggar had reverted to his angel form and finally made use of his wings to mark this special occasion. Mary pondered these strange events, and they seemed to her as simple and natural as her own hands in the moonlight. She returned to the house, took the oil lamp from its hook on the wall, and went to take a closer look at the deep hole where the plant had been. At the bottom of it lay the empty bowl. She reached in and lifted it out, the same plain bowl she remembered but with little earth left inside and no longer shining, an ordinary household utensil restored to its proper function. From now on it will be used to serve milk, water, or wine, according to one's taste and means, and how true

the saying which reminds us that everyone has his hour and everything its time.

Jesus found shelter on the first night of his travels. It was dusk when he came to a tiny hamlet just outside the city of Jenin, and fate, which had predicted so much ill fortune since the day he was born, relented on this occasion. The owners of the house where, with little hope, he sought shelter turned out to be hospitable people who could never have forgiven themselves if they left a boy of his age out in the open all night, especially at a time like this, with so much fighting and violence everywhere, men being crucified and innocent children hacked to death for no reason. Although Jesus told his kind hosts that he hailed from Nazareth and was on his way to Jerusalem, he did not repeat the shameful lie he had heard his mother tell when she said he left to do a job. He told them he was on his way to consult the teachers of the Temple about a point of holy law that greatly concerned his family. The head of the household expressed his surprise that such an important mission should be entrusted to a mere boy, however advanced in his religious studies. Jesus explained that he was entrusted with this matter as the eldest son, but made no mention of his father. He ate with the family, then settled down under the lean-to in the yard, which was the best they could offer a passing traveler. In the middle of the night the dream returned to haunt him, although this time his father and the soldiers did not get quite so close and the horse's nose did not appear around the corner. Do not imagine, however, that the dream was any less terrifying, put yourself in Jesus' place, suppose you dreamed that the father who gave you life was pursuing you with drawn sword. Those asleep inside were completely unaware of the drama taking place in the yard, for Jesus had learned to hide his fear even while he slept. When the fear became unbearable, he would instinctively cover his mouth with a hand to muffle the cry of anguish throbbing in his head. In the morning, he joined the family for breakfast, then thanked them for their hospitality with such courtesy and eloquence that the whole family felt they were momentarily sharing in the ineffable peace of the Lord, humble Samaritans though they were. Jesus said good-bye and departed, his host's parting words ringing in his ears, Blessed be You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who guides our footsteps, words he repeated to himself, praising that same Lord, God, and King, provider of all our needs, as can clearly be seen from everyday experience, in accordance with that most just rule of direct proportion, which says that more should be given to those who have more.

The rest of the journey to Jerusalem was not so easy. In the first place, there are Samaritans and there are Samaritans, which means that even in those days one swallow was not enough to make a summer, it took two, two swallows, that is, not two summers, provided there was a fertile male and female and they had offspring. No more doors opened when Jesus knocked, so our traveler had to find somewhere to sleep outdoors, once under a fig tree of the large spreading variety that resemble a dirndl skirt, on another occasion by joining a caravan which, fortunately for Jesus, had to pitch tent in the open countryside because the nearby caravansary was full. We say fortunately because before this, while crossing some uninhabited mountain, the poor boy was

attacked by two cowardly thieves, who took the little money he possessed, which meant that Jesus had no hope of finding lodgings at any of the inns, where everything had to be paid for. Anyone witnessing that episode would have looked with pity on the lad, abandoned to his fate by those heartless rogues, who went off laughing at his plight. He lay there in a lamentable state, with nothing but the sky overhead and the surrounding mountains, the infinite universe stripped of moral significance and peopled with stars, thieves, and executioners. One might argue that a boy of thirteen could not have had sufficient knowledge of science and philosophy, or even sufficient experience of life, for such thoughts, and that this boy in particular, notwithstanding his religious studies in the synagogue and his natural talent for debate, was not capable of the words and deeds attributed to him. There is no lack of carpenters' sons in these parts, or of sons whose fathers were crucified, but even if another man's son had been chosen, we are confident that whoever he was, he would have given us just as much food for thought as young Jesus. First because it is well known that every man is a world unto himself, by the path either of transcendence or immanence, and secondly because this land has always been different from any other, one need only consider how many people, both rich and poor, have traveled here to preach and prophesy, from Isaiah to Malachi, nobles, priests, shepherds, men from every conceivable walk of life, which teaches us to be cautious about jumping to conclusions, the humble origins of a carpenter's son do not give us the right to dismiss him. This boy who is on his way to Jerusalem at an age when most children do not venture outside the front door may not be a genius or luminary, but he deserves our respect. His soul, as he himself confessed, has been deeply wounded, and since the wound is unlikely to heal quickly, given his reflective nature, he has gone out into the world, perhaps to combine his scars into one definitive sorrow. It may seem inappropriate to put the complex theories of modern thinkers into the head of a Palestinian who lived so many years before Freud, Jung, Groddeck, and Lacan, but if you will pardon our presumption, it is not all that foolish, when one considers that the scriptures from which the Jews derive their spiritual nourishment consistently teach that a man, no matter the age in which he lives, is the equal in intellect of all other men. Adam and Eve are the only exceptions, not just because they were the first man and woman but because they had no childhood. And while biology and psychology may be invoked to prove that the human mind as we know it today can be traced back to Cro-Magnon man, that argument is of no interest here, inasmuch as Cro-Magnon man is not even mentioned in the Book of Genesis, which is all Jesus knew about the beginning of the world.

Distracted by these reflections, which are not entirely irrelevant to the gospel we have been telling, we forgot, to our shame, to accompany Joseph's son on the last leg of his journey to Jerusalem, where he is just now arriving, penniless but safe. Although his feet are badly blistered after the long trip, he is as steadfast as when he left home three days ago. He has been here before, so his excitement is no greater than one might expect from a devout man whose God is about to manifest himself. From this mountain known as Gethsemane, or the Mount of Olives, one can get a view of Jerusalem's

magnificent architecture, of the city's Temple, the towers, palaces, and houses, which give the impression of being within reach, but this impression depends on the degree of mystical fervor, which can lead the faithful to confuse the limitations of the body with the infinite power of the universal spirit. The evening is drawing to a close, and the sun is setting over the distant sea. Jesus begins his descent into the valley, wondering where he will spend the night, whether inside or outside the city walls. On other occasions, when he accompanied his parents at Passover, the family spent the night outside the walls, in a tent thoughtfully provided by the civic and military authorities to receive pilgrims, all of them segregated, needless to say, the men with the men, the women with the women, and the children divided according to sex. When Jesus reached the city walls, the night air had already turned chilly. He arrived just as the gates were being closed, but the watchmen allowed him to enter, and as those great wooden crossbars slammed into position, Jesus may have begun to feel remorse for some past sin, imagining himself caught in a trap, its iron teeth about to snap shut, a web imprisoning a fly. At the age of thirteen, however, he cannot have sins that numerous or serious, he is not at an age yet to be killing or stealing or bearing false witness, to be coveting his neighbor's wife or house or fields, his neighbor's male or female slave or ass or ox or any other thing that belongs to his neighbor, therefore this boy walks pure and undefiled, though he may have lost his innocence, for no one can witness death without being affected.

The roads become deserted at this hour as families gather for supper, and on them there are only beggars and vagabonds, who will also retreat into their dens and hideaways, because any minute now Roman soldiers will be scouring the streets in search of malefactors that venture even into the capital of Herod Antipas's kingdom to commit every manner of crime and iniquity despite the severe sentences that await them if they are caught, as we saw in Sepphoris. At the end of the road a night patrol with torches blazing marches past amid the clang of swords and shields and to the rhythm of feet clad in military sandals. Hiding in a dark corner, the boy waited for the soldiers to disappear, then went to look for a place to sleep. He found one among the many building sites around the Temple, a gap between two great stone slabs, with another slab on top to form a roof. There he munched what remained of his hard, moldy bread, along with some dry figs he found at the bottom of his pack. He was thirsty but resigned himself to going without water. Stretching out on his mat, he covered himself with the little mantle he carried as part of his baggage and, curling up to protect himself from the cold, which penetrated from both sides of his precarious refuge, he managed to fall asleep. Being in Jerusalem did not prevent him from dreaming, but perhaps because he was close to God's holy presence, his dream was merely a repetition of familiar scenes that merged with the arrival of the patrol he encountered earlier. He awoke as the sun was rising. Wrapped in his mantle, he dragged himself out of that hole cold as a tomb and saw the houses of Jerusalem before him, low-lying houses made of stone, their walls painted pale crimson by the morning light. Then, with great solemnity, coming as it did from the lips of one who after all is still a boy, he offered up a prayer of thanksgiving, Thanks be to You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who through the power of Your mercy restored my

soul. There are certain moments in life that should be arrested and protected from time, and not simply be transmitted in a gospel or a painting or, as in this modern age, a photograph, film, or video. How much more interesting it would be if the person who lived those moments could remain forever visible to his descendants, so that those of us alive today could go to Jerusalem and see with our own eyes young Jesus, son of Joseph, all wrapped up in his little threadbare mantle, beholding the houses of Jerusalem and giving thanks to the Lord who mercifully restored his soul. Since his life is just beginning at the age of thirteen, one can assume there are brighter and darker hours in store for him, moments of greater joy and despair, pleasure and grief, but this is the moment we ourselves would choose, while the city slumbers, the sun is at a standstill, the light intangible, and a young boy wrapped in a mantle looks wide-eyed at the houses, a pack at his feet and the entire world, near and far, waiting in suspense. Alas, he has moved, the instant is gone, time has carried us into the realm of memory, it was like this, no, it was not, and everything becomes what we choose to invent.

Now Jesus walks through the narrow, crowded streets, it is still too early to go to the Temple, the teachers, as in all ages and places, only start appearing later. Jesus is no longer cold, but his stomach is rumbling, those two remaining figs served only to whet his appetite, Joseph's son is famished. Now he could do with the money those rogues stole from him, for city life is quite unlike that leisurely existence in the country, where one goes around whistling and looking for what may have been left behind by God-fearing laborers who carry out His commandments to the letter, When you are harvesting your fields and leave a sheaf behind, do not turn back to retrieve it, When you pick olives, do not go back to collect those still hanging on the branches, When you gather grapes from your vineyard, do not go rummaging for any you overlooked, leave them to be gathered by the stranger, orphan, or widow, and always remember that you were once a slave in the land of Egypt. Now, because it is a large city, and despite God's decree that His earthly dwelling be built here, these humanitarian precepts are not observed in Jerusalem, so that for anyone arriving without thirty or even three pieces of silver in his pocket the only recourse is to beg and almost certainly be refused, or to steal and run the risk of being flogged, imprisoned, or worse. But this youth is incapable of stealing and much too shy to beg. His mouth waters as he stares at the stacks of loaves, the pyramids of fruits, the cooked meats and vegetables set out on stalls up and down the streets, and the sight of all that food after three days of fasting, if we don't count the Samaritan's hospitality, almost makes him faint. It is true that he is heading for the Temple, but notwithstanding the claims of those mystics who believe in fasting, his mind would be in better condition to receive the word of the Lord if his body were fed. Fortunately, a Pharisee who happened to be passing noticed the boy's weak condition and took pity on him. Posterity will unjustly give the Pharisees the worst possible reputation, but at heart they were decent people, as this encounter clearly shows, Where are you from, asked the Pharisee, and Jesus replied, I'm from Nazareth of Galilee. Are you hungry, the man asked, and the boy lowered his eyes, there was no need to say anything, hunger was written on his face. Have you no family. Yes, but I'm traveling on my own. Did you run away. No,

and it is true, he did not run away. We must not forget that his mother and brothers bade him an affectionate farewell at the gate, and the fact that he did not turn back even once does not mean he fled. The words we use are like that, to say yes or no is the most straightforward answer possible and in principle the most convincing, yet the world demands that we start indecisively, Well no, not really, I didn't exactly run away, at which point we have to hear the story all over again, but do not worry, this is unnecessary, first because the Pharisee, who reappears in our gospel, does not need to hear it and, secondly because we know the story better than anyone else. Just think how little the main characters of this gospel know about one another, Jesus does not know everything about his mother and father, Mary does not know everything about her husband and son, and Joseph, who is dead, knows nothing about anything. Whereas we know everything that has been done, spoken, and thought, whether by them or by others, although we have to act as if we too are in the dark, in that sense we are like the Pharisee who asked, Are you hungry, when Jesus' pinched, wan face spoke for itself, No need to ask, just give me something to eat. And that is exactly what the compassionate man did, he bought two loaves still hot from the oven and a bowl of milk, and without a word handed them to Jesus. As the bowl passed between them, it so happened that a little milk spilled on their hands, whereupon they both made the same gesture, which surely comes from the depths of time, each lifted his wet hand to his lips to suck the milk, like kissing bread when it has fallen to the floor. What a pity these two will never meet again after they have sealed such an admirable and symbolic pact. The Pharisee went about his affairs, but not before taking two coins from his pocket and saying, Take this money and return home, the world is much too big for someone like you. The carpenter's son stood there clutching the bowl and the bread, no longer hungry, or perhaps still hungry but not feeling anything. He watched the Pharisee walk away, and only then did he say, Thank you, but in such a low voice that the Pharisee could not possibly have heard him, and if the man expected to be thanked, then he must have thought to himself, What an ungrateful boy. In the middle of the road, Jesus suddenly regained his appetite. He lost no time in eating his bread and drinking his milk, then gave the empty bowl to the vendor, who told him, The bowl is paid for, keep it. Is it the custom in Jerusalem to buy the bowl with the milk. No, but that's what the Pharisee wanted, though you can never tell what's on a Pharisee's mind. So I can keep it. I already told you, it's paid for. Jesus wrapped the bowl in his mantle and tucked it into his pack while thinking that he would have to handle it carefully. These earthenware bowls are fragile and easily broken, they are only made of a little clay on which fortune has precariously bestowed a shape, and the same could be said of mankind. His body nourished and his spirits revived, Jesus set off in the direction of the Temple.

A LARGE CROWD HAD ALREADY GATHERED ON THE CONCOURSE facing the steep stairway that led up to the entrance. Ranged along the walls on either side were the tents of the peddlers and traders selling animals for sacrifice, and here and there were money changers at their stalls, groups of people engaged in conversation, gesticulating merchants, Roman soldiers on foot and on horseback, keeping a watchful eye, slave-borne litters, camels and donkeys laden with baggage, and frenzied shouting everywhere, interrupted by the feeble bleats of lambs and goats, some carried in people's arms or on their backs like tired children, others dragged by a rope around their neck, but all destined to perish by sword or fire. Jesus passed the bathhouse used for purification, climbed the steps, and without stopping crossed the Court of the Gentiles. He entered the Court of the Women through the door between the Chamber of the Holy Oils and the Chamber of the Nazirites, and there he found what he was looking for, the assembly of elders and scribes who traditionally gathered to discuss holy law, answer questions, and dispense advice. They stood in groups, and the boy joined the smallest of these just as a man was raising his hand to ask a question. The scribe invited him to speak, and the man asked, Can you tell me if we should accept, word for word, the commandments given by the Lord to Moses on Mount Sinai, when He promised peace on earth and told us no one would disturb our sleep, when He promised that He would banish dangerous animals from our midst, that the sword would not pass through our land, and that if our enemies pursued us, they would fall under our sword, for as the Lord Himself said, Five of you will pursue a hundred men, a hundred of you ten thousand, and your enemies will fall under your sword. The scribe eyed the man suspiciously and, thinking he might be a rebel in disguise sent by Judas the Galilean to stir up trouble with wicked insinuations about the Temple's passive resistance to Roman rule, he replied brusquely, Those words were spoken by the Lord when our forefathers were in the desert, having fled the Egyptians. The man raised his hand a second time and asked another question, Are we to understand, then, that the Lord's words on Mount Sinai were meaningful only so long as our forefathers did not enter the promised land. If that is how you interpret them, you are not a good Israelite, the words of the Lord must prevail in every age, past, present, and future, for they were in His mind before He uttered them and remained there after He spoke. But it was you yourself who said what you forbid me to think. And what do you think. That the Lord allows that our swords should not be raised against this military force which oppresses us, that a hundred of our men lack the courage to face five of theirs, that ten thousand Jews cower before a hundred Romans. Let me remind you that you are in the Temple of the Lord and not on some battlefield. The Lord is the God of legions. True, but do not forget that God imposed His condition. What condition. The Lord said, So long as you observe my laws and keep my commandments. But what are these laws and commandments we have ignored, that we should accept Roman rule as just and necessary punishment for our sins. The Lord must know. Yes, the Lord must know, and how often man sins without knowing, but would you care to explain why the Lord should make use of the Roman army to punish us instead of confronting His chosen people and punishing us Himself. The Lord knows His intentions and chooses His means. So you're trying to tell me that the Lord wants the Romans to govern Israel. Yes. Well, if that is so,

then the rebels fighting the Romans are opposing the Lord and His holy will. You jump to the wrong conclusion. And you, scribe, contradict yourself. God's will may be not-to-will, and that not-to-will may be His will. So the will of man is genuine yet of no importance in the eyes of God. That's right. So man is free. Yes, free so that he might be punished. A murmur went up among the bystanders, some stared at the person who had asked the questions, based on the texts yet politically inopportune, and they looked at him accusingly, as if he were the one who should answer for the sins of all Israel, while the skeptical were reassured by the victory of the scribe, who acknowledged their praise and applause with a complacent smile. The scribe looked around him confidently and asked if there were other questions, like a gladiator who, having dispatched a weak opponent, seeks a more worthy opponent in order to gain greater glory. Another hand went up, and a different question was raised, The Lord spoke to Moses and told him, The stranger in your midst shall be treated as one of your own and you will love him as you love yourselves, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. But before the man could finish speaking, the scribe, still flushed from his victory, interrupted in a sarcastic voice, I hope you are not about to ask me why we do not treat the Romans as our compatriots since they, too, are foreigners. No, what I want to ask is whether the Romans would treat us as their compatriots if both sides spent less time arguing about the differences between their laws and gods. So you too have come here to anger the Lord with blasphemous interpretations of His holy word, said the scribe. On the contrary, all I ask is whether you truly believe that we are obeying the holy word of the Lord when strangers are strangers not so much to the land in which we live as to the religion we profess. To which strangers do you refer. To some in our own day and age, to many in the past, and probably many more in the years to come. I've no time to waste on enigmas and parables, make yourself clear. When we arrived from Egypt, there were other nations living in the land we now call Israel, whom we had to fight, and in those days we were the strangers, and the Lord commanded us to exterminate the people who opposed His will. The land was promised to us but had to be conquered, we did not buy it, nor was it offered to us. And now we find ourselves living under foreign rule, we have lost the land we made our own. Israel lives forever in the spirit of the Lord, so that wherever His people may be, whether united or dispersed, there the land of Israel will be. In other words, wherever we Jews find ourselves, others will always be the stranger. Certainly, in the eyes of the Lord. But the stranger who lives among us, according to the word of the Lord, must be our compatriot and we must love him as we love ourselves, for we were once strangers in Egypt. That is what the Lord said. In that case, the stranger we are expected to love must also be those who, living among us, are not so powerful that they can rule us, as at present with the Romans. Yes, I agree. Then tell me, do you believe that if one day we become powerful, the Lord will permit us to oppress the stranger He commanded us to love. All Israel can do is obey the will of the Lord, and since the children of Israel are His chosen people, the Lord wills only what is good for them. Even if it means not loving those we should. Yes, if so willed. Willed by whom, the Lord or Israel. By both, for they are one and the same. Thou shalt not violate the stranger's rights, says the Lord. When that stranger has rights and we acknowledge them, replied the scribe. Once again, those present murmured their

approval, and the scribe's eyes gleamed like those of a champion wrestler, discus thrower, gladiator, or charioteer.

Jesus raised his hand. No one present found it strange that a boy his age should come forward to question a scribe or doctor of the Temple, the young have been plagued by doubts ever since the time of Cain and Abel, they tend to ask questions to which adults respond with a condescending smile and a pat on the shoulder, When you grow up, young man, you'll stop worrying about such matters, while the more understanding will say, When I was your age, I thought the same. Some moved away, and others were preparing to do so, which vexed the scribe, who did not want to see his attentive audience leave, but Jesus' question caused many to turn back and listen, What I want to discuss is guilt. You mean your own guilt. No, guilt in general, but also the guilt a man may feel without having sinned himself. Explain yourself more clearly. The Lord said that parents will not die for their children or children for their parents and that each man will be judged for his own crime. This was a precept for those ancient times when an entire family, however innocent, paid for the crime of any one of its members. But if the word of the Lord is forever, there is no end to guilt, and as you yourself just said, saying man is free so that he might be punished, then one is right to believe that the father's guilt, even after his punishment, does not cease but is passed on to his children, just as all of us who are alive today have inherited the guilt of Adam and Eve, our first parents. I am amazed that a boy of your age and humble circumstances should know so much about the scriptures and be able to debate these matters with such ease. I only know what I was taught. Where are you from. From Nazareth of Galilee. I thought as much from your manner of speaking. Please answer my question. We may assume that the gravest sin of Adam and Eve, when they disobeyed the Lord, was not eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil but, rather, its consequence, because their sin prevented the Lord from carrying out the plan He had in mind when He created first man and then woman. Whereupon the second man who asked a question challenged the scribe with another gem of sophistry, which the carpenter's son would never have had the courage to voice in public, Do you mean to say that every human act, such as that of the disobedience in Eden, can interfere with God's will, which is like an island in the ocean assailed on all sides by the turbulent waves of human will. Not exactly, the scribe replied cautiously, the will of the Lord is not content only to prevail over all things, His will makes everything what it is. But you yourself said that it is because of Adam's disobedience that we do not know the plan God conceived for him. That is what our reason tells us, but the will of God, the creator and ruler of the universe, embraces all possible wills, His own as well as that of every man born into this world. If this is so, intervened Jesus with sudden insight, then each man is a part of God. Probably, but even if all men were united as one, that combined part would be but a grain of sand in the infinite desert that is God. Sitting on the ground surrounded by men who watch him with mixed feelings of awe and fear, as if they are in the presence of a magician who has unwittingly conjured up powers greater than his own, the scribe looks less complacent. With drooping shoulders and doleful expression, his hands resting on his knees, his entire body seems to ask that he be left

alone with his anguish. People in the group started rising to their feet, some made their way to the Court of the Israelites, some to join other groups still engaged in discussion. Jesus said, You didn't answer my question. The scribe stared at him like someone coming out of a trance, then after a long, tense silence replied, Guilt is a wolf that eats her cub after devouring its father. The wolf of which you speak has already devoured my father. Then it will soon be your turn. And what about you, were you ever devoured. Not only devoured but also spewed up.

Jesus rose to his feet and left. Heading for the gate through which he had entered, he paused and looked back. The column of smoke coming from the sacrificial fires climbed into the heavens, where it dispersed and vanished, as if sucked in by God's mighty lungs. It was mid-morning, more and more people were arriving, while inside the Temple sat a man broken by a sense of emptiness, waiting to regain his composure so that he could reply calmly to one who came wanting to know if the pillar of salt that Lot's wife turned into was rock salt or sea salt, or if Noah got drunk on white wine or red wine. Outside the Temple, Jesus asked the way to Bethlehem, his second destination. He lost his way twice amid the confusion of streets and people before he found the gate through which he had passed while inside his mother's womb thirteen years earlier, almost ready to enter the world. But this was not in Jesus' mind, because the obvious, as we all know, clips the wings of the restless bird of imagination, if any reader of this gospel were to look at a photograph of his pregnant mother when she was carrying him, for example, could he possibly imagine himself inside that womb. Jesus descends in the direction of Bethlehem, now he can reflect on the scribe's answers not just to his own question but also to the questions raised by others. What worries him is the feeling that all those questions were really one question, and that the reply given to each answered all, especially the last reply, which summed up the rest, the insatiable hunger of the wolf of guilt that is forever gnawing, devouring, and spewing up. Thanks to the fickleness of memory we often do not know, or know but try to forget, what caused our guilt, or, speaking metaphorically like the scribe, the lair of the wolf that pursues us. But Jesus knows, and that is where he is going. He has no idea what he'll do when he gets there, but this is better than announcing, I am here, and waiting for someone to ask, What do you want, punishment, pardon, or oblivion.

Like his father and mother before him, he stopped at Rachel's tomb to pray. Then, feeling his heart beat faster and faster, he resumed his journey. The first houses of Bethlehem were within sight, this is the main road into the village, taken by his homicidal father and the soldiers in his dream night after night. In daylight it doesn't seem a place of horror, even the tranquil white clouds drifting across the sky are benevolent gestures from God, and the very earth slumbers beneath the sun, as if bidding us, Let's leave things as they are, there's nothing to be gained by digging up the past, and before a woman with a child in her arms appears at a window asking, Who are you looking for, turn back, erase your footprints, and pray that the endless motion of the hourglass of time will quickly obliterate with its dust all memory of those events. Too late. There is a

moment when a fly about to brush past the web still has time to escape, but once it touches the web and finds its wing caught, then the slightest movement suffices to trap and paralyze it completely, forever, however indifferent the spider to its new victim. For Jesus, that moment has passed. In the middle of a square with a spreading fig tree stands a tiny square building, and one does not have to look twice to see it is a tomb. Jesus approached, walked around it slowly, paused to read the faded inscription on one side, and this was enough, he had found what he was looking for. A woman crossed the square, leading a five-year-old child by the hand. She stopped, looked inquisitively at the stranger, and asked him, Where do you come from, and to justify her question added, You're not from these parts. No, I'm from Nazareth in Galilee. Have you relatives here. No, I was visiting Jerusalem, and it seemed a good opportunity to take a look at Bethlehem. Are you passing through. Yes, I'll return to Jerusalem later this afternoon, when it gets cooler. Lifting the child onto her left arm, the woman told him, May the Lord go with you, then turned to leave, but Jesus detained her, asking, Whose tomb is this. The woman pressed the child to her bosom, as if to protect it from some threat, and replied, Twenty-five little boys, who died years ago, are buried here. How many. Twenty-five. I mean how many years ago. Oh, about fourteen. So many. I think that's right, they would be your age if they were alive today. Yes, but what about the little boys. One of them was my brother. You have a brother buried here. Yes. And this child in your arms, is he your son. He's my firstborn. Why did they kill only the little boys. No one knows, I was only seven at the time. But you must have heard your parents and the other grown-ups talking about it. There was no need, I myself saw some of the children being killed. Your brother as well. Yes, my brother. And who killed them. The king's soldiers came searching for little boys up to the age of three, and they killed all of them. Yet you don't know why. No one knows to this day. And after Herod died, did anyone go to the Temple to ask the priests to investigate. I really don't know. If the soldiers had been Romans, one might understand it, but to have our own king ordering his people slaughtered, mere babes, seems very strange, unless there was some reason. The will of kings is beyond our understanding, may the Lord go with you and protect you. It's a long time since I was three. At the hour of death men go back to being children, replied the woman before departing.

Once alone, Jesus knelt beside the boulder covering the entrance to the tomb, took the last piece of stale bread from his pack, rubbed it into crumbs between his palms, and sprinkled the crumbs all along the entrance, as if making an offering to the invisible mouths of the innocents buried there. As he finished, another woman appeared from around the corner, but this woman was very old and bent and walked with the aid of a stick. No longer able to see clearly, she had caught only a fuzzy glimpse of what the boy did. She stopped, watched him carefully, saw him get to his feet and bow his head as if praying for the repose of the souls of those unfortunate infants, and although it is customary, we will refrain from adding the word eternal to souls, for our imagination failed us on the one and only occasion we tried to picture eternal rest. Jesus ended his prayer and looked around him, blank walls, closed doors, nothing except the old woman

standing there, dressed in a slave's tunic and leaning on her stick, the living image of that third part of the sphinx's famous enigma about the animal that walks on four feet in the morning, two at midday, and three in the evening, It is man, replied astute Oedipus, who forgot that some do not even get as far as midday, and that in Bethlehem alone twenty-five infants were cut down. The old woman drew closer, hobbling at a snail's pace, and now she stands before Jesus, twists her neck to get a better view of him, and asks, Are you looking for someone. The boy did not answer immediately, in fact he was not looking for anyone, those he sought are all dead, buried here, and are not even what you could call someone, mere infants still in diapers and with pacifiers in their mouths, whimpering, their noses running, yet death struck and turned them into an enormous presence that cannot be contained in any ossuary or reliquary, these are bodies that come out of their graves each night, if there is any justice, to show their wounds, the holes that, opened at sword point, allowed life to escape, No, replied Jesus, I am not. The old woman did not go, she seemed to be waiting for him to continue, so Jesus confided, I was born in this village, in a cave, and was curious to see the place. She stepped back unsteadily and strained her eyes to get a better look, her voice trembling as she asked him, What is your name, where do you come from, who are your parents. No one needs to answer a slave, but the elderly, however low their station, deserve our respect, we must never forget that they have little time left for asking questions, it would be cruel in the extreme to ignore them, after all we might possess the very answer they have been waiting for. My name is Jesus and I come from Nazareth of Galilee, the boy told her, and he seems to have been saying nothing else since he left home. The old woman stepped forward again, And your parents, what are their names. My father's name was Joseph, my mother is Mary. How old are you. I'm almost fourteen. The woman looked around her, as if seeking a place to sit, but a square in Bethlehem of Judaea is not the same as a garden in Sao Paulo de Alcântara, with its park benches and pleasant view of the castle, here we have to sit on the dusty ground, at best on a doorstep or, if there's a tomb, on the stone by the entrance put there for the respite of the living who come to mourn their loved ones, and perhaps also for those ghosts who leave their rest to shed any remaining tears, as does Rachel, in the tomb nearby, where it is written, Here lies Rachel who weeps for her children and seeks no consolation, for one does not need to be as shrewd as Oedipus to see that this place befits the circumstances, and Rachel's weeping the cause of her grief. The old woman lowered herself onto the stone with effort, and the boy went to help her, but too late, for halfhearted gestures are never made in time. I know you, the old woman told him. You must be mistaken, said Jesus, I've never been here before and I never saw you in Nazareth. The first hands to touch you were not your mother's but mine. How is that, old woman. My name is Salome, and I was the midwife who delivered you. Acting on impulse, which only goes to prove the sincerity of gestures made spontaneously, Jesus fell to his knees at the old woman's feet, wanting both to know everything and to show his gratitude for bringing him out of a limbo without memory into a world that would mean nothing without memory. My mother never mentioned you, said Jesus. There was no need, your parents appeared on my master's doorstep, and I was asked to help, since I had some experience as a midwife. Was that when the innocents were massacred.

That's right, you were fortunate they didn't find you. Because we lived in a cave. It was either that or because you'd already left, I never found out, for when I went to see what had happened to you, the cave was empty. Do you remember my father. Yes, I remember him well, at that time he was in his prime, a fine figure of a man, and honest. He's dead. Poor man, he didn't live long, but if you're his heir, what are you doing here, for I assume your mother is still alive. I came to see the place where I was born, also to learn more about the children who were slaughtered here. God alone knows why they had to die, the angel of death, disguised as Herod's soldiers, descended into Bethlehem and slew them. So you believe it was God's will. I'm only an old slave, but all my life I've heard people say that everything that happens in this world can happen only by the will of God. So it is written. God may decide to take me any day now, that I can understand, but these were innocent little children. Your death will be decided by God in His own good time, but it was a man who ordered that the children be killed. The hand of God, then, can do precious little if it cannot come between the sword and little children. You mustn't offend the Lord, good woman. An ignorant old woman like me isn't likely to cause any offense. Today in the Temple I heard it said that every human action, however insignificant, interferes with the will of God, and that man is free only in order to be punished. My punishment doesn't come from being free, it comes from being a slave, the old woman told him. Jesus fell silent. He hardly heard Salome's words, because it suddenly dawned on him that man is a mere toy in the hands of God and forever subject to His will, whether he imagines himself to be obeying or disobeying Him.

The sun was going down, and the fig tree's evil shadow lengthened and came closer. Jesus spoke to the old woman. Salome raised her head with effort, What do you want, she asked. Take me to the cave where I was born, or at least tell me how to get there, if it's too far for you to walk. I'm not very steady on my feet, but you won't find it unless I show you. Is it far from here. No, but there are many caves and they all look alike. Let's go, then. As you wish, she said. Anyone who happened to be watching that day, when Salome and the unknown boy passed by, must have asked himself where those two could have met. But no one ever knew, because the old slave revealed nothing to the day she died, and Jesus never again returned to the land of his birth. Next morning Salome went to the cave where she had left the boy. No sign of him. She was relieved, because even if he had still been there, they would have had nothing more to say to each other.

MUCH HAS BEEN SAID ABOUT LIFE'S COINCIDENCES BUT little or nothing about the everyday encounters that guide the course of life, although one could argue that an encounter, strictly speaking, is a coincidence, which obviously does not mean that all coincidences have to be encounters. Throughout this gospel there have been many coincidences, and if we look carefully at the life of Jesus, especially after he left home, we can see that there has been no lack of encounters either. Leaving aside his unfortunate adventure with the thieves, since it is too early to tell what the consequence of that might be in the future, Jesus' first journey on his own has resulted in many meetings, such as the providential appearance of the Pharisee, thanks to whom the boy not only satisfied his hunger but, by eating in haste, reached the Temple in time to listen to the questions and answers that prepared the ground, as it were, for his question about guilt, the question that brought him all the way from Nazareth. When critics discuss the rules of effective narration, they insist that important encounters, in fiction as in life, be interspersed with others of no importance, so that the hero of the story does not find himself transformed into an exceptional being to whom nothing ordinary ever happens. They argue that this narrative approach best serves the ever desirable effect of verisimilitude, for if the episode imagined and described is not, and is not likely to become or supplant, factual reality, there must at least be some similitude, not as in the present narrative, where the reader's credence has clearly been put to the test, Jesus having taken himself to Bethlehem only to come face-to-face as soon as he arrives, with Salome, who assisted at his birth, as if that other encounter, with the woman carrying a child in her arms, whom we deliberately planted there to fill in the story, had not been license enough. The most incredible part of our story, however, is yet to come, after the slave Salome accompanies Jesus to the cave and leaves him there at his request, Leave me alone between these dark walls, that I may hear my first cry in the deep silence, if echoes can last that long. These were the words the woman thought she heard, and so they are recorded here, at the risk of once more offending verisimilitude, but, then, we can always blame the unreliable testimony of a senile old woman. Unsteady on her feet, Salome hobbled off, moving cautiously, one step at a time and leaning heavily on her staff, which she gripped with both hands. It would have been a nice gesture on the boy's part to help this poor, suffering creature return home, but such is youth, selfish and thoughtless, and there is nothing to suggest that Jesus was different from other boys his age.

He sat on a stone, and on a stone beside him was an oil lamp casting its dim light on the cave's rough walls, the dark heap of coals where once there was a fire, and his limp hands and pensive face. This is where I was born, he thought, I once slept in that manger, my father and mother once sat on this very stone I am sitting on now, this is where we took refuge as Herod's soldiers searched the village and slaughtered infants. But hard as I try, I will never hear the cry of life I gave at birth, or the cries of those dying children and the parents who watched them die, there is nothing but silence in this cave where a beginning and an end came together. As I learned in the Temple, parents pay for the sins they have committed, and their children for the sins they may one day commit, but if life is a sentence and death a punishment, there was never a more innocent town

than Bethlehem, infants who died in perfect innocence, parents who had done no wrong, nor was there ever a more guilty man than my father, who remained silent when he should have spoken, and now I, whose life was saved so that I could learn of the crime that saved my life, and even if I commit no other offense, this will suffice to kill me. Amid the shadows of the cave Jesus got to his feet, as if to flee, but after a few faltering steps his legs gave way, and he put his hands to his eyes to catch his tears, poor boy, writhing in the dust, tormented by a crime he never committed, condemned to remorse for the rest of his life. This flood of bitter tears will leave its mark in Jesus' eyes forever, a dull glimmer of sadness and despair, always as if he has just stopped crying. Time passed, the sun outside began to set, the earth's shadows grew, the prelude to the great shadow that descends at dusk. The darkness penetrated the cave, where shadows were already threatening to extinguish the lamp's tiny flame, the oil is clearly running out, this is what it will be like when the sun finally disappears, when men say to one another, We are losing our sight, unaware that their eyes are no longer of any use to them.

Jesus is now asleep, yielding to the merciful exhaustion of recent days, his father's horrible death, the inherited nightmare, his resigned mother, and then the journey to Jerusalem, the daunting vision of the Temple, the discouraging words uttered by the scribe, the descent to Bethlehem, the fateful encounter with Salome, who appeared from the depths of time to reveal the circumstances of his birth, therefore it is not surprising that his weary body should have overcome his spirit, he appears to be resting now, but his spirit stirs, in his dream it rouses his body so that they may go together to Bethlehem and there, in the middle of the square, confess their heinous crime. Through the physical instrument of voice his spirit declares, I am he who brought death to your children, judge me, condemn this body I bring before you, abuse and torture it, for only by mortifying the flesh can we hope to gain absolution and the rewards of the spirit. In his dream Jesus sees the mothers of Bethlehem bearing tiny bodies, only one of the infants is alive, and its mother is the woman who spoke to Jesus with a child in her arms, it is she who replies, Unless you can restore their lives, be silent, for who needs words in the presence of death. In self-abasement his soul shrinks into itself like a tunic folded three times, surrendering his defenseless body to the mercy of the mothers of Bethlehem, but his body is spared, because just as the woman with the child is about to tell him, You're not to blame, you may go, a flash of lightning fills the cave and wakes him with a start. Where am I, was his first thought. Struggling to his feet from the dusty ground, tears in his eyes, he saw a giant of a man towering over him with head aflame, then he realized his mistake, the man held a torch in his right hand, the fire almost touched the ceiling of the cave. But the head was so huge, it could have been the head of Goliath, there was nothing hostile about the face, however, with its gratified expression of one who has been searching and found what he wanted. Jesus got to his feet and backed against a wall of the cave, to get a better look at the giant, who was not that big after all, perhaps a span taller than the tallest man of Nazareth. Such optical illusions, without which there can be no prodigies or miracles, were discovered ages ago, and the only reason Goliath did not become a basketball player is that he was born before his time. And who are you,

the man asked. Resting his torch on a jutting rock, he stood the two sticks he was carrying against the wall, one with great knots smoothed by constant use, the other still covered with bark and recently cut from a tree. Then, seating himself on the largest stone, he began pulling the vast mantle he wore down over his shoulders. I am Jesus of Nazareth, the boy replied. What are you doing here if you're from Nazareth. Although I'm from Nazareth, I was born in this cave, and I came to see the place where I was born. Where you were born, my lad, was in your mother's belly, and you'll never be able to crawl back in there. Unaccustomed to such language, Jesus blushed at the man's words and could think of nothing to say. Did you run away from home, the man asked. As if searching in his heart to see if his departure could be described as running away, the boy hesitated before answering, Yes. Did you quarrel with your parents. My father's dead. Oh, was all the man said, but Jesus had the strange feeling that the man already knew this, and everything, and all that had been said and all that remained to be said. You didn't answer my question, the man insisted, What question, Did you quarrel with your parents, It's not your business. Don't be rude to me, boy, unless you want a good thrashing, not even God will hear your cries for help in this place. God is eye, ear, and tongue, He sees and hears everything, and it's only because He chooses not to that He doesn't speak everything. What does a boy your age know about God. What I learned in the synagogue. You never heard anyone in the synagogue say that God is eye, ear, and tongue. I myself decided that if this were not so, then God would not be God. And why do you think God has an eye and an ear and not two eyes and two ears like the rest of us. So that one eye cannot deceive the other, or one ear the other, and as for the tongue, there is no problem, because we only have one tongue. The tongue of man is also two-sided, serving both truth and falsehood. God cannot lie. Who's to prevent Him. God Himself, otherwise He'd deny Himself. Have you ever seen Him, Seen who, Seen God, Some have seen Him and announced His coming. The man stared at the boy in silence, as if looking for some familiar trait, then said, True, some believed they've seen Him. He paused, then continued with a mischievous smile, You still haven't answered my question. What question. Did you quarrel with your parents. I left home because I wanted to see the world. You've mastered the art of lying, my boy, but I know who you are, you were born to a simple carpenter named Joseph and a wool carder named Mary. How do you know. I found out one day and have remembered ever since. I don't understand. I'm a shepherd and have spent nearly all my life breeding and caring for my sheep and goats, and I happened to be in these parts when the soldiers came to slaughter the children of Bethlehem, so as you can see, I've known you since the day you were born. Jesus looked at the man nervously and asked, What is your name. My sheep don't know me by a name. But I am not one of your sheep. Who knows. Tell me what you're called. If you insist on giving me a name, call me Pastor, that will be enough to summon me if you ever need me. Will you take me with you to help with the flock. I was waiting for you to ask. Well then. Yes, you may join the flock. The man stood, lifted his torch, and went outside. Jesus followed.

It was darkest night, and the moon had still not risen. Gathered near the entrance to

the cave, sheep and goats waited in silence, except for the faint jingling of bells from time to time. Patiently they awaited the outcome of the conversation between the shepherd and his latest helpmate. The man raised the torch, revealing the black heads of the goats and the white snouts of the sheep, some sheep scrawny with sparse hair, others plump with woolly coats, and he told him, This is my flock, take care not to lose even one of these animals. Jesus and the shepherd sat at the entrance to the cave beneath the flickering light of the torch and ate cheese and stale bread from their packs. Then the shepherd went inside and returned with the new stick, the one still covered with bark. He lit a fire and, deftly turning the wood in the flames, slowly scorched the bark until it peeled off in long strips, and then he smoothed down the knots. Allowing the stick to cool, he plunged it back into the fire, but turned it briskly this time so the wood would not burn, darkening and strengthening the surface until it took on the appearance of seasoned wood. Handing the stick to Jesus when it was ready, he said, Here's your shepherd's crook, strong and straight and as good as a third arm. Jesus, although his hands were hardly delicate, dropped the stick with a howl. How could the shepherd hold anything so hot, he asked himself. When the moon finally appeared, they went into the cave to get some sleep. A few sheep and goats followed and lay down beside them. At first light, the shepherd shook Jesus, Time to get up, the flock has to be fed, from now on you'll take them out to pasture, as important a job as you're ever likely to be entrusted with. Walking as fast as their tiny steps allowed, the flock moved on, the shepherd in front, his helpmate at the rear. The cool, transparent dawn seemed to be in no hurry for the sun, envious of that splendor heralding a world reborn. Hours later, an old woman, going slowly with the aid of a stick, emerged from the houses of Bethlehem and entered the cave. She was not surprised that Jesus was no longer there, besides they would have had nothing more to say to each other. Amid the eternal shadows inside the cave a tiny flame continued to shine, because the shepherd had filled the lamp with oil.

Four years from now, Jesus will meet God. This unexpected revelation, which is probably premature according to the rules of effective narration referred to above, is intended simply to prepare the reader for some everyday scenes from pastoral life which will add little of substance to the main thread of our story, thus excusing anyone who might be tempted to jump ahead. Nevertheless, four years is four years, especially at an age when there are so many physical and mental changes in a youth, when his body grows so fast, the first signs of a beard, a swarthy complexion becoming even darker, the voice turning as deep and harsh as a stone rolling down a mountain slope, and that faraway look, as if he is daydreaming, always reprehensible but especially when one has a duty to be vigilant, like sentinels in barracks, castles, and encampments or, lest we stray from our story, like this shepherd boy who has been warned to keep a watchful eye on his master's goats and sheep. Although we do not really know who that master is. Tending sheep at this time and in these parts is work for a servant or slave, who under pain of punishment must give a regular account of milk, cheese, and wool, not to mention the number of animals, which should always be on the increase so that neighbors can see that the eyes of the Lord are looking down with favor on the pious owner of such

abundant possessions, and if the owner wishes to conform to the rules of this world, he must have greater trust in the Lord than in the genetic strength of the mating rams of his flock. Yet how strange that Pastor, as he asked to be called, does not seem to have any master over him, for during the next four years no one will come to the desert to collect the wool, milk, or cheese, nor will Pastor ever leave the flock to give account of his duties. All would be well if Pastor were the owner of these goats and sheep. Though it is hard to believe that any owner would allow such an incredible amount of wool to be lost, shearing his sheep only to prevent them from suffocating from the heat, or would use the milk, if at all, only to make the day's supply of cheese, then barter the rest for figs, dates, and bread, or, mystery of mysteries, would never sell lambs and kids from his flock, not even during Passover, when they are much in demand and fetch such high prices. Little wonder, therefore, that the flock continues to grow bigger, as if obeying, with the persistence and enthusiasm of those who feel their life span is guaranteed, that famous mandate given by the Lord, who may have lacked confidence in the efficacy of sweet natural instinct, Go forth and multiply. In this unusual and wayward flock the animals tend to die of old age, but Pastor himself serenely lends a hand by killing those who can no longer keep up with the others because of disease or age. Jesus, the first time this occurred after he started working for Pastor, protested at such cruelty, but the shepherd said, Either I kill them as I've always done, or I leave them to die alone in this wilderness, or I hold up the flock, wait for the old and sick to die, and risk letting the healthy animals starve to death for lack of pasture. So tell me what you would do if you were in my shoes and had power of life and death over your flock. Jesus did not know what to say and changed the subject by asking, Since you don't sell the wool, have more milk and cheese than we need in order to live, and never take the lambs and kids to market, why do you allow this flock to become bigger and bigger, one of these days your goats and sheep will cover every hill in sight and there will be no land left for pasture. Pastor told him, The flock was here and somebody had to look after the animals and protect them from thieves, and that person happened to be me. What do you mean by here. Here, there, everywhere. Are you asking me to believe that this flock has always been here. More or less. Did you buy the first sheep and goat, No, Who then. I simply found them, I don't know if anyone bought them, there was already a flock when I came here. Were they given to you. No one gave them to me, I found them, and they found me. So you are the owner. No, I'm not the owner, nothing in this world belongs to me. For everything belongs to the Lord, as you know, True, How long have you been a shepherd. I was a shepherd before you were born, How many years, Difficult to say, perhaps if we multiplied your age by fifty. Only the patriarchs before the great flood lived that long, and no one nowadays can hope to reach their age. No need to tell me. Yet if you insist you've lived that long, don't expect me to believe you're human. I don't. Now, if Jesus, who was as skilled in the art of interrogation as any disciple of Socrates, had asked, What are you, then, if you are not a man, Pastor would most probably have answered, An angel, but don't tell anyone. This often happens, we refrain from asking a question because we are unprepared or simply too afraid to hear the answer. And when finally we summon the courage to ask, no answer is forthcoming, just as Jesus one day

will refuse to answer when asked, What is truth. A question that remains unanswered to this day.

Jesus knows without having to ask that his mysterious companion, whatever he may be, is not an angel of the Lord, because the angels of the Lord forever sing His glory, while men praise Him only out of obligation and on prescribed occasions, although it is worth pointing out that angels have greater reason for singing Glory since they live in intimacy, as it were, with the Lord in His heavenly kingdom. What surprised Jesus from the beginning was that when they left the cave at first light, Pastor, unlike him, did not praise the Lord with all the usual blessings, such as having restored man's soul and having endowed the cock with intelligence, and when obliged to step behind a rock to relieve himself, Pastor did not thank the Lord for the providential orifices and vessels that help the human body function and without which we would be in a sorry state. Pastor looked at heaven and earth as one does on getting out of bed, he muttered something about the fine day ahead, and putting two fingers to his lips, gave a shrill whistle which brought the entire flock to its feet as one. And that was all. Jesus thought he might have forgotten, always possible when one's mind is on other things, such as how to teach this boy, accustomed to the easy life of a carpenter, the rudiments of tending sheep and goats. Now, as we know, in a normal situation among ordinary people, Jesus would not have had to wait long to discover the extent of his master's piety, since Jews in those days gave thanks to the Lord some thirty times a day and on the slightest pretext, as indeed we have often seen in this gospel. But the day passed, and Pastor showed no sign of offering prayers of thanksgiving, dusk fell, and they settled down to sleep out in the open, and not even the majesty of God's sky above touched the shepherd's heart or brought so much as a word of praise or gratitude to his lips, after all, it could have been raining and it was not, a clear sign that the Lord was watching over His creatures. Next morning, after they had eaten and his master was preparing to inspect the flock to make sure that they were all there and that some restless goat had not decided to wander off, Jesus announced in a firm voice, I am leaving. Pastor stopped, looked at him without any change of expression, and said, Have a good journey, but you don't need to tell me, you're not my slave and there is no legal contract between us, you can leave whenever you like. But don't you want to know why I'm leaving. I'm not all that curious. Well, I'll tell you just the same, I'm leaving because I do not want to work with a man who doesn't perform his obligations to the Lord. What obligations. The simplest obligations, such as offering up prayers of thanksgiving. Pastor said nothing, his eyes half smiling, then finally he spoke, I'm not a Jew and therefore have no such obligations to perform. Deeply shocked, Jesus backed away. That the land of Israel was swarming with foreigners and worshipers of false gods he knew all too well, but this was the first time he had actually slept beside such a person and shared his bread and milk. As if holding a sword and shield before him, he exclaimed, The Lord alone is God. Pastor's smile faded and his mouth became twisted and grim, Certainly if God exists, He must be only one, but it would be better if He were two, then there would be a god for the wolf and one for the sheep, a god for the victim and one for the assassin, a god for the condemned man and

one for the executioner. God is one, whole, and indivisible, exclaimed Jesus, almost weeping with pious indignation, whereupon Pastor retorted, I don't know how God can live, but he got no further, because Jesus, with all the authority of a teacher in the synagogue, interrupted him, God does not live, God exists. These fine distinctions escape me, but I'll tell you this, I wouldn't like to be a god who guides the dagger in the hand of the assassin while he offers the throat that is about to be cut. You offend God with these irreverent thoughts. You overestimate my importance. Remember, God never sleeps, and one day He will punish you. Just as well He doesn't sleep, so He can avoid the nightmares of remorse. Why speak to me of the nightmares of remorse. Because we're discussing your god. And which god do you serve. Like my sheep, I have no god. But sheep, at least, produce lambs for the altars of the Lord. And I can assure you that their mothers would howl like wolves if they knew. Jesus turned pale and could think of no reply.

All was silent as the flock gathered around them attentively. The sun had already risen, its light casting a crimson glow on the fleecy coats of the sheep and the horns of the rams. Jesus said, I'm off, but didn't move. Pastor waited, leaning on his crook, as composed as if he had all the time in the world. At last Jesus took a few steps, opening a path through the sheep, then suddenly stopped and asked, What do you know about remorse and nightmares. That you are your father's heir. These words were too much for Jesus, his legs buckled, and the pack slipped from his shoulder, and either by chance or necessity his father's sandals fell out, and he could hear the Pharisee's bowl shatter into pieces. Jesus began weeping like a lost child, but Pastor made no attempt to comfort him, he merely said from where he was standing, Do not forget that I've known about you since the day you were born, and now you had better decide whether you're going or staying. First tell me who you are. The time has not yet come for you to know. And when will I know. If you stay, you'll regret not having left, and if you leave, you'll regret not having stayed. But if I leave, I will never know who you are. You're wrong, your hour will come, and when it does, I will be there to tell you, and that's enough conversation for now, the flock can't stand here all day waiting for you to make up your mind. Jesus gathered up the broken pieces of the bowl, looking at them as if he couldn't bear to part with them, but for no good reason, yesterday at this hour he had not yet met the Pharisee, besides, what had happened was only to be expected, earthenware breaks so easily. He scattered the pieces on the ground like sowing seeds, and Pastor said, You will have another bowl, but the next won't break while you are alive. Jesus didn't hear him, he held Joseph's sandals in his hand and was trying to decide if he should wear them. Not so long ago they would have been much too big for him, but time, as we know, can be deceptive, Jesus felt as if he had been carrying his father's sandals in his pack for ages, he would have been very surprised to find they were still too big for him. He slipped them on and, without knowing why, packed his own. Pastor said, Once feet have grown, they don't shrink again, and you will have no sons to inherit your tunic, mantle, and sandals, but Jesus did not discard them, their weight helped keep the almost empty pack on his shoulders. There was no need to give Pastor the answer he wanted, Jesus took his place

behind the flock, his heart divided between a vague sense of terror, as if his soul were in peril, and another, even vaguer sense of somber fascination. I must find out who you are, murmured Jesus, choking on the dust raised by the flock as he chased after a sheep that lagged behind, and this, he believed, was the reason he had decided to stay with the mysterious shepherd.

That was the first day. No more was said about matters of faith and blasphemy, about life, death, and inheritance, but Jesus, who had started to watch Pastor, his every attitude and gesture, noticed that each time the shepherd offered up prayers of thanksgiving to the Lord, he got down and placed the palms of his hands on the ground, lowering his head and shutting his eyes, without uttering a word. One day, when he was still a little boy, Jesus had heard some elderly travelers who were passing through Nazareth relate that deep in the earth were vast caverns where one could find cities, fields, rivers, forests, and deserts just like those on the surface of the world, and that this underworld, a perfect image and likeness of the one we live in, was created by the devil after God threw him down from the heavens as punishment for his rebellion. Since God had initially befriended the devil and looked on him with favor, causing the angels to comment that there had never been so close a friendship in the universe, the devil witnessed the birth of Adam and Eve. Having learned how it was done, he repeated the process in his underworld and created a man and woman for himself, with the one difference that, unlike God, he forbade them nothing, which explains why there has never been such a thing as original sin in the devil's world. One of the old men even dared suggest, And because there was no original sin, there was no other kind of sin either. After the men were sent on their way with the help of some persuasive stones thrown by outraged Nazirites, who soon realized what these irreverent old fools were getting at with their remarks, there was a sudden tremor, nothing serious, a mere sign of confirmation coming from the bowels of the earth, which made young Jesus think, capable as he was, even as a boy, of linking cause and effect. And now, watching Pastor kneel before him with his head lowered and palms resting lightly on the ground to feel every grain of sand, every pebble and rootlet and blade sprouting on the surface, Jesus was reminded of that story. Perhaps this man inhabited the hidden world created by the devil in the image and likeness of the visible world. What is he doing here, Jesus asked himself, but he didn't dare probe any further. When Pastor eventually got to his feet, Jesus asked him, What are you doing. I want to be sure the earth is still beneath me. Surely you can tell with your feet. My feet perceive nothing, only my hands can tell me, when you adore your God, you don't raise your feet to Him, you raise your hands, even though you could raise other parts of your body, for example what is between your legs, unless you happen to be a eunuch. Overcome with shame and horror, Jesus turned beet red. Do not offend the God you do not know, he told Pastor severely when he had recovered, but Pastor asked, Who created your body. It was God, of course. Just as it is now, Yes, And did the devil play any part in creating your body. None whatsoever, man's body is God's creation. So all the parts of your body are equally worthy in the eyes of God, Obviously, So God isn't likely to disown what you have between your legs, for example. No, I suppose not, but

then the Lord created Adam, yet expelled him from Paradise even though he was His creation. Just give me a straight answer, boy, and stop talking like a teacher in the synagogue. You're trying to make me give the answers you want, but I can tell you, if you wish, all the cases in which man is forbidden by the Lord, under pain of death, to expose his own or another's nakedness, which proves that certain parts of the body are in themselves sinful. No more sinful than the mouth when it utters falsehood and slander, that same mouth with which you praise your Lord before uttering falsehood and after spreading slander. That's enough, I don't want to hear another word. You must hear me out, if only to answer my question. What question. Can God disown what you have between your legs as something not of His making, just answer yes or no. No, He can't, Why not, Because the Lord cannot undo what He has willed. Slowly nodding his head, Pastor said, In other words, your God is the only warden of a prison where the only prisoner is your God. The final echo of these momentous words was still ringing in Jesus' ears when Pastor went on to say in an almost natural voice, You must choose a sheep. What, asked Jesus in bewilderment. I said choose a sheep, unless you prefer a goat. Whatever for. Because you'll need it, unless you really are a eunuch. When Pastor's meaning sank in, the boy was stunned, but worst of all was the surge of vile sensuality once he had suppressed his embarrassment and revulsion. Covering his face with both hands, he said in a hoarse voice, This is the word of the Lord, The man who copulates with an animal will be punished with death and the animal slaughtered, and the Lord also said, Cursed is the man who sins with an animal of any species. Did your Lord say all that. Yes, and now leave me alone, abominable creature, for you are not of God but belong to the devil. Pastor listened impassively, waiting for Jesus' curse to have its full effect, whatever that might be, an apparition, leprosy, the sudden destruction of body and soul. But nothing happened. Wind came playing between the stones, raising a cloud of dust that swept across the wilderness, then nothing, silence, the universe quietly watching men and animals, perhaps waiting to see what meaning they can find, recognize, or construe in those words, it consumes itself in this vigil, the primordial fire is already reduced to ashes, but the response is slow in coming. Then Pastor raised his arms and called out to his flock in a commanding voice, Listen, my sheep, hear what this learned boy has come to teach us, God has forbidden anyone to copulate with you, so fear not, but as for shearing you, neglecting you, slaughtering you, and eating you, all these things are permitted, because for this you were created by God's law and are sustained by His providence. He gave three long whistles and, waving his crook over his head, he cried, Be off, be off with you, whereupon the flock began moving toward the spot where the column of smoke disappeared. Jesus stood watching until the tall figure of Pastor all but vanished from sight and the resigned rumps of the animals merged with the color of the earth. I'm not going with him, Jesus said, but he went. He adjusted the pack on his back, tightened the straps of the sandals that had belonged to his father, and followed the flock at a distance. He caught up with them at nightfall and, emerging from the shadows into the light of the campfire, announced, I'm here.

TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY IS A WELL-KNOWN SAYING AND to the point, yet not as simple as it may seem to one who is satisfied with the approximate meaning of words, whether taken separately or together, because everything depends on how a thing is said, which varies according to the mood of the person speaking. When the words are expressed by one whose life is going badly and who hopes for better times, they are not the same as when one utters them as a threat, promising vengeance at some future date. The most extreme case would be one who sighs, Tomorrow is another day, because he is a pessimist by nature and given to expecting the worst. It would not be entirely plausible for Jesus to go around saying this at his age, whatever his meaning or tone of voice, but for us, yes, because like God we know everything about what has been and what is to come, so we can say, mutter, or whisper these words as we watch Jesus go about his tasks as a shepherd boy, crossing the hills of Judah, or, later, descending into the valley of Jordan. And not just because we are writing about Jesus but because every human being is constantly confronted with good and bad, one thing coming after another, day following day. Since this gospel was never meant to dismiss what others have written about Jesus or to contradict their accounts, and since Jesus is clearly the hero of our story, it would be easy for us to go up to him and predict his future, tell him what a wonderful life lies ahead, the miracles he will perform to provide food and restore health, even one to conquer death, but that would hardly be wise, because young Jesus, notwithstanding his aptitude for religious studies and his knowledge of patriarchs and prophets, enjoys the healthy skepticism one associates with youth, so he would send us away with scorn. Yes, he will change his mind when he meets God, but it is much too soon for that great encounter, and before then Jesus will have to go up and down many a mountain slope, milk many a goat and sheep, help make cheese, and barter wares in the villages. He will also kill animals that are diseased or have outlived their usefulness, and he will mourn their loss. But fret not, all you sensitive souls, he will never engage in the horrid vice suggested by Pastor, of coupling with a goat or sheep or both to relieve and satisfy the corrupt flesh that houses his pure soul. This is neither the time nor the place, however, to ponder how often the soul, in order to be able to boast of a clean body, has burdened itself with sadness, envy, and impurity.

Although their initial exchanges on ethical and theological matters remained unresolved, Pastor and Jesus got along well enough with each other, the shepherd patiently teaching him how to tend the flock, the boy listening intently, as if it were a matter of life and death. Jesus learned how to send his crook whirling through the air to land on the rump of an animal that in a moment of distraction or daring had strayed from the flock, but his apprenticeship was painful, because one day, while he was still struggling to master the technique, he threw the crook too low and accidentally hit the tender neck of a newborn kid, with such force that he killed the poor thing outright. Such accidents can happen to anyone, even an experienced and skillful shepherd, but Jesus, who was already burdened with so many sorrows, stiffened with horror as he lifted the little kid, still warm, into his arms. There was nothing to be done. Even the mother goat, after sniffing her child for a moment, moved away and resumed grazing, pawing at tufts

of grass, which she pulled at with quick movements of her head, recalling the familiar refrain, A bleating goat doesn't chew much grass, which is another way of saying, You can't cry and eat at the same time. Pastor came to see what happened, Bad luck, no need for you to feel guilty. But I killed the poor little animal, Jesus said mournfully. So you did, but if he'd been an ugly, smelly old billy goat you wouldn't have felt much pity, put him on the ground and let me deal with this while you go attend to that ewe over there that looks as if she's about to give birth. What will you do with the kid. Skin it, of course, unless you expect me to work a miracle and bring it back to life. I swear I'll never touch that meat. Eating the animal we kill is our only way of showing respect, what is wrong is to eat what others have been forced to kill. I refuse to eat it. Please yourself, there will be all the more for me. Pastor drew a knife from his belt, looked at Jesus, and said, This is something else you'll have to learn sooner or later, to study the entrails of the animals created to serve and feed us. Jesus looked away and turned to go, but Pastor, knife in hand, went on to say, Slaves exist to serve us, perhaps we should open them up to see if they carry slaves inside, or open up a monarch to see if he has another monarch in his belly, I'll bet if we met the devil and he allowed us to open him up, we might be surprised to find God jumping out. Pastor still liked to provoke Jesus with these outrageous remarks. Jesus had gradually learned that the best way to deal with this was ignore it and say nothing. For Pastor might have gone even further, suggesting that on opening up God one might find the devil inside. Jesus went off in search of the ewe about to give birth, here at least there were no surprises awaiting him, a lamb like any other would appear, in the image and likeness of its mother, who in turn was identical to her sisters, for the one thing we can expect from these creatures is a smooth continuity of the species. The sheep had already given birth. The newborn lamb, lying on the ground, seemed to be all legs as its mother tried to help it to its feet, gently nudging with her nose, but the poor, dazed creature could only cock its head, as if trying to find the best angle to take in this strange new world. Jesus helped hold it steady on its feet, his hands sticky with the afterbirth, but he did not mind, one gets used to such things when one is in constant contact with animals, and this lamb arrived at the right moment, so pretty with its curly coat and its pink little mouth already searching avidly for milk from those teats, which it is seeing for the first time and could never have imagined from inside its mother's womb. No one has any grounds for complaining about God, when we discover so many useful things from the moment we are born.

Within sight, Pastor stretches the kid's pelt on a wooden frame in the form of a star, the skinned carcass already in his pack, wrapped in cloth. He will salt it later, when the flock settles down for the night, except for the piece Pastor intends to have for his supper, since Jesus is adamant he will not touch the meat of an animal he killed. These scruples on the part of Jesus place him in conflict with the religion he observes and the traditions he respects, including the slaughter of all those other innocent animals sacrificed daily on the altars of the Lord, especially in Jerusalem, where the victims are counted in hecatombs. Given the time and place, Jesus' attitude does seem odd, but perhaps it is really a question of vulnerability, for we must not forget Joseph's tragic

death and Jesus' recent discovery of the appalling massacre that took place in Bethlehem almost fifteen years ago, enough to disturb any young mind, not to mention those terrifying nightmares, which we have not mentioned lately, although they still trouble him and refuse to go away. When he can no longer bear the thought that Joseph is coming to kill him, his cries wake the flock in the middle of the night, and Pastor gives him a gentle shake, What's this, what's going on. Delivered from his nightmare, Jesus falls into the shepherd's arms, as if Pastor were his unfortunate father. Soon after joining Pastor, Jesus had confided in him that he had nightmares, though not giving the reason, but Pastor said, Save your breath, I know everything, even what you're hiding from me. This was about the time Jesus rebuked Pastor for his lack of faith and his wickedness, particularly, if you'll forgive my laboring the point, in sexual matters. But Jesus realized that he had no one else in the world, besides the family he had abandoned and forgotten, but not the mother who gave him life, although he often wished she hadn't, and, after his mother, only his sister Lisa, which he couldn't explain, but then memory is like that, it has its own reasons. So gradually Jesus began to enjoy Pastor's company, and it is easy to imagine his relief at not having to live alone with his remorse, at having someone at his side who understood, who would not pretend to forgive what could not be forgiven, someone who would treat him with both kindness and severity in accordance with his innocence and his guilt. We felt this needed explaining, so that the reader would find it easier to understand and accept why Jesus, so different in character and outlook from his ill-bred master, decided to stay with him until the prophesied encounter with God, which promises to be momentous, because God is not likely to appear to a simple mortal without good reason.

But before that, the circumstances and coincidences which we have discussed at length dictate that Jesus meet his mother and some of his brothers in Jerusalem during Passover, which he thought he would be celebrating for the first time without his family. That Jesus wanted to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem might have angered Pastor, for they were in the hills and the flock needed all their attention. Besides, Pastor was not a Jew and had no other god to honor, so he could well have refused Jesus permission, telling him, Oh no, you don't, you'll stay right here, I'm the one who gives the orders, and there's work to be done. Yet none of this happened, Pastor simply asked, Will you be coming back, but from the tone of his voice he seemed certain that Jesus would return, and indeed, the boy replied without a moment's hesitation, although he was surprised that the words came out so quickly, Yes, I'll be back. Then pick yourself a clean lamb, Jesus, and take it to be sacrificed, since you Jews attach so much importance to such practices. Pastor was putting him to the test, to see if the boy could lead to its death a lamb from the flock they had worked so hard to maintain and protect. No one warned Jesus, no tiny, invisible angel whispered in his ear, Be careful, it's a trap, don't trust him, this man is capable of anything. His gentle nature provided him with a good answer, or perhaps it was the memory of the dead kid and the newborn lamb. I want no lamb from this flock, he said. Why not. I cannot lead to its death an animal that I myself raised. Please yourself, but I hope you realize that you'll have to get a lamb from some other flock. I suppose so, since lambs don't fall from heaven. When are you thinking of leaving,

Early tomorrow morning, And you'll be coming back, Yes, I'll be back. They said no more on the subject, although it was difficult to see how Jesus would find enough money to buy a paschal lamb when he could barely scrape together a living. One may presume that, not given to vices that cost money, he still had the few coins given him by the Pharisee almost a year ago, but they didn't amount to much, and, as we said, at this time of the year the prices of livestock in general and of lambs especially rise out of all proportion, so that one really has to put one's trust in God. Despite all the misfortunes that have befallen him, one is tempted to say that a lucky star guides this boy, but it would be feeble-minded of this or any other evangelist to believe that celestial bodies so remote from our planet could have any appreciable influence on a human life, however much the devout Magi may have invoked, studied, and compared the stars. For, if what we are told is true, they must have traveled here some years ago, only to see what they saw and to go away again. What we are simply trying to say in this long-winded passage is that our Jesus must somehow find a way to present himself worthily in the Temple with a little lamb, thus fulfilling what is expected of him. For he has proved himself a good Jew even in difficult situations, such as those tense exchanges with Pastor.

About this time the flock was enjoying the rich pastures of the valley of Aijalon, situated between the cities of Gezer and Emmaus. In Emmaus, Jesus tried to earn enough money to buy the much-needed lamb, but he soon saw that after a year of tending sheep and goats he no longer had the aptitude for any other kind of work, not even for carpentry, in which, from lack of practice, he had made no progress. So he took the road that leads up from Emmaus to Jerusalem, wondering what he should do, he had no money to buy the lamb, stealing was out of the question, and it would be more miracle than luck if he found a stray lamb on the road. There are plenty of lambs in sight, some with ropes around their necks following their owners, others fortunate enough to be carried in loving arms. Imagining themselves on an outing, these innocent creatures are excited and nervous, they are curious about everything, and because they cannot ask questions, they use their eyes in the hope of making sense of a world made of words. Jesus sat on a stone by the roadside to think of a solution to this material problem that prevented him from carrying out his spiritual duty, if only another Pharisee, or even the same one, who probably gives alms daily, were suddenly to appear and ask him, Are you in need of a lamb, just as the man had previously asked him, Are you hungry. On that first occasion Jesus did not have to beg in order to receive, but now, with little hope of being given anything, he will have to beg. He already has his hand out, a gesture so eloquent that it dispenses with all explanations, and so expressive that we nearly always avert our eyes rather than be confronted with an unsightly wound or distressing obscenity. A few coins were dropped into Jesus' palm by less distracted travelers, but so few that at this rate the road from Emmaus will never bring him to the gates of Jerusalem. When he adds up what money he already has and what he just collected, there isn't enough to buy even half a lamb, and the Lord, as everyone knows, does not accept an animal on His altars unless it is perfect and whole, He refuses those that are blind, crippled, mutilated, diseased, or contaminated. You can imagine the scandal in the

Temple if we were to present ourselves at the sacrificial altar with the hindquarters only, or, if by any misfortune the testicles have been crushed, broken, or cut, that too would exclude it. No one asks this boy why he needs money, but wait, an elderly man with a long white beard now approaches Jesus while his family pauses in the middle of the road, respectfully waiting for the patriarch to rejoin them. Jesus thought he would receive another coin, but he was mistaken. The old man asked, Who are you, and the boy stood up to answer, I am Jesus of Nazareth. Have you no family. Yes, I have. Then why are you not with them. I came to work as a shepherd in Judaea, a deceitful way of telling the truth, or putting the truth at the service of a lie. The old man looked at him quizzically and asked, Why are you begging for alms if you have a trade. I earn my keep but cannot save enough money to buy a lamb for Passover. So that is why you beg. Yes, whereupon the patriarch ordered one of the men in his group, Give this boy a lamb, we can buy another when we get to the Temple. There were six lambs tied to the same rope, the man untied the last of them and handed it to the old man, who told Jesus, Here's your lamb so that you too may offer sacrifice to the Lord this Passover, and without waiting to be thanked, he returned to his family, who received him with smiles and admiration. Before Jesus could thank the old man, he was gone, then suddenly the road was mysteriously empty, between one bend and the next there was only Jesus and the lamb, who had finally found each other on the road from Emmaus thanks to the generosity of an elderly Jew. Jesus clutched the end of the cord, the animal looked up at his new master and started to bleat me-e-e-e in that nervous, tremulous way of young lambs before they are sacrificed to placate the gods. This bleating, which Jesus had heard thousands of times since becoming a shepherd's helpmate, touched his heart, and he felt as if his limbs were dissolving with pity. Here he was, with power as never before over the life of another creature, this immaculate white lamb that had no will and no desire, its trusting little face looking up at him anxiously, its pink tongue showing each time it bleated, and pink flesh beneath its soft hairs, and pink inside its ears, and pink nails on its feet, just as humans have, but nails that would never harden and be called hooves. Jesus stroked the lamb's head, it responded by stretching its neck and rubbing its moist nose against the palm of his hand, sending a shiver up his spine. The spell broke as suddenly as it had begun. At the end of the road, from the direction of Emmaus, other pilgrims appeared in a swarm of fluttering tunics, of packs and staffs, with more lambs and prayers of thanksgiving to the Lord. Jesus lifted his lamb into his arms and started walking.

He had not been back to Jerusalem since that distant day he came out of necessity to discover the burden of sorrow and remorse in life, whether shared like an inheritance or kept entirely to oneself like death. The crowd filling the streets resembled a muddy brown river about to flood the concourse before the steps of the Temple. Holding the lamb in his arms, Jesus watched the people file past, some coming, some going, some carrying animals to be sacrificed, some returning without them, looking joyful and exclaiming, Alleluia, Hosanna, Amen, or saying none of these things, feeling it was inappropriate to walk around shouting Hallelujah or Hip hip hurrah, because there is

really not much difference between the two expressions, we use them enthusiastically until with the passage of time and by dint of repetition we finally ask ourselves, What does it mean, only to find there is no answer. The endless column of smoke spiraling above the Temple indicated for miles around that all who had come to offer sacrifices were direct and legitimate descendants of Abel, that son of Adam and Eve who in his day offered to the Lord the firstborn of his flock and their fat, which were favorably received, while his brother Cain, who had nothing to offer but the simple fruits of nature, saw that the Lord for some reason did not so much as look at him. If this was Cain's motive for killing Abel, then we can put our minds at rest, the worshipers here are not likely to kill one another, they all offer the same sacrifice, and how the fat spits and the carcasses sizzle as God in the sublime heavens inhales the odors of all this carnage with satisfaction. Jesus pressed his lamb to his breast, unable to fathom why God could not be appeased with a cup of milk poured over His altar, that sap of life which passes from one being to another, or with a handful of wheat, the basic substance of immortal bread. Soon he will have to part with the old man's generous gift, his for such a short time, the poor little lamb will not live to see the sun set this day, it is time to mount the stairs of the Temple, to deliver it to the knife and sacrificial fire, as if it were no longer worthy of existence or being punished by the eternal guardian of myths and fables for having drunk from the waters of life. Then Jesus decided, in defiance of the law of the synagogue and the word of God, that this lamb would not die, that what he had received to deliver to the altar would continue to live and that he would leave Jerusalem a greater sinner than when he arrived. As if his previous offenses were not enough, he was now committing this one too, but the day will come when he has to pay for all his sins, because God never forgets. The fear of punishment made him hesitate for a moment, but suddenly, in his mind's eye, he saw a horrifying vision, a vast sea of blood, the blood of the countless lambs and other animals sacrificed since the creation of mankind, for that is why men have been put on this earth, to adore and to offer sacrifice. And he saw the steps of the Temple awash with red, as blood came streaming down them, and he saw himself standing in a pool of blood and raising the lifeless body of his beheaded lamb to heaven. Deep in thought, Jesus stood inside a sphere of silence, but then the sphere shattered, and once more he was plunged into the clamor of invocations and blessings, pleas, cries, chants, and the pitiful bleating of lambs, until all was silenced in an instant by three low blasts from the shofar, the long, spiral horn of a ram made into a trumpet. Covering the lamb with his pack, Jesus ran from the concourse and disappeared into a labyrinth of narrow alleyways without worrying where he might end up. When he finally stopped for breath, he was on the outskirts, having left the city by the northern gate, known as that of Ramah, the same gate by which he had entered when he arrived from Nazareth. He sat beneath an olive tree by the side of the road and took the lamb out of his pack, no one would have found it strange to see him sitting there, they would simply have thought, He has traveled a long way and is recovering his strength before taking his lamb to the Temple, how endearing, we do not know whether the person thinking this means the lamb or Jesus. We find both of them endearing, but if we had to make a choice, the prize would almost certainly go to the lamb, on the condition that it does not grow any

bigger. Jesus lies on his back, holding the end of the cord to prevent the lamb from escaping, an unnecessary precaution, the poor animal has no strength, not only because of its tender age but also because of all the excitement, the constant motion back and forth, not to mention the meager food it was given this morning, for it is considered neither fitting nor decent for anyone, lamb or martyr, to die with a full belly.

Stretched out on the ground, Jesus gradually recovers and starts breathing normally again. Between the branches of the olive tree, as it sways gently in the wind, he can see the sky, the sun's rays filtering through gaps in the foliage and playing on his face, it must be about the sixth hour, the sun directly overhead shortens the shadows, and who would ever think that night will come to extinguish this dazzling light. Some people pass on the road, more follow behind, and when Jesus looks again at that group, he receives such a shock that his first impulse is to flee, but how can he, for coming toward him is his own mother accompanied by some of his brothers, the older sons, James, Joseph, and Judas, and Lisa too, but she is a girl and should be mentioned separately rather than listed according to age, which would place her between James and Joseph. They still have not seen him. Jesus goes into the road to meet them, once more carrying his lamb in his arms, but one suspects this is only to make sure his arms are full. First to notice him is James, who waves before turning to their mother in great excitement, and now Mary is looking, they start walking faster, and Jesus too feels obliged to hasten toward them, though he cannot run with the lamb in his arms. We are taking so long over this that the reader might get the impression we do not want them to meet, but this is not so, maternal, fraternal, and filial love should give them wings, yet there are reservations and certain constraints, we know how they separated, we do not know the effect of all those months apart without news of each other. If one keeps walking, one eventually arrives, and there they are, face-to-face, Jesus says, Your blessing, Mother, and his mother says, May the Lord bless you, my son. They embraced, then it was his brothers' turn, then Lisa's, followed by an awkward silence, all of them at a loss for words, Mary was not going to say to her son, Such a surprise, what on earth are you doing here, nor Jesus to his mother, I never expected to find you here, what brings you to the city, the lamb in his arms and the one they have brought speak for themselves, this is the Passover of the Lord, the difference being that one lamb is going to die and the other has been saved. We waited and waited to hear from you, Mary said at length, bursting into tears. Her eldest son stands before her, so tall, so grown-up, with the beginnings of a beard and the weather-beaten complexion of one who has spent his days in the open, exposed to the sun, wind, and dust of the desert. Don't cry, Mother, I have work. I'm a shepherd now. A shepherd. Yes, a shepherd. But I was hoping you'd follow your father and take up the trade he taught you. Well, as things turned out, I became a shepherd, and that's what I am. When are you coming home. I don't know, one day, I suppose. At least accompany your mother and brothers to the Temple. Mother, I'm not going to the Temple. Why not, you have your lamb there. This lamb isn't going to the Temple either. Is there something wrong with it. No, nothing, but he will die a natural death when his time comes. My son, I don't understand. You don't have to understand, if I save this lamb, it's so that someone

may save me. Then why not come with your family. I was leaving. Where to, Back to the flock where I belong, Where did you leave it, At present it's in the valley of Aijalon, Where is this valley of Aijalon, On the other side, What other side, On the other side of Bethlehem. Mary stepped back and turned quite pale, how she has aged although barely thirty, Why do you mention Bethlehem, she asked. That's where I met the shepherd who is my master. Who is this man, and before Jesus had time to reply, she said to the others, You go on ahead and wait for me at the entrance. Then taking Jesus by the hand, she led him to the side of the road, Who is this man, she asked a second time. I don't know, Jesus answered. Doesn't he have a name. If he has, he's never told me, I call him Pastor and that's all. What does he look like, He's big, And where did you meet him, In the cave where I was born, Who took you there, A slave named Salome, who told me she helped deliver me, And this man, What about him, What did he say to you, Nothing you don't already know. Mary slumped to the ground, as if a heavy hand were pushing her, That man is a demon. How do you know, did he tell you so. No, the first time I saw him, he told me he was an angel and asked me not to say a word to anyone. When did you see him. The day your father learned I was pregnant, he appeared at our door disguised as a beggar and told me he was an angel. Did you ever see him again. On the road when your father and I traveled to Bethlehem for the census, then in the cave where you were born, and the night after you left home, he walked into the yard, I thought it was you, and peering through the gap in the door, I saw him uproot the plant in the yard, you remember that bush which grew at the very spot where the bowl of bright earth was buried. What bowl, what earth. You were never told, but the beggar gave it to me before he went away, when he returned the bowl after he had finished eating, there was luminous earth inside. For earth to shine, he must have been an angel. At first I believed so, but the devil too has magical powers. Jesus sat beside his mother and left the lamb to roam at will. Yes, I've learned that when they are both in agreement, it's almost impossible to tell the difference between an angel of the Lord and an angel of Satan, he told her. Stay with us, don't go back to that man, do this for your mother's sake. No, I promised to return, and I will keep my word. People make promises to the devil only in order to deceive him. This man, who I'm certain is no man but an angel or demon, has been haunting me since the day I was born, and I want to know why. Jesus, my son, come to the Temple with your mother and brothers, by taking this lamb to the altar you'll fulfill your obligation and the lamb its destiny, and there you can ask the Lord to deliver you from the powers of Satan and all evil thoughts. This lamb will die only when his time comes. But this is its day for dying. Mother, the lambs you gave birth to must die, but you should not make them die before their time. Lambs are not people, and even less so when those people are sons. When the Lord ordered Abraham to kill his son Isaac, no distinction was made then. My son, I'm a simple woman, I have no answer to give you, but I beseech you, give up these evil thoughts. Mother, thoughts are but passing shadows, neither good nor bad in themselves, actions alone count. Praised be the Lord who blessed this poor, ignorant woman with such a wise son, yet I cannot believe this is the wisdom of God. One can learn also from the devil. And I fear you are in his power. If his power saved this lamb, then something has been gained in the world today. Mary

made no attempt to reply. They saw James approaching from the city gate. Mary got to her feet, I find my son only to lose him again, she said, to which Jesus replied, If you haven't already lost him, you will not lose him now. He put his hand into his pack and took out the money he had been given as alms, This is all I have. You've worked all those months for so little. I work to earn my keep. You must be very fond of that master of yours to be satisfied with so little. The Lord is my shepherd. Don't offend God, living with a demon. Who knows, Mother, who knows, he could be an angel serving another God who reigns in another heaven. The Lord said, I am the Lord and you will worship no other god. Amen, responded Jesus. He gathered the lamb into his arms and said, I see James approaching, farewell, Mother, and Mary said, One would think you had more affection for that lamb than for your own family. Right now I do, said Jesus. Choking with grief and anger, Mary turned away and ran to meet her other son. She did not look back.

Outside the city walls, Jesus took a different route across the fields before beginning the long descent into the valley of Aijalon. He stopped at a village and bought food with the money his mother had refused, some bread and figs, milk for himself and the lamb, sheep's milk, and if there was any difference, it wasn't noticeable, it's possible, at least in this case, that one mother is as good as another. Anyone surprised that Jesus spends money on a lamb that by rights should now be dead will be told that the boy once owned two lambs, one was sacrificed and lives on in the glory of the Lord, while this other lamb was rejected because it had a torn ear, Take a look, But there's nothing wrong with its ear, they might say, to which Jesus would reply, Well, then, I'll tear it myself, and lifting the lamb to his back, he went on his way. He caught sight of the flock as the evening light began to wane and the sky became overcast with dark, low clouds. The tension in the air spoke of thunderstorms, and indeed lightning rent the sky just as Jesus saw the flock. But there was no rain, it was one of those dry thunderstorms, all the more frightening because they make you feel so vulnerable, without the shield of rain and wind, as it were, to protect you in the naked battle between a thundering heaven that tears itself apart and an earth that trembles and cowers beneath the blows. A hundred paces from Jesus, another blinding flash split an olive tree, which immediately caught fire and blazed like a torch. A loud burst of thunder shuddered across the sky as if ripping it open from end to end, and the impact knocked Jesus to the ground and left him senseless. Two more bolts struck, here, there, like two decisive words, then little by little the peals of thunder grew remote and finally became a gentle murmur, an intimate dialogue between heaven and earth. The lamb, having survived the storm unharmed and no longer afraid, came up to Jesus and put its mouth to his lips, there was no sniffing, one touch was all that was needed. Jesus opened his eyes, saw the lamb, then the livid sky like a black hand blocking whatever light remained. The olive tree still burned. His bones ached when he tried to move, but at least he was in one piece, if that can be said of a body so fragile that it takes only a clap of thunder to knock it to the ground. He sat up with some effort and reassured himself, more by touch than by sight, that he was neither burned nor paralyzed, none of his bones were broken, and apart from a loud buzzing in his head as insistent as the drone of a trumpet, he was all right. He drew the

lamb to him and said, Don't be afraid, He only wanted to show you that you would have been dead by now if that was His will, and to show me that it was not I who saved your life but He. One last rumble of thunder slowly tore the air like a sigh, while below, the white patch of the flock seemed a beckoning oasis.

Struggling to overcome his weakness, Jesus descended the slope. The lamb, kept on its cord simply as a precaution, trotted at his side like a little dog. Behind them, the olive tree continued to burn, and the light it cast in the twilight allowed Jesus to see the tall figure of Pastor rise before him like a ghost, wrapped in a mantle that seemed endless and holding a crook that looked as though it might touch the clouds were he to raise it. Pastor said, I was expecting that thunderstorm. I'm the one who should have expected it, replied Jesus. Where did you get the lamb. I didn't have enough money to buy one for Passover, so I stood by the roadside and begged, then an old man came and gave me this lamb. Why didn't you offer it in sacrifice. I couldn't, I just couldn't bring myself to do it. Pastor smiled, Now I begin to understand, He waited for you, let you come to the flock safely, in order to show His might before my eyes. Jesus did not reply, he had more or less said the same thing to the lamb, but having just arrived, he had no desire to get into a discussion about God's motives and acts. So what will you do with your lamb. Nothing, I brought it here so that it could join the flock. The white lambs all look alike, tomorrow you won't even recognize it among the others. My lamb knows me. The day will come when it forgets you, besides the lamb will soon grow tired of always having to come and look for you, better to brand it or cut off a piece of its ear. Poor little beast. What's the difference, after all they branded you when they cut your foreskin so that people would know to whom you belong. It's not the same thing. It shouldn't be, but it is. As they were speaking, Pastor gathered up wood and was now busily trying to light a fire with a flint. Jesus told him, It would be easier to go and fetch a branch from the burning olive tree, whereupon Pastor replied, One should always leave heavenly fire to burn out by itself. The trunk of the olive tree was now one great ember glowing in the darkness, the wind made sparks fly from it and sent incandescent strips of bark and burning twigs into the air, where they soon went out. The sky remained heavy and strangely oppressive. Pastor and Jesus ate together as usual, which led Pastor to remark ironically, This year you're not partaking of the paschal lamb. Jesus listened and said nothing, but deep inside he felt uneasy, from now on he would face the awkward contradiction between eating lambs and refusing to kill them. So what's to be done, asked Pastor, is the lamb to be branded or not. I couldn't do it, said Jesus. Give it to me, then, and I'll do it. With a firm, quick flick of the knife Pastor removed the tip of one of its ears, then holding it up, he asked, What shall I do with this, bury it or throw it away. Without thinking, Jesus replied, Let me have it, and dropped it into the fire. That's exactly how they disposed of your foreskin, said Pastor. Blood dripped from the lamb's ear in a slow trickle that would soon stop. The smoke from the flames gave off the intoxicating smell of charred young flesh. And so at the end of a long day, in which much time had been wasted on childish and presumptuous gestures of defiance, the Lord finally received His due, perhaps because of those intimidating blasts of thunder and lightning, which surely made enough of an

impression to persuade these stubborn shepherds to show obedience. The earth quickly swallowed the last drop of the lamb's blood, for it would have been a great shame to lose the most precious drop of all from this much-disputed sacrifice.

Transformed by time into an ordinary sheep, distinguishable from the others only by the missing tip of one ear, this same animal came to lose itself three years later in the wild country bordering the desert south of Jericho. In so large a flock, one sheep more or less may not seem to make much difference, but we must not forget that this flock is like no other, even its shepherds have little in common with shepherds we have heard about or seen, so we should not be surprised if Pastor, looking from a hilltop, noticed that an animal was missing without having to count them. He called Jesus and told him, Your sheep is missing from the flock, go and look for it, and since Jesus himself did not ask Pastor, How do you know the sheep is mine, we will also refrain from asking Jesus. What matters now is to see where Jesus, who is unfamiliar with this region where few have ventured, will go on the broad horizon. Since they came from the fertile land of Jericho, where they had decided not to stay, preferring to wander at their leisure rather than be trapped among people, a person or sheep intent on getting lost was much more likely to choose a place where the effort of searching for food would not interfere with his precious solitude. By this logic, it was clear that Jesus' sheep had deliberately lagged behind the others and even now was probably grazing on the fertile banks of the Jordan, within sight of Jericho for greater safety. Logic, however, is not everything in this life. Often what you expect, as the most feasible outcome of a sequence of events or else foreseeable for some other reason, comes about in the most unlikely way. If this is so, then our Jesus should seek his lost sheep not in those rich pastures back there but in the scorched and arid desert before him. No one need argue that a sheep would not stray off to die of hunger and thirst, first because no one knows what goes on inside a sheep's head, and secondly because you must keep in mind what we just said about the uncertain nature of the foreseeable. And so we find Jesus already making his way into the desert. Pastor showed no surprise at his decision, he said nothing, only gave a slow and solemn nod of the head, which, oddly, looked also like a gesture of farewell.

The desert in this region is not one of those vast tracks of sand with which we are all familiar, here it is more a great sea of parched, rugged dunes straddling one another and creating an inextricable labyrinth of valleys. A few plants barely survive at the foot of these slopes, plants consisting of only thorns and thistles, which a goat might be able to chew but will tear the sensitive mouth of a sheep at the slightest contact. This desert is far more intimidating than one formed by smooth sands and constantly shifting dunes, here every hill announces the threat lurking on the next hill, and when we arrive there in fear and trembling, at once we feel the same threat at our back. In this desert our cries will raise no echo, all we will hear in reply are the hills themselves calling out, or the voice of the mysterious force hidden there. Jesus, carrying nothing but his crook and pack, entered the desert. He had not gone far, had barely crossed the threshold of this world, when he became aware that his father's old sandals were coming apart under his

feet. They had been often patched, but Jesus' mending skills could no longer save what had walked so many roads and pressed so much sweat into the dust. As if obeying a commandment, the last of the fibers disintegrated, the patches came undone, the laces broke in several places, and soon Jesus was practically barefoot. The boy Jesus, as we have grown used to calling him, although being Jewish and eighteen years of age, he is more adult than adolescent, suddenly remembered the sandals he had been carrying all this time in his pack, and he foolishly thought they might still fit. Pastor was right when he warned him, when feet grow, they will not shrink again, and Jesus could scarcely believe that once he could slip his feet into these tiny sandals. He confronted the desert in his bare feet, like Adam expelled from Eden, and like Adam he hesitated before taking his first painful step across the tortured earth that beckoned him. But then, without asking himself why he did it, perhaps in memory of Adam, he dropped his pack and crook, and lifting his tunic by the hem pulled it over his head to stand as naked as Adam himself. Pastor cannot see him here, no inquisitive lamb has followed him, only birds venturing beyond this frontier can catch a glimpse of him from the sky, as can the insects from the ground, the ants, the occasional centipede, a scorpion that in panic lifts its tail with its poisonous sting. These tiny creatures cannot remember ever having seen a naked man before and have no idea what he is trying to prove. If they were to ask Jesus, Why did you take off your clothes, perhaps he would tell them, One must walk into the desert naked, a reply beyond the understanding of insects of the genus Hemiptera, Myriapoda, or Arachnida. We ask ourselves, Naked, with all those thorns to graze bare skin and catch in pubic hair, naked, with all those sharp thistles and that rough sand, naked under that scorching sun which can make a man dizzy and blind, naked, to find that lost sheep we branded with our own mark. The desert opens to receive Jesus, then closes behind him, as if cutting off any path of retreat. Silence echoes in his ears like the noise from one of those dead, empty shells which, washed ashore, absorb the vast sound of the waves until some passerby brings it slowly to his ear, listens, and says, The sea. Jesus's feet are bleeding, the sun pushes aside the clouds and stabs him, thorns prick his legs like clawing nails, thistles scratch him. Sheep, where are you, he calls, and the hills pass on his words, Where are you, where are you. This would be a perfect echo, but the prolonged, faraway sound of the shell imposes itself, murmuring God, Go-o-od, Go-o-od. Then, as if the hills were suddenly swept away, Jesus emerged from the maze of valleys into a flat and sandy arena, his sheep right in the center. He ran to it as fast as he could on his blistered feet, but a voice restrained him, Wait.

Slowly billowing upward like a column of smoke, a cloud twice as tall as any man appeared before him. The voice came from this cloud. Who speaks, Jesus asked in terror, already knowing the reply. The voice said, I am the Lord, and Jesus understood why he had felt the need to remove his clothes at the edge of the desert. You brought me here, what do You want with me. For the moment nothing, but the day will come when I will want everything. What is everything. Your life. You are the Lord, You always take from us the life You gave us. There is no other way, I cannot allow the world to become overcrowded. Why do You want my life. You will know when the time comes, therefore

prepare your body and your soul, because the destiny that awaits you is one of great good fortune. My Lord, I do not understand what You mean or what You want with me. I will give you power and glory. What power, what glory. You will learn when I summon you again. And when will that be. Do not be impatient, live your life as best you can. My Lord, I stand here before You, You have brought me here naked, I beg You, give me today what You would give me tomorrow. It is not a gift. You said you would give. An exchange, nothing more than an exchange. My life in exchange for what. For power. And for glory, You said, but until I know more about this power, until You tell me what it is, over whom and in whose eyes, Your promise comes too soon. You will find Me again when you are ready, but My signs will accompany you henceforth. Lord, tell me. Be quiet, ask no more questions, the hour will come, not a second sooner or later, and then you will know what I want of you. To hear You, Lord, is to obey, but I have one more question. Stop asking Me questions. Please, Lord, I must. Very well then, speak. Can I save my sheep. So that's what's bothering you. Yes, that's all, may I. No. Why not. Because you must offer it in sacrifice to Me to seal our covenant. You mean this sheep. Yes. Let me choose another from the flock, I'll be right back. You heard Me, I want this one. But Lord, can't you see, its ear has been clipped. You are mistaken, take a good look, the ear is perfect. It isn't possible. I am the Lord, and with the Lord all things are possible. But this is my sheep. Again you are mistaken, the lamb was Mine and you took it from Me, now you will recompense Me with the sheep. Your will be done, for You rule the universe, and I am Your servant. Then offer this sheep in sacrifice, or there will be no covenant. Take pity on me, Lord, I stand here naked and have neither cleaver nor knife, said Jesus, hoping he might still be able to save the sheep's life, but God said, I would not be God if I were unable to solve this problem, here. No sooner had He finished speaking than a brand-new cleaver lay at Jesus' feet. Now quickly, said God, for I have work to do and cannot stay here chatting all day long. Grasping the cleaver by the handle, Jesus went to the sheep. It raised its head and hardly recognized him, never having seen him naked before, and as everyone knows, these animals do not have a strong sense of smell. Do you weep, God asked. The cleaver went up, took aim, and came down as swiftly as an executioner's ax or the guillotine, which has not yet been invented. The sheep did not even whimper. All one could hear was, Ah, as God gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. Jesus asked Him, May I go now. You may, and don't forget, from now on you are tied to Me in flesh and blood. How should I take my leave of You. It doesn't matter, for Me there is no front or back, but it's customary to back away from Me, bowing as you go. Tell me, Lord. What a tiresome fellow you are, what's bothering you now. The shepherd who owns the flock, What shepherd, My master, What about him, Is he an angel or a demon, He's someone I know. But tell me, is he an angel or a demon. I've already told you, for God there is no front or back, good-bye for now. The column of smoke was gone, and the sheep too, all that remained were drops of blood, and they were trying to hide in the soil.

When Jesus returned, Pastor stared at him and asked, Where's the sheep, and he explained, I met God. I didn't ask you if you met God, I asked you if you found the sheep.

I offered it in sacrifice. Whatever for. Because God was there and I had no choice. With the tip of his crook Pastor drew a line on the ground, a furrow deep as a pit, insurmountable as a wall of fire, then told him, You've learned nothing, begone with you.

HOW CAN I GO ANYWHERE WITH MY FEET IN THIS CONDITION, thought Jesus as he watched Pastor move to the other side of the flock. God, who had so efficiently disposed of the sheep, had not favored poor Jesus with any divine spittle from that cloud to anoint and heal the cuts on his feet, whose oozing blood glistened on the stones. And Pastor is not going to help him, he has withdrawn, expecting his command to be obeyed, he has no intention of watching Jesus prepare to leave, let alone of bidding him farewell. On hands and knees Jesus crawled to the shelter where they stored the tools for handling the sheep, the receptacles for the milk, the cheese presses, and the sheepskins and goatskins they cured before trading them for what they needed, a tunic, a mantle, provisions of every kind. Jesus thought no one would object if he used the skins to make himself a pair of shoes. The thongs he fashioned from strips of goatskin, which were less hairy and therefore more pliable, but on adjusting the shoes, he was uncertain whether the hair should be on the inside or the outside, he ended up using it as padding because of the wretched state of his feet. It would be uncomfortable if the hairs stuck to the sores, but he would be traveling along the banks of the Jordan and needed only put his shod feet into the water for the congealed blood to dissolve. The weight of those clumsy boots, for that is what they look like, when they are soaked in water, will keep the hair from adhering to the scabs without disturbing those protective crusts that are gradually forming. The color of the blood that seeped from the sores showed, a pleasant surprise, that they were not yet infected. On the slow journey northward Jesus stopped twice and sat on the riverbank to plunge his feet into the cool water, which was as good as medicine. It grieved him to be sent away in this manner, after having met God, an event unprecedented in the fullest sense of the word, for to the best of his knowledge there was not a single man in all Israel who could boast of having seen God and lived. It is true that Jesus did not exactly see Him, but if a cloud appears in the desert in the form of a pillar of smoke and says, I am the Lord, and then holds a conversation that is not only logical and sensible but so compelling that it can only be divine, then to have even the slightest doubt is unpardonable. The answer He gave when questioned about Pastor proved that He was indeed the Lord, His tone of contempt as well as of a certain intimacy, and His refusal to say whether Pastor was an angel or a demon. But the most interesting thing was that Pastor's words, unfeeling and seemingly irrelevant, actually confirmed the supernatural character of the encounter, I didn't ask you if you met God, as if to say, That much I knew already, as if the news was no surprise. But Pastor clearly blamed him for the sheep's death, those final words, You've learned nothing, begone with you, could have no other meaning, and the way he moved to the other side of the flock, his back to Jesus, until he disappeared from sight. On one of the occasions when Jesus allowed his mind to ponder what the Lord might want from him when they met again, Pastor's words suddenly came back to him as loudly and sharply as if the shepherd were standing right beside him, You've learned nothing, and at that moment the feeling of loss and solitude was so great as he sat by himself on the bank of the Jordan, watching his feet in the transparent river, a fine thread of blood suspended in the water, from a heel, that suddenly the blood and the heel no longer belonged to him, it was his father who had come there, limping on pierced feet, to find relief in the cool water of the river, and he repeated what Pastor had

said, You must start all over again, for you've learned nothing. As if lifting a long, heavy iron chain from the ground, Jesus recalled his life so far, link by link, the mysterious annunciation of his conception, the earth that shone, his birth in the cave, the massacred innocents of Bethlehem, his father's crucifixion, the nightmare he had inherited, the flight from home, the debate in the Temple, the revelation of Salome, the appearance of the shepherd, his experiences with the flock, the rescued lamb, the desert, the dead sheep, God. And as if this last word was too much for his mind to encompass, he concentrated on one question, Why should a lamb rescued from death eventually die as a sheep, an absurd question if ever there was one, it might make more sense if rephrased as follows, No salvation lasts, and damnation is final. And the last link in the chain is sitting now on the bank of the Jordan, listening to the mournful song of a woman who cannot be seen from here, she is hidden among the rushes, perhaps washing clothes, perhaps bathing, while Jesus tries to understand how all these things are connected, the living lamb that became a dead sheep, his feet bleeding his father's blood, and the woman singing, naked, lying on her back in the water, firm breasts above the surface, dark pubic hair ruffled by the breeze, for though it is true that Jesus never saw a naked woman before, if a man can predict, just by encountering a simple column of smoke, what it will be like to be with God when the time comes, then why should he not be able to visualize a naked woman in every detail, assuming she is naked, merely by listening to the song she sings, even though the words are not addressed to him. Joseph is no longer here, he has returned to the common grave in Sepphoris, while Pastor, not so much as the tip of his shepherd's crook is to be seen, and God, if He is everywhere, as people say, perhaps He is now in that current, in the very water where the woman is bathing. Jesus's body received a signal, the place between his legs began to swell, as with all humans and animals, the blood rushing there, causing his sores to dry up at once. Lord, this body has such strength, yet Jesus made no attempt to go in search of the woman, and his hands resisted the violent temptation of the flesh, You are no one until you love yourself, you will not reach God until you love your body. No one knows who spoke these words, God could not have spoken them, for they are not beads from His rosary, Pastor could well have uttered them, except he is far away, so perhaps they were the words of the song the woman sang. Jesus thought, How I wish I could go there and ask her to explain, but the singing had stopped, perhaps swept away by the current, or possibly the woman simply stepped from the water to dry herself and dress, thus silencing her body. Jesus put on his wet shoes and rose to his feet, dripping water everywhere like a sponge. The woman will have a good laugh if she passes this way and sees him wearing this grotesque footwear, but she will stop laughing when her eyes take in the shape beneath his tunic and stare at length into those eyes saddened by sorrows past and present, but looking troubled now for quite a different reason. With few or no words she will remove her clothes again and offer to do what one might expect in such cases, she will take off his shoes with the utmost care and tend those sores, kissing each of his feet and then covering them with her own damp hair, as if protecting an egg or cocoon. No sign of anyone coming down the road, Jesus looks around him, sighs, looks for a spot to conceal himself, heads there, but comes to a sudden halt, remembering in time that the Lord

punished Onan with death for spilling his seed on the ground. Now, Jesus could have provided a more sophisticated interpretation of this old episode, as was his wont, and not been deterred by the Lord's inflexibility, for two reasons, the first being that he had no sister-in-law by whom he was legally bound to provide an heir for a deceased brother, the second and perhaps more compelling reason being that the Lord, according to what He told him in the desert, had definite plans for his future which were yet to be revealed, therefore it would be neither practical nor logical to forget the promise made and risk losing everything, just because an uncontrolled hand strayed where it should not have, for the Lord knows our corporal needs, which are not confined to food and drink, there are other forms of abstention just as hard to endure. These and similar reflections should have encouraged Jesus to follow his natural inclinations and find a quiet spot to satisfy his urge, but instead they distracted him and confused him so much that he soon lost the desire to yield to wicked temptation. Resigned to his own virtue, Jesus lifted the pack to his shoulder, took up his staff, and went on his way.

On the first day of his journey along the banks of the Jordan, Jesus, accustomed to a lonely existence after four years of solitude, kept clear of inhabited places. But as he approached the Lake of Gennesaret, it became increasingly difficult to avoid passing through villages, especially since they were surrounded by cultivated fields that barred his way, moreover his rough appearance aroused the suspicions of the laborers. So Jesus decided to enter the world of men, and was pleasantly surprised by what he found there, all that really bothered him was the noise, which he had forgotten. In the first village he came to, a group of rowdy urchins roared with laughter at the sight of his sandal boots, no great problem, Jesus had enough money to buy new ones, remember that he has not touched any of the money he has been carrying with him since he was given two coins by the Pharisee, to live four years with few needs and no expenses has proved the greatest fortune one could have wished from the Lord. Now after buying the sandals he is left with two coins of little value, but poverty does not worry him, soon he will arrive at his destination, Nazareth, the home where he is certain to return, for on the day he left, and he feels as if he has been away forever, he said, One way or another I shall always come back. Following the thousand bends in the road along the Jordan, he travels at an easy pace, his feet are really in no condition for such a journey, but something else is slowing him down, something deep within, a vague premonition which might be expressed, The sooner I get there, the sooner I must leave. As he proceeds northward along the shore of the lake, he is already on the latitude of Nazareth, should he decide to make straight for home, all he need do is turn toward the setting sun, but he lingers by the waters of the lake, blue, wide, tranquil. He loves sitting on the shore watching the fishermen cast their nets, as a little boy he often came here with his parents, but he never stopped to watch the labors of these men who smell of fish as if they themselves lived in the sea.

As he went, Jesus earned enough to eat by doing what jobs he knew, which were none, or could do, which were few, pulling a boat ashore or pushing it into the water, helping to drag in a full net, and the fishermen, seeing how hungry he looked, would offer

him a couple of fish in payment. At first Jesus felt shy and would go off to cook and eat them on his own, but after several days the fishermen invited him to join them. On the third and last day Jesus went out on the lake with two brothers, Simon and Andrew, both older than he, already in their thirties. When they were out on the open water, Jesus, who knew nothing about fishing, laughing at his own awkwardness, tried at the insistence of his new friends to cast the net with that broad gesture which seen from a distance resembles a blessing or a challenge, but he had no success, and once almost fell into the water. Simon and Andrew roared with laughter, well aware that Jesus only knew how to handle goats and sheep, and Simon said, Life would be much easier for us if this flock could be gathered and led, to which Jesus replied, At least they don't go astray or get lost, they are all here in the lake, escaping the net or falling into it day after day. The catch was disappointing, the bottom of the boat almost empty, and Andrew said, Brother, let's turn back, we're not likely to catch more fish today. Simon agreed, You're right, brother, let's go. He slipped the oars into the oarlocks and was about to start rowing to the shore when Jesus suggested, not out of any inspiration or special insight but simply from inexplicable good spirits, that they try three more times, Who knows, perhaps this watery flock, led by its shepherd, has moved to our side. Simon laughed, That's another good thing about sheep, they're visible, and turning to Andrew, told him, Cast the net over there, nothing ventured, nothing gained, whereupon Andrew cast the net and it came back full. The fishermen gasped in amazement, and their amazement turned to awe when the net was cast a second and third time and came back full both times. From water that earlier seemed devoid of fish suddenly there came pouring forth, like a fountain, fish such as never were seen before, gleaming torrents of gills, scales, and fins that left one dazed. Simon and Andrew asked Jesus how he knew that the fish would gather there, and Jesus told them he didn't know, it was impulse when he said to try again. The two brothers had no reason to doubt him, pure chance can work such miracles, but Jesus trembled inside and in the silence of his soul asked, Who did this. Simon said, Give us a hand to sort them, and we should explain now that it was not from the Sea of Galilee that the ecumenical proverb originated which says, Everything that falls into the net is fish. Here different criteria prevail, the net may have caught fish, but the law, as elsewhere, is quite unambiguous, Behold what you may eat of the various aquatic species, you may eat anything in the waters, seas, and rivers that has fins and scales, but that which has neither fins nor scales, whether they be creatures that breed or that live in the water, you will shun and abhor them for all time, you will refrain from eating the flesh of everything in the water that has neither fins nor scales, and treat them as abomination. And so the despised fish with smooth skins, those that cannot be served at the table of the people of the Lord, were returned to the sea, many of them so accustomed to this by now that they no longer worried when caught in the nets, for they knew they would soon be back in the water and out of danger. With their fish mentality, they believed themselves the recipients of some special favor from the Creator, perhaps even of a special love, so that in time they came to consider themselves superior to other fish, for those in the boats must have committed grievous sins beneath the dark water for God to let them perish so mercilessly.

When the three finally reached the shore, taking every precaution not to sink, for the waters of the lake came up to the edge of the boat as if about to swallow it, the people there were dumbfounded. They could not understand how this happened, the other fishermen had returned with empty boats, but by tacit and mutual agreement the three lucky men said nothing of what had brought about their prodigious catch. Simon and Andrew did not want to see their reputations as fishermen diminished in public, while Jesus had no desire to find himself in demand as a lookout for other crews, which, it must be said, would have been only just and fair, if we could abolish once and for all the favoritism that has caused so much harm in this world. Which thought led Jesus to announce that same night that, after four years of constant trial and tribulation which could have been sent only by Satan, he would depart tomorrow for Nazareth, where his family were expecting him. This decision saddened Simon and Andrew, who regretted losing the best lookout ever celebrated in the annals of Gennesaret. And two other fishermen felt regret, these were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, two simple lads whom people used to ask in jest, Who is the father of the sons of Zebedee, throwing both of them into mortified confusion, though they knew the answer, they were obviously his sons. They regretted Jesus' departure not only because it meant no more prodigious catches but because, being younger, and John was even younger than Jesus, they had hoped to form a crew that could compete with the older men. Their simplicity had nothing to do with being stupid or retarded, they simply went through life with their thoughts elsewhere, so that they were always caught by surprise when someone asked them who was the father of the sons of Zebedee, and were always puzzled by the merriment that broke out when they replied, Zebedee, of course. John tried to dissuade Jesus, he went up to him and said, Stay with us, our boat is bigger than Simon's and we can catch more fish, to which Jesus, wise and compassionate, replied, The measure of the Lord is not that of men but the measure of His justice. John went off, crestfallen, and the evening passed without any further approaches from interested parties. Next day, Jesus bade farewell to the first friends he ever made, and with his pack replenished he turned his back on the Lake of Gennesaret where, unless he was mistaken, God had given him a sign, and set out for the mountains that led to Nazareth.

Fate decreed, however, that as he passed through the town of Magdala, a troublesome sore on his foot should open, and it looked as if it would never stop bleeding. Fate also decreed that this misfortune should occur at the very edge of Magdala, directly in front of a house that stood apart, away from the other houses, as if ostracized. When the blood showed no sign of stopping, Jesus called, Anyone home, and a woman appeared in the doorway as if expecting to be called, from the lack of surprise on her face we might assume she is accustomed to people walking into the house without knocking, but on careful reflection we know this is not the case, for the woman is a prostitute, and the respect she owes her profession requires that she close her front door when she receives a client. Jesus, who was sitting on the ground and pressing the open sore, looked up as the woman approached, Help me, he said, and taking hold of her outstretched hand, he struggled to his feet and made a few faltering steps. You're in no

state to be walking, she told him, come inside and let me bathe your foot. Jesus did not say yes or no, the woman's perfume was so powerful that the pain vanished as if by magic, and with one arm around her shoulders and another arm, which obviously could not be his, around his waist, he felt turmoil surge through his body, or more precisely through his senses, because it was in his senses, or at least in one of them, which is neither sight nor smell nor taste nor touch, though all of these play some part, that he felt it most, God help him. The woman helped him into the yard, closed the gate, and made him sit. Wait here, she said. She went inside and returned with an earthenware basin and a white cloth. Filling the basin with water, she wet the cloth, knelt at Jesus' feet, rested the injured foot in the palm of her left hand, and washed it gently, removing the dirt and softening the broken scab, which oozed blood and disgusting yellow pus. The woman told him, It will take more than water to heal this, but Jesus said, All I ask is that you bandage my foot so I can reach Nazareth. He was on the point of saying, My mother will treat it, but stopped himself in time, he did not wish to give the impression of being a mama's boy who has only to stub his toe on a stone and he is crying to be comforted and nursed, It's nothing, child, look, it's better already. It's a long way from here to Nazareth, the woman told him, but if that's what you want, let me rub in a little ointment. She went back into the house and seemed to take longer this time. Jesus looks around him in surprise, for he has never seen such a clean and tidy yard. He suspects the woman is a prostitute, not because he is particularly good at guessing people's professions at first glance, besides, not that long ago he himself would have been identified as a shepherd by the smell of goat, yet now everyone would say, He's a fisherman, for he lost one smell only to replace it with another. The woman reeks of perfume, but Jesus, who may be innocent, has learned certain facts of life by watching the mating of goats and rams, he also has enough common sense to know that just because a woman uses perfume, it does not necessarily mean she is a whore. A whore should smell of the men she lies with, just as the goatherd smells of goat and the fisherman offish, but who knows, perhaps these women perfume themselves heavily because they want to conceal, disguise, or even forget the odor of a man's body. The woman reappeared with a small jar, and she was smiling, as if someone in the house had told her something amusing. Jesus saw her approach, but unless his eyes deceived him, she walked very slowly, the way it is often in dreams, her tunic flowing and revealing the curves of her body as she walked, her hips swaying, her black hair loose over her shoulders and tossing like corn silk in the wind. Her tunic was unmistakably a whore's, her body a dancer's, her laughter a whore's. Deeply troubled, Jesus searched his memory for some apt maxims by his famous namesake, Jesus the son of Sirach, and his memory obliged, whispering discreetly in his ear, Stay away from loose women lest you fall into their snares, Have nothing to do with female dancers lest you succumb to their charms, and finally, Do not fall into the hands of prostitutes lest you lose your soul and all your possessions, and Jesus' soul may well be in danger now that he has reached manhood, but as for his possessions, they are in no danger, for, as we know, he possesses nothing. So he will be quite safe when the moment comes to fix a price and the woman inquires, How much money do you have.

Jesus was prepared and showed no surprise when the woman asked him his name as she rubbed ointment into the sores on his foot, which rested on her lap. I am Jesus, he replied, without adding, of Nazareth, for he had said so earlier, just as the woman who lived here was clearly from Magdala, and when he asked her name, she replied only, Mary. Having carefully examined and dressed his injured foot, Mary Magdalene tied the bandage with a firm knot, That should do, she said. How can I thank you, asked Jesus, and for the first time his eyes met hers, eyes black and bright as coals, also like water running over water, veiled with a sensuality that Jesus found irresistible. The woman did not answer at once, she looked at him as if weighing him, the boy obviously had no money, at length she said, Remember me, that is all I ask, and Jesus assured her, I will never forget your kindness, and then, summoning his courage, Nor will I forget you. Why do you say that, she asked, smiling. Because you are beautiful. You should have seen me in my youth. You are beautiful as you are. Her smile faded, Do you know what I am, what I do, how I earn my living. I do. You only had to look at me, and you knew everything. I know nothing. Not even that I'm a prostitute. That I know. I sleep with men for money. Yes. Then, as I said, you know everything about me. That is all I know. The woman sat down beside him, gently stroked his hand, touched his mouth with the tips of her fingers, If you really want to thank me, spend the day here with me. I cannot, Why, I have no money to pay you, That's no surprise. Please do not mock me. You may not believe me, but I'd sooner mock a man with a full purse. It's not only a question of money. What is it, then. Jesus fell silent and turned his face away. She made no attempt to help him, she could have asked, Are you a virgin, but said nothing and waited. The silence was so great, only their hearts could be heard beating, his louder and faster, hers restless and agitated. Jesus said, Your hair reminds me of a flock of goats descending the mountain slopes of Gilead. The woman smiled but said nothing. Then Jesus said, Your eyes are like the pools of Heshbon by the Gate of Bath-Rabim. The woman smiled again but still said nothing. Then Jesus slowly turned to look at her and said, I have never been with a woman. Mary held his hands, This is how everyone has to begin, men who have never known a woman, women who have never known a man, until the day comes for the one who knows to teach the one who does not. Do you wish to teach me. So that you may thank me a second time. In this way, I will never stop thanking you. And I will never stop teaching you. Mary got to her feet, went to lock the gate, but only after hanging a sign outside, to tell any clients who might come looking for her that she had closed her window because it was now the hour to sing, Awake, north wind, and come, you south, blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out, let my beloved come into his garden and eat his pleasant fruits. Then together, Jesus' hand once more on the shoulder of Mary, this whore from Magdala who dressed his sores and is about to receive him in her bed, they went inside, into the welcome shade of a clean, fresh room. Her bed was no primitive mat on the floor with a coarse sheet on top, the sort Jesus remembered from his parents' house, this was a real bed, as once described elsewhere, I have adorned my bed with covers and embroidered sheets of Egyptian linen, I have perfumed my couch with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Leading Jesus to the hearth, with its floor of brick, Mary Magdalene insisted on removing his tunic and washing him herself, stroking his body with

her fingertips and kissing him softly on the chest and thighs, first one side, then the other. The delicate touch of hands and lips made Jesus shiver, the nails grazing his skin gave him gooseflesh, Don't be frightened, she whispered. She dried him and led him to the bed, Lie down, I'll be with you in a moment. She drew a curtain, there was the sound of splashing water, a pause, perfume filled the air, and Mary reappeared, completely naked. Jesus too was naked, lying as she had left him, he thought, This must be right, for to cover the body she had uncovered would give offense. Mary lingered at the side of the bed, gazed on him with an expression both passionate and tender, and told him, You are so handsome, but to be perfect you must close your eyes. Jesus hesitantly closed them, opened them again, and in that moment he understood the true meaning of King Solomon's words, Your thighs are like jewels, your navel is like a round goblet filled with scented wine, your belly is like a heap of wheat set about with lilies, your breasts are like two fawns that are the twins of a gazelle, and he understood them even better when Mary lay down beside him and took his hands in hers, and drew them to her, and guided them slowly over her body, her hair, face, neck, shoulders, her breasts, which he gently squeezed, her belly, navel, her lower hair, where he lingered, twining and untwining it with his fingers, then the curve of her smooth thighs, and as she moved his hands, she repeated in a whisper, Come, discover my body, come discover my body. Jesus breathed so fast, for one moment he thought he would faint when her hands, the left hand on his forehead, the right hand on his ankles, began caressing him, slowly coming together, meeting in the middle, then starting all over again. You've learned nothing, begone with you, Pastor had told him, and who knows, perhaps he meant to say that Jesus had not learned to cherish life. Now Mary Magdalene instructed him, Discover my body, and she said it again, but in a different way, changing one word, Discover your body, and there it was, tense, taut, roused, and she, naked and magnificent, was above him and saying, There is nothing to fear, do not move, leave this to me. Then he felt part of him, this organ, disappearing inside her, a ring of fire around it, coming and going, a shudder passed through him, like a wriggling fish slipping free with a shout, surely impossible, fish do not shout, no, it was he, Jesus, crying out as Mary slumped over his body with a moan and absorbed his cry with her lips, with a hungry kiss that sent a second, unending shudder through him.

For the rest of that day no one came to knock on Mary Magdalene's door. For the rest of that day she instructed the youth from Nazareth who came to ask her if she could relieve his pain and heal the sores which, unbeknownst to her, began with that other encounter, when Jesus met God in the desert. God had told him, Henceforth you are tied to me in flesh and blood, and the devil, if that is who he was, had spurned him, You've learned nothing, begone with you, and Mary Magdalene, the perspiration running down her breasts, her loose hair seeming to give off smoke, her lips swollen, her eyes dark pools, said, You won't stay with me because of what I taught you, but sleep here tonight. And Jesus, on top of her, replied, What you taught me is no prison but freedom. They slept together, and not only that night. When they woke, it was morning, and after their bodies sought and found each other once more, Mary examined Jesus' foot, It looks much

better, but you should wait before journeying home, walking will only make it worse, not to mention all that dust. I cannot stay any longer, you yourself said my foot is much better. Of course you can stay, it's a question of wanting to, and as for the gate in the yard, that will remain locked for as long as we please. What about your life here. My life now is you. But why. Let me answer in the words of King Solomon, My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door and my heart trembled. But how can I be your beloved if you don't know me, I am simply someone who came to ask your help, on whom you took pity for his misfortune and ignorance. That is why I love you, because I helped and instructed you, but you will never love me, having neither helped nor instructed me. But you are not in pain. You will find my wound if you look carefully. What wound might that be. This open door through which others have entered, but not my beloved. You said I am your beloved. That is why the door closed behind you as you entered. There is nothing I can teach you, only what I learned from you. Teach me, so that I may know what it is like to learn from you. We cannot live together. You mean you cannot live with a whore. Yes. While you live with me, I will not be a whore, I stopped being one the moment you came into this house, and it is up to you whether or not I continue living as one. You ask too much. Nothing that you cannot give me for one or two days, or for as long as it takes your foot to heal, so that my wound may open once more. It took me eighteen years to get here. A few days more won't make much difference, you're still young. So are you. Older than you, younger than your mother. Do you know my mother, No, Then why did you mention her, Because I'm too young to have a son your age, How stupid of me. No, you're not stupid, only innocent, But I'm no longer innocent, Just because you've been with a woman, No, I lost my innocence before you. Tell me about yourself, but not just yet, for the moment all I want is to feel your left hand under my head and your right hand embracing me.

Jesus stayed in Mary Magdalene's house a week, sufficient time for new skin to form beneath the scabs. The gate remained locked. Several men, driven by lust or wounded pride, knocked impatiently at it, ignoring the sign that told them to keep away. They were curious to see this fellow who took so long, one joker called over the wall, Either he isn't up to it or he has no idea what to do, open the gate, Mary, and I'll show him how it's done. Mary Magdalene went out into the yard to curse him, Whoever you are, boaster, your days of male prowess are over, so be off with you. Damned whore. That's just where you're wrong, for you won't find a woman anywhere more blessed than me. Whether it was because of this incident or because fate so decreed, no one else came knocking at the gate, most likely any man living in Magdala or passing through who heard of Mary's curse wanted to avoid the risk of being made impotent, for it is generally believed that an experienced prostitute can not only inflame a man but also kill his pride and desire forever. And so Mary and Jesus were left in peace for eight days, during which time the lessons given and received became one discourse of gestures, discoveries, surprises, murmurings, inventions, like the pieces of a mosaic that are nothing if taken one by one yet become everything when assembled and put into their proper places. Several times she asked her beloved to talk about himself, but he would change the subject and break

into verses such as, I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse, I have gathered my myrrh with my spice, I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey, I have drunk my wine with my milk, which he recited with passion before partaking of the poetic act itself, verily, verily, I say unto you, dear Jesus, this is no way to hold a conversation. But one day he told her about his father who was a carpenter and his mother who carded wool, about his brothers and sisters, and how he had started to learn his father's trade before going off to be a shepherd for four years, but now he was returning home. He also mentioned the few days he spent on the lake with some fishermen without mastering their skills. Then one evening, when they were eating out in the yard, Jesus took Mary Magdalene into his confidence, and from time to time they looked up at the rapid flight of swallows passing overhead with strident cries. The two, to judge from their silence, have nothing more to say to each other, the man has confessed all to the woman, but she asks, as if disappointed, Is that all, and nodding, he says, Yes, that's all.

The silence deepened, the circling swallows went elsewhere, and Jesus said, My father was crucified four years ago in Sepphoris, his name was Joseph. And you are his eldest son. Yes, I'm the eldest. Then I don't understand, surely you should be looking after your family. We quarreled, but don't ask me any more. No more about your family, then, but what about your time as a shepherd, tell me about that. There's nothing to tell, every day the same thing, goats, sheep, kids, lambs, and milk, lots of milk, milk everywhere. Did you enjoy being a shepherd. Yes, I did. Then why did you leave. I became restless, began to miss my family, felt homesick. Homesick, what is that. Sadness at being so far away. You're lying, Why do you think I'm lying, Because I see not sadness but fear and guilt in your eyes. Jesus did not reply, he got up, walked around the yard, then stopped in front of Mary, One day, if we should meet again, I'll tell you the rest if you promise not to tell anyone. Why not tell me now. I'll tell you when we meet again. You hope that by then I will have given up prostitution, you still don't trust me, you think I might sell your secrets for money or pass them on to the first man who turns up, for amusement or in exchange for a night of love more glorious than those you and I have shared. No, that's not the reason for my silence. Well, I promise you that Mary Magdalene, prostitute or not, will be at your side whenever you need her. Who am I to deserve this. Don't you know who you are.

That night the nightmare returned. It had been more bearable of late, a vague anguish that only occasionally disturbed his sleep, but this night, perhaps because it was the last night Jesus was to sleep in Mary's bed, perhaps because he had mentioned Sepphoris and the men crucified there, the nightmare began to uncoil in twists and turns like a huge snake awakening from hibernation, and to raise its hideous head. Jesus woke with a start, crying out in terror, his body covered with cold sweat. What's wrong, Mary asked in alarm. I was dreaming, only dreaming, he said evasively. Tell me, and those simple words were said with so much love and tenderness that Jesus could not hold back his tears, and after much weeping he revealed what he had hoped to withhold, I dream over and over that my father is coming to kill me. But your father is dead and you are still

alive. In my dream I'm still a child back in Bethlehem of Judaea, and my father is coming to kill me. Why in Bethlehem. That's where I was born. Perhaps you think your father didn't want you to be born, and that is why you have this dream. You don't know what happened. No, I don't. Children in Bethlehem died because of my father. Did he kill them. He killed them because he made no attempt to save them, although his was not the hand that drew the sword. And in your dream, are you one of those children. I have died a thousand deaths. Poor man, poor Jesus. That is why I left home. I begin to understand, You think you understand, What more is there to know, What I cannot reveal yet, You mean what you will tell me when we meet again, That's right. Resting his hand on Mary's shoulder, his cheek on her breast, Jesus fell asleep. She stayed awake throughout the night, her heart aching, for it would soon be morning and time to separate. But her soul was at peace, she knew that this man in her arms was the one for whom she had been waiting all her life, the one who belonged to her and to whom she belonged, his body pure, hers defiled, but their world is just beginning. They have been together eight days, but only tonight was their union confirmed, and eight days is nothing compared to a whole future, for this Jesus who has come into my life is so young, and here am I, Mary Magdalene, in bed with a man, as so often in the past, but this time deep in love and ageless.

They spent the morning preparing for the journey. One would have thought young Jesus was traveling to the end of the world, while in fact he had no more than twenty miles to cover, a distance any healthy man could walk between noon and dusk, notwithstanding the rough road from Magdala to Nazareth, with its steep slopes and rocky terrain. Take care, Mary warned him, you may run into rebel forces still fighting the Romans. After all this time, asked Jesus. You haven't lived here, this is Galilee. But I'm a native of Galilee, they're not likely to do me any harm. You can't be Galilean if you were born in Bethlehem of Judaea. My parents conceived me in Nazareth, and to be honest, I wasn't even born in Bethlehem, I was born in a cave in the earth, and now I feel reborn here in Magdala. Mothered by a whore. You're no whore in my eyes, said Jesus strongly. Alas, that is the life I've led. These words were followed by a long silence, Mary waiting for Jesus to speak, Jesus trying to still his uneasiness. Finally he asked her, Do you intend to remove the sign you hung on the gate to keep men from entering. Mary looked at him with a serious expression, then smiled mischievously, I could not possibly have two men in the house at the same time. What are you saying. Simply that you are leaving but will still be here. She paused, then added, The sign on the gate remains there. People will think you're with a man. And they'll be right, I'll be with you. Are you telling me no man will ever pass through that gate again. Yes, because this woman they call Mary Magdalene stopped being a prostitute the moment you walked into her house. But how will you live. Only the lilies in the fields thrive without working or spinning. Jesus took her hands and said, Nazareth isn't far from Magdala, one day I will return. If you come looking for me, you'll find me here. My desire is to find you all my life. You will find me even after death. You mean I will die before you. I'm older than you, so most likely I will die first, but if you die before me, I will go on living so that you may find me. And if you

die first. Then blessed be the woman who brought you into the world during my lifetime. After this conversation, Mary served Jesus food, and he did not have to tell her, Sit with me, for since their first day together behind locked doors this man and this woman have divided and multiplied between them feelings, gestures, spaces, and sensations without paying much attention to the rules and laws. They certainly would not know what to say if we were to ask them how they would behave outside the privacy of these four walls, where they have been free for some days to forge a world in the simple image and likeness of a man and a woman. A world that is more hers than his, let it be said, but since they are both so confident about meeting again, we need only have the patience to wait for the time when, side by side, they will confront the outside world, where people are already asking themselves anxiously, What's going on in there, and they don't mean the usual antics in the bedroom. After they had eaten, Mary helped Jesus into his sandals and told him, You must leave if you're to reach Nazareth before nightfall. Farewell, said Jesus, and taking up his pack and staff, he went out into the yard. The sky was covered with clouds as if lined with unwashed wool, the Lord must not be finding it easy today to keep an eye on His sheep from on high. Jesus and Mary Magdalene embraced a long time before exchanging a farewell kiss, which did not take long at all, and little wonder, for kissing was not the custom then.

THE SUN HAD JUST SET WHEN JESUS ARRIVED IN NAZARETH, four long years, give or take a week, from the day he left, a mere child driven by desperation to go out into the world in search of someone who might help him understand the unbearable truth about his birth. Four years, however long, may not be enough to heal one's sorrow, but they should bring some relief. He had asked questions in the Temple, traveled mountain paths with the devil's flock, met God, and slept with Mary Magdalene. Reaching Nazareth, he no longer gives the appearance of suffering, except for those tears in his eyes, but that could also be a delayed reaction to the smoke from the sacrifices, or sudden joy in his soul upon looking down at the town from a high pasture, or the fear of a man alone in the desert who has heard a voice say, I am the Lord, or, most likely, for most recent, yearning for the woman he left only a few hours ago, I have comforted myself with raisins, I have strengthened myself with apples, for I am swooning with love.

Jesus might recite these sweet words to his mother and brothers, but he pauses on the threshold to ask himself, My mother and brothers, not that he does not know who they are, the question is, do they know who he is now, he who asked questions in the Temple, who watched the horizon, who met God, who has experienced carnal love and discovered his manhood. Before this same door once stood a beggar who claimed to be an angel, who if he really was an angel could have burst into the house with a great commotion of ruffled wings, yet he preferred to knock and to beg for alms like any pauper. The door is only latched. Jesus does not need to call out as he did in Magdala, he can walk calmly into his own home, the sores on his feet are completely healed, but then sores that bleed and fester are the quickest healed. There was no need to knock, but he did. He had heard voices over the wall, recognized the voice of his mother coming from farther away, yet could not summon the courage simply to push the door open and announce, I'm here, like one who knows his arrival is welcome and wishes to give a pleasant surprise. The door was opened by a little girl about eight or nine years old, who did not recognize the visitor, and voice of blood and kinship did not come to his assistance by telling her, This is your brother Jesus, don't you remember him. Instead he said, despite the four years that had passed since they last saw each other and despite the fading light, You must be Lydia, and she answered, Yes, amazed that a complete stranger should know her name, but the spell was broken when he said, I'm your brother Jesus, may I come in. In the yard under the lean-to adjoining the house he could see shadowy figures, probably his brothers, now they were looking in the direction of the door, and two of them, the oldest, James and Joseph, approached. They had not heard Jesus' words, but didn't need to go to the trouble of identifying the visitor, for Lydia was already calling out excitedly, It's Jesus, it's our brother, whereupon the shadows stirred and Mary appeared in the doorway, accompanied by Lisa, the other daughter, almost as tall now as her mother, and both of them called out with one voice, My son, My brother, and the next moment they were all embracing in joyful reunion in the middle of the yard, always a happy event, but especially when it is the eldest son returning. Jesus greeted his mother, then each of his brothers, and was greeted warmly by all of them, Brother Jesus, how good to see you again, Brother Jesus, we thought you had forgotten us, but

no one said, Brother Jesus, you don't look any richer. They went inside and sat down to the meal his mother had been preparing when he knocked at the door. One could almost say to Jesus, coming as he does from where he does, having indulged his sinful flesh and kept bad company, one could almost say with the brutal frankness of simple people who suddenly see their share of food diminish, When it's time to eat, the devil always brings an extra mouth to feed. No one present dared put this thought into words, and it would have been wrong if he had, an extra mouth makes little difference when there are already nine to feed. Besides, the new arrival has more right to be here than any of them. During supper, the younger children wanted to know about his adventures, while the three older children and Mary observed that there had been no change in his occupation since their meeting in Jerusalem, for the smell of fish has long since disappeared, and the wind swept away the sensuous perfume of Mary Magdalene, and don't forget all the sweat and dust acquired on the road, unless one were to take a close sniff at Jesus' tunic, but if his own family did not take such a liberty, why should we. Jesus told them how he had tended one of the largest flocks ever seen, how he had recently been on a lake helping fishermen bring in the most extraordinary catch of fish, and that he had also experienced the most wonderful adventure any man could imagine or hope for, but he would tell them about it some other time and then only some of them. The younger children pleaded, Tell us, please tell us, and Judas, the middle brother, asked him in all innocence, Did you make a lot of money while you were away, to which Jesus replied, Not so much as three coins, or two, or even one, nothing, and seeing disbelief on their faces, he emptied his pack without further ado. And truly, he had little to show for his labors, his only belongings a metal knife that was worn and bent, a bit of string, a chunk of bread as hard as a rock, two pairs of sandals reduced to tatters, the remnants of an old tunic. This belonged to your father, said Mary, stroking the tunic, then the larger pair of sandals, she told him, These too were his. The others lowered their heads in memory of their dead father.

Jesus was putting everything back into his pack when he felt a large, heavy knot in the hem of the tunic. The blood rushed to his face, it could only be money, money that he had denied possessing and that must have been put there by Mary Magdalene, and therefore earned not in the sweat of one's brow as dignity demands but with sinful groans and sweat of another kind. His mother and brothers looked at the knot, then all looked at him. Uncertain whether to try to conceal the proof of his deception or bluff his way out without really explaining, Jesus chose the more difficult way. He untied the knot and revealed the treasure, twenty coins the likes of which had never been seen in this house, and said, I had no idea this money was here. Their silent rebuke passed through the air like a hot desert wind, how shameful, the eldest son and caught telling such a lie. Jesus searched his heart but could not be angry with Mary Magdalene, he felt nothing but gratitude for her generosity, this touching act of giving him money she knew he would have been ashamed to accept openly, for it is one thing to say, Your left hand is under my head and your right hand embraces me, and another not to remember that other hands have embraced her. Now it is Jesus who looks at his family, defying them to doubt

his word, I had no idea this money was here, which is true but not quite the whole truth, daring them to ask him the question to which there is no answer, If you didn't know you had this money, how do you account for its being here now. He cannot tell them, A prostitute with whom I spent the last eight days put the coins here, money she received from the men she slept with before I came. Scattered on the soiled, threadbare tunic of the man who was crucified four years ago and whose remains were shamefully thrown into a common grave, the twenty coins shine like the luminous earth that one night struck terror in this same household, but no elders will come from the synagogue this time to say, The coins must be buried, just as no one here will ask, Where do they come from, lest the reply oblige us to give them up against our will. Jesus gathers the money into the palms of his hands and says once more, I didn't know I had these coins, as if giving his family one last chance, and then, glancing at his mother, says, It is not the devil's money. His brothers shuddered in horror, but Mary replied without showing any anger, Nor did it come from God. Jesus playfully tossed the coins into the air, once, twice, and said as naturally as if he were announcing he would return to his carpenter's bench the next day, Mother, we'll discuss God in the morning. Then turning to his brothers James and Joseph, he added, I also have something to say to you, and this was no condescending gesture, for both brothers are now of age according to their religion and therefore entitled to be taken into his confidence. But James felt that given the importance of the occasion, something ought to be said beforehand about the justification for the promised conversation, since no brother, however senior, can expect to appear unannounced and say, We must have a talk about God. So with a bland smile he said to Jesus, If, as you say, you traveled hill and dale four years as a shepherd, there couldn't have been much time to attend the synagogue and acquire so much knowledge that no sooner do you return home than you want to talk to us about the Lord. Jesus sensed the barb beneath these words and replied, Ah, James, how little you understand God if you think we have to go in search of Him when He has decided to come to us. Am I right in thinking you refer to yourself. Save your questions until tomorrow, when I will tell you all I have to say. James muttered to himself, no doubt making some sour comment about people who think they know everything. Mary, turning to Jesus with a weary expression on her face, said, You can tell us tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or whenever you like, but for now tell us what you intend to do with this money, for we are in great difficulty. Don't you want to know where it came from. You said you didn't know. That's the truth, but I've been thinking and can guess how it got there. If the money doesn't taint your hands, then it won't taint ours. Is that all you have to say about this money. Yes. Then let us spend it, as is only right, on the family. There was a general murmur of approval, even James seemed satisfied with this decision, and Mary said, If you don't mind, we'll put some of the money aside for your sister's dowry. You didn't say anything about Lisa getting married. Yes, in the spring. Tell me how much you need. That depends on what those coins are worth. Jesus smiled and said, I'm afraid I don't know what they are worth, only their value. He laughed, amused by his own words, and the family looked at him in bewilderment. Only Lisa lowered her eyes, she is fifteen, still innocent, but has all the mysterious intuition of adolescence. Among those present, she is the most troubled about

the money. Jesus gave a coin to his mother, You can change it tomorrow, then we'll know what it's worth. Someone is sure to ask me where it came from, thinking that whoever possesses such a coin must have others hidden away. Simply tell them that your son Jesus has returned, and that there is no greater fortune than the return of a prodigal son.

That night Jesus dreamed of his father. He had settled down to sleep in the lean-to rather than with all the others inside. He could not bear the idea of sleeping in the same room with ten people, each trying unsuccessfully to get a little privacy, they are no longer like a flock of little lambs but growing fast, all legs and arms and far from comfortable in such cramped quarters. Before falling asleep, he thought about Mary Magdalene and everything they had done together, which stirred him to such a pitch that he had to get up twice and walk in the yard to cool his blood, but when sleep finally came, he slept as peacefully as a small child, it was as if his body were floating slowly downstream while he watched branches and clouds pass overhead, and a silent bird flying back and forth. No sooner did the dream begin than he felt a slight jolt, as if he had brushed against another. He thought it was Mary Magdalene and smiled, and smiling turned his head in her direction, but the body drifting past, carried by the same current beneath the sky and branches and the fluttering silent bird, was that of his father. The usual cry of terror formed in his throat but stopped there, this was not his usual dream, he was not an infant in a public square in Bethlehem awaiting death with other children, there was no sound of footsteps, no neighing of horses or clanking and scraping of weapons, there was only the gentle murmur of water and the two bodies forming a raft as father and son were carried along by the river. All the fear went out of Jesus. Overcome with a feeling of exultation, he called out, Father, in his dream, Father, he repeated, awakening, but now with tears in his eyes, realizing he was alone. He tried to revive his dream, to repeat it, to feel again the brushing jolt and find his father beside him, so that they might float together on these waters to the end of time. He did not succeed that night, but the first dream never returned, from now on he will experience elation instead of fear, companionship instead of solitude, promised life instead of imminent death. Now let the wise men of Holy Scripture explain, if they can, the meaning of Jesus' dream, the significance of this river, the overhanging branches, the drifting clouds, and the silent bird, which made it possible for father and son to be united even though the guilt of the one cannot be pardoned or the sorrow of the other relieved.

The following day Jesus offered to help James with some carpentry, but it soon became clear that good intentions were no substitute for the skills he lacked and had never fully acquired even by the time Joseph died. To meet their father's customers' needs, James had become a reliable carpenter, and even young Joseph, who was not yet fourteen, already knew enough to have been able to teach his eldest brother had such disrespect for seniority been allowed within the strict family hierarchy. James laughed at Jesus' clumsiness and told him, Whoever turned you into a shepherd led you astray, words of lighthearted irony that no one would have suspected of concealing any deeper meaning, but Jesus rose abruptly from the workbench, and Mary rebuked her second son,

Speak not of perdition, lest you summon Satan and bring evil into our home. Taken aback, James protested, But I summoned no one, Mother, all I said was, We know what you said, interrupted Jesus, Mother and I heard what you said, it was Mother who linked the word shepherd with perdition, not you, and you don't know why, but she does. I warned you, Mary said. You warned me when the evil had already been done, if it was evil, for when I look at myself, I cannot see it, said Jesus, whereupon Mary told him, There are none so blind as those who will not see. These words annoyed Jesus, and he said reproachfully, Be quiet, Mother, if your son's eyes saw evil, they saw it after you, but these same eyes you call blind have also seen things you've never seen or are likely to see. Her son's authority and stern tone, and the strange thing he said, made Mary yield, but her reply conveyed a final warning, Forgive me, I didn't mean to offend you, may the Lord always protect the light in your eyes and soul. James looked at his mother, then at his brother, saw there was a disagreement but could not imagine what had caused it, clearly something from the past, because his brother had not been back long enough to start an argument. Jesus made for the house, but at the door he turned and said to his mother, Send the children out to play, I must talk to you in private along with James and Joseph. The others left, and the house, which had been so crowded a moment ago, suddenly seemed empty. Four now sat on the floor, Mary between James and Joseph, with Jesus facing them. A long silence followed, as if by common consent they were giving the children time to go far enough away. Finally Jesus spoke, pronouncing his words carefully, I have seen God. The first reaction on the faces of his mother and brothers was awe, followed by disbelief, and between the one and the other there was a hint of cynical mistrust in James's expression, of wonder in that of Joseph, of resigned bitterness in that of Mary. All three remained silent, and Jesus said a second time, I have seen God. If a moment of silence, as the saying goes, marks the passage of an angel, here angels are still passing. Jesus has said all there is to say, his family is at a loss for words, and soon they will rise to their feet and go about their affairs, wondering if this was all a dream. Yet silence, given enough time, has the power to make people speak. Unable to control himself any longer, James asked a question, the most innocent question of all, pure of rhetoric, Are you sure. Jesus did not reply, simply looked at James, perhaps as God had looked at him from within the cloud, and for the third time said, I have seen God. Mary, who had no questions to ask, said, You must have imagined it. Jesus replied, Mother, God spoke to me. James, having re-covered his composure, decided this must be some kind of madness, a brother of his speaking to God, how ridiculous, Well, who knows, perhaps it was God who put the money in your pack, he said, smiling ironically. Jesus reddened but spoke coldly, Everything comes to us from the Lord, He is forever finding paths to reach us, and although this money may not have come from Him, it certainly came through Him. And what did the Lord say to you, where did you see Him, and were you asleep or keeping watch. I was in the desert looking for a stray sheep when He called out to me. Are you allowed to tell us what He said. That one day He will ask for my life. All lives belong to the Lord. That's what I told Him. And what did He say. That in exchange for the life I must give Him, I will have power and glory. You will have power and glory after you die, asked Mary, unable to believe her ears. Yes, Mother. What power

and glory can be given to someone after death. I don't know. Were you dreaming. I was awake and looking for my sheep in the desert. And when is the Lord going to ask you for your life. I don't know, but He told me we would meet again when I was ready. James looked at his brother in dismay, The sun in the desert affected your brain, you've been suffering from sunstroke, but Mary suddenly asked, And what about the sheep, what happened to the sheep. The Lord ordered me to sacrifice it to seal our covenant. These words provoked James, You're offending the Lord, the Lord made a covenant with His people and He's not likely to make one with an ordinary man like you, the son of a carpenter, a shepherd, and who knows what else. Mary appeared to be following some thread of thought carefully, as if it might break, but by persevering she found the question she had to ask, What sheep was that. The lamb I had with me when we met in Jerusalem at the Gate of Ramah, in the end what I tried to keep from the Lord the Lord took from me. And God, what did God look like when you saw Him. A cloud. Open or closed, asked James. A column of smoke. You're mad, brother. If I am mad, God made me mad. You're in Satan's power, said Mary, shouting more than speaking. It wasn't Satan I met in the desert, it was the Lord, and if it's true that I'm in Satan's power, then the Lord has so ordained. You've been in the clutches of Satan since the day you were born. You ought to know. Yes, I know all right, you chose to live with the devil for four long years rather than with God. And after spending four years with the devil, I met God. You're telling the most awful lies. I'm the son you brought into the world, either believe me or renounce me. I believe you, but not what you say. Jesus got to his feet, raised his eyes to heaven, and said, When the Lord's promise is fulfilled, you will have to believe what people say of me. He went to get his pack and staff and put on his sandals. Dividing the money in two parts, arranging the coins side by side on the ground, he said, This is Lisa's dowry, when she marries, and added, The rest will be returned where it came from, and perhaps also be used as a dowry. He turned to the door, was about to leave without saying good-bye, when Mary remarked, I noticed you no longer carry a bowl in your pack. I had one, but it broke. There are four bowls over there, choose one and take it with you. Jesus hesitated, preferring to leave empty-handed, but he went to the hearth where the four bowls were stacked one on top of the other. Choose one, Mary said again. Jesus looked and chose, I'll take this one, which has seen better days. You picked the right one for you, said Mary. Why do you say that. It's the color of the black earth, it neither disintegrates nor breaks. Jesus put the bowl into his pack, tapped his staff on the ground, Tell me once more that you don't believe me. We don't believe you, said his mother, and now less than ever, because you chose the devil's symbol. What symbol are you talking about. That bowl. At that very moment Pastor's words came to Jesus from the depths of memory, You will have another bowl, but the next won't break while you are alive. A rope seemed to have been extended its full length, ending in a circle and tied with a knot. Jesus was leaving home for the second time, but this time he did not say, One way or another I shall always come back. As he turned his back on Nazareth and began descending the first mountain slope, an even sadder thought crossed his mind, What if Mary Magdalene did not believe him either.

This man who carries God's promise with him has nowhere to go except the house of a prostitute. He cannot return to his flock, Begone with you, were Pastor's last words to him, nor can he return home, We don't believe you, his family told him, and his steps begin to falter, he is afraid to proceed, to arrive. It is as if he were back in the desert, Who am I, but the mountains and valleys do not answer, nor the heavens, which ought to know everything. If he goes back now and repeats the question, his mother will say, You're my son, but I don't believe you, so the time has come for Jesus to sit on this stone that has been reserved for him since the world began, to sit and shed tears of misery and loneliness. Who knows, perhaps the Lord will appear to him once more, even if only in the form of smoke, all He has to say is, Come, there's no need for all this weeping and wailing, what's the matter with you, we all have our bad moments, and there's one important thing I should have mentioned earlier, everything is relative in life, and every misfortune becomes bearable when compared with something worse, so dry your tears and behave like a man, you've already made your peace with your father, what more do you want, and as for this friction with your mother, I'll deal with that when the time comes, what didn't please Me much was that business with Mary Magdalene, a common whore, but then you're still young and might as well enjoy life while you can, the one thing doesn't rule out the other, there's a time for eating and a time for fasting, a time for sinning and a time for repenting, a time for living and a time for dying. Jesus wiped his tears on the back of his hand, blew his nose, who knows where, and yes, there is no point spending the whole day here, the desert is what it is, it surrounds us, in some ways protects us, but when it comes to giving, it gives us nothing, it simply looks on, and when the sun suddenly clouds over, so that we find ourselves thinking, The sky mirrors our sorrow, we are being foolish, because the sky is quite impartial and neither rejoices in our happiness nor is cast down by our grief.

People are heading in this direction on their way to Nazareth, and Jesus, a grown man with a beard, does not wish to be seen crying like a child. From time to time a few travelers pass one another on the road, some going up, others coming down, they greet one another effusively, but only after they are certain of their mutual goodwill, for the bandits in these parts are of two types. There are those who assault travelers, like the heartless rogues who robbed Jesus some five years ago when the poor boy was on his way to Jerusalem to find solace. Then there are the rebels, who certainly do not make a habit of traveling the main roads, but they sometimes appear in disguise to spy on the movements of Roman troops before setting up the next ambush, or without any disguise they'll stop wealthy travelers collaborating with the Romans and strip them of their silver, gold, and other valuables, and even well-armed bodyguards are powerless to spare the travelers this outrage. It was natural for the eighteen-year-old Jesus to sigh for adventure as he gazed on those lofty mountains with the ravines and caves where the followers of Judas the Galilean continued to take refuge. He wondered what he would do if a band of rebels appeared from nowhere and invited him to join them, exchanging the amenities of peace for the glory of battle, for it is written that one day the Lord will bring forth a Messiah, who will deliver His people once and for all from oppression and give them

strength against future enemies. A gust of mad hope and pride blows like a sign from the Spirit on Jesus' forehead, and for one spellbinding moment this carpenter's son sees himself as captain, leader, and supreme commander, with raised sword, his very presence striking awe and terror in the Roman legions, who throw themselves over precipices like pigs possessed by demons, so much for *Senatus Populusque Romanus*. Then Jesus remembered that he was promised power and glory, but only after his death, so he might as well enjoy life, and if he must go to war, let it be on one condition, that occasionally he will be allowed to leave the lines and spend a few days with Mary Magdalene, unless they allow one female companion for each soldier, anything more would lead to promiscuity and Mary has already said she has given that up. Let us hope so, for Jesus feels his strength redouble at the thought of the woman who cured his painful wound, which she replaced with the intolerable wound of desire. But here is the problem, how is he to face the locked gate with the sign unless he is absolutely certain he will find on the other side the woman he believes he left behind, who waits for him and him alone, in body and soul, because Mary Magdalene will not accept one without the other.

The day is drawing to a close, the houses of Magdala can be seen in the distance huddled together like a flock. Mary's house, the sheep that wandered off, cannot be seen from here, amid the great boulders that line the road bend after bend. Jesus remembers the sheep he had to kill in order to seal in blood the covenant demanded by the Lord, and his soul, now free of battles and victories, warms at the thought of searching once more for his sheep, not to kill it or lead it back to the flock but so that together they can climb to fresh pastures, which are still to be found if we look carefully enough in this vast and much traveled world, if we look even closer into those impenetrable gorges, sheep that we are. Jesus stopped in front of the door and discreetly confirmed that it was locked. The sign still hangs there, Mary Magdalene is not receiving anyone. Jesus need only call out, It's me, to hear her joyfully sing, This is the voice of my beloved, behold him who has come leaping over mountains and jumping over hills, there he waits on the other side of this wall, behind this door, and it is true, but Jesus would rather knock on the door, once, twice, without uttering a word, waiting for someone to open. Who's there, what do you want, someone asked from within. Jesus disguised his voice, pretending to be an eager client with money to spend, using words such as, Open up, flower, you won't regret it, I'll pay and service you well, and if the voice was false, his words were true enough when he said, I'm Jesus of Nazareth. Mary Magdalene did not open, the voice did not quite match the words, besides she thought it unlikely that Jesus could be back so soon, when he had said, One day I'll come, Nazareth isn't far from Magdala, after all. People often say such things to please the listener, and one day might mean three months but never tomorrow. Mary Magdalene opens the door, throws herself into Jesus' arms, cannot believe her good fortune. In her excitement she foolishly imagines that he has come back because the sore on his foot reopened, so she leads him inside, sits him down, and fetches the lamp, Your foot, show me your foot, but Jesus tells her, My foot has healed, can't you see. She could have replied, No, I can't, which was true, for her eyes were filled

with tears. She had to put her lips to the sole of his foot, which was covered with dust, untie carefully the thongs attaching the sandal to his ankle, and stroke with her fingertips the new skin which had formed, in order to verify that the ointment had done its work, though perhaps love too had played some part in the cure.

During supper she asked no questions, only wanted to know if he had had a good journey or encountered any unpleasantness on the road, small talk and nothing more. When they finished eating, there was a long silence, for it was not her turn to speak. Jesus regarded her, as if from a high rock he were weighing his strength against the sea, not because he feared man-eating fish or dangerous reefs beneath the smooth surface, he was simply putting his courage to the test. He has known this woman for a week, sufficient time to tell whether she will receive him with open arms, yet he is afraid to reveal, now that the moment has come, what has just been rejected by those of his own flesh and blood, who should have been with him also in spirit. Jesus hesitates, tries to find words, but all that comes out is a phrase to gain time, Weren't you surprised to see me back so soon. I began waiting for you the moment you left and did not count the hours between your leaving and returning, nor should I have counted them had you stayed away for ten years. Jesus smiled, he should have known there was no point being evasive with this woman. They sat on the ground, facing each other, a lamp in the middle and the leftovers from their supper. He took a piece of bread, broke it in two, and giving a piece to her, said, Let this be the bread of truth, let us eat it so that we may believe and never doubt, whatever is said and learned here. So be it, said Mary Magdalene. He ate his bread, waited for her to finish hers, and said, for the fourth time, I have seen God. Her expression did not change, she only fidgeted, her hands crossed on her lap, and asked, Was this what you said you would tell me when we met again. Yes, as well as all the other things that have happened to me since I left home four years ago, I feel they are all linked, although I cannot explain how or why. I am your lips and ears, replied Mary Magdalene, whatever you say, you will be saying it to yourself, for I am inside you. Now Jesus can begin to speak, for they have both partaken of the bread of truth, and there are few such moments in life. Night turned to dawn, the flame in the lamp died twice, and Jesus' entire history as we know it was related there, even including certain details we didn't consider worthwhile mentioning and countless thoughts that escaped us, not because he tried to conceal them but simply because this evangelist cannot be everywhere at once. As Jesus began telling in a weary voice what happened after he returned home, grief caused him to waver, just as dark foreboding had made him pause before knocking at the door. Breaking her silence for the first time, Mary Magdalene asked him in a voice of one who already knows the answer, Your mother didn't believe you. That's right, said Jesus. And so you came back to your other home. Yes. If only I could lie to you and tell you that I don't believe you. Why. So that you would do again what you've just done, leave as you left your home, and I, not believing you, would not have to follow you. That doesn't answer my question. True, it is not an answer, well then, if I did not believe you, I would not have to share the dreadful fate that awaits you. How do you know a dreadful fate awaits me. I know nothing about God, except that His

pleasure is as terrifying as His displeasure. Whatever put that strange idea into your head. You have to be a woman to know what it means to live with God's contempt, and now you'll have to be more than a man to live and die as one of His chosen. Are you trying to frighten me. Let me tell you my dream, one night a little boy appeared to me and told me God was horrible, and with those words he disappeared, I have no idea who that child was, where he came from, or who he belonged to. It's only a dream. You of all people speaking of a dream that way. And then what happened. Then I turned to prostitution. But you've given that up. Not in the dream, not even after I met you. Tell me again what the child said. God is horrible. Jesus saw the desert, the dead sheep, the blood on the sand, heard the column of smoke sighing with satisfaction, and said, Yes, that could be, but it's one thing to hear it in a dream and another to experience it in real life. God forbid that you should ever experience it. Each of us has to fulfill his destiny. And you've been given the first solemn warning about yours. Studded with stars, the heavenly dome turns slowly over Magdala and the wide world. Somewhere in the infinite that He occupies, God advances and withdraws the pawns of the other games He plays, but it is too soon to worry about this one, all He need do for the present is allow things to take their natural course, apart from the occasional adjustment with the tip of His little finger to make sure some stray thought or action does not interfere with the harmony of destinies. Hence His lack of interest in the rest of the conversation between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. And now what will you do, she asks him. You said you would follow me wherever I go. I will be with you wherever you are. What is the difference. None at all, but you can stay here as long as you like, if you don't mind living in what was once a house of sin. Jesus paused, reflected at length, and finally said, I will find work in Magdala, and we can live together as husband and wife. You promise too much, I'm quite content just to sit here at your feet.

Jesus found no work, and met with what he might have expected, jeers, ridicule, insults, which was not surprising, for here was a mere youth living with the notorious Mary Magdalene, It won't be long before we see him sitting at the front door waiting his turn like all her other clients. He tolerated their jibes for several weeks, but finally he said to Mary, I must get away from this place. But where can we go. Somewhere by the sea. They left before dawn, and the people of Magdala came too late to salvage anything from the flames.

MONTHS LATER, ON A COLD AND RAINY WINTER NIGHT, AN angel entered the house of Mary of Nazareth without disturbing anyone. Mary herself only noticed the visitor because the angel spoke to her as follows, Know, Mary, that the Lord mixed His seed with that of Joseph on the morning you conceived for the first time, and it was the Lord's seed rather than that of your husband, however legitimate, that sired your son Jesus. Much surprised, Mary asked the angel, So Jesus is my son and also the son of the Lord. Woman, what are you saying, show some respect for precedence, the way you should put it is the son of the Lord and also of me. Of the Lord and also of you. No, of the Lord and of you. You confuse me, just answer my question, is Jesus our son. You mean to say the Lord's son, because you only served to bear the child. So the Lord didn't choose me. Don't be absurd, the Lord was merely passing, as anyone watching would have seen from the color of the sky, when His eye caught you and Joseph, a fine, healthy couple, and then, if you can still remember how God's will was made manifest, He ordained that Jesus be born nine months later. Is there any proof that it was the Lord's seed that sired my firstborn. Well, it's a delicate matter, what you're demanding is nothing less than a paternity test, which in these mixed unions, no matter how many analyses, tests, and genetic comparisons one carries out, can never give conclusive results. There I was thinking the Lord had chosen me for His bride that morning, and now you tell me it was pure chance and He could just as easily have chosen someone else, well, let me tell you, I wish you hadn't descended to Nazareth to leave me in this state of uncertainty, besides, surely any son of the Lord, even with me as the mother, would have stood out at birth and, growing up, would have had the same bearing, appearance, and manner of speaking as the Lord himself, and though people say a mother's love is blind, my son Jesus looks ordinary enough to me. Your first mistake, Mary, is to think I came here only to discuss some sexual episode in the Lord's past, and your second mistake is to think that the beauty and speech of mankind resemble those of the Lord, when I can vouch, as someone close to Him, that the Lord's way of doing things is invariably the opposite of what humans imagine, and strictly between us, I'm convinced the Lord couldn't operate in any other fashion, and the word most frequently on His lips is not yes but no. But surely it's the devil who's the spirit of denial. No, my child, the devil only denies himself, and until you learn to tell the difference, you'll never know to whom you belong. I belong to the Lord. So you belong to the Lord, do you, well your third and biggest mistake is not to have believed your son. You mean Jesus. Yes, Jesus, for no other man saw God or is ever likely to see Him. Tell me, angel of the Lord, is it really true that my son Jesus saw God. Yes, like a child finding his first nest he came running to show you, and you, suspicious, mistrusting, told him that it couldn't be true, that if there was any nest, it was empty, if there were any eggs, they were hollow, and if there were no eggs, a snake devoured them. Forgive me for having doubted. Now I cannot be sure whether you are talking to me or to your son. To him, to you, to both, what can I do to make amends for the harm done. Listen to your maternal heart. Then I should go and find him, tell him that I believe him, ask him to forgive me and come home, where the Lord will summon him when the time comes. I honestly don't know whether you will reach him in time, there is no one more sensitive than an adolescent, you risk being insulted and having the door slammed in your face. If that

happens, the demon who bewitched and led him astray is to blame, and I cannot understand how the Lord, as a father, could have permitted such liberties and given the rascal so much freedom. To which demon are you referring. To the shepherd my son accompanied for four years and whose flock he tended for no good reason. Oh, that shepherd. Do you know him. We went to school together. And does the Lord let such a demon thrive and prosper. The harmony of the universe requires it, but the Lord will always have the last word, only we don't know when He will say it, but you'll see, one of these days we'll wake up and find there is no evil in the world, now if you'll excuse me I must be off, if you have any more questions to ask, this is your opportunity. Only one. Fine, go ahead. Why does the Lord want my son. Your son, in a manner of speaking. In the eyes of the world Jesus is my son. Why does the Lord want him, you ask, well there's an interesting question, but unfortunately I cannot answer it, at the moment that's between the two of them, and I don't believe Jesus knows any more than he has already told you. He told me he will have power and glory after death. Yes, I'm aware of that. But what must he do in life to merit this reward the Lord has promised. Come now, you're being stupid, surely you don't believe that such a word exists in the eyes of the Lord or that what you presumptuously refer to as merit has any value or meaning, it's incredible what you people get into your heads when you're nothing but complete slaves of God's absolute will. I'll say no more, for I am truly the servant of the Lord and would have Him do with me as He will, but tell me one thing, after all these months where am I to find my son. It is your duty to go in search of him just as he went in search of his lost sheep. In order to kill it. Don't worry, he won't kill you, but you will certainly kill him by not being present at the hour of his death. How do you know I won't die first. I am sufficiently close to the seat of power to know, and now I must bid you farewell, you've asked all the questions you wanted, except the one question you should have asked, but that's something which no longer concerns me. Explain. Explain it to yourself. And with these words the angel disappeared, and Mary opened her eyes.

The children were all fast asleep, the boys together in two groups of three, James, Joseph, and Judas, the three older boys, in one corner, in the other their younger brothers, Simon, Justus, and Samuel, and lying beside Mary were Lisa on one side, Lydia on the other. Troubled by the angel's words, Mary noticed with alarm and dismay that Lisa was practically naked, her tunic in disarray and pulled up over her breasts as she lay asleep with a smile on her face, the perspiration glistening on her forehead and upper hp, which appeared to be red from kissing. Had Mary not been certain that only one angel had entered, Lisa's appearance would have been enough to convince her that one of those incubuses who violate women in their sleep had secretly been having his way with the poor girl while her mother was engaged in conversation. This probably happens all the time without our knowing, these angels go around in pairs at their leisure, and while one diverts attention by telling fairy tales, the other carries out the wickedness, which strictly speaking is not all that wicked, and probably they will reverse their roles next time, so that the salutary meaning of the duality of flesh and spirit will not be lost on either the dreamer or the person being dreamed about. Mary covered her daughter,

pulled the tunic down before waking her and asking in a whisper, What were you dreaming. Taken by surprise, the girl had no time to invent a lie, she confessed that she dreamed of an angel who said nothing but looked at her with as gentle and sweet an expression as one could hope to find in paradise. Did he touch you, asked Mary, and Lisa replied, Mother, no one touches with their eyes. Not altogether convinced, Mary said in an even lower whisper, I too dreamed of an angel. And did your angel speak or was he also silent, Lisa asked in all innocence. He told me your brother Jesus was telling the truth when he said he saw God. Oh, Mother, how wrong we were not to believe Jesus, who is so good and patient, no one could have blamed him had he taken back the money for my dowry. Now we must try to put things right. But we don't know where to find him, he has sent no news, oh, if only we had asked the angel, after all, angels know everything. Of course, but the angel didn't offer to help, he just said it was our duty to look for your brother. Mother, if brother Jesus was truly with the Lord, then our life is going to be different from now on. Different, perhaps, but for the worse. Why. If we don't believe Jesus or his word, how can you expect others to believe, we can't very well go through the streets and squares of Nazareth proclaiming Jesus has seen the Lord, Jesus has seen the Lord, unless we want people chasing us with stones. But if the Lord himself chose Jesus, then surely He will protect us, his family. Don't be too certain, we weren't around when Jesus was chosen, and as far as the Lord is concerned, there are neither fathers nor sons, remember Abraham, remember Isaac. Oh, Mother, how terrible. It would be wise, my child, to keep this matter to ourselves and say as little as possible. Then what will we do. Tomorrow I'll send James and Joseph to look for Jesus. But where, Galilee is so big, and so is Samaria, if he went there, and Judaea and Idumaea are at the end of the world. Your brother has probably gone to sea, remember what he told us when he came, that he had been helping some fishermen. Isn't it more likely that he returned to the flock. Those days are over. How do you know. Try to get some sleep, it's getting late. Who knows, we might dream of our angels again. Perhaps. Whether Lisa's angel, having given its companion the slip, visited her dream once more, no one ever discovered, but the angel who brought Mary tidings was unable to return, because her eyes remained open as she lay in the darkness, yet what she knew was more than enough, and what she suspected filled her with fear.

At daybreak the mats were rolled up, and Mary summoned all her children before her. She explained that she had been thinking seriously about their recent treatment of Jesus, Starting with myself, as his mother, I think we should have been kinder and more understanding, and I've come to the conclusion that it's only right that we go look for him and ask him to come home, for we believe in him and, God willing, will one day believe what he told us. This was what Mary told them, unaware that she was repeating the words used by Joseph, who had also been present during that dramatic moment of family rejection. Who knows, perhaps Jesus would still be here today if that quiet murmur, although we did not point it out at the time, for it was but a murmur, had been on everyone's lips. Mary said nothing about the angel and the angel's words, she just reminded her children of the respect they owed their oldest brother. James dared not

question his mother's change of heart, but he continued to doubt his brother's sanity, unless Jesus had fallen under the spell of some dangerous charlatan. He asked, knowing her reply, And who is to go look for our brother Jesus. You must go, as the second oldest, and Joseph will accompany you, together you will travel more safely. Where should we begin. By the Sea of Galilee, I'm sure you'll find him there. When do we leave. Jesus left months ago, so there's no time to lose. But the rains have started, Mother, and this is no time to be traveling. My son, the circumstances create the need, and the need, when it is great enough, creates the circumstances. Mary's children looked at her in surprise, unaccustomed to such deep maxims from their mother's lips and still too young to know that keeping company with angels can produce these and even more impressive results. Take Lisa, for example, who at this very moment is slowly nodding her head in a daze, the others suspecting nothing.

When the family meeting was over, James and Joseph took a good look at the sky to see if there was any chance of a dry day for their departure despite the recent bad weather. The sky must have noticed, for right over the Sea of Galilee it turned a watery blue which promised an afternoon without rain. Having discreetly made their farewells indoors, since Mary felt the neighbors should know as little as possible, the two brothers finally set out on their journey, not along the road to Magdala, for there was no reason to think Jesus had gone in that direction, but by another route, which would soon bring them to the new city of Tiberias. They went barefoot, with all the mud on the roads they could hardly wear sandals, so they kept them safely in their packs until the weather improved. James had two reasons for choosing the road to Tiberias. First because he was curious, coming from the provinces, to see the palaces and temples he had heard so much about, and secondly because he had been told that the city was situated about halfway up this side of the river. Since they would have to earn a living while searching, James hoped to find work on a building site there, despite what the devout Jews of Nazareth said about the place's being unhealthy because of the polluted air and sulphurous waters nearby. The brothers did not reach Tiberias that day, because the promising signs in the sky came to nothing, within an hour of their departure it started raining again. They were fortunate to come upon a cave big enough to shelter them before the floodwater could sweep them away. They slept in safety, but no longer trusted in the weather.

In Tiberias the only work they found at a building site was unskilled, carting stones, but after a few days they had earned enough to satisfy their modest needs, not that King Herod Antipas was generous to his workers. They inquired if anyone had seen a certain Jesus of Nazareth, perhaps only passing through, He's our brother, looks more or less like us, but we're not sure whether or not he's traveling alone. No one had seen him working there, so James and Joseph went around to all the boat houses. Clearly, if their brother had decided to rejoin the fishermen, he would not have wasted time slaving at a building site under some harsh foreman when the lake was right there. But no one had seen him. Now that the brothers had a little money, the next thing to consider was whether the search along the riverbank, village by village, crew by crew, boat by boat, should be

carried out to the north or to the south. James finally decided they should travel south, that road was flatter, the northern road was much more uneven. The weather became stable, the cold bearable, the rain had passed, anyone with more experience of nature's cycle than these two youths had would have recognized, just by sniffing the air and feeling the soil, the first signs of spring. This mission to find their brother was turning into an agreeable country outing, a pleasant holiday by the lake, and James and Joseph were almost in danger of forgetting why they had come, when unexpectedly they met some fishermen who gave them news of Jesus, expressed in the strangest manner. One of the fishermen told them, Yes, we know him, and when you find him, tell him we wait for his return as eagerly as if we were waiting for our daily bread. The brothers were astounded, they could scarcely believe these men were talking about Jesus, perhaps the fishermen had mistaken him for some other Jesus, Judging from your description, he's the same Jesus, but whether he came from Nazareth we cannot say, for he never mentioned it. And why do you wait for his return as eagerly as if waiting for your daily bread, James asked. Because whenever he was in the boat, the fish swam straight into our nets. But our brother knows nothing about fishing, so he can't be the same Jesus. We never said he knows anything about fishing, but he only has to say, Cast your nets on this side, and no sooner are the nets lowered than they come up full. Then why is he no longer with you. Because he moved on after a few days, saying he must help other fishermen, which is true, because he joined us on three occasions, always promising to return. And where is he now. We don't know, last time he left, he was heading south, but he may have gone north without our noticing, he comes and goes at will. James said to Joseph, Let's go south, at least we know our brother is somewhere on this side of the water. This seemed sensible, though they would miss Jesus if he happened to be out on the lake, on one of those miraculous fishing trips. We tend to overlook such details, but fate is not what we imagine, a thing determined according to some principle or other, note how certain encounters, such as the one we have just described, can occur only if the persons concerned happen to be in the same place at the same time, which is not always easy. If we pause for a moment to look up at a cloud in the sky, to listen to the song of a bird, to count the entrances and exits of an anthill, or are so preoccupied that we neither look nor listen nor count but continue on our way, we may miss the perfect opportunity. Believe me, brother Joseph, fate is the most difficult thing of all in this world, as you'll learn when you're my age. Forewarned, the two brothers kept a watchful eye, stopped often to see if any boat was late in returning, several times they even retraced their steps in the hope of taking Jesus by surprise in some unlikely place, till finally they reached the end of the lake. Crossing to the other side of the river Jordan, they asked the first fishermen they met if they knew anything about Jesus. Yes, of course the men had heard about his wondrous deeds, but no one had seen him. James and Joseph went back and headed north again, more observant this time, like fishermen dragging their nets in the hope of catching the king of fish. Whenever they spent the night by the road, they kept watch in turn, lest Jesus take advantage of the moonlight to steal from one place to another. Making inquiries as they went, they reached Tiberias, where they did not have to look for work, they still had some money left thanks to the generosity of the fishermen, who

supplied them with fish, prompting Joseph to ask on one occasion, James, has it occurred to you that this fish we are eating might have been caught by our brother, and James replied, That won't improve the taste, unkind words coming from a brother but understandable when one considers James's frustration, God help him, as he wearily went on searching for a needle in a haystack.

They found Jesus an hour, that is to say, by our time, after leaving Tiberias. The first to spot him was Joseph, who has keen eyes and can see things from quite a distance, That's him, over there, he cried. In fact there are two persons coming in this direction, and one is a woman. No, says James, it can't be him. A young boy rarely contradicts an older brother, but Joseph is so overjoyed that he dispenses with the usual rules and conventions, I'm telling you, it's him, But I see a woman there, Yes, a woman with a man, and the man is Jesus. Along the riverbank and across a stretch of flat land between two hills that sloped practically to the water's edge, Jesus and Mary Magdalene could be seen approaching. James stopped and waited, and ordered Joseph to stay with him. The boy reluctantly obeyed, eager as he was to run to his long-lost brother, to embrace him and throw his arms around his neck. James, however, was disturbed by the presence of the woman at Jesus' side. Who is she, he asked himself, refusing to believe that his brother already had carnal knowledge of a woman, the very idea created an enormous gulf between James and his older brother, as if Jesus, who boasted of having seen God, was now in a completely different realm, simply by having carnal knowledge of a woman. One reflection leads to another, though we often do not notice the connection between them, it is like crossing a river by a covered bridge, we walk without looking where we are going, passing over a river we did not know existed, and James too began to think it was not right to remain standing there, as if he were the eldest in the family and Jesus should come to him. No sooner did James stir than Joseph ran to Jesus with open arms and cries of joy, startling into flight a flock of birds that, concealed among the tall reeds, had been foraging in the marsh by the river. James walked faster, to prevent Joseph from delivering any messages that were his responsibility, and coming face-to-face with Jesus, he said to him, Thanks be to the Lord that we found you, brother, and Jesus replied, I am delighted to see both of you in such good health. Mary Magdalene, meanwhile, had lingered behind. Jesus asked, What brings you to these parts, and James suggested, Let's go over there, where no one can hear us. We can talk here, said Jesus, and if you're referring to the woman accompanying me, then let me assure you that whatever you have to say and that I may wish to hear can be said in her presence. The deep silence which followed was that of the sea and the mountains put together, not the silence of four human beings confronting one another and summoning their courage. Jesus seemed older, and his skin was tanned, but his feverish look had gone, and the expression behind his heavy, dark beard was composed, serene, despite the tension of this unexpected encounter. Who is that woman, asked James. Her name is Mary, and she is with me, said Jesus. Is she your wife. Well, yes and no. I don't understand. That doesn't surprise me. I must talk to you. Go ahead. I've brought a message from Mother. I'm listening. I'd prefer to tell you in private. You heard what I said. Mary Magdalene stepped forward, I can stay

out of the way until you've finished your conversation. No, said Jesus, you share all my thoughts, therefore you should know what my mother thinks of me, so I don't have to repeat it to you later. James flushed and made as if to turn away, giving Mary Magdalene a black look that betrayed mixed feelings of hatred and desire. Joseph stretched out his hands to keep them apart, all that he could do. James eventually calmed down, then remembered what he had to say, Mother sent us to find you and accompany you back home, for we believe you, and with God's help perhaps one day we'll believe what you told us. Is that all. Those were Mother's words. So, not willing to believe what I told you, you wait for the Lord to help you change your mind. Whether we believe or not depends on the Lord. You are mistaken, the Lord gave us legs that we might walk, and we walked, I've never heard of any man who waited for the Lord to say, Start walking, and it's the same with our mind, God gave us a mind to use according to our will and desire. I won't argue with you. Just as well, for you wouldn't win. What should I tell Mother. Tell her the message comes too late, that Joseph spoke those same words in time, but she paid no attention, and even should an angel of the Lord appear and convince her that everything I said was true, I have no intention of returning home. You're committing the sin of pride. A tree weeps when cut down, a dog howls when beaten, but a man matures when offended. She's your mother, and we are your brothers. Who are my mother and brothers, my mother and brothers are they who believe me when I speak, they are the fishermen who know that when I join them, they will catch more fish than ever, my mother and brothers are they who do not have to wait for the hour of my death to take pity on my life. Have you no other message for Mother. That is all, but you will hear others speak of me, said Jesus, then turning to Mary Magdalene, Let us go, Mary, the boats are ready to leave, the fish are gathering, time to reap this harvest. As they walked away, James called out, Jesus, should I mention this woman to Mother. Tell her she is with me and her name is Mary, and the name echoed between the hills and over the lake. Crouching on the ground, young Joseph wept bitter tears.

WHEN JESUS GOES TO FISH WITH THE FISHERMEN, MARY Magdalene waits for him, usually seated on a rock at the water's edge, or on a nearby hill if there is one, from where she can easily follow the route they sail. Fishing is no longer a slow operation, for there have never been so many fish in this lake, it's like putting one's hand in a bucket filled with fish, but not for everyone, because if Jesus happens to go elsewhere, then the bucket reverts to being almost empty, and hands and arms soon tire of casting net after net to find only an occasional fish or two trapped in the mesh. In despair, the entire fishing community on the western side of the Sea of Galilee goes to ask Jesus, to implore Jesus, to demand that Jesus help them, and in some places they even receive him with festivities and floral tributes, as if it were Palm Sunday. But the bread of humanity being what it is, a mixture of envy and malice with a little charity here and there, the yeast of fear fermenting evil while suppressing good, one group of fishermen began quarreling with another, one village with another, they all wanted Jesus, and let the others provide for themselves as best they can. Whenever they started fighting, Jesus withdrew to the desert, returning only when the troublemakers repented and asked forgiveness for their rough behavior while protesting their love and devotion. But what we will never know is why the fishermen on the eastern side never sent delegates to discuss the drafting of a fair treaty that would benefit all parties, not including the large number of Gentiles of different races and persuasions who are to be found in this region. The fishermen on the other bank could also have sent a fleet with nets and pikes, under cover of darkness, to kidnap Jesus, reducing those on the western side to a meager existence just when they had grown accustomed to plenty.

But let us go back to the day James and Joseph came to ask Jesus to give up this existence and return home despite his newfound prosperity since he took up fishing. By now the two brothers, James in a rage, Joseph in tears, are quickly making their way back to Nazareth, where their mother continues to wonder whether the two sons who left will bring a third, but she is doubtful. Their homeward route from the spot on the shore where they met Jesus obliged them to pass through Magdala. James scarcely knew the town and Joseph not at all, the place didn't appear to have anything of interest to detain them there, so after a brief rest the brothers resumed their journey. As they passed the last of the houses before the wilderness began, they saw on their left the bare walls of a house that had been gutted by fire. The gate to the yard had been forced open but only partially destroyed, and it looked as if the fire had started inside. The passerby hopes that some treasure may be left among the ashes, and if there is no danger of a beam falling on his head, he cannot resist exploring further. Treading carefully, he pokes at the debris with one foot, looking for something shiny, a gold coin, an indestructible diamond, an emerald necklace. James and Joseph entered only out of curiosity, they are not so naive as to imagine that rapacious neighbors have not been here already to loot the place, although the house is so small that any prized possessions almost certainly have been removed by the owners. The roof of the oven had caved in, the brick floor was broken, and there were loose tiles underfoot. There's nothing here, said James, let's go, but Joseph asked, What's that. It was a bedstead, but the legs had been burned and the

whole frame badly damaged, a phantom throne with bits of charred drapery hanging in tatters. It's a bed, said James, people like great lords and wealthy merchants actually sleep on such things. This doesn't strike me as a rich person's house, argued Joseph. Appearances can be deceptive, James wisely reminded him. As they left, Joseph noticed a cane hanging outside the gate, the sort used for gathering figs, no doubt it had originally been much longer. What is this doing here, he asked, and without waiting for a reply, either from himself or from his brother, he removed the useless cane and took it with him, a souvenir of a fire, of a house destroyed, of people unknown. No one had seen them enter, no one saw them leave, they are only two brothers going home in soiled tunics and with bad news, one brother frustrated by the memory of Mary Magdalene, the other thinking of the fun he will have playing with the broken cane.

Mary Magdalene, sitting on a rock and waiting for Jesus to return from fishing, thinks about Mary of Nazareth. Until today she simply thought of her as Jesus' mother, now she knows, after questioning him, that his mother is also named Mary, a coincidence of no great consequence when one considers the vast number of Marys on this earth and the many more to come if the fashion persists, but we are inclined to believe that there is nevertheless a sense of solidarity between those who share the same name, Joseph for example may think of himself no longer as the son of Joseph but more as his brother, and this could be God's problem, no one else bears His name. These reflections may seem farfetched for someone like Mary Magdalene, but we are confident that she is perfectly capable of such ideas once her thoughts about the man she loves lead her to think of his mother. Mary Magdalene has never had a son of her own to love, but at long last she has learned what it means to love a man, having practiced the thousand and one deceptions of false love. She loves Jesus as a woman loves a man, but also wants to love him as a mother loves a son, perhaps because she is not much younger than his real mother, who sent a message asking her son to come home, only to be refused. Mary Magdalene wonders how Mary of Nazareth will feel when she receives his answer, but that is not the same as imagining how she herself would suffer were she to lose him, for she would be losing her man rather than her son. O Lord, punish me with both sorrows if necessary, murmured Mary Magdalene as she sat waiting for Jesus to return. And as the boat drew nearer and was pulled ashore, as the baskets laden with glistening fish were hauled in, as Jesus, his feet in the water, helped the fishermen and laughed like a child at play, Mary Magdalene saw herself in the role of Mary of Nazareth and, getting up, she went down to the water's edge and waded in to greet Jesus. Kissing him on the shoulder, she whispered, My son. No one heard Jesus say, Mother, for as we know, words that come from the heart are never spoken, they get caught in the throat and can only be read in one's eyes. Mary and Jesus were rewarded with a basket of fish, and as usual they retired to the house where they would spend the night, for they had no home of their own, going from boat to boat and from mat to mat. In the beginning Jesus often said to Mary, This is no life for you, let's find a house of our own where I can join you whenever possible, but Mary insisted, I don't want to wait behind, I prefer to be with you. One day he asked her if she had any relatives who might offer her shelter, and she told him that her brother

Lazarus and sister Martha lived in the village of Bethany in Judaea, although she herself left home when she turned to prostitution, and to spare them embarrassment she moved farther and farther away, until she ended up in Magdala. So your name should really be Mary of Bethany if that's where you were born, said Jesus. Yes, I was born in Bethany, but you found me in Magdala, so I think of myself as being from Magdala. People don't refer to me as Jesus of Bethlehem although I was born there, and I don't think of myself as being from Nazareth, because people there don't want me and I certainly don't want them, perhaps I should say like you, I'm from Magdala, and for the same reason. Don't forget we destroyed our house. But not the memory, replied Jesus. No more was said about Mary's returning to Bethany, this stretch of shore is their whole world, and wherever Jesus may go, she will go with him.

How true, the saying which reminds us that there is so much sorrow in this world, misfortunes grow like weeds beneath our feet. Such a saying could only have been invented by mortals, accustomed as they are to life's ups and downs, obstacles, setbacks, and constant struggle. The only people likely to question it are those who sail the seas, for they know that even greater woe lies beneath their feet, indeed, unfathomable chasms. The misfortunes of seafarers, the winds and gales sent from heaven, cause waves to swell, storms to break, sails to rip, and fragile vessels to founder. And these fishermen and sailors truly perish between heaven and earth, a heaven hands cannot reach, an earth feet never touch. The Sea of Galilee is nearly always tranquil and smooth, like any lake, until the watery furies are unleashed, and then it is every man for himself, although sadly some drown. But let us return to Jesus of Nazareth and his recent worries, which only goes to show that the human heart is never content, and that doing one's duty does not bring peace of mind, though those who are easily satisfied would have us believe otherwise. One could say that thanks to the endless comings and goings of Jesus up and down the river Jordan, there is no longer any hardship, not even an occasional shortage, on the western shore, and not only fishermen have benefited, because the abundance of fish has brought down prices and provided people with more to eat. It is true that some attempts were made to keep prices high by the well-known corporate method of throwing part of the catch back into the sea, but Jesus threatened to go elsewhere if those responsible for this abuse did not apologize and change their ways. So everyone is happy, except Jesus. He is tired of the constant back and forth, the embarking and disembarking, the same routine day in and day out, and since the power of making fish appear clearly comes from the Lord, why should he be condemned to this monotony until the Lord is ready to summon him as promised. Jesus does not doubt that the Lord is with him, for the fish never fail to come when he calls them, which has led him to speculate whether the Lord might not be willing to concede him other powers, on the clear understanding that he put them to good use. For as we have seen, Jesus, who has achieved so much already with nothing but intuition to guide him, should have no difficulty meeting that condition. There was one way to find out, as easy as saying, Oh, and that was to try. If it worked, God approved, and if it didn't, God was showing His displeasure. The first problem was that of choice. Unable to consult the Lord directly,

Jesus would have to risk choosing a power, one that would provoke the least objection, it could not be too obvious, yet not so subtle as to go unnoticed by those who would benefit, or by the world, for that would diminish the glory of God, which must be considered above all things. But Jesus could not make up his mind, he was afraid God might ridicule him, humiliate him as He had done in the desert, even now he shuddered at the thought of the embarrassment he would have suffered if the nets had come back empty when he first suggested, Cast your nets on this side. These matters worried him so much that one night he dreamed someone was whispering in his ear, Don't be afraid, remember God needs you, but when he woke up, he could not help wondering who had spoken, an angel, one of the many who go around delivering messages from the Lord, or was it a demon, one of the many who do Satan's bidding. Mary Magdalene was fast asleep beside him, so it could not have been her.

This was how things stood when Jesus set out one day, which seemed no different from any other, to perform the usual miracle. The clouds were low in the sky and there were signs of rain, but it takes more than rain to keep fishermen at home, they are used to every kind of weather. On this particular day the boat belonged to Simon and his brother Andrew, who had witnessed the first miracle, and it was accompanied by the boat of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, because one can never tell if a miracle will always have the same effect, a boat nearby may get some of the fish gathering there. The strong wind carries them swiftly out, and after lowering the sails the fishermen in both boats prepare their nets and wait for Jesus to tell them where they should cast them. At this point the situation starts getting difficult, a storm suddenly comes without warning from the overcast sky, it grows so fierce that the waves swell and rise, driven by the frenzied gale, and those two fragile nutshells are buffeted wildly as the elements unleash their wrath. The plight of the defenseless fishermen brought shouts and lamentations from the people watching on the shore. Wives, mothers, sisters, children, and the occasional good-hearted mother-in-law were gathered there, making such a din with their weeping and wailing that it must have been heard in heaven, Oh, my poor husband, Oh, my beloved son, Oh, my dear brother, Oh, my poor son-in-law, A curse on you, miserable sea, Holy Mother of the Afflicted, help us, Protectress of the Voyager, come to our aid, but all the children could do was to weep. Mary Magdalene was there too, murmuring, Jesus, Jesus, but she did not pray for him, she knew the Lord was saving him for another occasion, not likely to let him perish in a mere storm at sea, where the only consequence was a few drowned men. She kept on repeating, Jesus, Jesus, as if the very sound of his name could rescue the fishermen, who certainly appeared close to meeting their fate. In the midst of the storm, Jesus watched the despair and destruction all around him, the waves sweeping over the boats and flooding them, the masts breaking, the sails flying through the air, the rain becoming a flood capable of sinking one of the emperor's own ships. Jesus watched and thought, It is not right that these men should die while I live, the Lord will rebuke me, saying, You could have saved those who were with you, yet you made no attempt to save them, as if your father's crime were not enough. To be reminded of that was so painful, Jesus jumped to his feet, and standing as

firmly as if on solid ground, he commanded the wind, Be quiet, and told the sea, Be calm, and no sooner had he spoken than the sea and the wind abated, the clouds in the sky dispersed, and the sun appeared in all its glory, ever a wondrous sight in the eyes of us poor mortals. Impossible to describe the rejoicing in the boats, the kissing and embracing, the tears of joy ashore, those on the far bank were puzzled that the storm died down so quickly, those here, as if restored to life, could think of nothing but their lucky escape, and if some spontaneously exclaimed, Miracle, miracle, they seemed unaware that someone had to be responsible for it. A sudden silence fell over the water, the other boats surrounded that of Simon and Andrew, and all the fishermen looked at Jesus, too astonished to speak, for above the roar of the storm they had heard him call out, Be quiet, Be calm, and there he was, Jesus, the man who could summon fish from the sea, and now he had forbidden the sea to deliver men to the fish. Eyes lowered, Jesus sat on the oarsman's bench, his face showing both triumph and disaster, as if on reaching a mountain peak he was now beginning the sad and inevitable descent. Forming a circle, the men waited for him to speak. It was not enough to have tamed the wind and pacified the water, he had to explain how a simple Galilean, an obscure carpenter's son, could have achieved such a miracle, when God himself had abandoned them to death's cold embrace. Jesus rose to his feet and told them, What you have just witnessed was not my doing, the voice that quelled the storm was not mine but that of the Lord speaking through me, as through the prophets, I am only the mouth of the Lord. Simon, who was in the boat with him, said, Just as the Lord sent the storm, He could also have sent it away, but it was your word that saved our lives. Believe me, it was God's doing, not mine. Whereupon John, the younger son of Zebedee, spoke, proving that he was not at all simpleminded, It may have been God's doing, for in Him resides all power, but He acted through you, so clearly it is God's will that we should know you. But you already know me. Only that you came from who knows where and mysteriously filled our boats with fish. I am Jesus of Nazareth, the son of a carpenter who was crucified by the Romans, for a time I was a shepherd for a flock of sheep and goats, and now here I am with you, and perhaps I will go on being a fisherman until the hour of my death. Andrew, the brother of Simon, said, We will stay with you, because any man with your power is condemned to loneliness heavier than any millstone around one's neck. Jesus said, Stay with me if that is what your heart asks, and if the Lord, as John says, wishes that you should know me, but tell no one what has passed here, for the time has not yet come for Him to reveal my fate. Then James, the older son of Zebedee, who like his brother was no simpleton, said, Don't imagine people won't talk, just look at the crowd there on the shore, see how they're waiting to praise you, some so impatient that they're already pushing out their boats to come and join us, and even if we succeed in reining their enthusiasm and persuading them to keep our secret, how can you be sure that God will not continue to manifest Himself through you, however much you dislike the idea. The living image of sorrow, Jesus hung his head and said, We are all in the hands of the Lord. You more than the rest of us, replied Simon, for He has chosen you, but we shall follow you. To the end, said John. Until you have no further need of us, said Andrew. For as long as possible, said James. The boats were fast approaching, with much waving of arms and

chanting of prayers and praise and thanks to the Lord. Resigned, Jesus told the others, Let's go, the wine is poured and we must drink it. He did not seek out Mary Magdalene, he knew she was waiting for him as always, it would take more than a miracle to stop her vigil, and the thought of her waiting for him filled his heart with gratitude and peace. Disembarking, he fell into her arms, and showed no surprise when she whispered in his ear, her cheek pressed against his wet beard, You will lose the war but win every battle. Arm in arm and accompanied by friends, they greeted the cheering spectators, who hailed Jesus as if he were a victorious general. Arm in arm, Jesus and Mary climbed the steep path to Capernaum, the village that overlooked the lake, where Simon and Andrew lived and where they had been offered hospitality.

James was right when he warned Jesus that the episode of the storm would be on everyone's lips. Within a few days people for miles around were discussing nothing else. Although, strange to relate, no one seems to have been aware of the storm in Tiberias, even though the lake there is not that wide, as we already mentioned, and from a height one can see from shore to shore on a clear day. When someone arrived with the news that a stranger accompanying the fishermen of Capernaum had quelled the storm just by speaking to it, he was asked to his amazement, What storm. But there was no lack of witnesses to testify that there had indeed been a storm, and there were those who had been involved directly or indirectly, among them some muleteers from Safed and Cana who chanced to be there in the course of their work. It was they who spread the news elsewhere, each man embroidering the story according to his fancy, but the news did not reach everyone, and we know what happens to such tales, they lose credibility after a while, by the time the news reached Nazareth, the tellers were no longer sure if there had been a genuine miracle or simply the lucky coincidence of a word's being tossed to the wind and a gale's growing tired of blowing. A mother's heart, however, is never deceived, and Mary had only to hear the dying echo of this prodigy that people were already questioning to know that her absent son was responsible. She grieved that the loss of her maternal authority had led her to conceal from Jesus the angel's revelation, confident that a message couched in a few words would bring home the son who had left with his own heart grieving. And now that Lisa was married and living in Cana, Mary no longer had anyone in whom to confide her bitterness. She could not turn to James, who had come back in a rage after the meeting with his brother. He spared Mary no details, and gave a withering account of the woman with Jesus, She's old enough to be his mother, and from the look of her there's nothing she doesn't know about life, to put it mildly. Not that James himself knows that much about life, here in this remote village. So Mary unburdened herself to Joseph, the son who in name and appearance reminded her most of her husband, but he gave her little comfort, Mother, we are paying for our mistake, after seeing Jesus, I fear he'll never come home, people say he calmed a storm, and the fishermen themselves told us that he fills their boats with fish as if by magic. Then the angel was right. What angel, asked Joseph, and Mary told him everything that had happened, from the beggar who put glowing earth into the bowl to the appearance of the angel in her dream. They did not hold this conversation inside, for with such a

large family it is almost impossible to have any privacy. When these people wish to disclose secrets, they go into the desert, where one might even meet God. Joseph and Mary were still deep in conversation when Joseph, looking over his mother's shoulder, saw a flock of sheep and goats with their shepherd pass over the distant hills. The flock did not appear to be very big or the shepherd very tall, so he watched without saying a word. And when his mother sighed, I will never see Jesus again, he replied pensively, Who knows.

Joseph was right. About a year later, Lisa sent a message to their mother, inviting her on behalf of her in-laws to come to Cana for the wedding of her husband's younger sister, and Mary was asked to bring as many of the children as she wished, they would all be most welcome. Despite this generous invitation Mary was reluctant to be a burden, for there is nothing more tiresome than a widow with a horde of children, so she decided to take her current favorite, Joseph, and Lydia, who like all other girls her age adored parties and celebrations. Cana is not far from Nazareth, little more than an hour away if calculated by our time, and with gentle autumn already here, this promised to be an agreeable outing, even without a wedding to look forward to. They left at sunrise, in order to arrive in Cana in time for Mary to assist in the final preparations for the festivities, for such labor is in direct proportion to the pleasure of the guests. Lisa ran out to meet her mother, brother, and sister, embracing them affectionately. She asked about their health, they asked if she was well and happy, but there was much work to be done, so they moved on quickly. Lisa and Mary went to the bridegroom's house, where the feast was traditionally held, to share the cooking with the other women of the family, and Joseph and Lydia remained in the yard with the children, the boys playing with the boys, the girls dancing with the girls, until it was time for the ceremony to begin. Then off they ran, boys and girls together, behind the men accompanying the bridegroom, friends carrying the customary torches although it was a bright, sunny morning, which shows that a little extra light, even from a torch, is not to be despised. Smiling neighbors came out to greet them, but saved their blessings for when the procession would return bringing the bride. Joseph and Lydia missed the rest of this, but then they have already seen a wedding in their own family, the bridegroom knocking at the door and asking to see the bride, the bride appearing surrounded by her friends, who carry little oil lamps, which are more suited to women than great flaming torches, and then the bridegroom lifts the bride's veil and shouts with joy on finding such a treasure there, as if he has not seen her thousands of times already during the last twelve months of courtship, and not gone to bed with her as often as he pleased. Joseph and Lydia missed all this, because Joseph, who happened to look down the street, saw two men and a woman in the distance. Recognizing Jesus and the woman with him, he felt a strange sensation for the second time, and called to his sister, Look, it's Jesus, and they ran to meet him, but then Joseph stopped, remembering his mother and the coldness with which his brother had received them by the lake, not so much James and him, it is true, as the message they had delivered. So Joseph, thinking to himself that he would eventually have to explain his behavior to Jesus, turned back. Before disappearing around the corner, he took another

look and felt envy when he saw his brother gather Lydia into his arms like a feather in flight and smother her with kisses, while the woman and the other man looked on approvingly. Eyes filled with tears of frustration, Joseph ran, came to the house, crossed the yard, jumping to avoid the linen cloths and food set out on the ground and low tables, and called, Mother, Mother. Our own distinctive voices are our saving grace, otherwise mothers everywhere would be looking up only to see someone else's son. One look, and Mary understood when Joseph said to her, Jesus is coming this way. The color drained from her face, then she blushed, smiled, turned serious and pale once more, and these conflicting emotions brought her hand to her breast, as if her heart were no longer beating and she had backed into a wall. Who is with him, she asked, for she was certain someone was with him. A man and a woman, and Lydia, who's still with them, replied Joseph. Is that the woman you saw before. Yes, Mother, but I don't know the man. Lisa joined them, curious, unaware that there was something amiss, What's the matter, Mother. Your brother has arrived for the wedding. You mean Jesus is here in Cana. Yes, Joseph has just seen him. Lisa could not keep from smiling as she murmured to herself, My brother, and that quiet smile of hers betrayed the deepest satisfaction. Let's go and meet him, she said. You go, I'll stay here, her mother answered defensively, and turning to Joseph, she told him, Go with your sister. But Joseph felt resentful that Lydia had been the first to be embraced by Jesus, and Lisa did not have the courage to go on her own, so there they stood, like three criminals awaiting sentence and unsure of the judge's mercy, if the words judge and mercy mean anything here.

Jesus appeared in the doorway, carrying Lydia in his arms, and Mary Magdalene followed behind, but the first to enter was Andrew, the other man in the group and related to the bridegroom, as soon became apparent when he said to those who came smiling to welcome him, No, Simon couldn't come. And while many present were happily absorbed in this family reunion, others eyed one another over a chasm, asking themselves who would be first to set foot on that fragile, narrow bridge, which despite everything still joined the one side to the other. We shall not say, as a poet once said, that children are the greatest joy in this world, but it is thanks to them that adults sometimes succeed in taking difficult steps without losing face, even if they discover afterward that they have not gone very far. Lydia slipped from Jesus' arms and ran to her mother, and as in a puppet show one move led to another move, and another, Jesus went up to his mother and brother, greeted them in the sober, matter-of-fact tone of one who has seen them every day, then moved on, leaving them dumbfounded. Mary Magdalene followed him, and as she passed Mary of Nazareth, the two women, one upright, the other fallen, glanced at each other, not with hostility or contempt but with mutual recognition, which only those familiar with the labyrinthine ways of the feminine heart can understand. The procession was drawing near, shouts and applause could be heard, the tremulous vibration of tambourines, the scattered notes of gentle harps, the rhythm of dancing, the shrill sound of voices as everyone tried to speak at once. Then the guests poured into the yard, the bride and groom were almost swept in amid cheering and clapping as they went before parents and parents-in-law to receive their blessings.

Mary was also there, waiting to give her blessing, just as she had blessed her daughter Lisa, then as now without her husband or eldest son at her side to take his rightful place as head of the family. As they sat down to eat, Jesus was offered a special seat, Andrew having quietly informed his relatives that this was the man who filled empty nets with fish and calmed storms, but Jesus refused the honor, choosing to sit with the guests farthest away from the bridal party. Mary Magdalene served Jesus, and no one questioned her presence there. Lisa too went to him several times, to make sure he was all right, and Jesus treated both women in exactly the same way. Watching this from afar, his mother's eyes met those of Mary Magdalene. Mary beckoned her to a quiet corner of the yard and without further ado told her, Take care of my son, for an angel warned me that great tribulations await him, and I can do nothing for him. You may count on me to protect and defend him with my life if necessary. What is your name. I'm known as Mary Magdalene, and I lived as a prostitute until I met your son. Mary said nothing but began to see things more clearly, certain details came back to her, the coins, the guarded statements made by Jesus when she asked where the money came from, James's indignant account of his meeting with Jesus, his remarks about the woman who was with his brother. Now she knew everything, and turning to Mary Magdalene, said, You will always have my blessing and gratitude for all the good you have done my son Jesus. Mary Magdalene leaned over and kissed Mary's shoulder as a mark of respect, but Mary threw her arms around her and held her tight, and there they remained for some moments, embracing each other in silence before returning to the kitchen, where there was work waiting to be done.

The festivities continued, one dish after another was brought in from the kitchen, wine flowed from the pitchers, guests began singing and dancing, when suddenly the steward came and whispered in the ear of the parents of the bride and groom, The wine is running out. They could not have been more dismayed had they been told the roof was falling in, What will we do now, how can we face our guests and tell them there's no more wine, by tomorrow everyone in Cana will know of our shame. My poor daughter, groaned the bride's mother, people will mock her, saying that even the wine ran dry on her wedding day, what have we done to deserve this, and what a bad start to married life. At the tables the guests were draining their goblets, many looking around for someone to serve them more wine, when Mary, who has now entrusted her maternal duties to another woman, decided to put Jesus' miraculous powers to the test before withdrawing into the silence of her own home, ready to depart this world, her mission on earth completed. She looked around for Mary Magdalene, saw her slowly nod her assent, so wasting no time, she went up to Jesus and said, There is no wine. Jesus turned to face his mother, looked at her as if she had spoken from a distance, and asked, Woman, what have I to do with you, shattering words that shocked and amazed those who overheard them, for no son treats in this manner the mother who brought him into the world. In time these words will be rephrased and interpreted in different ways to make them sound less brutal, some have even tried to change their meaning completely, insisting that what Jesus really said was, Why bother me with this, or, What has this to do with me, or, Who asked you to interfere, or, Why should we get involved, woman, or, Why can't you leave

this to me, or, Tell me what you want and I'll see what can be done, or even, You can rely on me to do my best to please you. Mary did not flinch, she withstood Jesus' look of disdain and ended her challenge by saying to the servants, which put her son in an awkward position, Whatever he says, do it. As his mother went off, Jesus watched without saying a word or trying to stop her, aware that the Lord had used her, just as He had used the storm and the plight of the fishermen. Jesus raised his goblet, which still held some wine, and pointing to six stone jars of water used for purification, told the servants, Fill these with water, whereupon they filled them to the brim, and each jar held two to three measures. Bring them here, he told them, and they obeyed. Then into each jar Jesus poured a few drops of the wine in his goblet, and ordered the servants, Take them to the steward. Without knowing where the jars came from, the steward sampled the water, which the small quantity of wine had barely colored, and summoned the groom and told him, Every man serves good wine at the beginning, but when the guests have drunk their fill, serves that which is poorer, yet you have kept the best wine until now. The bridegroom, who had never before seen wine served in such jars and who knew, moreover, that the wine had run out, tasted it for himself and confirmed that it was wine by commenting, with an expression of false modesty, on the excellent quality of this vintage. Had it not been for the servants, who spread the news next day, this would have been a buried miracle, for the steward, ignorant of the transmutation, would have remained ignorant, while the groom would have been only too happy to take the credit, and no one expected Jesus to go around saying, I worked such and such a miracle, and Mary Magdalene, who was involved in the plan from the first, was unlikely to start boasting, He worked a miracle, and his mother even less so, because this was something between Mary and her son, the rest of it was a bonus in every sense of the word, as any guest who had his goblet refilled will testify.

Mary of Nazareth and her son conversed no more. Without saying good-bye to anyone, Jesus and Mary Magdalene left that same afternoon and set off for Tiberias. Joseph and Lydia, keeping out of sight, followed them to the outskirts of the village, where they stood watching until the couple disappeared around the bend in the road.

THEN THE LONG WAIT BEGAN. THE SIGNS BY WHICH THE Lord had manifested Himself in the person of Jesus were so far little more than magic tricks, clever, fascinating, with a few quick words of abracadabra, not unlike those performed with rather more style by Oriental fakirs, such as tossing a rope into midair and climbing it without any visible sign of support, no hooks, no hand of a mysterious genie. To work these wonders, Jesus had only to will them, and if anyone had asked him why, he would have had no answer other than that he could hardly ignore the misery of fishermen with empty nets, the danger of that raging storm, or the mortifying lack of wine at that marriage feast, for truly the hour has not yet arrived for the Lord to speak through his lips. Villagers dwelling on this side of Galilee said that a man from Nazareth was going around exercising powers that could only come from God, and that he did not deny it, but in the absence of any reason or explanation for his appearance among them, they might as well take advantage of this sudden abundance and ask no questions. Simon and Andrew were not of this opinion, nor were the sons of Zebedee, but they were his friends and feared for his life. Each morning when he woke up, Jesus asked in silence, Perhaps today, and sometimes he even asked the question aloud, so that Mary Magdalene would hear him, but she said nothing, just lay there sighing, then put her arms around him and kissed him on the forehead and eyes while he breathed in the sweet, warm odor of her breasts. There were days when he went back to sleep, and days when he forgot the question and took refuge in Mary Magdalene's body, as if entering a cocoon from which he could be reborn in some other form. Later he would go down to the lake and to the waiting fishermen, many of whom would never understand him, they kept asking him why he didn't get himself a boat and fish independently, keeping the entire catch for himself. Sometimes, when they were out at sea and resting between catches, still necessary even though the fishing had become as easy as yawning, Jesus would have a sudden premonition, and his heart trembled, but instead of turning to heaven, where, as we know, God resides, his eyes settled with yearning on the lake's calm surface, on that smooth water that shone like the clearest skin, as if he waited with desire and fear to see rising from the depths not fish but the voice that was slow in coming. The day's fishing over, the boat returned laden, and Jesus, with lowered head, once more walked along the shore, Mary Magdalene behind him. And so the weeks and months passed, and the years, the only visible change taking place in Tiberias, where more buildings went up as the city prospered, otherwise things went on as usual in this land that seems to die with every winter and be reborn with every spring, a false observation and a deception on the part of the senses, for spring would be nothing without the sleep of winter.

Jesus was now twenty-five years old, and suddenly the entire universe awakened, there were signs, one after another, as if someone were anxiously trying to make up for lost time. True, the first sign was not exactly a miracle, after all there was nothing that remarkable about Simon's mother's falling ill with a fever and Jesus' going to her bedside and placing his hand on her forehead, something we have all instinctively done at one time or other, without expecting to cure the patient by this simple, natural gesture. But the fever subsided beneath his hand, as poisoned water is absorbed by the soil, and the

old woman rose immediately and said, somewhat irrelevantly, Whoever befriends me befriends my son-in-law, then went about her household chores as if nothing had happened. This first sign was a private matter and took place indoors, but the second brought Jesus into open conflict with the written and observed law, though it was perhaps understandable, given human nature and the fact that Jesus was living in sin with Mary Magdalene. Seeing an adulteress about to be stoned to death in accordance with the law of Moses, Jesus intervened and said, Stop, he that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her, as if to say, Were I not living with a prostitute and tainted by her in deed and thought, I might join you in carrying out this punishment. He was taking a big risk, because some of the more callous among the men could have turned a deaf ear to his rebuke and thrown stones, being themselves exempt from the law they were applying, which was meant only for women. What appears to have escaped Jesus, perhaps from lack of experience, is that if we wait for the arrival of sanctimonious judges who believe they alone have the right to condemn and punish, crime is likely to increase dramatically and wickedness to thrive, adulteresses will be on the loose, one minute with this man, the next with another, and adultery brings after it the thousand vices that persuaded the Lord to send down fire and brimstone on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, reducing them to ashes. But the evil that was born with the world, and from which the world has learned everything it knows, dear brethren, is like that famous phoenix that no one has ever seen and that even while appearing to perish in the flames is reborn from an egg hatched in its own ashes. Good is delicate, fragile, while Evil need only blow the hot breath of sin into the face of purity for it to be forevermore disfigured, for the stalk of the lily to break and the orange blossom to wither. Jesus told the adulteress, Go and sin no more, but in his heart he had serious doubts.

Another notable event took place on the opposite side of the lake, where Jesus decided he ought to go now and then, lest it be said that all his attention was given to the western shore. So he summoned James and John and suggested, Let's explore the other side, where the Gadarenes live, to see what fortune brings, and on the way back we can fish, so that we have something to show for our journey. The sons of Zebedee warmed to this idea, and after setting their boat on course, began to row, hoping that farther ahead there would be a breeze to help them on their way. And their prayer was answered, their satisfaction, however, soon turned to alarm when a storm came up that promised to be even more violent than the one they had experienced years ago, but Jesus chided the water and the sky, Now then, what's going on here, as if scolding a child, and the water calmed immediately, and the wind went back to blowing at the right speed and in the right direction. All three disembarked, Jesus walking first, James and John following him. They had never been to this region before and were surprised by everything they saw there, but the strangest sight of all on the road was the sudden appearance of a man, if one can use that word to describe the filthy creature with matted beard and wild hair. The stench he gave off was like that of a tomb, and little wonder, for as they soon learned, that was where the man took refuge whenever he managed to break the chains with which he was restrained. It is well known that a madman's strength

is twice as great when he flies into a rage, yet he cannot be held with double the number of chains, this had been tried many times but to no avail, because the man was not simply a madman, the unclean spirit that possessed and ruled him made a mockery of all attempts to chain him. Day and night the possessed man went bounding over the mountains, fleeing from himself and his own shadow, and he hid among the tombs and often in them, from where he had to be dragged, to the horror of anyone who happened to be passing. This was how Jesus first saw him, the guards in pursuit, waving their arms at Jesus to get out of harm's way, but Jesus had come in search of adventure and was not going to miss this for anything. John and James, though terrified by the madman, did not abandon their friend, and so they were the first to hear words no one would ever expect to hear, words that undermined the Lord and His laws, as we are about to discover. The fierce man advances with outstretched claws and bared fangs from which hang the remains of rotten flesh, Jesus' hair stands on end with fright, but suddenly the possessed creature throws himself on the ground two paces away and cries out, What do you want of me, Jesus, son of the Almighty, I beseech you in the name of God to stop tormenting me. Now, this was the first time in public, not in private dreams which prudence and skepticism compel us to doubt, that a voice was raised, and a diabolical voice if ever there was one, proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth was the son of God, something he himself was unaware of until this moment, for during his conversation with God in the desert the question of paternity never came up. I will need you later, was all the Lord said, and even that was suspect, considering that his heavenly father had appeared before him in the guise of a cloud and column of smoke. The possessed man writhed at his feet, and a voice within Jesus finally revealed what had hitherto been concealed, and at that moment, like one who sees himself reflected in another, he felt that he too was possessed and at the mercy of powers which would lead him who knows where, but no doubt ultimately to the grave of graves. He asked the spirit, What is your name, and the spirit answered, Legion, for we are many. In commanding tones, Jesus said, Leave this man, unclean spirit. And no sooner had he spoken than a chorus of infernal voices went up, some reedy and shrill, others deep and hoarse, some as gentle as a woman's, others as harsh as the sound of a saw cutting through stone, some mocking and taunting, others pleading with the humility of paupers, some arrogant, others whining, some prattling like children learning their first words, others crying out like ghosts in distress, but all begging Jesus to allow them to remain, one word from him could drive them from this man's body, For pity's sake, the evil spirits begged, do not expel us. And Jesus asked them, Tell me, then, where do you want to go. Now as it happened, a large herd of pigs was grazing on the slopes of the mountain nearby, and the spirits implored Jesus, Allow us to enter the pigs. Jesus thought for a moment and decided it was the perfect solution, the pigs had to belong to Gentiles, since pork is unclean and forbidden to Jews, it never occurred to him that by eating the pigs the Gentiles would also eat the demons inside them and become possessed, and he failed to foresee the unfortunate events that would follow from this, but the fact is that not even the son of God, who is still not used to such elevated kinship, can see as on a chessboard all the consequences of one move or one decision. In great excitement the evil spirits

made bets, awaiting Jesus' reply, and when he said, Yes, giving them permission to pass into the pigs, they cheered in triumph and inhabited the animals instantly. The pigs, either because of the shock of it or because they hated being possessed by demons, went wild and threw themselves over the cliff, all two thousand of them, and into the lake, where they drowned. The wrath of the swineherds tending these innocent animals was indescribable. One minute the poor things had been grazing at their leisure, grubbing in what soft soil they could find for roots and worms, and pawing at the sparse tufts of grass on the parched surface, the next minute they were down below in the water, a pitiful sight, some already lifeless and floating, others almost unconscious but making one last valiant effort to keep their ears above water, for as everyone knows pigs cannot close their eardrums, and once too much water gets in, the creatures drown. Enraged, the swineherds began throwing stones at Jesus and his companions, and were now coming after them, to demand compensation, so much per head multiplied by two thousand, a sum easy enough to calculate, not so easy to pay. Fishermen earn little money, they lead a meager existence, and Jesus could not even claim to be a fisherman. But the Nazarene decided to face the irate swineherds, to explain to them that there is no greater evil in this world than the devil, and that compared with Satan two thousand pigs is nothing, besides, we all suffer losses in this life, material or otherwise, So be patient, brethren, Jesus was prepared to urge them. But the last thing James and John wanted was a heated exchange with the swineherds, any show of friendship or goodwill was unlikely to appease the wrath of those rough characters intent on revenge. Reluctantly Jesus yielded to James and John's arguments, which grew more persuasive as the stones fell closer. They ran down the slope to the water's edge, jumped into their boat, and rowing at top speed, were soon out of danger. Swineherds, as a rule, do little fishing, and if the ones in pursuit had boats, they were nowhere in sight. Some pigs were lost, a soul was saved, the winner is God, said James. Jesus looked at him, his thoughts elsewhere, on something the two brothers watching him wished to hear about and discuss, the strange revelation by the demons that Jesus was the son of God, but Jesus turned to the bank from which they had escaped, gazed at the water, the pigs floating and rolling with the waves, two thousand innocent animals, and he felt an uneasiness rising within him, searching for an outlet, until he could no longer contain himself and exclaimed, The demons, where are the demons, and then he sent up a roar of laughter to heaven, Listen, Lord, either You chose poorly this son who must carry out Your plans, according to what those demons said, or there is something missing in Your powers, for otherwise You would be able to defeat the devil. What are you saying, asked John, appalled by this unthinkable challenge. I'm saying that the demons who possessed the man are now free, for demons as we know don't die, my friends, not even God can kill them, and for all the good I did there I might as well have struck the lake with a sword. On the shore a great crowd was descending, some jumped into the water to retrieve the pigs floating within reach, while others jumped into their boats and set off to gather any they could find.

That night, in the home of Simon and Andrew, which was near the synagogue, the five friends gathered in secret to discuss the extraordinary revelation by the demons that

Jesus was the son of God. Greatly puzzled by what had happened, they agreed not to talk until after dusk, and the moment had now come to speak their minds. Jesus began by saying, One cannot trust the father of falsehood, clearly referring to the devil. Andrew said, Truth and falsehood pass through the same lips and leave no mark, the devil does not cease to be the devil just because he may have spoken the truth. Simon said, We knew you were no ordinary man, first there were the fish you helped us catch, then the storm that almost killed us, then the water you turned to wine, then the adulteress you saved from being stoned to death, and now these demons you exorcised. Jesus said, I am not the only one who has driven demons from people. That's true, said James, but you're the first they have addressed as the son of the Almighty. It didn't do much good, either, for in the end it was not they but I who was humiliated. That's not the point, interrupted John, I was there and heard everything, why didn't you tell us you were the son of God. But I'm not sure I am the son of God. How can the devil know if you don't. A good question, but they alone can answer it. Who do you mean by they. I mean God, whose son the devil claims I am, and the devil, who could only have been told by God. A silence fell, as if everyone was giving the powers invoked time to declare themselves, until finally Simon asked, What is there between you and God. Jesus sighed, That's the question I was afraid you would ask. Who would ever believe the son of God would choose to be a fisherman. I've already explained, I'm not even sure I am the son of God. Well, who are you then. Jesus covered his face with his hands, wondered how to begin the confession they wanted from him, his life suddenly seemed to be the life of someone else, perhaps that was it, if the demons spoke the truth, then everything which had happened to him took on a different meaning, and some of those events were only now becoming clear in the light of this. He lowered his hands, looked at his friends one by one with a pleading expression, as if asking them for trust to a greater degree than any man had a right to ask another, then after a long pause he told them, I have seen God. No one said a word, they waited. Lowering his eyes, he continued, I met Him in the desert, and He told me that when the hour came, He would give me power and glory in exchange for my life, but He never said I was His son. More silence. And how did God appear to you, asked James. Like a cloud, a column of smoke. You're sure it wasn't fire. No, not fire but smoke, and He said nothing else, only that He would return at the right moment. What moment is that. I really don't know, perhaps He meant the moment when I must sacrifice my life. And what about this power and glory, when will these be granted. Who knows. Again silence. The heat inside was stifling, yet they were all shivering. Then Simon asked slowly, Are you the Messiah whom we should call the son of God because you have come to deliver God's people from bondage. I, the Messiah. No more incredible than your being the son of the Lord, said Andrew nervously. James said, Messiah or son of God, what I cannot understand is how the devil came to know it, when even the Lord did not confide in you. John said pensively, I wonder what the secret relationship is between the devil and God. Terrified of learning that truth, they eyed each other uneasily, and Simon asked Jesus, What are you going to do, and Jesus replied, The only thing I can do, wait for my hour to come.

And it is fast approaching, but until then Jesus will have two more opportunities to demonstrate his miraculous powers, although it might be better for us to draw a veil over the second, because it was a blunder on his part and resulted in the death of a fig tree as innocent of evil as those pigs the demons sent hurtling into the lake. The first of these two miracles, however, fully deserved to be brought to the attention of the priests of Jerusalem, that it might later be engraved in gold letters over the Temple door, for such a thing had never been witnessed before and indeed was never witnessed thereafter. Historians disagree as to why so many different races should have gathered in that place, whose exact location, let it be said in passing, has also been the subject of debate. Some historians claim the gathering was nothing more than a traditional pilgrimage, the origins of which are obscure, others say the crowd assembled there because of a rumor, later disproved, that an envoy had arrived from Rome to announce a reduction in taxes, there are also some historians who, not offering any hypotheses themselves, argue that only the simpleminded could believe in a tax reduction that would benefit taxpayers, and as for the pilgrimage of obscure origins, it could easily be verified if those who liked to spin such fantasies took the trouble to do a little research. What is beyond dispute is that some four to five thousand people came together there, not counting women and children, and that it turned out that they had nothing to eat. How such careful people, used to traveling and never without a well-stocked pack even on the shortest journey, could have suddenly found themselves without so much as a crust of bread or scrap of meat is something no one has ever been able to explain. But facts are facts, and the facts say that there were twelve to fifteen thousand, this time including women and children, who had gone without food for hours and would soon return to their homes and risk dropping from sheer weakness on route, unless fortunate enough to be rescued by a charitable passerby. The children, who are always the first to complain in any crisis, grew impatient, some of them whimpering, Mother, I'm hungry, and the situation was quickly becoming intolerable. Jesus walked among the multitude with Mary Magdalene, accompanied by Simon, Andrew, James, and John, who since the episode of the pigs and its aftermath went everywhere with Jesus, but unlike the rest of the crowd they had brought some bread and fish and so had come provided. To have set about eating in the presence of all these people, however, would not only have shown complete selfishness but also have put them at some risk, for necessity knows no law, and the most effective form of justice, as Cain taught us, is that which we ourselves grab with both hands. Jesus did not imagine for a moment that he could be of any help to this vast assembly in need of food, but James and John said to him, If you were able to drive demons from a man's body, surely you can give these people the food they need. And how am I to do this if we have no food other than the few provisions we brought for ourselves. As the son of God you must be able to do something. Jesus looked at Mary Magdalene, who told him, There is no turning back now, and her face was filled with compassion, although Jesus did not know if it was meant for him or for the tarnished multitude. He took the six loaves they had brought with them, broke each loaf in half, and gave them to his companions, then he did the same with the six fish, keeping a loaf and a fish for himself. Then he said, follow me and do as I do. And we know what he did, but will never know how he

managed it. Going from person to person, he divided and distributed bread and fish, and each person received a whole loaf and a whole fish. Mary Magdalene and the four friends of Jesus did the same, and they passed through the crowd as a beneficent wind blows over the field of a farm and raises the drooping cornstalks one by one, to the sound of rustling leaves, which were mouths chewing and thanking. It is the Messiah, said some. He's a magician, insisted others, but it never dawned on anyone in the crowd to ask, Could this be the son of God. And to all of them Jesus said, Let those who have ears listen, for unless you divide, you will never multiply.

It was only right for Jesus to teach this rule when he had the opportunity. But he was wrong to apply it to the letter when it was inopportune, as in the case of the fig tree mentioned earlier. He was walking along a country lane when he began to feel hungry, and spotting a green fig tree in the distance, he went to see if it had any fruit on it. But coming closer, he found nothing but leaves, because it was too early for figs. Whereupon Jesus said to the tree, No more fruit will grow on your branches, and at that very moment the fig tree dried up. Mary Magdalene, who was with him, said, You must give to those in need but ask nothing of those with nothing to give. Filled with remorse, Jesus tried to revive the fig tree, but it was quite dead.

A MISTY MORNING. THE FISHERMAN RISES FROM HIS MAT, looks at the whiteness through a chink in the door, and says to his wife, i'm not taking the boat out today, in this kind of mist even the fish lose their way. All the other fishermen, from one shore to another, echo his sentiment, using more or less the same words, they are puzzled by the rare phenomenon of mist at this time of year. Only one man, who is not a fisherman by profession although he lives and works with fishermen, goes to his front door and sees that this is the day he has been waiting for. Looking up at the dull sky, he says, i'm going fishing. At his shoulder, Mary Magdalene asks, Must you, and Jesus replied, i've waited a long time for this day to come. Won't you eat something. Eyes are fasting when they open in the morning, but he embraced her and said, At last I will learn who I am and what is expected of me, then with surprising confidence, for he could not even see his own feet in the mist, he descended the slope to the water's edge, climbed into one of the boats moored there, and began rowing out toward the invisible space in the middle of the lake. The noise of the oars scraping against the sides of the boat and the bubbling and rippling of water around the wood blades carried over the surface, it kept awake those fishermen whose wives had told them, If you can't go out fishing, at least try to get some sleep. Restless and uneasy, the villagers stared at the impenetrable mist in the direction of the lake and waited for the noise of the oars to stop, so they could return to their homes and secure their doors with keys, crossbars, and padlocks, while knowing that if he in the mist is who they think he is and he decides to blow this way, a puff of air from him would knock them down. The mist allows Jesus to pass, but his eyes can see no farther than the tip of the oars and the stern, with its simple plank that serves as a bench. The rest is a blank wall, at first dim and gray, then, as the boat approaches its destination, a diffused light turns the mist white and lustrous, it quivers as if searching for a sound in the silence. The boat, moving into a circle of light, comes to a halt, it has reached the center of the lake. God is sitting at the stern, on the bench.

Unlike the first time, He does not appear as a cloud or column of smoke, which in this weather would be lost in the mist. This time He is a big man, elderly, a great flowing beard over His chest, head uncovered, hair hanging loose, a broad and powerful face, fleshy lips which barely move when He begins to speak. He is dressed like a wealthy Jew, in a long magenta tunic under a blue cape with sleeves and gold braiding, the thick sandals on His feet are those of one who walks a great deal, whose habits are anything but sedentary. When He is gone, we will ask ourselves, What was His hair like, unable to remember whether it was white, black, or brown, judging by His age it must have been white, but there are some whose hair takes a long time to turn white, and He might be one of them. Jesus raised the oars and rested them inside the boat, as if preparing for a lengthy conversation, and simply said, Here I am. Slowly and methodically, God arranged the folds of the cape over His knees and added, Well, here we are. The voice suggested a smile, though His lips hardly moved, only the long hairs of His mustache and beard quivered like the vibration of a bell. Jesus said, I've come to find out who I am and what I must do henceforth to fulfill my part of the covenant. God said, These are two questions, let us take them one at a time, where would you like to start. With the first, said Jesus,

and asked again, Who am I. Don't you know. Well, I thought I knew, I thought I was my father's son. Which father do you mean. My father, the carpenter Joseph, son of Eli, or was it Jacob, for I'm no longer certain. You mean the carpenter Joseph whom they crucified. I didn't know there was any other. A tragic mistake on the part of the Romans, that poor father died innocent, having committed no crime. You said that father, so there is another. I'm proud of you, I can see you're an intelligent lad and perceptive. There was no need for intelligence, I was told by the devil. Are you in league with the devil. No, I'm not in league with the devil, it was the devil who sought me out. And what did you hear from his lips. That I am Your son. Nodding His head slowly in agreement, God told him, Yes, you are my son. But how can a man be the son of God. If you're the son of God, you are not a man. But I am a man, I breathe, I eat, I sleep, and I love like a man, therefore I am a man and will die as a man. In your case I wouldn't be too sure. What do you mean. That's the second question, but we have time, how did you answer the devil when he said you were my son. I didn't answer, I simply waited for the day when I would meet You, then I drove Satan out of the possessed man he was tormenting, the man called himself Legion and said he was many. Where are they now. I have no idea. You said you exorcised those demons. Surely You know better than I that when demons are driven out of a body, nobody knows where they go. And what makes you think I'm familiar with the devil's affairs. Being God, You must know everything. Up to a point, only up to a point. What point is that. The point where it becomes interesting to pretend I do not know. At least You must know how I came to be Your son and for what reason. I can see you are somewhat more confident, not to say impatient, than when I first met you. I was a mere boy then and rather shy, but I'm grown now. And you're not afraid. No. You will be, fear always comes, even to a son of God. You mean you have others. What others. Sons, of course. No, I only needed one. And how did I come to be Your son. Didn't your mother tell you. Does my mother know. I sent an angel to explain things to her, I thought she told you. And when was this angel with my mother. Let Me see, unless I'm mistaken it was after you left home for the second time and before you miraculously changed the water into wine at Cana. So, Mother knew and never said a word, when I told her I saw You in the desert, she didn't believe me, but she must have realized I was telling the truth after the angel's appearance, yet she did not confide in me. You know what women are like, after all you live with one, they have their little sensitivities and scruples. What sensitivities and scruples. Well, let Me explain, I mixed My seed with that of your father before you were conceived, it was the easiest way and the least conspicuous. If the seeds were mixed, how can You be sure I am Your son. I agree that it's usually unwise to be certain about anything, but I'm certain, there is some advantage in being God. And why did You want a son. I didn't have a son in heaven, so I had to arrange for one on earth, which is not all that original, even in religions with gods and goddesses, who can easily give one another children, we have seen some of them descend to earth, probably for a change of scenery, and at the same time they benefit mankind with the creation of heroes and other wonders. And this son who I am, why did You want him. Not, needless to say, for a change of scenery. Why, then. Because I needed someone to help Me here on earth. But surely, being God, You don't need help. That is the second question.

In the silence that followed, one could hear off in the mist, although from which direction one could not tell, the noise of a man swimming this way. To judge from the puffing and panting, he was no great swimmer and close to exhaustion. Jesus thought he saw God smiling and felt sure He was deliberately giving the swimmer time to reach the circle of clear air around the boat. The swimmer surfaced unexpectedly on the starboard side, Jesus was looking on the port side, it was a dark, ill-defined shape which at first he mistook for a pig, its ears sticking out of the water, but after it took a few more strokes he saw it was a man or a creature with human form. God turned His head to the swimmer, not out of idle curiosity but with real interest, as if encouraging him to make one last effort, and this turn of the head, perhaps because it came from God, had an immediate effect, the final strokes were rapid and regular, as if the swimmer had not covered all that distance from the shore. His hands clutched the edge of the boat, although his head was still half in the water, they were huge, powerful hands with strong nails, hands belonging to a body that had to be tall, sturdy, and advanced in years, like God's. The boat swayed, the swimmer's head emerged from the water, then his torso, splashing water everywhere, then his legs, a leviathan rising from the depths, and it turned out to be Pastor, reappearing after all these years. I've come to join you, he said, settling himself on the side of the boat, equidistant between Jesus and God, and yet oddly enough this time the boat did not tip to his side, as if Pastor had no weight or he was levitating and not really sitting, I've come to join you, he repeated, and hope I'm in time to take part in the conversation. We've been talking but still haven't got to the heart of the matter, replied God, and turning to Jesus, He told him, This is the devil whom we have just been discussing. Jesus looked from one to the other and saw that without God's beard they could have passed for twins, although the devil was younger and less wrinkled. Jesus said, I know very well who he is, I lived with him for four years when he was known as Pastor, and God replied, You had to live with someone, it couldn't be with Me, and you didn't wish to be with your family, so that left only the devil. Did he come looking for me or did You send him. Neither one nor the other, let's say we agreed that this was the best solution. So that's why, when he spoke through the possessed man from Gadara, he called me Your son. Precisely. Which means that both of you kept me in the dark. As happens to all humans. But You said I was not human. And that is true, but you have been what might technically be called incarnated. And now what do you two want of me. I'm the one who wants something, not he. But both of you are here, I noticed that Pastor's appearance came as no surprise, You must have been expecting him. Not exactly, although in principle one should always expect the devil. But if the matter You and I have to resolve affects only us, what is he doing here and why don't You send him away. One can dismiss the rabble in the devil's service if they become troublesome in word or deed, but not Satan himself. Then he's here because this conversation concerns him too. My son, never forget what I'm about to tell you, everything that concerns God also concerns the devil. Pastor, whom we shall sometimes refer to as such rather than constantly invoke the Enemy by name, overheard all this without appearing to listen or care, as if in contradiction of God's momentous statement. It soon became clear, however, that his inattentiveness was a sham, because when Jesus

said, Let's now turn to the second question, Pastor immediately pricked up his ears.

God took a deep breath, looked at the mist around Him, and murmured in the hushed tone of one who has just made a curious discovery, This is not unlike being in the desert. He turned His eyes toward Jesus, paused awhile, then began speaking, as if resigning himself to the inevitable, Dissatisfaction, My son, was put into the hearts of men by the God who created them, I'm referring to Myself, of course, but this dissatisfaction, one of the qualities which make man in My image and likeness, I nursed in My own heart, and rather than diminish with time it has grown stronger, more pressing and insistent. God stopped for a moment to consider this preamble before going on to say, For the last four thousand and four years I have been the God of the Jews, a quarrelsome and difficult race by nature, but on the whole I have got along fairly well with them, they now take Me seriously and are likely to go on doing so for the foreseeable future. So, You are satisfied, said Jesus. I am and I am not, or rather, I would be were it not for this restless heart of Mine, which is forever telling Me, Well now, a fine destiny you've arranged after four thousand years of trial and tribulation that no amount of sacrifice on altars will ever be able to repay, for You continue to be the god of a tiny population that occupies a minute part of this world You created with everything that's on it, so tell Me, My son, if I should be satisfied with this depressing situation. Never having created a world, I'm in no position to judge, replied Jesus. True, you cannot judge, but you could help. Help in what way. To spread My word, to help Me become the god of more people. I don't understand. If you play your part, that is to say, the part I have reserved for you in My plan, I have every confidence that within the next six centuries or so, despite all the struggles and obstacles ahead of us, I will pass from being God of the Jews to being God of those whom we will call Catholics, from the Greek. And what is this part You have reserved for me in Your plan. That of martyr, My son, that of victim, which is the best role of all for propagating any faith and stirring up fervor. God made the words martyr and victim seem like milk and honey on His tongue, but Jesus felt a sudden chill in his limbs, as if the mist had closed over him, while the devil regarded him with an enigmatic expression which combined scientific curiosity with grudging compassion.

You promised me power and glory, stammered Jesus, shivering with cold. And I intend to keep that promise, but remember our agreement, you will have them after your death. What good will it do me to have power and glory when I'm dead. Well, you won't be dead in the absolute sense of the word, for as My son you'll be with Me, or in Me, I still haven't decided. You haven't decided how I will not be dead. That's right, for example you'll be venerated in churches and on altars to such an extent that people will even forget that I came first as God, but no matter, abundance can be shared, what is in short supply should not be. Jesus looked at Pastor, saw him smile, and understood, Now I see why the devil is here, if Your authority extends to more people in more places, his power also spreads, for his territory will be the same as Yours. You're quite right, my son, and I'm delighted to see how quick you are, for most people overlook the fact that the demons of one religion are powerless to act in another, just as any god, confronting

another, can neither vanquish him nor be vanquished by him. And my death, what will that be like. A martyr's death should be painful and, if possible, ignominious, that the believers may be moved to greater devotion. Come to the point and tell me what kind of death I can expect. A painful and ignominious death on a cross. Like my father. You're forgetting that I'm your father. Were I free to make a choice, I'd choose him despite his moment of shame. But you have been chosen and therefore have no say. I want to end our covenant, to have nothing more to do with You, I want to live like any other man. Empty words, My son, don't you see that you're in My power and that all these documents we call covenants, agreements, pacts, or contracts, in which I figure, could be reduced to a single clause, wasting less paper and ink, a clause that bluntly says, Everything in the law of God is necessary, even the exceptions, and since you, My son, are an exception, you are as necessary as the law and I who made it. But with the power You have, wouldn't it be simpler and more honest for You to go out and conquer those other countries and races Yourself. Alas, I cannot, it is forbidden by the binding agreement between the gods ever to interfere directly, can you imagine Me in a public square, surrounded by Gentiles and pagans, trying to persuade them that their god is false while I am their real God, this is not something one god does to another, besides, no god likes another god to come and do in his house what the latter forbids in his own. So You make use of men instead. Yes, My son, man is a piece of wood that can be used for anything, from the moment he is born to the moment he dies, he's always ready to obey, send him and he goes, tell him to stop and he stops, tell him to withdraw and he withdraws, whether in peace or in war, man generally speaking is the best thing that ever happened to the gods. And the wood from which I'm made, since I'm a man, what use will it be put to, since I'm Your son. You will be the spoon I dip into humanity and bring out filled with people who believe in the new god I intend to become. Filled with people You will eat. There's no need for Me to eat those who eat themselves.

Jesus lowered his oars back into the water and said, Farewell, I'm going home, and you can both go back the way you came, you by swimming and You by disappearing as mysteriously as You appeared. Neither God nor the devil stirred, so Jesus added ironically, Then you prefer to go by boat, better still, I'll row you ashore myself so that everyone can see how alike God and the devil are and how well they get on together. Jesus turned the boat to face the direction from which he had come, and rowing vigorously, he entered the mist, which was so thick that he could no longer see God or the devil's face. Jesus felt alive, happy, and unusually strong. The prow of the boat rose with each stroke of the oars like the head of a horse in a race, and he rowed harder, they must be almost there, he wonders how people will react when he tells them, The one with the beard is God, the other is the devil. Glancing over his shoulder at the shore ahead, Jesus could make out a light, and he announced, We're here, and continued rowing, expecting any second to feel the bottom of the boat glide softly over thick mud, and the playful grazing of tiny loose pebbles, but the prow of the boat was pointing instead to the middle of the lake, and as for the light, it was now the same magic circle of light, the bright snare which Jesus thought he had escaped. His head fell, he crossed his

arms over his knees in exhaustion, one wrist resting on the other, as if waiting to be bound, he even forgot to pull in the oars, convinced that any further action was futile. But he would not be the first to speak, he would not acknowledge defeat in a loud voice and ask to be forgiven for having defied God's will and also indirectly the devil's interests, the devil being the beneficiary of the consequences of His plan. The silence was short-lived. Sitting there on the bench, God arranged the folds of His tunic and the hood of His cape, then with mock solemnity, like a judge about to pass sentence, said, Let us start again, going back to where I revealed that you are in My power, for until you submit humbly to this truth you waste your time and Mine. Let us start again, agreed Jesus, but be warned, I refuse to work any more miracles, and without miracles Your plan will come to nothing, a mere sprinkle from heaven which cannot satisfy any real thirst. You would be right if it lay within your power not to work miracles. Don't I have that power. What an idea, I work miracles both great and small, naturally in your presence, so that you may reap the benefits on my behalf, but you are superstitious, believing the miracle worker must stand at the patient's bedside for the thing to take place, yet if I so wished, a man dying alone, with no one at his side, without a doctor, nurse, or beloved relative within sight or hearing, if I so wished, I tell you, that man would be saved and go on living as if nothing had happened to him. Then why not do it. Because he would imagine he'd been cured by his own merit and start boasting, I am too good to die, and with all the presumption there already is in this world I've created, I have no intention of encouraging such nonsense. So all my miracles are Yours. All you have worked and will work, and even if you persist in opposing My will, and go out into the world and deny you are the son of God, I will cause so many miracles to occur wherever you pass that you will be obliged to accept the gratitude of those thanking you and thereby thanking Me. Then there is no way out. None whatever, and don't play the lamb taken to be sacrificed, who struggles and bleats pitifully, for your fate is sealed, the sword awaits. Am I that lamb. You are the lamb of God, My son, which God himself will carry to the altar we are preparing here.

Jesus looked to Pastor, not so much for help as for a signal, Pastor's understanding of the world must be different, he is not a man or ever has been, or a god, a glance or raised eyebrow might suggest a reply that would allow Jesus to extricate himself, at least momentarily, from this difficult situation. But all he reads in Pastor's eyes are the words the shepherd spoke to him when he banished him from the herd, You've learned nothing, begone with you. Now Jesus realizes that to disobey God once is not enough, that having refused to offer Him his sacrificial lamb, he must also refuse Him His own lamb, one cannot say yes to God and then say no, as if yes and no were one's left and right hands and the only good work the kind done with both. Because notwithstanding His manifestations of power, the universe and stars, lightning and thunder, voices and flames on mountaintops, God did not force you to slaughter the sheep, it was out of ambition that you killed the animal, and its blood could not be absorbed by all the sand in the desert, see how it has even reached us, that thread of crimson which will follow us wherever we go, you and God and me. Jesus said to God, I will tell men I am Your son, the only son God has, but I do not think that even in this land of Yours it will be enough

to enlarge Your kingdom as much as You wish. At last you speak like a true son, you've given up those tiresome acts of rebellion which were beginning to anger Me, you've come around to My way of thinking, therefore know that whatever their race, color, creed, or philosophy, one thing is common to all men, only one, such that none of them, wise or ignorant, young or old, rich or poor, would dare to say, This has nothing to do with me. And what might that be, asked Jesus with interest. All men, replied God, as if imparting wisdom, whoever and wherever they may be and whatever they may do, are sinners, for sin is as inseparable from man as man from sin, man is like a coin, turn it over and what you see is sin. You haven't answered my question. Here is My answer, the only word no man can say does not apply to him is repentance, because all have succumbed to temptation, entertained an evil thought, broken a rule, committed some crime, serious or minor, spurned a soul in need, neglected a duty, offended religion and its ministers, or turned away from God, to all such men you need only say, Repent, repent, repent. But why sacrifice Your own son's life for so little, surely all You have to do is send a prophet. The time when people listened to prophets has passed, nowadays one must administer stronger medicine, shock treatment, to touch men's hearts and stir their feelings. Such as a son of God hanging from a cross. Yes, why not. And what else am I supposed to say to these people, besides urging them to repent, if they grow tired of hearing Your message and turn a deaf ear. Yes, I agree, it may not be enough to ask them to repent, you may have to use your imagination, and don't make any excuses, look at the cunning way you avoided sacrificing your lamb. That was easy enough, the animal had nothing to repent. A subtle reply but meaningless, although meaninglessness too has its charm, people should be left perplexed, afraid that they don't understand and that it is their fault. So I'm to make up stories. Yes, stories, parables, moral tales, even if it means distorting holy law a little, don't let that bother you, the timid always admire it when liberties are taken, I myself was impressed by the way you saved that adulteress from death, and remember, it was I who put that punishment into the commandments I gave. It's a bad sign when You start allowing men to tamper with Your commandments. Only when it suits Me and is useful, you must not forget what I told you about the law and its exceptions, for whatever I will becomes instantly necessary. You said I must die on the cross. That is my will. Jesus looked askance at Pastor, who seemed to be preoccupied, as if contemplating a moment in the future, unable to believe his eyes. Jesus dropped his arms and said, Then do with me as You will.

God was about to rejoice, to rise to His feet and embrace His beloved son, when Jesus stopped Him with a gesture and said, On one condition. You know perfectly well you cannot set conditions, God replied angrily. Then let's call it a plea rather than a condition, the simple plea of a man sentenced to death. Tell me. You are God and therefore can speak only the truth when asked a question, and being God, You know the past, the present, what lies between them, and what the future will bring. That is so, I am time, truth, and life. Then tell me, in the name of all You claim to be, what will the future bring after my death, what will it contain that it would not had I refused to sacrifice myself to Your dissatisfaction and desire to reign far and wide. As if trapped by His own

words, God made a halfhearted attempt to shrug this off, Now then, son, the future is infinite and would take a long time to summarize. How long have we been out here in the middle of the lake, surrounded by mist, asked Jesus, a day, a month, a year, well then, let's stay another year, month, or day, allow the devil to leave if he wants to, for in any case his share is guaranteed, and if the benefits are proportional, as seems just, the more God prospers, the more the devil prospers. I'm staying, said Pastor, and these were the first words he spoke since revealing his identity. I'm staying, he said a second time, and added, I myself can see things in the future, but I'm not always certain if what I see there is true or false, in other words I can see my lies for what they are, that is, my truths, but I don't know to what extent the truths of others are their lies. This tortuous statement might have been clearer had Pastor said something more about the future he saw, but he abruptly fell silent, as if he had already said too much. Jesus, who kept his eyes on God, said with wistful irony, Why pretend not to know what You know, You realized I would ask this question, and You know very well You will tell me what I want to hear, so postpone no longer my time of dying. You began dying the moment you were born. True, but now I die all the sooner. God looked at Jesus with an expression which in a person we would describe as respectful, His whole manner became human, and although the one thing did not appear to have anything to do with the other, the mist came nearer the boat, surrounded it like a wall to keep from the world God's words about the consequences of the sacrifice of Jesus, who He claims is His son, with Mary, but whose real father is Joseph, if we go by the unwritten law that tells us to believe only in what we see, although as everyone knows, we mortals do not always see things in the same way, and this has undoubtedly helped preserve the relative sanity of the species.

God said, There will be a church, a religious society founded by you or in your name, which comes to the same thing, and this church will spread throughout the world and be called Catholic, because universal, although sadly this will not prevent discord and misunderstanding among those who see you, rather than Me, as their spiritual leader, which will last no more than several thousand years, for I was here before you and will continue to be here after you cease to be what you are and what you will be. Speak more clearly, said Jesus. It's impossible, said God, human words are like shadows, and shadows cannot explain light, and between shadow and light stands the opaque body from which words are born. I asked You about the future. It's the future I speak about. What I want to know is how the men who come after me will live. Are you referring to your followers. Yes, will they be happier. Not in the true sense of the word, but they will have the hope of achieving happiness up in heaven, where I reign for all eternity and where they hope to live eternally with Me. Is that all. Surely it is no small thing to live with God. Small, great, or everything, we will only know at the day of final judgment, when You judge men according to the good or evil they have done, until then You reside alone in heaven. My angels and archangels keep Me company. But You have no human beings there. True, and you must be crucified in order that they come to Me. I want to know more, said Jesus, trying hard to shut out the mental image of himself hanging from a cross, covered with blood, dead, How will people come to believe in me and follow me, surely what I say

to them or what those who come after me say to them in my name will not be enough, take the Gentiles and Romans, for example, who worship other gods, You don't expect me to believe they will give them up just like that to worship me. Not to worship you but to worship Me. But did You not say that You and me amounts to the same thing, let us not play with words, however, just answer my question. Whoever has faith will come to us. Just like that, as easily as You've just said. The other gods will resist. And You will fight them, of course. Don't be absurd, war occurs only on earth, heaven is eternal and peaceful, and men will fulfill their destiny wherever they may be. You mean men will die for You and for me. Men have always died for gods, even for false and lying gods. Can gods lie. They can. And You are the one and only true god among them. Yes, the one and only true god. Yet You are unable to prevent men from dying for You when they should have been born to live for You on earth rather than in heaven, where You have none of life's joys to offer them. Those joys too are false, for they come from original sin, ask your friend Pastor, he'll explain what happened. If there are any secrets You and the devil do not share, I hope one of them is what I learned from him, even though he says I learned nothing. There was silence, God and the devil faced each other for the first time, both giving the impression of being about to speak, but they didn't. Jesus said, I'm waiting. For what, asked God, as if distracted. For You to tell me how much death and suffering Your victory over other gods will cause, how much death and suffering will be needed in the battles men fight in Your name and mine. You insist on knowing. I do.

Very well then, the church I mentioned will be established, but its foundation, in order to be truly solid, will be dug in flesh, its walls made from the cement of renunciation, tears, agony, anguish, every conceivable form of death. At long last You speak so I can understand, go on. Let's start with someone you know and love, the fisherman Simon, whom you will call Peter, like you, he will be crucified, but upside down, Andrew too will be crucified, on a cross in the shape of an X, the son of Zebedee known as James will be beheaded. What about John, and Mary Magdalene. They will die of natural causes when their time comes, but you will make other friends, disciples, and apostles who will not escape torture, such as Philip, who will be tied to a cross and stoned to death, Bartholomew, who will be skinned alive, Thomas, who will be speared to death, Matthew, the details of whose death I no longer remember, another Simon, who will be sawed in half, Judas, who will be beaten to death, James stoned, Matthias beheaded with an ax, also Judas Iscariot hanged from a fig tree by his own hand. Are all these men to die because of You, asked Jesus. If you phrase the question that way, the answer is yes, they will die for My sake. And then what. Then, My son, as I've already told you, there follows an endless tale of iron and blood, of fire and ashes, an infinite sea of sorrow and tears. Tell me, I want to know everything. God sighed, and in the monotonous tone of one who chooses to suppress compassion He began a litany, in alphabetical order so as not to hurt any feelings about precedence and importance, Adalbert of Prague put to death with a seven-pronged pikestaff, Adrian hammered to death over an anvil, Afra of Augsburg burned at the stake, Agapitus of Praeneste burned at the stake hanging by his feet, Agnes of Rome disemboweled, Agricola of Bologna

crucified and impaled on nails, Agueda of Sicily stabbed six times, Alphege of Canterbury beaten to death with the shinbone of an ox, Anastasia of Sirmium burned at the stake and her breasts cut off, Anastasius of Salona strung up on the gallows and decapitated, Ansanus of Siena his entrails ripped out, Antonius of Pamiers drawn and quartered, Antony of Rivoli stoned and burned alive, Apollinaris of Ravenna clubbed to death, Apollonia of Alexandria burned at the stake after her teeth had been knocked out, Augusta of Treviso decapitated and burned at the stake, Aurea of Ostia drowned with a millstone around her neck, Aurea of Syria bled to death by being forced onto a chair covered with nails, Auta shot with arrows, Babylas of Antioch decapitated, Barbara of Nicomedia likewise, Barnabas of Cyprus stoned and burned at the stake, Beatrice of Rome strangled, Benignus of Dijon speared to death, Blaise of Sebaste thrown onto iron spikes, Blandina of Lyons gored by a savage bull, Callistus put to death with a millstone around his neck, Cassian of Imola stabbed with a dagger by his disciples, Castulus buried alive, Catherine of Alexandria decapitated, Cecilia of Rome beheaded, Christina of Bolsena tortured repeatedly with millstones, tongs, arrows, and snakes, Clarus of Nastes decapitated, Clarus of Vienne likewise, Clement drowned with an anchor around his neck, Crispin and Crispinian of Soissons both decapitated, Cucuphas of Barcelona disemboweled, Cyprian of Carthage beheaded, young Cyricus of Tarsus killed by a judge who knocked his head against the stairs of the tribunal, and on reaching the end of the letter C, God said, And so on, it's all much the same, with a few variations and an occasional refinement which would take forever to explain, so let's leave it at that. No, continue, said Jesus, so reluctantly God continued, abbreviating wherever possible, Donatus of Arezzo decapitated, Eliphios of Rampillon scalped, Emerita burned alive, Emilian of Trevi decapitated, Emmeramus of Regensburg tied to a ladder and put to death, Engratia of Saragossa decapitated, Erasmus of Gaeta also called Elmo stretched on a windlass, Escubiculus beheaded, Eskil of Sweden stoned to death, Eulalia of Merida decapitated, Euphemia of Chalcedon put to the sword, Eutropius of Saintes beheaded with an ax, Fabian stabbed and spiked, Faith of Agen beheaded, Félicitas and seven sons beheaded with a sword, Felix and his brother Adauctus likewise, Ferreolus of Besançon decapitated, Fidelis of Sigmaringen beaten to death with a spiked club, Firminus of Pamplona beheaded, Flavia Domitilla likewise, Fortunatus of Evora probably met the same fate, Fructosus of Tarragon burned at the stake, Gaudentius of France decapitated, Gelasius likewise with iron spikes, Gengolf of Burgundy assassinated by his wife's lover, Gerard Sagreda of Budapest speared to death, Gereon of Cologne decapitated, the twins Gervase and Protase likewise, Godleva and Ghistelles strangled, Gratus of Aosta decapitated, Hermenegild clubbed to death, Hero stabbed with a sword, Hippolytus dragged to his death by a horse, Ignatius of Azevedo murdered by the Calvinists, who are not Catholics, Januarius of Naples decapitated after being thrown to wild beasts and then into a furnace, Joan of Arc burned at the stake, John de Britto beheaded, John Fisher decapitated, John of Nepomuk drowned in the river Vltava, John of Prado stabbed in the head, Julia of Corsica whose breasts were cut off before she was crucified, Juliana of Nicomedia decapitated, Justa and Ruffina of Seville the former killed on the wheel and the latter strangled, Justina of Antioch thrown into a caldron of boiling tar and then

beheaded, Justus and Pastor, not our Pastor but the one from Alcalá de Henares, decapitated, Kilian of Würzburg decapitated, Lawrence burned on a gridiron, Léger of Autun decapitated after his eyes and tongue were torn out, Leocadia of Toledo thrown to her death from a high cliff, Livinus of Ghent decapitated after his tongue was torn out, Longinus decapitated, Lucy of Syracuse beheaded after having her eyes plucked out, Ludmila of Prague strangled, Maginus of Tarragon decapitated with a serrated scythe, Mamas of Cappadocia disemboweled, Manuel, Sabel, and Ismael, Manuel put to death with an iron nail embedded in each nipple and an iron rod driven through his head from ear to ear and all three beheaded, Margaret of Antioch killed with a firebrand and an iron comb, Maria Goretti strangled, Marius of Persia put to the sword and his hands amputated, Martina of Rome decapitated, the martyrs of Morocco, Berard of Carbio, Peter of Gimignano, Otto, Adjuto, and Accursio, beheaded, those of Japan, all twenty-six crucified, speared, and burned alive, Maurice of Agaune put to the sword, Meinrad of Einsiedeln clubbed to death, Menas of Alexandria also put to the sword, Mercurius of Cappadocia decapitated, Nicasius of Rheims likewise, Odilia of Huy shot with arrows, Paneras beheaded, Pantaleon of Nicomedia likewise, Paphnutius crucified, Patroclus of Troyes and Soest likewise, Paul of Tarsus, to whom you will owe your first church, likewise, Pelagius drawn and quartered, Perpetua and her slave Felicity of Carthage both gored by a raging bull, Peter of Rates killed with a sword, Peter of Verona his head slashed with a cutlass and a dagger driven into his chest, Philomena shot with arrows and anchored, Piaton of Tournai scalped, Polycarp stabbed and burned alive, Prisca of Rome devoured by lions, Processus and Martinian probably met the same fate, Quintinus nails driven into his head and other parts of his body, Quirinus of Rouen scalped, Quiteria of Coimbra decapitated by her own father, Reine of Alise put to the sword, Renaud of Dortmund bludgeoned to death with a mason's mallet, Restituta of Naples burned at the stake, Roland put to the sword, Romanus of Antioch strangled to death after his tongue was torn out, have you had enough, God asked Jesus, who retorted, That's something You should ask Yourself, go on. So God continued, Sabinian of Sens beheaded, Sabinus of Assis stoned to death, Saturninus of Toulouse dragged to his death by a bull, Sebastian pierced by arrows, Secundus of Asti decapitated, Servatius of Tongres and Maastricht killed by a blow to the head with a wooden clog, Severus of Barcelona killed by having nails embedded in his head, Sidwell of Exeter decapitated, Sigismund king of Burgundy thrown into a well, Sixtus decapitated, Stephen stoned to death, Symphorian of Autun decapitated, Taresius stoned to death, Thecla of Iconium mutilated and burned alive, Theodore burned at the stake, Thomas Becket of Canterbury a sword driven into his skull, Thomas More beheaded, Thyrsus sawed in half, Tiburtius beheaded, Timothy of Ephesus stoned to death, Torquatus and the twenty-seven killed by General Muga at the gates of Guimaraes, Tropez of Pisa decapitated, Urbanus, Valeria of Limoges, and Valerian and Venantius of Camerino met the same fate, Victor decapitated, Victor of Marseilles beheaded, Victoria of Rome put to death after having her tongue pulled out, Vincent of Saragossa tortured to death with millstone, grid, and spikes, Virgilius of Trent beaten to death with a wooden clog, Vitalis of Ravenna put to the sword, Wilgefortis or Livrade or Eutropia the bearded virgin crucified, and so on and so forth, all of them meeting similar

fates.

That's not good enough, said Jesus, to what others do You refer. Do you really have to know. I do. I refer to those who will escape martyrdom and die from natural causes after having suffered the torments of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and who in order to overcome them will have to mortify their bodies with fasting and prayer, there is even the amusing case of a certain John Schorn, who will spend so much time on his knees praying that he ends up with corns on his knees of all places, and some will say, this will interest you, he has trapped the devil inside a boot, ha ha ha. Me in a boot, said Pastor scornfully, these are old-wives' tales, any boot capable of holding me would have to be as vast as the world, besides, I'd like to see who would be capable of putting the boot on and taking it off afterward. Perhaps only with fasting and prayer, suggested Jesus, whereupon God replied, They will also mortify their flesh with pain and blood and grime and innumerable penances, hair shirts and flagellation, there will be some who never wash and others who throw themselves onto brambles and roll in the snow to suppress carnal desires that are the work of Satan, who sends these temptations to lure souls from the straight and narrow path that leads to heaven, sends visions of naked women, terrifying monsters, abominable creatures, because lust and fear are weapons the demon uses to torment wretched mankind. Is this true, Jesus asked Pastor, who replied, More or less, I simply took what God didn't want, the flesh with all its joys and sorrows, youth and senility, bloom and decay, but it isn't true that fear is one of my weapons, I don't recall having invented sin and punishment or the terror they inspire. Be quiet, God snapped, sin and the devil are one and the same thing. What thing is that, asked Jesus. My absence. How do you explain Your absence, is it because You withdraw or because mankind abandons You. I never withdraw, never. Yet You allow men to abandon You. Those who abandon Me come looking for Me. And when they do not find You, I suppose You blame the devil. No, he's not to blame, I'm to blame, because I cannot reach out to those who seek Me, words uttered by God with an unexpected, poignant melancholy, as if He had suddenly found a limitation to His power. Jesus said, Go on.

There are others, God continued slowly, who go into the wilderness, where they lead solitary lives in caves and grottoes, with nothing but animals for company, and others who choose a monastic existence, and others who climb to the top of high pillars and sit there year in year out, and others, His voice fell and died away, God was now contemplating an endless procession of people, thousands upon thousands of men and women throughout the world entering convents and monasteries, some buildings rustic, many palatial, There they will remain to serve you and Me from morning until night, with vigils and prayers, all with the same mission and the same destiny, to worship us and die with our names on their lips, they will call themselves Benedictines, Cistercians, Carthusians, Augustinians, Gilbertines, Trinitarians, Franciscans, Dominicans, Capuchins, Carmelites, Jesuits, and there will be so many of them that I should dearly like to be able to exclaim, My God, why so many. At this point the devil said to Jesus, Note from what He has told us that there are two ways of parting with one's life, through martyrdom and

by renunciation, it isn't enough for all these people to wait until their time comes, they must run to meet their deaths, be crucified, disemboweled, beheaded, burned at the stake, stoned, drowned, drawn and quartered, skinned alive, speared, gored, buried alive, sawed in two, shot with arrows, mutilated, tortured, or to die in their cells, chapter houses, and cloisters, doing penance and mortifying the flesh God gave them, without which flesh they would have nowhere to put their souls, these punishments were not invented by the devil who is talking to you. Is that all, Jesus asked God. No, there are the wars and massacres. No need to tell me of massacres, I almost perished in one, and thinking it over, what a pity I didn't, for then I would have been spared the crucifixion awaiting me. It was I who led your other father to the place where he overheard the soldiers' conversation and therefore I who saved your life. You saved my life only in order to ordain my death at Your pleasure and convenience, as if killing me twice. The end justifies the means, My son. From what You have told me so far I can believe it, renunciation, cloisters, suffering, death, and now wars and massacres, what wars are they. One war after another and unending, especially those waged against you and Me in the name of a god who has yet to appear. How can there possibly be a god who has yet to appear, any true god can only have existed forever and ever. I know it's difficult to understand or explain, but what I'm telling you will come to pass, a god will rise up against us and our followers, entire nations, no, there are no words to describe the massacres then, the bloodshed and slaughter, imagine my altar in Jerusalem multiplied a thousandfold, replace the sacrificial animals with men, even then you will have no idea what those crusades were like. Crusades, what are they, and why do You refer to them in the past if they have yet to take place. Remember, I am time, for Me all that will happen has happened already, all that has happened goes on happening every day. Tell me more about the crusades. Well, My son, this region where we now find ourselves, including Jerusalem, and other territories to the north and west, will be conquered by the followers of the god I mentioned, who has been slow in coming, the followers on our side will do everything possible to expel them from the places you have traveled and I constantly frequent. You haven't done much to rid this land of the Romans. Don't distract me, I'm talking about the future. Go on, then. Furthermore, you were born, you lived, and you died here. I'm not dead yet. That's irrelevant, because as I've just explained to you, for Me what will happen and what has happened are the same thing, and please stop interrupting, otherwise I'll say no more. All right, I'll be quiet. Now then, future generations will refer to this area as the holy places, because you were born, lived, and died here, so it didn't seem fitting that the cradle of the religion you represent should fall into the hands of infidels, this justified the coming of great armies from the west, who for almost two hundred years fought to conquer and preserve for Christendom the cave where you were born and the hill where you will die, to mention only the most important landmarks. Are these armies the crusades. That's right. And did they conquer what they wanted. No, but they slaughtered many people. What about the crusaders themselves. They lost just as many lives, if not more. And all this bloodshed in our name. They will go into battle crying, God wills it. And no doubt die crying, God willed it. Such a nice way to end one's life. The sacrifice isn't worth it. To save one's soul, My son, the body must be

sacrificed. And you, Pastor, what do you say about these amazing events that lie ahead. No one in his right mind can possibly suggest that the devil was, is, or ever will be responsible for so much bloodshed and death, unless some villain brings up that wicked slander accusing me of having conceived the god who will oppose this one here. No, you are not to blame, and should anyone blame you, you need only reply that if the devil is false, he could not have created a true god. Who, then, will create this hostile god, asked Pastor. Jesus was at a loss for an answer, and God, who had been silent, remained silent, but a voice came down from the mist and said, Perhaps this God and the one to come are the same god. Jesus, God, and the devil pretended not to hear, but could not help looking at one another in alarm, mutual fear is like that, it readily unites enemies.

Time passed, the mist did not speak again, and Jesus asked, now with the voice of one who expects an affirmative reply, Nothing more. God hesitated, then in a tired voice said, There is still the Inquisition, but if you don't mind, we'll discuss that some other time. What is the Inquisition. The Inquisition is another long story. Tell me. It's best you don't know, you will only feel remorse today for what belongs to tomorrow. And You won't God, being God, feels no remorse. Well, since I'm already bearing this burden of having to die for You, I can also endure the remorse that ought to be Yours. I wanted to protect you. You've done nothing else from the day I was born. Like most children, you're ungrateful. Let's stop all this posturing, tell me about the Inquisition. Also known as the Tribunal of the Holy Office, the Inquisition is a necessary evil, we will use this cruel instrument to combat the disease that persistently attacks the body of your church in the form of wicked heresies and their harmful consequences along with a number of physical and moral perversions, which, lumped together without regard for order of importance, will include Lutherans and Calvinists, Molinists and Judaizers, sodomites and sorcerers, some of these plagues belong to the future, others can be found in every age. And if the Inquisition is a necessary evil, as You say, how will it proceed to eliminate these heresies. The Inquisition is a police force, a tribunal, and will therefore pursue, judge, and sentence its enemies as would any police force. Sentence them to what. Prison, exile, the stake. Did You say the stake. Yes, in days to come, thousands upon thousands of men and women will be burned at the stake. You mentioned some of them earlier. They will be burned alive because they believe in you, others because they doubt you. Isn't it permitted to doubt me. No. Yet we're allowed to doubt that the Jupiter of the Romans is god. I am the one and only Lord God, and you are My son. You say thousands will die. Hundreds of thousands of men and women, and on earth there will be much sighing and weeping and cries of anguish, the smoke from charred corpses will blot out the sun, human flesh will sizzle over live coals, the stench will be nauseating. And all this is my fault. You are not to blame, your cause demands it. Father, take from me this cup. My power and your glory demand that you drink it to the last drop. I don't want the glory. But I want the power. The mist began to lift, and around the boat water could be seen, smooth, somber water undisturbed by a ripple of wind or the tremor of a passing fin. Then the devil interrupted, One has to be God to countenance so much blood.

The mist advanced again, something else was about to happen, some revelation, some new sorrow or new remorse. But it was Pastor who spoke, I have a proposal to make, he said, addressing God, and God, taken aback, replied, A proposal from you, and what proposal might that be. His tone, cynical and forbidding, would have reduced most to silence, but the devil was an old acquaintance. Pastor searched for the right words before explaining, I've been listening to all that has been said here in this boat, and although I myself have caught glimpses of the light and darkness ahead, I never realized that the light came from burning stakes and the darkness from great piles of bodies. Does this trouble you. It shouldn't trouble me, for I am the devil, and the devil profits from death even more than You do, it goes without saying that hell is more crowded than heaven. Then why do you complain. I'm not complaining, I'm making a proposal. Go ahead, but be quick, I cannot loiter here for all eternity. No one knows better than You that the devil too has a heart. Yes, but you make poor use of it. Today I use it by acknowledging Your power and wishing that it spread to the ends of the earth without the need of so much death, and since You insist that whatever thwarts and denies You comes from the evil I represent and govern in this world, I propose that You receive me into Your heavenly kingdom, my past offenses redeemed by those I will not commit in future, that You accept my obedience as in those happy days when I was one of Your chosen angels, Lucifer You called me, bearer of light, before my ambition to become Your equal consumed my soul and made me rebel against You. And would you care to tell Me why I should pardon you and receive you into My kingdom. Because if You grant me that same pardon You will one day promise left and right, then evil will cease, Your son will not have to die, and Your kingdom will extend beyond the land of the Hebrews to embrace the whole globe, good will prevail everywhere, and I shall stand among the lowliest of the angels who have remained faithful, more faithful than all of them now that I have repented, and I shall sing Your praises, everything will end as if it had never been, everything will become what it should always have been. I always knew you had a talent for leading souls astray, but I never heard you speak with such conviction and eloquence, you almost won me over. So You won't accept or pardon me. No, I neither accept nor pardon you, I much prefer you as you are, and were it possible, I'd have you be even worse. But why. Because the good I represent cannot exist without the evil you represent, if you were to end, so would I, unless the devil is the devil, God cannot be God. Is that Your final word. My first and last, first because that was the first time I said it, last because I have no intention of repeating it. Pastor shrugged and said to Jesus, Never let it be said the devil didn't tempt God, and getting to his feet, he was about to pass one leg over the side of the boat, but stopped and said, In your pack there is something that belongs to me. Jesus could not remember having taken the pack with him into the boat, but in fact there it was, rolled up at his feet, What thing, he asked, and on opening the pack he found nothing inside but the old black bowl he had brought from Nazareth. That's it, that's it, said the devil, picking up the bowl with both hands, One day this will be yours again, but you won't know you have it. He tucked the bowl inside his coarse shepherd's tunic and lowered himself into the water. Without looking at God, he said, as if addressing an invisible audience, Farewell forever, since that is what He has

ordained. Jesus followed with his eyes as Pastor gradually swam off into the mist, from a distance he looked once more like a pig with pointed ears, and he was panting furiously, but anyone with a keen ear would have had no difficulty hearing the note of fear in it, fear not of drowning, what an idea, because the devil, as we have just learned, has no end, but of having to live forever. Pastor had disappeared behind the broken fringe of mist when God's voice suddenly rang out in farewell, I will send a man named John to help, but you will have to prove to him that you are who you are. Jesus looked around, but God was no longer there. Just then the mist lifted and vanished, leaving the lake clear and smooth from mountain to mountain, there was no sign of the devil in the water, no sign of God in the air.

On the shore from which he had come, Jesus could see a large crowd and, in the background, numerous tents, evidently an encampment for people who did not live there and who, having nowhere to sleep, had settled themselves as best they could. Curious, he lowered the oars into the water and rowed in that direction. Looking over his shoulder, he saw boats being pushed into the water, and taking a closer look, he saw Simon and Andrew, James and John in them, with others he did not know. Rowing hard, they were soon within speaking distance. Simon called out, Where have you been, obviously this was not what he wanted to know, but he had to begin somewhere, Here on the lake, replied Jesus, an answer as inane as the question, not a good start in this new chapter in the life of the son of God, Mary, and Joseph. Then Simon was clambering into Jesus' boat, and the incomprehensible and impossible was revealed, Do you know how long you've been out here in the mist, while we tried to launch our boats only to be pushed back by strong winds, asked Simon. All day, replied Jesus, then added, All day and night, seeing the intensity in Simon's face. Forty days, shouted Simon, then lowering his voice, You've been on the lake forty days, and all that time the mist never lifted, as if it were hiding something from us, what were you doing out here, we haven't caught a single fish in these waters for forty days. Jesus passed one of the oars to Simon, and both rowed and conversed in harmony, shoulder to shoulder, moving at a pace ideal for exchanging confidences, and Jesus said before any of the other boats could get closer, I've been with God, and I know what the future holds for me, how long I will live and the life that awaits me after this life. What is He like, I mean, what does God look like. God does not appear in only one form, He may be a cloud, a pillar of smoke, even a wealthy Jew, but once you hear His voice, you know Him. What did He say to you. He told me I am His son. Then the devil was right, during that business with the pigs. The devil too was here in the boat and heard everything, he seems to know as much about me as God does, sometimes I think he knows even more than God. And where, Where what, Where were they, The devil was on one side of the boat, between where you are now and the bench at the stern, which is where God sat. What did God say to you. That I am His son and will be crucified. If you're going to the mountains to fight on the rebel side, we'll come with you. You will come with me, but not to the mountains, we will not conquer Caesar with arms but make God triumph with words. With words alone. Also by giving a good example, and giving our lives if necessary. Are these your father's words. Henceforth all my words are

His, and those who believe in Him must believe in me, for it is impossible to believe in the father without believing in the son, since the new path the father has chosen for Himself can begin only with me, His son. When you say we will come with you, who do you mean. First of all you, then Andrew your brother, the sons of Zebedee, James and John, which reminds me that God said He would send a man named John to assist me, but that cannot be the same John. We don't need anyone else, this isn't one of Herod's ceremonial processions. Others will come, perhaps some are already there waiting for God's sign, a sign He will manifest through me, that they may believe and follow. What will you tell the people. That they must repent of their sins and prepare themselves for God's new era, which is about to dawn, an era in which His flaming sword will humble those who have rejected and vilified His holy word. But you must tell them you're the son of God. I'll say that my father called me his son and I carried that word in my heart since the day I was born, but God Himself has now come to claim me as His son, one father does not make one forget the other, but the father giving orders today is God, so we must obey Him. Leave this to me, said Simon, dropping his oar and moving to the prow, and he called out in a loud voice, Hosanna, the son of God approaches, he who has spent forty days on the water speaking with his father and now returns to us so that we may repent and prepare ourselves. Don't mention that the devil was also there, Jesus quickly warned him, afraid of the difficulty he would have explaining this if it became public knowledge. Simon gave another cry, louder, causing great excitement among the crowd gathered on the shore, then he hurried back to his seat and told Jesus, I'll row, you stand on the prow, but say nothing, not a single word, until we reach the shore. And so they arrived, Jesus standing on the prow of the boat in his worn tunic and with his empty pack over his shoulder, arms half raised as if wanting to greet someone or bestow a blessing but too shy, not confident enough. Among those waiting, three men were so impatient that they waded in up to their waists. Reaching the boat at last, they began pushing each other, one of them trying with his free hand to touch Jesus' tunic, not because he believed what Simon had said but because he was pulled by the mystery of this man who had been on the lake forty days, like searching for God in the desert, and who now returned from that mountain of cold mist, where he might or might not have seen God. Needless to say, in all the nearby villages people were speaking of nothing else, and the people gathered on the shore had come to see the meteorological phenomenon for themselves. When they heard there was a man lost in the mist, they muttered, Poor fellow.

The boat glided to its destination as if borne on the wings of angels. Simon helped Jesus step ashore, and in annoyance shook off the three men who had jumped into the water, Leave them alone, said Jesus, one day they will hear of my death and regret not having been there to bear my body, so let them accompany me while I'm still alive. Jesus climbed a rise and asked his companions, Where is Mary, and no sooner had he asked than he saw her. It was as if the very sound of her name had released her from a void, one moment she was nowhere to be seen, the next she was there, I'm here, Jesus. Come stand beside me, you too, Simon and Andrew, and James and John, sons of Zebedee, for

you all believe me, you believed me when I was unable to tell you I was the son of God, the son summoned by God the father, spending forty days with Him on the lake before returning to tell you that the hour of the Lord has come and that you must repent before the devil gathers the rotting ears of corn fallen from the harvest God holds in His lap, for you are those rotting ears of corn if by sinning you fell from God's loving embrace. A murmur went through the crowd, passed over their heads like ripples on water, many of those present had heard of the miracles performed by this man, some had seen them with their own eyes or even been the beneficiaries of them, I ate that bread and fish, said one, I drank that wine, said another, I was the neighbor of that adulteress, said a third, but however wonderful these wonders were, they were eclipsed by the sublime moment when Jesus was proclaimed the son of God and therefore God Himself, a revelation as remote from those other miracles as the sky is from the earth, and to the best of our knowledge the distance between them has not been measured to this day. A voice came from the crowd, Prove that you're the son of God, and I will follow you. You would follow me forever if your heart were not locked inside your breast, you ask for the proof your senses can grasp, very well, I'll give you proof that will satisfy them but be denied by your mind until, torn between mind and senses, you'll have no choice but to come to me through your heart. Whatever that means, for I haven't understood a word, scoffed the man. What is your name, asked Jesus. Thomas. Come here, Thomas, come with me to the water's edge and watch me make birds of mud, see how easy it is, I mold the body and wings, the head and beak, set these tiny pebbles for the eyes, adjust the long feathers of the tail, balance the legs and claws, and once that is done, I make eleven more, look here, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve birds, all of mud, just think, we could even give them names, this is Simon, this one James, this Andrew, this John, and this one, if you don't mind, will be called Thomas, as for the others we will wait until their names appear, names often get delayed along the way and arrive later, and now watch, I throw the net over my little birds to prevent them from escaping, for they will fly away if we're not careful. Are you trying to tell me that if this net is lifted, the birds will fly away, Thomas asked. Yes, if the net is lifted, the birds will fly away. Is this the proof you think will convince me. Yes and no. What do you mean, yes and no. The best proof would be for you not to lift the net, believing the birds will escape if you lift it. But birds made of mud cannot possibly fly. Adam, our first father, was made of mud, and you are one of his descendants. It was God who gave Adam life. Doubt no more, Thomas, and lift the net, for I am the son of God. Well, if you say so, here goes, but I promise you these birds won't fly, and without further ado Thomas lifted the net, and the birds, freed, took flight. Twittering with excitement, they circled twice above the astonished crowd before disappearing into the sky. Jesus said, Look, Thomas, your bird has gone, to which Thomas replied, No, Lord, I'm the bird, kneeling here at your feet.

Some of the men in the crowd surged forward, and several women behind them did the same. They drew near and gave their names, I am Philip, and Jesus saw stones and a cross, I am Bartholomew, and Jesus saw a flayed torso, I am Matthew, and Jesus saw a corpse among barbarians, I am Simon, and Jesus saw the saw that would cut Simon's

body, I am James son of Alphaeus, and Jesus saw him being stoned to death, I am Judas Thaddeus, and Jesus saw a club raised over the man's head, I am Judas Iscariot, and Jesus took pity on him, seeing him hang himself from a fig tree. Then Jesus called the others and said, Now that we are all here, the hour has come. And turning to Simon brother of Andrew, he told him, Because we have another Simon with us, you will be known as Peter. Turning their backs to the lake, the men started walking, followed by the women, most of whose names we never learned, not that it matters, for most of them are called Mary, and the rest will answer to that name, a man need only shout, Woman, or Mary, and they will look up and come to do his bidding.

JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES TRAVELED FROM VILLAGE TO VILLAGE, and God spoke through Jesus, and here is what He said, Time has run full circle, and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and have faith in this good news. The local inhabitants, hearing this, saw no difference between time's running full circle and time's coming to an end, and so believed the end of the world, which is where time is finally measured, must be fast approaching. They thanked God for having mercifully sent them advance notice of their fate through someone who claimed to be His son, a claim that might even be true, seeing as he worked miracles wherever he went, provided those seeking his help showed genuine faith and conviction, as in the case of the leper who pleaded, If you wish, you can make me clean, and Jesus, taking pity on the poor wretch covered with festering sores, laid his hand on him and said, It is my wish that you be clean, and no sooner were those words spoken than the sores healed, the body was restored to health, and the leper from whom everyone had fled in horror was now free of all blemish. Another remarkable cure was that of the paralytic. Such an enormous crowd had gathered around the door that the sick man had to be hoisted up, bed and all, then lowered through an opening in the roof of the house where Jesus was staying, which probably belonged to Simon, also known as Peter. Moved by the crowd's deep faith, Jesus told the sick man, My son, your sins are forgiven, but it happened that some distrustful scribes, eager to find cause for complaint and always ready to quote holy law, were present, and when they heard what Jesus said, they lost no time in protesting, How dare you say such things, this is blasphemy, only God can forgive, whereupon Jesus asked, Is it easier to say to one sick of the palsy, Your sins are forgiven, than to say, Arise, take up your bed, and walk, and without waiting for an answer, he continued, That you may know that the son of man has power on earth to forgive sins, I say unto you, and he turned to the paralytic, Arise, take up your bed, and go your way, and with these words the man miraculously got to his feet, his strength restored, and taking up the bed, he lifted it onto his shoulders and walked off, praising God.

Obviously we do not all go in search of miracles. In time we become used to our little aches and pains and learn to live with them, not thinking of importuning the divine powers. Sins, however, are quite a different matter, they get under our skin and torment us, sins, unlike a crippled leg, a paralyzed arm, or the ravages of leprosy, fester inside, and God knew what He was talking about when He told Jesus that every man has at least one sin, if not more, to repent. Now since this world is about to end and the kingdom of God is at hand, rather than enter it with our bodies restored by miraculous means we should pay attention to our souls, purify them by repentance, heal them by forgiveness. For if the paralytic from Capernaum spent most of his life on a bed, it was because he sinned, sickness as we all know is the result of sin, therefore we may safely conclude that the essential requirement for good health, not to mention immortality, can only be the utmost purity, a complete absence of sin, either through blessed ignorance or strenuous repudiation, both in thought and deed. Let no one think, however, that our Jesus journeyed through these lands squandering his power to heal and his authority to pardon sins, granted him by the Lord Himself. Though obviously he would have preferred,

personally, to become a universal panacea than announce, for God, the end of time and urge men to repent. And in order that sinners not lose too much time wrestling with the difficult decision of confessing, I have sinned, the Lord put certain terrifying threats into Jesus' mouth, as follows, Verily I say unto you that some of you who are present here will not die before seeing the kingdom of God arrive in all its majesty. Imagine the devastating effect such words must have had on those who flocked from all directions to follow Jesus, hoping he would lead them straight to the new paradise the Lord would establish on earth, which would be different from Eden, enjoyed after atonement for Adam's sin by prayer, mortification, and repentance. Since most of these trusting souls were from the working class, artisans and road diggers, fishermen and women of lowly condition, Jesus ventured one day, when God allowed him a little more freedom, to improvise a speech that left its audience spellbound, tears of joy flowing at the prospect of salvation, Blessed are you poor, Jesus told them, for yours is the kingdom of heaven, blessed are you that hunger, for you will be filled, blessed are you that weep, for you will laugh, but then God became aware of what was happening, and although it was too late to retract what Jesus had said, He forced him to speak other words, which turned the tears of joy into grim foreboding, Blessed are you when men hate you, and separate you from their company, and reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the son of man's sake. When Jesus finished speaking, it was as if his soul had fallen to his feet, for in that instant all the torments and deaths God had foretold on the lake marched before him. Numb with fear, the crowd watched Jesus sink to his knees, prostrate himself, and pray in silence. No one there could have imagined that he was asking their forgiveness, he, the son of God, who was able to forgive the sins of others. That night, in the privacy of the tent he shared with Mary Magdalene, Jesus said, I am the shepherd who with the same crook leads to sacrifice both the innocent and the wicked, the saved and the lost, those born and those yet to be born, who will deliver me from this guilt, for I now see myself as I once saw my father, he had to answer for twenty lives while I must answer for twenty thousand. Mary Magdalene wept with Jesus and tried to console him, It wasn't your doing, she sobbed. That makes it all the worse, he insisted. And as if she had known all along what we have only come to understand little by little, she said, It is God who draws the paths of fate and decides who must walk them, He chose you to open a path among paths on His behalf, but you will not walk that path or build a temple, others will build it upon your blood and body, you may as well accept the fate He has chosen for you, your every gesture has been determined, the words you will utter wait for you in the places you will visit, there you will find the crippled to whom you will restore limbs, the blind to whom you will give sight, the deaf to whom you will give hearing, the dumb to whom you will give speech, the dead whom you will resurrect. But I have no power over death. You haven't tried. I did try, but the fig tree did not revive. You must wish what God wills, but He cannot deny you what you wish. That He should take from me this burden, that is all I ask. You ask the impossible, Jesus, for the one thing God cannot do is not love Himself. How do you know. Women see things differently, perhaps because our bodies are different, yes, that must be the explanation.

One day, because the earth is too big for the strength of one man, even in a place as small as Palestine, Jesus decided to send his disciples, in pairs, to announce throughout the cities, towns, and villages the coming of God's kingdom, and to teach and preach as he did everywhere they went. And so, finding himself alone with Mary Magdalene, for the other women had gone off with the men according to their tastes and preferences, it occurred to him that since they were traveling to Bethany, which is near Jerusalem, they might as well kill two birds with one stone, if you will pardon the expression, and visit Mary's brother and sister. It was time they made their peace and for the two brothers-in-law to get to know each other. Reunited, they could make the journey together to Jerusalem, for Jesus had arranged a meeting with all his disciples in Bethany in three months' time. There is little to tell about the works of the twelve apostles in the lands of Israel, first because notwithstanding a few details about their lives and the circumstances of their deaths we have not been called upon to narrate their story, secondly because they had not been given any mandate other than to repeat, albeit each in his own way, the precepts of their master, which means they taught just as he did, performing cures as best they could. A pity Jesus forbade them to follow the path of the Gentiles or to enter any city of the Samaritans, this surprising intolerance in one so well educated deprived them of the chance to reduce their future task, because given God's intention of extending the domain of His influence, sooner or later His message would not only reach the Samaritans but, above all, the Gentiles, both here and elsewhere. Jesus instructed his disciples to heal the sick and raise the dead, make lepers clean and drive out demons, but apart from one or two vague references there is no clear evidence that any such miracles were performed, which goes to show that God does not trust just anyone, however strongly recommended. Once they are reunited with Jesus, the twelve disciples will undoubtedly have something to tell him about the results of their sermons on repentance, but probably little to report about healings, apart from the expelling of some fairly innocuous demons, who do not require much persuasion to pass from one soul to another. But the disciples will certainly tell Jesus how they themselves were often expelled, or given a hostile reception on roads where there were no Gentiles or in cities not populated by Samaritans, their only recourse being to shake the dust from their feet on leaving, as if the fault were that of the dust, which is trodden by everyone without ever complaining. But Jesus told them this was what they must do in such situations, as testimony against those who refused to listen, most regrettable, for this is the word of God Himself that is being rejected. Jesus told them, Don't worry about what to say, inspiration will come to you when you need it. But perhaps it doesn't work like that, after all, soundness of doctrine should come before personal delivery.

The perfume of freshly gathered roses hung in the air, the roads were clean and pleasant, as if angels were walking ahead and sprinkling dew as they went, then brushing the roads with laurel and myrtle. Jesus and Mary Magdalene avoided the caravansaries and the other travelers on the road, not wanting to be recognized, not that Jesus was shirking his duty, never easy under God's watchful eye, but it seemed that the Almighty had decided to grant him a breather, because no lepers came on the road to beg a cure,

or possessed souls needing exorcism, and the villages they passed through were quietly rejoicing in the peace of the Lord, as if they had already made progress along the path of repentance. The couple slept wherever they happened to be, seeking no comfort other than each other's lap, sometimes with only the sky for a roof, God's enormous eye, black but speckled with lights, lingering reflections of eyes raised to heaven by generation after generation, interrogating the silence and listening to the only answer silence ever gives. Later, when she is alone in the world, Mary Magdalene will try to recall those days and nights, but she will find it increasingly difficult to preserve her memories of sorrow and bitterness, as if trying in vain to protect an island of love from a tempestuous sea and its monsters. The hour is drawing near, but looking at heaven and earth, one sees no visible sign yet of its approach, just as a bird flies across an open sky without noticing the swift falcon drop like a stone, its claws ready. Jesus and Mary Magdalene, singing as they walk along, make an impression on other travelers, who think to themselves, Such a happy pair, and for the moment nothing could be truer. And thus they reached Jericho, and from there, because of the intense heat and lack of shade, they took two whole days to go up to Bethany. Mary Magdalene wondered how her brother and sister would receive her after all this time, especially since she left home to live as a prostitute, They may think I'm dead, she said, they may even want me dead. Jesus tried to dissuade her from dwelling on such thoughts, Time heals everything, he said, forgetting that the wound inflicted by his own family is still raw and bleeding. They entered Bethany, Mary half covering her face for fear one of the villagers might recognize her. Jesus gently rebuked her, Why are you hiding, your past is now behind you and exists no more. I'm not the person I was, it is true, but I am still bound to who I was by shame. You are now only who you are, and you are with me. Thanks be to God, but the day will come when He takes you from me. Dropping her mantle, Mary showed her face, but no one said, Look, there is Lazarus's sister, the one who went off to live as a prostitute.

This is the house, she said, but could not bring herself to knock or to announce her arrival. Jesus gave the unlocked gate a gentle push and called out, Anyone home, and a woman's voice answered, Who's there, and with those words she appeared in the doorway. This was Martha, the twin sister of Mary Magdalene, but now bearing little resemblance to her, for age had left its mark on Martha, or it could have been the hard life she had led, or purely a matter of temperament and outlook. The first thing she noticed were Jesus' eyes and expression, as if a dark cloud had lifted all at once, leaving his face luminous, but then she saw her sister and became wary, her frown showing displeasure, Who is this man with her, she must have thought, or perhaps, How can he be with her if he is what he seems, but pressed to explain herself, Martha would have been unable to say what he seemed to be. This is probably why, instead of asking her sister, How are you, or, What are you doing here, all she could say was, Who is this man you've brought with you. Jesus smiled, and his smile went straight to Martha's heart like an arrow and there it remained, making it ache with satisfaction, My name is Jesus of Nazareth, he told her, and I'm with your sister, the same words, *mutatis mutandis*, the Romans would say, as those he used when he took leave of his brother James by the

lake, telling him, Her name is Mary Magdalene and she's with me. Pushing the door wide open, Martha said, Come in, make yourself at home, but it was not clear which of them she meant. Once inside the yard, Mary Magdalene took her sister by the arm and told her, I belong here as much as you do, and I belong to this man, who does not belong to you, I've been frank with both of you, so do not flaunt your virtue or condemn my wickedness, I come in peace and in peace I wish to be. Martha said, I will receive you as my sister, and I long for the day when I can welcome you with love, but it's too soon, and she was about to continue when a thought stopped her, she was not sure whether this man standing beside her sister knew about the life her sister had led and might still be leading, and she began to blush, hating the two of them and herself, until Jesus finally spoke so that Martha could learn what she needed to know, for it is not that difficult to tell what people are thinking, and he told her, God judges all of us and does so differently each day, according to what we are each day, now if God were to judge you at this moment, Martha, don't imagine you'd be any different in His eyes from Mary. Explain that more clearly, for I don't understand. There is no more to be said, but keep my words in your heart and repeat them to yourself whenever you look at your sister. Is she no longer. You mean am I no longer a whore, asked Mary Magdalene bluntly, despising her sister's delicacy. Martha flinched, raised her hands to her face, No, I don't want to know, Jesus' words are enough, and unable to restrain herself, she burst into tears. Mary went to her and embraced her, cradling her in her arms, while Martha kept saying between sobs, What a life, what a life, but one could not be certain whether she meant her own life or her sister's. Where is Lazarus, asked Mary. In the synagogue. How is he these days. He still suffers from those bouts of choking, but otherwise his health is not bad. She felt like adding resentfully that Mary was slow in showing concern, for during all those years of guilty absence, this prodigal sister, prodigal with both her time and her body, had not kept in touch with her family, had not once inquired after their brother, whose health had always been precarious. But turning to Jesus, who was observing the hostility between them, Martha told him, Our brother copies out books in the synagogue, it is as much as he can do in his poor state of health, and her tone was of one incapable of understanding how anyone could live without being engaged in some worthwhile task from morning till night. What ails Lazarus, asked Jesus. He chokes, as if his heart were about to stop beating, then he turns so pale, you'd think he was going to pass away. Martha paused before adding, He's younger than we are, she spoke without thinking, perhaps suddenly struck by Jesus' youth, and once again she felt perturbed, felt pangs of jealousy, which brought words to her lips that sounded strange coming from Martha when Mary Magdalene, whose duty and privilege it was to say them, was standing there, You're tired, Martha said to Jesus, Sit down and let me wash your feet. Afterward, when Mary found herself alone with Jesus, she remarked half jokingly, It would seem that we two sisters were born to love you, and Jesus replied, Martha is sad that she has had so little pleasure in life. She's resentful, thinking there is no justice in heaven when a fallen woman gets the prize and a virtuous woman like her goes unrewarded. God will reward her in other ways. Perhaps, but God, having made the world, has no right to deprive women of any of the fruits of His creation. Such as carnal knowledge of men. Of course,

just as you came to know woman, and what more could you wish for, being as you are, the son of God. He who lies with you is not the son of God but the son of Joseph. Frankly, ever since you came into my life, I never felt I was lying with the son of a god. You mean of God. If only you weren't.

Martha entrusted a neighbor's little boy with a message for Lazarus, informing him that Mary had returned home, but she did so only after much hesitation, for she was anxious that no one know that their disreputable sister was back in the village, because tongues would start wagging again after all this time. How would she face people on the street the next day, and worse still, how would she find the courage to walk out with her sister. It would be difficult to ignore her neighbors and friends, and she dreaded having to say to them, This is my sister Mary, do you remember her, she's come home, only to receive knowing looks and sly comments, Of course we remember, who doesn't remember Mary, let us hope these prosaic details do not offend our readers, because the story of God is not all divine. Martha was trying to suppress these uncharitable thoughts when Lazarus arrived, and embracing Mary, he said simply, Welcome home, sister, putting aside the sorrow of all those years of separation and silent anxiety. Martha, feeling it was up to her to put a brave face on things, pointed to Jesus and told her brother, This is Jesus, our brother-in-law. The two men exchanged a friendly nod, then sat down to have a chat, while the women prepared a meal together as they had done so many times in the past. Now after they had eaten, Lazarus and Jesus went into the yard to enjoy the cool night air while the sisters remained inside to resolve the important question of how to arrange the sleeping mats, since they were now four instead of two. Jesus, gazing at length at the first stars to appear in the sky, which was still light, finally asked Lazarus, Do you suffer much pain, and Lazarus replied with surprising composure, Yes, I suffer all right. Your suffering will be over, said Jesus. No doubt, when I'm dead. No, I mean very soon. I didn't know you were a physician. Brother, if I were a physician, I wouldn't be able to cure you. Nor can you even if you're not. You are cured, Jesus murmured softly, taking him by the hand. And Lazarus felt the sickness drain from his body like murky water absorbed by the sun. His breathing became easier, his pulse stronger, and he asked nervously, puzzled by what was happening, What's going on, his voice hoarse with alarm, Who are you. A physician I am not, smiled Jesus. In the name of God, tell me who you are. Do not take the name of God in vain. But what am I to make of this. Call Mary, she'll tell you. There was no need to call anyone. Drawn by the sudden raising of voices, Martha and Mary appeared in the doorway, afraid the two men might be quarreling, but they saw at once they were mistaken, a blue light suffused the entire yard, from the sky, and a shaken Lazarus was pointing at Jesus, Who is this man, he asked, for he had only to touch me and say, You are cured, and the sickness left. Martha went to comfort her brother, how could he be cured when he was trembling from head to foot, but Lazarus pushed her away, saying, Mary, you brought him here, tell us who he is. Without stirring from the doorway, Mary Magdalene said, He is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of God. Now even though this region has been favored with prophetic revelations and apocalyptic signs since time immemorial, it would have been perfectly natural for Lazarus

and Martha to express utter disbelief, it is one thing for you to acknowledge that you have been cured by miraculous means, and quite another to be told that the man who touched your hand is none other than the son of God himself. Faith and love, however, can achieve much, some even claim they do not have to go together to achieve what they achieve, as it happened Martha threw herself weeping into Jesus' arms, then, alarmed by her daring, she slumped to the ground, where she remained, her face completely transformed as she muttered to herself, And I washed your feet. Lazarus did not move, out of fear, and we might even suggest that if this sudden revelation did not kill him, it was because his sister's timely act of love had given him a new heart. Smiling, Jesus went to embrace him and said, Don't be surprised to find that the son of God is a son of man, frankly, God had no one else to choose, just as men choose their women and women their men. These final words were intended for Mary Magdalene, but Jesus forgot that they would only aggravate Martha's distress and desperate loneliness, this is the difference between God and His son, God does it on purpose, His son out of carelessness, which is all too human. Never mind, today there is rejoicing in this household, and Martha can go back to her sighing tomorrow, but she has one consolation she can be sure of, no one will dare gossip about her sister's past in the streets, squares, and marketplaces of Bethany once they learn, and Martha herself will make sure they are told, that the man with her cured Lazarus of his sickness without the use of potions or infusions of herbs. They were sitting at home enjoying one another's company when Lazarus remarked, There have been rumors about a man from Galilee going around performing miracles, but it has never been suggested that he is the son of God. Some news travels faster than others, said Jesus. Are you that man. You have said it. Then Jesus told his story from the beginning, but not quite everything, he did not mention Pastor, and he said nothing about God except that He had appeared to him to announce, You are My son. Without those rumors of miracles, now turned into fact by the evidence of this latest miracle, and without the power of faith and love, it would have been difficult indeed for Jesus to convince Lazarus and Martha that the man who would shortly be sharing a mat with their sister was made of divine spirit. For it was with flesh and blood that Jesus embraced this woman who had embraced so many men without fear of God. And let us forgive Martha the spiritual pride that led her to mutter, under the sheet pulled over her head so she would not see or hear, I deserve him more than she does.

Next day the news spread like wildfire, people everywhere in Bethany praised and thanked the Lord, and even those dry souls who were doubtful to begin with, thinking the earth too small to hold such wonders, were forced to change their minds when confronted with a miraculously cured Lazarus, of whom it should never be said that he began selling good health to others, for he was so good-hearted that he would sooner have given it all away. Now people gathered around the door, curious to see with their own eyes this miracle-worker, whom they might even be allowed to touch, a last, definitive proof. The sick and infirm also came in droves, some on foot, others carried in litters or on the backs of relatives, until the narrow street where Lazarus and his sister lived was completely filled. When Jesus became aware of the situation, he sent word that he would address

the crowd in the main square of the village, where they should go and he would join them shortly. But any man who holds a bird securely in his hand is not going to be foolish enough to let it escape. So understandably no one moved from his vantage point, and Jesus was obliged to show his face, leaving the house like anyone else, without fanfare, pomp, or ceremony, and without any tremors in heaven or on earth. Here I am, he said, trying to speak naturally, but his words were sufficient to make the inhabitants of an entire village fall to their knees and beg for mercy, Save us, cried some, Cure me, implored others. Jesus cured one man who, being mute, was unable to plead, but he sent the others away because they did not have enough faith. He told them to come back another day, but first they must repent of their sins, because as we know the kingdom of God is at hand and time is about to end. Are you the son of God, they asked, and Jesus answered enigmatically, If I were not, God would strike you dumb rather than permit such a question.

He began his stay in Bethany with these remarkable deeds, while waiting to be reunited with his disciples, who still journeyed through distant lands. Needless to say, people soon arrived from surrounding towns and villages when they heard that the man who worked miracles in the north was now in Bethany. There was no need for Jesus to leave Lazarus's house, because everyone flocked there as though to a place of pilgrimage, but he did not receive them, ordering them instead to gather on a hill outside the village, where he would preach repentance and heal the sick. The excitement and news quickly reached Jerusalem, which made the crowds even larger, until Jesus began asking himself if he should remain there at the risk of provoking riots, which are all too common when crowds get out of control. Humble folk were the first to come from Jerusalem in search of healing, but it was not long before people from every social class began arriving, including a number of Pharisees and scribes who could not believe that anyone in his right mind would have the courage, one might even say the suicidal courage, openly to declare himself the son of God. They returned to Jerusalem irritated and puzzled, because Jesus never gave a straight answer when questioned. If pressed about his parentage, he said he was the son of man, and if he happened to say father when referring to God, it was clear he meant God as everyone's father and not just his own. There remained the troublesome question of these healing powers he exercised without recourse to trickery or magic. All he needed were a few simple words, Walk, Arise, Speak, See, Be clean, the leper's skin suddenly glowed like dew in the morning light when Jesus touched it with his fingertips, mutes and stammerers became inebriated with words, paralytics jumped out of bed and danced with joy, the blind could not believe their eyes could see again, the lame ran to their heart's content, then playfully pretended to be lame once more, so they could start running all over again. Repent, Jesus told them, Repent, and that was all he asked of them. But the high priests of the Temple, who knew better than anyone of the upheavals provoked in their time by prophets and soothsayers, decided that there should be no more religious, social, and political disturbances, and that from now on they should pay close attention to everything the Galilean did and said, and if it became necessary, to uproot and eliminate the evil,

because, in the words of the high priest, This man does not deceive me, the son of man is the son of God. Jesus had not gone to sow in Jerusalem, but here in Bethany he was forging and honing the scythe with which he would be cut down.

Then the disciples began to arrive in Bethany, in pairs, two today, two tomorrow, or even four if they chanced to meet en route. Apart from a few minor details, they all had the same story to tell, about a man who came out of the desert and prophesied in the traditional manner, as if moving boulders with his voice and whole mountains with his arms, he spoke of the punishment in store for people and of the imminent arrival of the Messiah. The disciples never actually saw him, because he was constantly on the move, going from place to place, so their information was secondhand, they would have sought this prophet out, but their three months were nearly up and they didn't wish to miss their meeting. Jesus asked them if they knew the prophet's name, and they told him it was John. So he's here already, said Jesus. His friends did not know what he meant, except for Mary Magdalene, but then she knew everything. Jesus wanted to go look for John, who almost certainly was looking for him, but of the twelve apostles, Thomas and Judas Iscariot still had not arrived, and since they might have more information, their delay was all the more frustrating. The wait for them, however, proved to be justified, because the two latecomers had not only seen John but spoken to him. The others emerged from their tents, pitched outside Bethany, to hear what Thomas and Judas Iscariot had to tell, they sat in a circle in the yard of Lazarus's house, with Martha and Mary and the other women in attendance. Judas Iscariot and Thomas spoke in turn, explaining how John had been in the wilderness when he received the word of God, and went to the banks of the Jordan to baptize and preach penance for the remission of sins, but as the multitudes flocked to him to be baptized, he rebuked them with loud cries that frightened everyone out of their wits, O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come, bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance, and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham for our father, for I say unto you that God is able from these stones to raise up children unto Abraham, leaving you despised, and now the ax is put to the root of the trees, therefore every tree that brings not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. Terror-stricken, the multitudes asked him, What must we do, and John replied, Let the man who has two tunics share them with him who has none, and the man who has provisions do the same, and to the collectors of taxes John said, Make no demands other than those established by law, and do not think the law is just because you call it the law, and to the soldiers who asked him, And what about us, what must we do, he replied, Use violence against no one, do not sentence anyone falsely, and content yourselves with your wages. Here Thomas, who had begun, fell silent, and Judas Iscariot took over. They asked John if he was the Messiah, and he told them, I baptize you with water unto repentance, but he who comes after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear, he will baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire, his fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Judas Iscariot said nothing more, and everyone waited for Jesus to speak, but Jesus, with one finger tracing enigmatic lines on

the ground, appeared to be waiting. Then Peter said, So you are the Messiah whose coming John prophesies, and Jesus replied, still scribbling in the dust, You have said it, not I, God only told me I was His son, he paused for a moment, then ended by saying, I will go look for John. We'll go with you, said the son of Zebedee who was also John, but Jesus slowly shook his head, I'll take only Thomas and Judas, because they've seen him, and turning to Judas, he asked, What does he look like. He's taller than you, said Judas, and heavier, he has a long beard as if made of bristles, and he wears nothing except a garment of camel's hair and a leather girdle around his waist, people say that in the wilderness he feeds on locusts and wild honey. He sounds more like the Messiah than I do, Jesus said, rising from the circle.

The three of them set out early the next morning, and knowing that John never stayed more than a few days in the same place and that they would most probably find him baptizing on the banks of the Jordan, they went down from Bethany to a place called Bethabara at the edge of the Dead Sea, intending to travel upriver as far as the Sea of Galilee, and even farther north to the headwaters if necessary. But their journey was shorter than they imagined, for it was in Bethabara itself that they found John, alone, as if he was expecting them. They caught their first glimpse of the man from afar, a tiny figure seated on the riverbank, surrounded by somber crags resembling skulls and ravines that looked like open scars. To the right, beneath the sun and the white sky, was the sinister Dead Sea, its awesome surface agleam like molten copper. When they came within throwing distance, Jesus asked his companions, Is it he. Shading their eyes with their hands, the disciples took a careful look and replied, Either it is he or his twin. Wait here until I return, and come no closer, said Jesus, and without another word he began making his descent to the river. Thomas and Judas sat on the parched ground and watched Jesus walk away, appearing and disappearing as the land rose and fell, then when he reached the bank, they saw him approaching John, who had not stirred all this time. Let's hope we're not mistaken, said Thomas. We should have gone closer, said Judas Iscariot. But Jesus was certain the moment he saw him and had asked only for the sake of asking. Down below, John rose to his feet and looked at Jesus as he walked toward him. What will they have to say to each other, wondered Judas Iscariot. Perhaps Jesus will tell us, perhaps he won't, said Thomas. Now the two men in the distance were face-to-face and conversing excitedly, judging from the gestures they made with their staffs, and after a while they went to the water's edge, where they disappeared from view behind the jutting embankment, but Judas and Thomas knew what was happening there, because they too had been baptized by John. They had waded into the river until the water came up to their waists. John will scoop up water in his cupped hands, raise it to heaven, then let it fall on Jesus' head, reciting, I baptize you with this water, may it nourish your fire. When this is accomplished, John and Jesus will emerge from the river, retrieve their staffs, and bid each other farewell with an embrace, and John will start walking along the river in a northerly direction, while Jesus returns to us. Thomas and Judas Iscariot stand waiting for him, and he indeed appears, he passes in silence and leads the way to Bethany. Feeling somewhat slighted, his disciples walk behind him, their

curiosity unsatisfied, until Thomas, unable to contain himself any longer and ignoring Judas's gesture, asked, Aren't you going to tell us what John said. In good time, replied Jesus. Did he tell you, at least, that you're the Messiah. In good time, said Jesus again, and his disciples wondered if he was telling them, by this repetition, that it was not yet time for the Messiah to appear.

Only Mary Magdalene learned what happened that day. Little was said, Jesus confided, no sooner did we meet than John wanted to know if I was he who has come or if we had to await another. And what did you tell him. I told him the blind regain their sight and the lame walk, the lepers are made clean and the deaf hear, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And what did he say. The Messiah won't need to do much, so long as he does what is expected of him. Is that what he said. Yes, those were his very words. And what is expected of the Messiah. That's what I asked him, And what answer did he give you, He told me to find out for myself, And then what did he say. Nothing else, he took me to the river, baptized me, and walked away. What words did he use to baptize you. I baptize you with water, and may it nourish your fire. After this conversation with Mary Magdalene, Jesus did not speak for a week. He left Lazarus's house and went to join his disciples just outside Bethany, where he put up a tent away from the others and spent the entire day alone. Not even Mary Magdalene was allowed to enter the tent, and Jesus left it only at night to go into the mountains. Sometimes his disciples secretly followed him, on the pretext that they wanted to protect him from wild beasts, though there were no wild beasts in those parts. They found that he would choose a comfortable spot and sit there staring, not at the sky but straight ahead, as if waiting for someone to appear from the ominous shadow of a ravine or from around the slope of a hill. There was moonlight, so anyone who appeared would have been visible from afar, but no one appeared. At first light Jesus returned to the camp. He ate very little of the food John and Judas Iscariot brought him in turn, and he made no attempt to respond to their greetings. On one occasion he even dismissed Peter brusquely when Peter asked if all was well and if he had any orders to give. Peter was not completely mistaken, he had only spoken too soon, because after eight days Jesus emerged from the tent in broad daylight, rejoined his disciples, ate with them, and when he had finished, he told them, Tomorrow we go up to Jerusalem, to the Temple, there you will do as I do, because the time has come for the son of God to know what use is being made of his father's house, and for the Messiah to begin to do what is expected of him. The disciples wanted to know more, but apart from telling them, You won't have to wait much longer to find out, Jesus would say nothing. The disciples were not accustomed to being spoken to in this way or to seeing his face so severe, he was no longer the gentle, tranquil Jesus they knew, who went wherever God wished without a murmur of complaint. This change had been brought about by circumstances unknown, whatever had led him to separate himself from his disciples and to wander over hill and dale as if possessed by the demons of night, in search of who knows what. Peter, the oldest one there, thought it unfair that Jesus should order them to go up to Jerusalem just like that, as if they were servants and fit only to fetch and carry, to go back and forth with no explanation. So he protested, We

recognize your authority and are prepared to obey you in word and deed, both as the son of God and as a man, but is it right that you treat us like irresponsible children or doddering old men, refusing to confide in us, giving orders without asking our opinion or allowing us to make our own decisions. Forgive me, all of you, said Jesus, for I myself do not know what calls me to Jerusalem, all I was told was that I must go, nothing more, you do not have to accompany me. Who told you you must go to Jerusalem. A voice in my head, it tells me what I must and must not do. You're much changed since your meeting with John. Yes, it made me realize that it isn't enough to bring peace, one must also carry a sword. If the kingdom of God is at hand, why carry a sword, asked Andrew. Because God has not revealed by what means His kingdom will come, we've tried peace, now let us try the sword, and God will choose, but I repeat, you do not have to accompany me. You know we will follow you wherever you go, John told him, and Jesus replied, Don't swear it, those of you who go with me will learn.

The next morning, Jesus went to Lazarus's house to say good-bye and also reassure Lazarus and Martha that he was again living with his disciples after his mysterious retreat into the wilderness. Martha told him that her brother had left for the synagogue. So Jesus and his disciples set off on the road to Jerusalem, Mary Magdalene and the other women accompanying them as far as the last houses of Bethany, where they stopped and waved, content to wave although the men did not look back even once. The sky is cloudy and threatens rain, perhaps this is why there are so few people on the road, those with no urgent business in Jerusalem have decided to stay at home and wait for a sign from the heavens. The thirteen men walk, and thick gray clouds rumble above the mountains, as if sky and earth were finally about to come together, the mold and the molded, male and female, concave and convex. They reached the city gates and found, though the road had been deserted, the usual crowd gathered there, and they re-signed themselves to a long wait before reaching the Temple. But things turned out differently. The appearance of thirteen men, nearly all of them barefoot, with great staves, flowing beards, and heavy, dark capes over tunics that had seen better days, caused the startled crowd to fall back and ask among themselves, Where can these men have come from, and who's the one in front. No one knew the answer until a man who had come down from Galilee said, He's Jesus of Nazareth, who claims to be the son of God and performs miracles. Where are they going, asked others, and since the only way of finding out was to follow them, many walked behind them, so that by the time they reached the entrance to the Temple, they were no longer thirteen but a thousand, and the people waited to see what would happen. Jesus walked on the side where the money changers were and said to his disciples, Here is what we have come to do, and with these words he began overturning the tables, berating those who were buying and selling, causing such an uproar that his words would not have been heard but for the fact that his natural voice rang out in stentorian tones, It is written that my house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves, and he continued to overturn the tables, scattering coins everywhere, which brought great joy to the horde that rushed to gather this manna. The disciples followed Jesus' example, and the tables of the dove sellers were also thrown to

the ground, and the birds, released, flew over the Temple, circling wildly around the distant smoke from the altar, where they will not be burned now, for their savior has come. The Temple guards rushed to the scene, armed with batons to punish, capture, or expel the rioters, only to find themselves up against thirteen formidable Galileans with staffs in hand, who swept aside all who dared approach. Come, come, the lot of you, and feel God's might, they taunted, falling on the guards, destroying everything in sight, and putting a torch to the tents. Soon a second column of smoke was spiraling into the air, and a voice cried out, Call the Roman soldiers, but no one paid attention, for happen what might, the Romans were forbidden by law to enter the Temple. More guards rushed to the scene, this time with swords and lances, they were joined by a few money changers and dove sellers determined not to leave the protection of their property to strangers, so little by little the guards gained the upper hand, and if this struggle was as pleasing to God as the crusades to come, He did not appear to be doing much to help His side. This was the situation when the high priest appeared at the top of the steps accompanied by all the other priests, elders, and scribes who could be summoned in haste, and in a voice powerful enough to match that of Jesus he declared, Let him go this time, but if he shows his face here again, we will cut him down and discard him, as we do to tares that threaten to choke the wheat at harvesttime. Andrew said to Jesus, who had fought at his side, You weren't joking when you said you would bring the sword instead of peace, but staffs are useless as swords, to which Jesus replied, It all depends who is wielding the staff. What do we do now, asked Andrew. Let's return to Bethany, answered Jesus, it's not swords we need but determination. They withdrew in orderly fashion, their staffs pointed at the jeering crowd, who taunted them but went no further, and soon the disciples were safely out of Jerusalem and beating a hasty retreat, all of them exhausted, some even wounded.

When they reached Bethany, they noticed that that the people who appeared in their doorways looked at them with pity, but the disciples thought this only natural, given the lamentable state in which they had returned from battle. They learned the real reason for the gloom on everyone's face when they came to the street where Lazarus lived and sensed a tragedy had occurred. Jesus ran ahead of the others, entered the yard, the people gathered there stepped aside with mournful sighs to let him pass, and from within came the sound of weeping and lamentation, Oh my beloved brother, Martha could be heard sobbing, Oh my beloved brother, wailed the voice of Mary. Stretched out on the ground, on a pallet, Lazarus seemed to be sleeping, but he was not sleeping, he was dead. Nearly all his life he had suffered from a weak heart, then was cured, as everyone in Bethany could testify, and now was as composed as if carved from marble, as serene as if he had already passed into eternity, soon the first signs of putrefaction will appear, causing those around the corpse to feel even greater pain. Jesus, as if the strength had suddenly gone from his legs, fell to his knees, groaning and weeping, How did this happen, how did this happen, words that never fail to spring to our lips when we are confronted by something irremediable. We ask how it happened, a desperate, futile attempt to postpone the awful moment when we must accept the truth, we ask how it

happened, as if we could replace death with life, exchange what is with what should be. From the depths of her grief Martha said to Jesus, Had you been here, my brother would not have died, but I know that everything you ask of God He will grant you, He granted you sight for the blind, healing for the lepers, speech for the mute, and all the other wonders that reside in your will and await your word. Jesus told her, Your brother will be raised from the dead, and Martha replied, I know he will rise to life on the day of resurrection. Jesus stood, an infinite strength took possession of him, in that moment he knew he could do anything, banish death from this body, restore it to life, give it speech, movement, laughter, even tears, but not of sorrow, and truly say, I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and he asked Martha, Do you believe this, and she said, Yes, I believe you are the son of God who has come into this world. This being so, and with everything necessary in place, the power and the will to use that power, all Jesus has to do is stretch out his arms to that body abandoned by its soul, and say, Lazarus, arise, and Lazarus will rise from the dead, because it is the will of God, but at the very last moment Mary Magdalene placed a hand on Jesus' shoulder and said, No one has committed so much sin in his life that he deserves to die twice, and dropping his arms, Jesus went outside to weep.

LIKE AN ICY GUST OF WIND, THE DEATH OF LAZARUS EXTINGUISHED the zeal John had kindled in Jesus' heart, a zeal in which serving God and serving the people had become one and the same thing. After the first few days of mourning, when the duties and habits of everyday life were gradually resumed, Peter and Andrew went to speak to Jesus. They questioned him about his plans, asked whether they should go preach once more in the towns or instead return to Jerusalem for a fresh assault, the disciples were beginning to feel restless, eager to be doing something, We didn't part with our possessions, our work, and our families, they complained, just to sit around all day. Jesus looked at them as if in a blur and listened as if having difficulty recognizing their voices amid a chorus of discordant cries. After a long silence he told them they must be patient, must wait a little more, he still had some thinking to do, could sense that something was about to happen which would decide their fate once and for all. And he assured them he would soon join them in the camp, which puzzled Peter and Andrew, for why should the two sisters remain alone when the men still had not decided what to do, You don't need to come back for our sake, said Peter, who had no way of knowing that Jesus was torn between two duties, the first toward the men and women who had abandoned everything to follow him, the second here in this house, toward the sisters, duties similar yet opposed, like a face and a mirror. The ghost of Lazarus was present and refused to go away, he was in the harsh words spoken by Martha, who could not forgive Mary for having prevented their brother from being restored to life, nor could she forgive Jesus for not using his God-given power. Lazarus was present too in Mary's tears, for by delivering her brother from a second death she would have to live forever with the remorse of having failed to deliver him from his first. Like an enormous presence filling every space, Lazarus was also in Jesus' troubled soul, in which horses pulled in four directions, or four ropes coiled around winches were slowly tearing him apart, and the hands of God and the devil were amusing themselves, divinely and diabolically, with the remains.

The afflicted and diseased, hoping to be healed, came to the door of the house that had once belonged to Lazarus. Sometimes Martha would appear and drive them away, as if to say, There was no salvation for my brother, why should there be for you, but they would keep returning until they succeeded in reaching Jesus, who healed them and sent them away without once saying, Repent. To be healed is like being reborn without having died, for the newborn have no sins and therefore no need to repent. But these acts of physical rebirth, if I may call them that, although most merciful, left a sour feeling in Jesus' heart, for they were only a postponement of the inevitable, he who today leaves healthy and content will be back tomorrow with new woes that have no remedy. Jesus became so melancholy that one day Martha said, Don't you die on me, for that would be like losing Lazarus all over again, and Mary Magdalene, beneath the sheet they shared, whimpered like a wounded animal hiding in the dark, You need me now more than ever, but I cannot reach you if you lock yourself behind a door beyond human strength. Jesus answered Martha, saying, My death will embrace all the deaths of Lazarus, who will go on dying without ever being restored to life, and to Mary he said, Even if you cannot enter, do not abandon me, even if you cannot see me, stretch out your hand, otherwise I will

forget life or it will forget me. A few days later he went to join his disciples, and Mary Magdalene went with him. I'll look at your shadow if you don't wish me to look at you, she told him, and he replied, I wish to be wherever my shadow is if that is where your eyes are. Loving each other, they exchanged these amorous phrases not only because they were beautiful and true, but because shadows were closing in, and it was time for the two to prepare themselves for the darkness of final absence.

News reached the camp that John the Baptist had been taken prisoner. Nothing was known except that he had been arrested and Herod himself ordered his imprisonment. Jesus and his followers were inclined to think that Herod had been provoked by John's prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, which he repeated everywhere between baptisms, He who comes after me will baptize you with fire, and between imprecations, O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Jesus told his disciples that they must be prepared for every manner of persecution, because rumors had been rife for some time that they were preaching the same message, it was only to be expected that Herod would put two and two together and pursue the carpenter's son, who claimed to be the son of God, and his followers, for this was the second and more powerful head of the dragon threatening to topple him from his throne. Bad news may not be preferable to no news, but it was received with equanimity by men who had been waiting and hoping for everything but lately had had to make do with nothing. They asked one another, and Jesus too, what they should now do, stand together and resist Herod's wickedness, scatter throughout the towns, or retreat into the wilderness, where they could eat wild honey and locusts, as John the Baptist had done before he left to herald the glory of Jesus and, by the looks of it, to meet a miserable end. Yet there was no sign of Herod's troops arriving in Bethany to slaughter more innocents, thus Jesus and his disciples were considering carefully the various alternatives when another report arrived, informing them that John had been beheaded and that his punishment had nothing to do with the coming of the Messiah or the kingdom of God, he had incurred Herod's wrath by speaking out against adultery, of which the king himself was guilty, having married Herodias, his niece and sister-in-law, while her husband still lived. The news of John's death brought tears to the eyes of men and women alike, and the entire camp mourned, but no one believed that he had been killed for the reason given. Judas Iscariot, whom, you may remember, John baptized, was beside himself with rage, he said that Herod's decision must have had a more serious motive, How can this be, he asked the company gathered there, including the women, John proclaims the Messiah is coming to redeem people, and they kill him for condemning an adulterous marriage between uncle and niece, when adultery has been common practice in that family since the time of the first Herod. How can this be, he railed, when God Himself ordered John to proclaim the coming of the Messiah, it must have been God, because nothing can happen without His willing it, so perhaps those of you who know God better than I can explain to me why He should allow His plan to go awry like this on earth, and before you tell me that God knows even if we don't, let me tell you that I insist on knowing what God knows.

A shiver passed through everyone listening, who feared the wrath of God would descend on this insolent fellow, and on themselves for not punishing such blasphemy at once. But since He was not present to deal with Judas, the challenge could only be taken up by Jesus, closest to the Supreme Being whose wisdom was called into question. Had this been another religion and the circumstances different, perhaps things would have gone no further than Jesus' enigmatic smile, which, however faint and fleeting, showed many things, surprise, benevolence, and curiosity, though the surprise was short-lived, the benevolence condescending, and the curiosity somewhat ironic. The smile, leaving, left behind a deathly pallor, a face that suddenly looked cadaverous, as if it had just beheld the image of its own fate. In a voice without expression Jesus finally said, Let the women withdraw, and Mary Magdalene was the first to rise to her feet. Then, after the silence had slowly formed walls and a ceiling to enclose them in the deepest cave on earth, Jesus said, Let John ask God why He allowed a man prophesying such good tidings to die for so paltry a reason. Judas Iscariot was about to speak, but Jesus raised his hand to silence him and said, I now see I must tell you what I learned from God, unless He Himself prevents me. Voices grew louder as the disciples began talking nervously among themselves, afraid of what they were about to hear. Judas alone maintained the attitude of defiance with which he had begun all this. Jesus told them, I know my future and yours, and that of generations to come, I know God's intention and design, and we will speak of these matters, for they concern all of us. Peter asked, Must we know what God has revealed to you, would it not be better to keep it to yourself. If He wished, God could silence me this instant. Then surely He doesn't care whether you remain silent or speak, it's all the same, and if He has spoken through you, He will continue to speak through you, even when you think you oppose His will. as at present. Do you know, Peter, that I am to be crucified. Yes, you told me. But I didn't tell you that you too, with Andrew and Philip here, will be crucified, and that Bartholomew will be skinned alive, and that Matthew will be butchered by barbarians, and that they will behead James the son of Zebedee, and that another James, the son of Alphaeus, will be stoned to death, and Thomas will be killed with a lance, and Judas Thaddaeus will have his skull crushed, and Simon will be sawed in half, these things you didn't know, but I am telling all of you now. This was received in silence, there is no further reason to fear the future, once revealed, as if Jesus had finally told them, You will die, and they replied in chorus, So what, we know already. But John and Judas Iscariot have not heard what will happen to them, so they ask, What about us, and Jesus said, You, John, will live to a ripe old age and die of natural causes, as for you, Judas, keep away from fig trees, because it won't be long before you hang yourself from one. So we will die because of you, a voice asked, but no one ever identified the person who spoke. Because of God, answered Jesus. What does God want, asked John. He wants a larger congregation than the one He has at present, He wants the entire world for Himself. But if God is Lord of the universe, how can the world belong to anyone but Him, not just since yesterday or starting tomorrow but from the beginning of time, asked Thomas. That I cannot tell you, replied Jesus. But if you've kept all these things in your heart for so long, why tell us now. Because Lazarus, whom I healed, died, and John the Baptist, who prophesied my coming, was killed, and now

death has joined us. All creatures have to die, said Peter, and men like all the rest. Many will die in future because of God and His will. If willed by God, then it must be for some holy cause. They will die because they were born neither before nor after. Will they receive eternal life, asked Matthew. Yes, but the condition should be less horrible. If the son of God has said what he has said, he has denied himself, said Peter. You're mistaken, only the son of God is permitted to say these things, and what is blasphemy on your lips is the word of God on mine, replied Jesus. You speak as if we had to choose between you and God, said Peter. You will always have to choose between God and God, and like you and all other men, I am in the middle. So what do you want us to do. Help my death protect the lives of future generations. But you cannot oppose God's will. No, but I can at least try. You are safe because you are the son of God, but we will lose our souls. No, for if you obey me, you will still be obeying God. The edge of a red moon could be seen on the horizon of the distant wilderness. Speak, said Andrew, but Jesus waited until the entire moon, an enormous blood-red disk, had risen from the earth, and only then did he speak, telling them, The son of God must die on the cross so that the will of the father may be done, but if we replace him with an ordinary man, God will no longer be able to sacrifice His son. Do you wish one of us to take your place, asked Peter. No, I myself will take the son's place. For the love of God, explain yourself. An ordinary man, who has proclaimed himself king of the Jews to incite the people to depose Herod from his throne and expel the Romans from the land, and all I ask is that one of you go immediately to the Temple and say that I am this man, and if justice is swift, perhaps God's justice will not have time to stay man's, just as it did not stay the ax of the executioner who beheaded John. Everyone was struck dumb, but not for long, soon there was an outcry of indignation, protest, disbelief. If you are the son of God, then you must die as the son of God, a voice exclaimed, Having eaten your bread, how can I now denounce you, wailed another, Surely he who is destined to be king of the universe cannot wish to be king of the Jews, said one man, Death to anyone who dares stir from here to denounce you, threatened another. At that moment the voice of Judas Iscariot rang out above the din, I'll go. They seized him, were already drawing daggers from their tunics, when Jesus said, Leave him alone and do him no harm. He then rose and embraced Judas, kissing him on both cheeks, Go, my hour is yours. Without a word, Judas Iscariot threw the hem of his cape over one shoulder and vanished into the black night.

The Temple guards, accompanied by Herod's soldiers, came to arrest Jesus at first light. After surrounding the camp by stealth, a small detachment armed with swords and lances quickly advanced, and the soldier in command called out, Where is this man who claims to be king of the Jews. He called a second time, Let the man who claims to be king of the Jews come forward, whereupon Jesus emerged from his tent with a tearful Mary Magdalene and told them, I am king of the Jews. A soldier went up to him and tied his hands, whispering in his ear, Although now my prisoner, if you become my king, remember that I acted under orders from another, and should you ask me to arrest him, I'll obey you as I'm now obeying him. Jesus told him, A king does not arrest another king a god does not kill another god, and that is why ordinal y men were created, so that

arrests and killings could be left to them. A rope was also tied around his feet to prevent him from running away, and Jesus said to himself, Too late, I have already fled. Then Mary Magdalene let out a cry as if her heart were breaking, and Jesus said, You will weep for me, and all you women will weep when such an hour befalls your men or you yourselves, but know that for every tear you shed a thousand would have been shed in times to come had I not died thus. And turning to the soldier in command, he asked of him, Release these men with me, for I am king of the Jews, not they, and without further delay he stepped into the midst of the soldiers. The sun was up and hovering over the roofs of Bethany when the multitude, with Jesus in front, between two soldiers holding the ends of the rope tied around his wrists, began climbing the road to Jerusalem. Behind walked the disciples and their womenfolk, the men fuming, the women sobbing, but their anger and tears were of no avail. What are we to do, they asked themselves under their breath, should we throw ourselves on the soldiers and try to free Jesus, perhaps losing our lives in the struggle, or should we disperse before an order is also given for our arrest. On the horns of this dilemma, they did nothing, and continued following at a distance behind the retinue of soldiers. After a while they saw that the procession had come to a halt, and wondered if the order had been revoked, if now the ropes around Jesus' hands and feet would be untied, but one would have to be naive to think any such thing. Another knot, however, has come untied, that of Judas Iscariot's life, there on a fig tree by the side of the road where Jesus will pass. Dangling from a branch is the disciple who carried out his master's last wish. The soldier leading the retinue ordered two soldiers to cut the cord and lower the body, He's still warm, observed one of them. Perhaps Judas Iscariot was sitting in the tree with the noose already around his neck, patiently waiting for Jesus to appear in the distance before letting go of the branch, finally at peace with himself now that he had done his duty. Jesus drew near, and the soldiers made no attempt to restrain him. He stood, staring at Judas's face twisted by sudden death. He's still warm, the soldier said a second time, and it occurred to Jesus that he could do for Judas what he had not done for Lazarus, bring him back to life, so that on some other day and in some other place the man might have his own death, remote and obscure, instead of being the haunting symbol of betrayal. But, as we know, only the son of God has the power to bring people back to life, not this king of the Jews who walks here, his spirit broken and his hands and feet bound. The soldier in command told his men, Leave the body there to be buried by the people of Bethany, if the vultures don't eat it first, but check to see whether he is carrying anything of value. The soldiers searched but found nothing, Not a single coin, one of the soldiers said, and little wonder, for the disciple in charge of the community's funds is Matthew, who knows his job, having served as a tax collector in the days when he was called Levi. Didn't they pay him for his betrayal, asked Jesus, and Matthew, who overheard, replied, They wanted to, but he said he was in the habit of settling his accounts, and that's it, he has settled them. The procession continued, but some of the disciples lingered behind to stare in pity at the body, until John said, Let's leave it here, he was not one of us, but the other Judas, also called Thaddaeus, hastened to correct him, Whether we like it or not he will always be one of us, we may not know what to do with him, but he will go on being one of us. Let's

move on, said Peter, this is no place for us, here at the feet of Judas Iscariot. You're right, said Thomas, our place should be at Jesus' side, but that place is empty.

At last they entered Jerusalem, and Jesus was taken before the council of elders, high priests, and scribes. Delighted to see him there, the high priest said, I gave you fair warning, but you refused to listen, your pride won't save you now and your lies will damn you. What lies, asked Jesus. First, that you are king of the Jews. But I am king of the Jews. And second, that you are the son of God. Who told you that I claim to be the son of God. Everyone says so. Pay no heed to them, I am king of the Jews. So you admit you're not the son of God. How often do I have to tell you, I am king of the Jews. Be careful what you say, a statement like that is enough to have you sentenced. I stand by what I've said. Very well, you will appear before the Roman prefect, who is keen to meet the man who wishes to depose him and wrest these territories from Caesar's power. The soldiers escorted Jesus to Pilate's residence. The news had already spread that the man who claimed to be king of the Jews, the one who thrashed the money changers and set fire to their stalls, had been arrested, and people rushed to see what a king looked like when led through the streets for all to see, his hands tied like those of a common thief. And, as always happens, since not everyone is alike in this world, there were some who took pity on Jesus and some who did not, some said, Set the fellow free, he's mad, while some believed that punishing a crime serves as a warning to others, and there were as many of the latter as of the former. The disciples, mingling with the crowd, were distraught. You could easily recognize the women with them because of their tears, but one woman did not weep, she was Mary Magdalene, who grieved in silence.

The distance between the house of the high priest and the prefect's palace was not great, but Jesus thought he would never get there, not because of the hissing and jeering from the crowd, who thus expressed its disappointment with this sad figure of a king, but because he was anxious to keep his appointment with death, lest God look this way and say, What's going on, are you backing out of our agreement. At the palace gates, soldiers from Rome took charge of the prisoner, while Herod's soldiers and the Temple guards remained outside to await the verdict. Apart from a few priests no one was allowed to accompany Jesus into the palace. Seated on his throne, the prefect Pilate, for that was his name, inspected the man being led in, who looked like a beggar, with a heavy beard and bare feet, his tunic soiled with stains both old and new, the new from ripe fruit the gods created for eating rather than for showing hatred and leaving marks of shame. Standing before Pilate, the prisoner waited, his head erect, his eyes fixed on some point between himself and the prefect. Pilate knew only two kinds of culprit, the kind who lowered their eyes and the kind who stared in defiance, the first he despised, the second made him nervous, in either case he lost no time in passing sentence. But this man standing here seemed oblivious of his surroundings, and so self-assured that he might well have been a royal personage, in fact and in law, the victim of a lamentable misunderstanding who would soon have his crown, scepter, and mantle restored. Pilate finally decided the prisoner belonged in the second category, so he began the

interrogation without delay, What is your name. I am Jesus son of Joseph and was born in Bethlehem of Judaea, but having lived in Nazareth of Galilee, I am known as Jesus of Nazareth. Who was your father. I just told you, his name was Joseph. What was his trade. Carpenter. Then would you care to explain how a carpenter named Joseph came to father a king. If a king can beget carpenters, why should a carpenter not beget a king. Hearing this, one of the priests intervened, Don't forget, Pilate, this man also claims to be the son of God. That isn't true, I am only the son of man, said Jesus, but the priest continued, Don't let him deceive you, Pilate, in our religion the son of man and of God are one and the same. Pilate waved his hand indifferently, If he had proclaimed himself the son of Jupiter, though he would not be the first, then this case would be of some interest, but whether he is or is not the son of your god is a matter of no importance. Then sentence him for claiming to be king of the Jews, and we'll leave satisfied. It remains to be seen if that will satisfy me, Pilate said sharply. Jesus waited patiently for this dialogue to end and the interrogation to resume. Who do you say you are, the prefect asked Jesus. I am who I am, king of the Jews. And as king of the Jews what do you hope to gain. All that a king can expect. For example. To govern and protect his people. Protect them from what. From whatever threatens them. And from whom. From whoever opposes them. If I understand you rightly, you would defend them against Rome. That is so. And in order to protect them, would you attack the Romans. There is no other way. And expel the Romans from these lands. One thing follows from another. Then you are the enemy of Caesar. I am king of the Jews. Confess you are the enemy of Caesar. I am king of the Jews and will say no more. The high priest raised his hands to heaven in triumph, You see, Pilate, he confesses, and you cannot spare the life of one who publicly declares his hatred of you and Caesar. Sighing with exasperation, Pilate rebuked the priest, Be quiet, then turning to Jesus, asked him, Have you anything more to say. Nothing, said Jesus. Then I have no choice but to sentence you. Do as you must. How do you wish to die. I have already decided, How then, On the cross, Very well, you'll be crucified. Jesus' eyes sought and finally met those of Pilate, Can I ask a favor, he said. So long as it doesn't interfere with the sentence I've just passed. Would you have them put an inscription above my head which says who and what I am, for all to see. Nothing else. Nothing else. Pilate beckoned a secretary, who brought writing materials, and in his own hand Pilate wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews. Roused from his complacency, the high priest suddenly realized what was happening and protested, You mustn't write king of the Jews but Jesus of Nazareth who claimed to be king of the Jews. Annoyed with himself, Pilate regretted not having dismissed the prisoner with a warning, for even the most vigilant of judges could see that this fellow was no threat to anyone let alone to Caesar, and turning to the high priest, he told him dryly, Stop interfering, I have written what I have written. He signaled to the soldiers to remove the condemned man and requested water to wash his hands, as was his custom after passing sentence.

They led Jesus away and took him to a hill known as Golgotha. Despite his strong constitution, his legs soon weakened under the weight of the cross, and the centurion in charge ordered a man who had stopped to watch to relieve the prisoner of his burden.

The crowd continued to jeer and shout insults, but now and then someone would utter words of compassion. As for the disciples, they walked in a daze. A woman stopped Peter and challenged him, You also were with Jesus of Galilee, but he denied it, I don't know what you're talking about, and tried to hide in the crowd, only to meet the same woman a second time, and once more she asked him, Were you not with Jesus, and again Peter denied it with an oath, I do not know the man. And since three is a number favored by God, Peter was challenged a third time, and for the third time he swore, saying, I do not know the man. The women went to Golgotha with Jesus, a few on either side, but Mary Magdalene, who stays closest of all, is not allowed to reach him, the soldiers push her away, just as they will make everyone keep their distance from the three crosses that have been put up, two already occupied by convicted men who howl with pain, the third now ready for occupation, standing tall and erect like a column that supports the sky. Ordering Jesus to be down, the soldiers extend his arms on the crossbar. As they hammer in the first nail, piercing the flesh of his wrist between two bones, a sudden dizziness sends him back in time, he feels the pain as his father felt it before him, sees himself as he saw him on the cross at Sepphoris. Then they drove a nail through his other wrist, and he experienced that first tearing of flesh as the soldiers began to hoist the crossbar to the top of the cross, his entire weight suspended from fragile bones, and it was almost a relief when they pushed his legs upward and hammered another nail through his heels, now there is nothing more to be done but wait for death.

Jesus is dying slowly, life ebbing from him, ebbing, when suddenly the heavens overhead open wide and God appears in the same attire he wore in the boat, and His words resound throughout the earth, This is My beloved son, in whom I am well pleased. Jesus realized then that he had been tricked, as the lamb led to sacrifice is tricked, and that his life had been planned for death from the very beginning. Remembering the river of blood and suffering that would flow from his side and flood the globe, he called out to the open sky, where God could be seen smiling, Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done. Then he began expiring in the midst of a dream. He found himself back in Nazareth and saw his father shrugging his shoulders and smiling as he told him, Just as I cannot ask you all the questions, neither can you give me all the answers. There was still some life in him when he felt a sponge soaked in water and vinegar moisten his lips, and looking down, he saw a man walking away with a bucket, a staff over his shoulder. But what Jesus did not see, on the ground, was the black bowl into which his blood was dripping.

THE STONE RAFT

Translated from the Portuguese
by Giovanni Pontiero

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Every future is fabulous.

—ALEJO CARPENTIER

When Joana Carda scratched the ground with the elm branch all the dogs of Cerbère began to bark, throwing the inhabitants into panic and terror, because from time immemorial it was believed that, when these canine creatures that had always been silent started to bark, the entire universe was nearing its end. No one remembers any longer the origin of this deep-rooted superstition, or firm conviction, in many cases these are simply alternative ways of expressing the same thing, but as so often happens, having heard the story and now passing it on with fresh distortions, French grandmothers used to amuse their grandchildren with the fable that in the times of the ancient Greek myths, here, in the district of Cerbère in the Eastern Pyrenees, a dog with three heads and the above-mentioned named of Cerberus had barked when summoned by its master, the ferryman Charon. We are equally unclear about the organic change this legendary howling canine must have undergone to acquire the historically proven muteness of its degenerate one-headed offspring. Nevertheless, and this is a point of doctrine known to almost everyone, especially to those of the older generation, the dog Cerberus, as written and pronounced in English, guarded with ferocity the gates of hell, so that no soul would dare try to escape, and then, perhaps as one final act of mercy on the part of the moribund gods, all the dogs fell silent for the rest of eternity, perhaps hoping that their silence might erase the memory of the infernal regions. But since the everlasting does not last forever, as the modern age has clearly shown us, it sufficed that a few days ago and hundreds of kilometers from Cerbère, somewhere in Portugal, in a place whose name we shall record anon, a woman named Joana Carda scratched the ground with an elm branch whereupon all the dogs came onto the streets howling, dogs, let me remind you, that had never barked before. Were someone to ask Joana Carda what had possessed her to scratch the ground with an elm branch, more the gesture of a moonstruck adolescent than that of a mature woman, if she had not thought of the possible consequences of an act that seemed meaningless, and these are the most dangerous acts of all, perhaps she might reply, I don't know what came over me, the branch was lying on the ground, I picked it up and drew a line. She had no idea that it might be a magic wand. It seemed rather big for a magic wand, and besides I've always heard it said that magic wands are made of shimmering gold and crystal and have a star on top. Did you know it was an elm branch. I know very little about trees, they told me afterwards that wych-elm is the same as wych-hazel, botanically known as *ulmus*, none of these having supernatural powers, even when they change their names, but in this case I'm sure that a matchstick would have produced the same effect, Why do you say that, What must be, must be, and there's no way around it, I've heard the old people say this a thousand times, Do you believe in fate, I believe in what has to be.

In Paris they had a good laugh at the appeal made by the maire, who appeared to be telephoning from a kennel at the hour when they were feeding the dogs, and it was only at the insistent pleading of a member of parliament born and bred in the commune, and thus familiar with local legends and tales, that two qualified veterinary surgeons of the Deuxième Bureau were dispatched to the south, with the special mission of investigating this unusual phenomenon and presenting a report and a plan of action.

Meanwhile, the desperate inhabitants, reduced to near-deafness, had crisscrossed the streets and squares of the agreeable resort town suddenly transformed into a hellhole, setting out dozens of poisoned meat pies, a method of supreme simplicity and one whose effectiveness has been confirmed by experience in every age and latitude. As it happened, only one dog died, but the lesson was not lost on the survivors, who soon disappeared, yelping, barking, and howling, into the surrounding fields, where, for no apparent reason, they fell silent within a few minutes. When the veterinary surgeons finally arrived, they were presented with the sad Medor, cold, swollen, so different from the contented animal who accompanied his mistress when she went shopping, and who, old dog that he was, liked nothing better than sleeping peacefully in the sun. But since justice has not yet entirely abandoned this world, God decided, poetically, that Medor should die from eating the meat pie cooked by his beloved mistress, who, let it be said, had meant the pie for a certain bitch of the neighborhood who never left her garden alone. The older of the veterinary surgeons, confronted by that sad corpse, suggested, Let's hold an autopsy, which was pointless, for any inhabitant of Cerbère could, if he or she so wished, testify to the cause of death. But the hidden intention of the Faculty, as it was referred to in the jargon of that secret service, was to proceed in secrecy to an examination of the vocal cords of an animal that, between the quietude of death, which was now definitive, and its lifelong silence, which had seemed eternal, had finally enjoyed a few hours of speech like any other dog. Their efforts were futile, Medor did not even have any vocal cords. The surgeons were amazed, but the maire, giving his official and judicious opinion, said, That's not surprising, for centuries the dogs of Cerbère have not barked, their vocal cords had wasted away. Then why the sudden change, I don't know, I'm not a veterinary surgeon, but our worries are over, the chiens have disappeared, from wherever they are they cannot be heard. Medor, dissected and badly stitched up again, was delivered to his weeping mistress, as a living reproach, which is what reproaches are even after they are dead. On the way to the airport, where they were about to catch a plane to Paris, the veterinary surgeons agreed that they would omit from their report the curious business about the missing vocal cords. And to all appearances definitive, for that same night there was Cerberus himself out prowling, an enormous dog as tall as a tree, three-headed but mute.

About the same time, perhaps before Joana Carda had scratched the ground with the elm branch, perhaps after, a man was strolling along the beach, it was toward evening, when the noise of the waves, brief and restrained like an unprovoked sigh, can scarcely be heard, and that man, who will later say that his name is Joaquim Sassa, was walking above the tidemark that distinguishes the dry sands from the wet, and from time to time he bent down to pick up a shell, a crab's claw, a strand of green seaweed, we often while away the hours in this way, and this solitary passerby was doing likewise. Since he had neither pockets nor sack to hoard his findings, he put the lifeless remnants back in the water when his hands were full, let the sea have what belongs to the sea, let the earth remain with the earth. But every rule has its exceptions, and Joaquim Sassa picked up a stone he had seen ahead, beyond the reach of the tides, a stone as large and heavy as a

discus and irregular in shape. If it had been like the others, light, with smooth outlines, like those stones that fit easily between the thumb and the index finger, then Joaquim Sassa would have skimmed it on the surface of the water, watching it bounce, childishly satisfied with his own ability, and finally sink, the impetus gone, a stone that appeared to have its destiny traced out, dried by the sun, dampened only by the rain, but now finally sinking into the dark depths to wait a million years, until this sea evaporates, or, receding, brings the stone back to land for another million years, allowing sufficient time for another Joaquim Sassa to come down to the beach and unwittingly perform the same gesture and movement, let no man say I will not do it, for no stone is secure and firm.

On the southern shores, at this tepid hour, there is someone having one last dip, swimming, playing with a ball, diving under the waves, or taking it easy on an air mattress, or feeling the first waft of the evening breeze on his skin, or shifting his position to receive one last caress from the sun that is about to settle momentarily on the sea, the longest moment of all, for we look at the sun and the sun allows itself to be watched. But here, on this northern shore where Joaquim Sassa is carrying a stone, so heavy that his arms are already tiring, the breeze is chilly, the sun is already halfway down, and there is not a sea gull in sight flying over the waters. Joaquim Sassa has thrown the stone, expecting it to fall a few paces away, not very far from where he's standing, each of us is obliged to know his own strength, there were not even any witnesses there to mock the efforts of the frustrated discus thrower, it was he who was prepared to laugh at himself, but things did not turn out as he expected, the stone, dark and heavy, went up into the air, came down and hit the surface of the water, the impact sent it back up in a great flight or leap, and down it came again, and then up, and finally it sank in the distance, unless the whiteness we have just seen some distance away is not just the froth of a breaking wave. How did that happen, Joaquim Sassa mused in bewilderment, how could I, weak as I am, have thrown such a heavy stone so far, way out on that sea that is already darkening, and there is no one here to say, Well done, Joaquim Sassa, I'm your witness for the Guinness Book of Records, such a feat cannot be ignored, what rotten luck, if I were to tell people what has happened, they would call me a liar. A towering wave came in from the open sea, foaming and gushing, the stone finally dropped into the water, this evokes the rivers of childhood, for anyone who had rivers in his childhood, this concentric undulation caused by stones thrown into the water. Joaquim Sassa ran up the shore, and the wave broke on the sand, dragging with it shells, crab's claws, green algae, but also other species, gulfweed, coralline, sea-tangle, and a small stone, light, of the type that can fit easily between the thumb and the index finger. How many years since it has seen the light of the sun.

Writing is extremely difficult, it is an enormous responsibility, you need only think of the exhausting work involved in setting out events in chronological order, first this one, then that, or, if more conducive to the desired effect, today's event before yesterday's

episode, and other no less risky acrobatics, presenting the past as if it were something new, or the present as a continuous process with neither beginning nor end, but, however hard writers might try, there is one feat they cannot achieve, and that is to put into writing, in the same tense, two events that have occurred simultaneously. Some believe the difficulty can be solved by dividing the page into two columns, side by side, but this proposal is too simple, because the one will have been written first and the other afterwards, nor may we forget that the reader will have to read this one first and then the other one, or vice versa. The people who come off best are the opera singers, each with his or her own part to sing, three, four, five, six in all among the tenors, basses, sopranos, and baritones, all singing different words, the cynic mocking, for example, the ingénue pleading, the gallant lover slow in coming to her aid, what interests the operagoer is the music, but the reader is not like this, he wants everything explained, syllable by syllable, one after the other, as they are shown here. That is why, having first spoken of Joaquim Sassa, only now will we mention Pedro Orce, when in fact Joaquim Sassa threw the stone into the sea and Pedro Orce rose from his chair at the very same instant, although according to the clocks there was an hour's difference, because the latter happened to be in Spain and the former in Portugal.

It is common knowledge that every effect has its cause, and this is a universal truth, but it is impossible to avoid certain errors of judgment, or of simple identification, for we might think that this effect comes from that cause, when after all it was some other cause, beyond any understanding we possess or any knowledge we think we possess. For example, there appeared to be proof that if the dogs of Cerbère barked it was because Joana Carda scratched the ground with an elm branch, and yet only a very credulous child, if any child has survived from the golden decades of credulity, or an innocent one, if the holy name of innocence can thus be taken in vain, only a child capable of believing that by closing its hands it has trapped the sunlight inside would believe that dogs could bark that had never barked before, for reasons as much historical as physiological. In these tens and tens of thousands of hamlets, villages, towns, and cities, there are many people who would swear that they were the cause or causes of the barking of the dogs and of all that was to follow, because they slammed a door, or split a fingernail, or picked a fruit, or drew back the curtain, or lit a cigarette, or died, or, not the same people, were born, these hypotheses about death and birth would be more difficult to credit, bearing in mind that we are the ones who would have to propose them, for no child comes out of its mother's womb speaking, just as no one speaks any more once he has entered the womb of the earth. And there is no point in adding that any one of us has reasons enough for judging himself the cause of all effects, the reasons we have just mentioned as well as those that are our exclusive contribution to the functioning of the world, and I should dearly like to know what it will be like when people and the effects they alone cause will exist no more, best not to think of such an enormity, for it is enough to make one dizzy, but it will be quite sufficient for some tiny animals, some insects, to survive for there still to be worlds, the world of the ant and the cicada, for example, they will not draw back curtains, they will not look at themselves in the mirror, and what does it matter, after all,

the only great truth is that the world cannot die.

Pedro Orce would say, if he so dared, that what caused the earth to tremble were his feet hitting the floor when he rose from the chair, great presumption on his part, if not ours, since we are frivolously expressing doubt, if every person leaves at least one sign in the world, this could be that of Pedro Orce, which is why he declares, I put my feet on the ground and the earth shook. It was an extraordinary trembling, so much so that no one appeared to have felt it, and even now, after two minutes, as the wave on the beach began to recede and Joaquim Sassa said to himself, If I were to tell anyone they would call me a liar, the earth still vibrates just as the chord continues to vibrate although it can no longer be heard, Pedro Orce can feel it in the soles of his feet, he continues to feel it as he leaves the pharmacy and steps out into the street, and no one there notices a thing, it's like watching a star and saying, What lovely light, what a beautiful star, without knowing that it went out in mid-sentence, and your children and grandchildren will repeat the same words, poor things, they speak of what is dead and say that it is alive, this deception is not confined to the science of astronomy. Here precisely the opposite happens, everyone would swear that the earth is firm and only Pedro Orce would say that it is trembling, just as well he kept his mouth shut and did not run away in terror, besides the walls are not swaying, the lamps hanging from the ceiling are as straight as a plumb line, and the little caged birds, who are usually the first to sound the alarm, doze peacefully on their perches, each with its head tucked under one wing, the needle of the seismograph has traced and continues to trace a straight horizontal line on the millimetric graph paper.

The next morning, a man was crossing an uncultivated plain, part scrubland, part swampy pasture, he was making his way along paths and tracks between the trees, poplars and ash, as elevated as the names by which they are known, and clumps of tamarisks, with their African scent, this man could not have chosen greater solitude or a loftier sky, and overhead, making the most incredible din, a flock of starlings followed him, so many of them that they formed a huge dark cloud, like the prelude to a storm. Whenever he paused the starlings began to fly in a circle or swooped noisily to roost in a tree, disappearing amid the branches until all the leaves were shaking and the crown echoed with harsh, strident sounds, giving the impression that some ferocious battle was being fought inside. José Anaíço started walking again, for that was his name, and the starlings took sudden flight, all at once, vruuuuuuuuuu. If we did not know this man, and started guessing, we might decide that he was a bird-catcher by trade or, like the snake, had the power to charm and entice, when, in fact, José Anaíço is as puzzled as we are about the reason for this winged festivity. What can these creatures desire of me, do not wonder at this archaic phrasing, for there are days when one does not feel like using commonplace words.

The man was traveling from east to west, for this was the route he favored, but, forced out of his way by a great reservoir, he now turned south around the bend, hugging the water's edge. By late morning the temperature will soar, but meanwhile there is a

fresh, clean breeze, what a pity one cannot store it in one's pocket and keep it there until it is needed once the heat builds up. José Anaíço was turning these thoughts over in his mind as he walked, vague and involuntary as if they did not belong to him, when he suddenly became aware that the starlings had stayed behind, were fluttering over where the road curves to skirt the reservoir, their behavior was quite extraordinary, but when all is said and done, whoever goes, goes, whoever remains, remains, good-bye little birds. José Anaíço had now circled the lake, an awkward journey that took nearly half an hour, amid thistles and nettles, and he picked up his original route, proceeding as he had begun, east to west like the sun, when suddenly, vruuuu, the starlings reappeared, where had they been hiding. Well, here's something for which there is no explanation. If a flock of starlings accompanies a man on his morning stroll, like a dog faithful to his master, and waits for him the time it takes to go around a reservoir, and then follows him as before, one doesn't ask him to explain or investigate their motives, birds don't have reasons, just instincts, often vague and involuntary as if they were not part of us, we spoke about instincts, but also about reasons and motives. So let us not ask José Anaíço who he is and what he does for a living, where he comes from and where he is going, whatever we find out about him, we shall only find out from him, and this description, this sketchy information will also have to serve for Joana Carda and her elm branch, for Joaquim Sassa and the stone he threw into the sea, for Pedro Orce and the chair he got up from, life does not begin when people are born, if it were so, each day would be a day gained, life begins much later, and how often too late, not to mention those lives that have no sooner begun than they are over, which has led one poet to exclaim, Ah, who will write the history of what might have been.

And now this woman called Maria Guavaira, such a strange name, who climbed up into the attic of the house and found an old sock, of the real old-fashioned kind that were used to keep money as safely as in any bank vault, symbolic hoardings, gratuitous savings, and upon finding the sock empty she set about unraveling the stitches to amuse herself, having nothing else with which to occupy her hands. An hour passed and another and yet another, and the long strand of blue wool is still unwinding, yet the sock does not appear to get any smaller, the four enigmas already mentioned were not enough, which shows us that at least on this occasion the contents can be greater than the container. The sound of the waves does not reach this silent house, the shadow of passing birds does not darken the window, there must be dogs but they do not bark, the earth, if it trembled, trembles no more. At the feet of the woman unraveling the thread is the mountain that goes on growing. Maria Guavaira is not called Ariadne, with this thread we shall not emerge from the labyrinth, perhaps it will help us to succeed at last in losing ourselves. Where is the end of this thread.

The first crack appeared in a large slab of natural stone, as smooth as the table of the winds, somewhere in these mountains of Alberes, which, at the eastern end of the Pyrenees, slope gently down to the sea and where the ill-starred dogs of Cerbère now rove, an allusion that is not inappropriate in time or place, for all these things, despite their appearances, are interconnected. Excluded, as has been stated, from any domestic sustenance, and consequently forced by necessity to recall in his unconscious memory the skills of his predatory ancestors in order to catch some stray rabbit, one of those dogs, Ardent by name and endowed with the acute hearing characteristic of the species, must have heard the stone cracking, for, although incapable of sniffing, the dog approached the stone, dilating his nostrils, his hairs bristling as much from curiosity as from fear. The crack, ever so fine, would remind any human observer of a line drawn with the sharpened point of a pencil, altogether different from that other line made with a branch on hard soil or in the loose, soft dust, or in the mud, should we choose to waste our time on such daydreams. But as the dog was approaching, the crack grew bigger, grew deeper and began to spread, splitting the stone up to the edges of the slab, and then all the way across, there was room to put a hand inside, a whole arm in width and length, had there been any man around with enough courage to cope with this phenomenon. The dog Ardent prowled around, agitated, yet unable to escape, attracted by the snake of which neither the head nor the tail could be seen, and suddenly he was lost, not knowing on which side to stay, whether in France, where he now found himself, or in Spain, no more than three spans away. But this dog, thanks be to God, was not one of those creatures who adapt to situations, the proof being that, with a single jump, he leapt over the abyss, if you'll pardon the obvious exaggeration in this expression, and ended up on this side, he preferred the infernal regions, and we shall never know what longings influence a dog's soul, what dreams, what temptations.

The second crack, but for the world the first, appeared a considerable distance away, toward the Bay of Biscay, not far from a place called Roncevalles, alas all too famous in the history of Charlemagne and his twelve Paladins, where Roland died when he blew on Oli-phaut, without Angelica or Durandal to come to his assistance. There, descending along the northeastern strip of the Sierra Abodi, runs the River Irati, which, originating in France, flows into the Spanish Erro, in its turn an affluent of the Aragón, which is a tributary of the Ebro, which, bearing all their waters, will finally deposit them in the Mediterranean. At the bottom of the valley, on the edge of the Irati, there is a town, Orbaiceta by name, and upstream exists a dam, or weir, as it is called in those parts.

It is time to explain that what is reported here, or may come to be reported, is the truth and nothing but the truth, as you may verify on any map, provided it is sufficiently comprehensive to include certain details that might seem insignificant, for that is the virtue of maps, they show what can be done with limited space, they foresee that everything can happen therein. And it does. We've already mentioned the rod of destiny, we've already shown that a stone, even if it be removed from the highest tidemark, can end up falling into the sea or make its way back to the shore, now it is the turn of

Orbaiceta, where, after the salutary upheaval caused by the construction of the dam many years ago, calm had been restored, a city in the Province of Navarre and dormant amid mountains, now thrown into turmoil once more. For some days Orbaiceta became the nerve center of Europe, if not of the world, invaded by government ministers, politicians, civil and military authorities, geologists and geographers, journalists and mineralogists, photographers, film and television crews, engineers of every kind, inspectors and sightseers. But Orbaiceta's fame will not last for long, a few fleeting days, not much longer than the roses of Malherbe, and how long could the latter, grown on poor soil, have lasted, but we are talking about Orbaiceta, nothing else, until some more notable event is reported elsewhere, which is what happens with notable events.

In the history of rivers there had never been anything like it, water flowing eternally and suddenly it flows no more, like a tap abruptly turned off, as when someone is washing his hands in a basin after shutting off the tap, he pulls the plug, the water drains away, goes down the pipe, disappears, what has remained in the enameled basin will soon evaporate. To put it more aptly, the waters of the Irati retreated like waves that ebb from the shore and vanish, leaving the riverbed exposed, nothing but pebbles, mud, slime, fishes that gasp as they leap and die, then sudden silence.

The engineers were not on the spot when this incredible event took place, but they noticed that something abnormal had occurred, the dials on the observation panels indicated that the river had stopped feeding the great aquatic basin. Three technicians set off in a jeep to investigate the intriguing development, they made their way along the edge of the weir, considered the different possible hypotheses, they had plenty of time to do so for they traveled almost five kilometers, and one of those hypotheses was that a subsidence or landslide on the mountain might have diverted the river's course, another was that it might be the work of the French, typical Gallic perfidy, notwithstanding the bilateral agreement about fluvial waters and their hydroelectric uses, yet another hypothesis, and the most radical of all, was that the source, the fountainhead, the spring, had dried up, the eternity that appeared to exist but did not exist after all. On this point, opinions were divided. One of the engineers, a quiet man, the thoughtful type, and someone who enjoyed life in Orbaiceta, feared that they might send him to some remote place, the others rubbed their hands with glee, perhaps they might be transferred to one of the dams on the Tagus, or closer to Madrid and the Gran Via. Debating these personal worries they reached the far end of the reservoir, where they found a drainage ditch but no river, nothing but a thin trickle of water still seeping from the soft earth, a muddy swirl that would not have enough power to turn a toy waterwheel. Where the devil can the river have got to, exclaimed the driver of the jeep, and he couldn't have been more forthright and explicit. Puzzled, amazed, uneasy and concerned, the engineers once more began discussing among themselves the various hypotheses mentioned earlier, and when they saw that there was nothing to be gained from this discussion, they returned to the offices attached to the dam, then went on to Orbaiceta where the administrators awaited them, having already been informed of the river's mysterious disappearance. There were

recriminations, exclamations of disbelief, telephone calls to Pamplona and Madrid, and the final outcome of these exhausting discussions was expressed in an order of the utmost simplicity, broken down into three successive and complementary stages, follow the course of the river upstream, find out what happened, and say nothing to the French.

Next morning before sunrise, the expedition set out for the frontier, keeping alongside or in sight of the parched river, and when the inspectors arrived, weary, they realized that there would be no more Irati. Through a crack that could not have been more than three meters wide, the waters rushed into the earth, roaring like a tiny Niagara. On the other side, the French had already started to gather, it would have been sublimely naive to think that their neighbors, astute and Cartesian, would have failed to notice the phenomenon, but at least they showed themselves to be as amazed and dumbfounded as the Spaniards on this side, and all brothers in ignorance. The two sides got around to speaking, but the conversation was neither wide-ranging nor profitable, little more than exclamations of justified alarm, a tentative airing of new hypotheses on the part of the Spaniards, in short, a general atmosphere of irritation that could find no obvious target, the French were soon smiling, after all they continued to be masters of the river down to the frontier, they would not need to modify their maps.

That afternoon, helicopters from both countries flew over the area, took photographs, observers were lowered with windlasses and suspended over the cataract, they looked and saw nothing, only the black gaping hole and the curving line and the shining surface of the water. In order to make some useful progress, the municipal authorities of Orbaiceta on the Spanish side, and of Larrau on the French side, met near the river under a tent set up for the occasion and dominated by the three flags, the Spanish bicolor and the French tricolor alongside the flag of Navarre, with the intention of examining the tourist potential of a natural phenomenon that must certainly be unique in the world, and how it might be exploited to their mutual advantage. Having considered the inadequacy and undoubtedly makeshift nature of the methods of analysis at their disposal, the gathering failed to draw up any document defining the obligations and rights of each party, so a joint commission was nominated and entrusted with preparing an agenda for another formal meeting, with all possible haste. At the last minute, however, a complication arose that upset the relative consensus they had reached, this being the almost simultaneous interventions, in Madrid and Paris, of the two States' delegates to the permanent commission charged with settling boundary disputes. These gentlemen expressed grave misgivings. The first thing to do was to see where the hole was opening up, whether toward the Spanish side or toward the French side. It seemed a trivial detail, but once the essentials had been explained, the delicacy of the matter became clear. It was clearly beyond question that from now on the Irati belonged entirely to France, under the jurisdiction of the district authorities in the Lower Pyrenees, but if the crack was entirely on the Spanish side, in the province of Navarre, further negotiations would be needed, since both countries, in a sense, would bear an equal share. If, on the other hand, the crack extended to the French side as well, then the problem was entirely

French, just as the respective primary resources, the river and the gaping hole, belonged to them. Faced with this new situation, the two authorities, concealing any mental reservations, agreed to keep in touch until some solution could be found to this crucial problem. In their turn, with a joint declaration that had been laboriously drafted, the two nations' Ministries for Foreign Affairs announced their intention of pursuing urgent talks within the scope of the aforesaid permanent commission for boundary matters, to be advised, as one would expect, by their respective teams of geodetic experts.

It was about this time that vast numbers of geologists from all over the world began to appear on the scene. Between Orbaiceta and Larrau there were already a considerable number of foreign geologists, if not quite as many as suggested earlier. But now all the wise men of this and other lands began to arrive in force, the inspectors of landslides and natural disasters, erratic strata and blocks, each carrying a tiny hammer in one hand, tapping on everything that so much as looked like stone. A French journalist called Michel, something of a wit, quipped to a Spanish colleague, a serious fellow named Miguel, who had already reported to Madrid that the crack was de-fi-nite-ly Spanish, or, to speak in geographical and nationalist terms, Navarrese, Why don't you people just keep it, was what the insolent Frenchman said, if the crack gives you so much pleasure and you need it so badly, after all, in the Cirque de Gavarnie alone we have a waterfall four hundred and twenty meters high, we don't need any inverted artesian wells. Miguel could have replied that on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees there are also plenty of waterfalls, and some of them very fine and high, but the problem was different here, a waterfall open to the sky presents no mystery, always looks the same, in full view of everyone, while in the case of the Irati, you can see where the crack originates, but no one knows where it ends, just like life itself. But it was another journalist, a Galician, moreover, who was passing through, as often happens with Galicians, who came up with the question that had yet to be asked, Where does this water go. This was at a time when geologists in both camps were engaged in scientific discussions, and the question, like that of a timid child, was barely heard by the person who is now putting it on record. Since the accent was Galician, therefore discreet and cautious, it was drowned out by Gallic rapture and Castilian bluster, but then others arrived to repeat the question, proudly claiming to have thought of it first, but then no one pays any heed to tiny nations, this is not a persecution mania, but a historical fact. The debate among the wise men had become almost incomprehensible for the layman, yet two basic theories emerged nonetheless from their discussions, that of the monoglaciologists and that of the polyglaciologists, both inflexible, and soon in opposition, like two conflicting religions, the one monotheist, the other polytheist. Certain statements even sounded interesting, such as the one about deformations, certain deformations that might be due either to a tectonic elevation or to an isotonic compensation for erosion. All the more so, they added, since our examination of the actual forms of the cordillera allows us to conclude that it is not old, that is to say, not old in geological terms. All this, probably, had something to do with the crack. After all, when a mountain is subjected to such play of traction, it is not surprising that there comes a day when it finds itself obliged to give

way, to splinter, to collapse, or, as in this instance, to crack open. This was not the case with the great slab lying inert on the mountains of Alberes, but the geologists had not seen it, the slab was far away, in a remote spot, no one came near it, the dog Ardent chased after the rabbit and did not return.

After two days, the members of the commission for boundaries were engaged in field work, taking measurements with their theodolites, checking against their tables, calculating with their instruments, and comparing all these data against the aerial photographs, the French somewhat disgruntled because there was no longer any doubt that the crack was Spanish, as the journalist Miguel had been the first to argue, when suddenly there was news of another fracture. No more was said about tranquil Orbaiceta nor about the River Irati, now cut off, *sic transit gloria mundi* and of Navarre. The journalists, some of whom were women, swarmed on to the crucial site in the Eastern Pyrenees, fortunately endowed with excellent means of access, so many and so excellent that within a few hours everyone who mattered was assembled there, people had even come from as far away as Toulouse and Barcelona. The highways were congested, and by the time the police on both sides of the border intervened to divert the flow of traffic it was much too late, the cars stretched for kilometer after kilometer, mechanical chaos, it soon became necessary to take drastic measures, to make everyone turn back in the other lane, which meant pulling down barriers, jamming the sides of the road with cars, an inferno, the Greeks had good reason to locate hell in this region. Particularly useful in dealing with the crisis were the helicopters, those flying constructions or airships capable of landing almost anywhere, and, whenever it proves impossible to land, they imitate the hummingbird, drawing close until they almost touch the flower, the passengers do not need a ladder, a little jump and that is all, they enter the corolla at once, amid the stamens and pistils, breathing in the aroma, frequently that of naphtha and charred flesh. Heads lowered, they set off running, anxious to find out what has happened, some of them have come straight from the Irati, already experienced in structural geology, but not equipped to cope with anything quite like this.

The crack cuts across the road and the entire parking area and runs on, thinning out on both sides, heading toward the valley, where it disappears from sight, and winding up the mountain slope, until it finally vanishes among the bushes. We are standing right on the frontier, the real one, the line of separation in this nameless limbo between the stations of the two police forces, the *aduana* and the *douane*, *la bandera* and *le drapeau*. At a prudent distance, for one cannot rule out the possibility of a landslide if the edges of the ruptured area should cave in, technicians exchange phrases devoid of any meaning or purpose, one cannot refer to that babble of voices as dialogue, and, to make matters worse, use loudspeakers to hear each other better, while the experts, inside the pavilions, speak on the telephone, one minute among themselves, the next with Madrid and Paris. No sooner have they landed than the journalists are off to discover what happened, and they all pick up the same story with some embroidered variants, which they will embellish further with their imagination, but in simple language, the person who

vouched for the occurrence was the motorist who, passing through as darkness fell, sensed his car give a sudden lurch, as if the wheels had bounced across a pothole in the middle of the road, and he got out to see what it was, thinking they might be resurfacing the road and had unwisely forgotten to put up a warning sign. By this time, the crack was half a span wide and at most some four meters long. The man, who was Portuguese, called Sousa, and traveling with his wife and parents-in-law, went back to the car and told them, It looks as if we're already in Portugal, would you believe it, there's an enormous pothole in the road, it's a miracle it didn't flatten the tires or snap the axle. It was no pothole, nor was it enormous, but the words, as we have written them, have one real advantage, simply because they are exaggerated, they allay fear, calm the nerves, why, precisely because they dramatize. The wife, without paying much attention to what he said, replied, You'd better take a look, and he decided to heed her advice, although that was not her intention, the woman's words were more an exclamation than an order, one of those exclamations that often serve as a reply, he got out of the car again and went to check the tires, fortunately there was no apparent damage. Within the next few days, back in his native Portugal, he will become a hero, be interviewed on radio and television, make statements to the press. You were the first to see it happen, Senhor Sousa, give us your impression of that terrible moment. He will repeat his story countless times, and he will always finish off his embroidered version of events with an anxious, rhetorical question, calculated to make the listener shudder as he himself shudders with delicious ecstasy. Just think, if the hole had been bigger, as they say it now is, we would have fallen in, God knows how far down, and the Galician must have been thinking more or less the same when he asked, as you may recall, Where does that water go.

How far, that is the crucial question. The first practical step would be to examine the damage, to check the depth, and then to study, define, and put into operation the appropriate measures in order to fill in the breach, no word could be more apt, it is universal, after all, and one is tempted to believe that someone thought of it one day, or invented it, so that it could be fittingly invoked whenever the earth should crack open. The investigation, once completed, registered a depth of little more than twenty meters, of no real significance, given the resources of modern engineering in carrying out public works. From Spain and from France, from near and from afar, concrete mixers were brought in, those interesting machines that with their simultaneous movements remind one of the earth in space, of rotation, of removal, and upon reaching the spot they poured out the concrete, torrential, measured to achieve the right effect with great quantities of rough stones and fast-setting cement. The filling-up operation was well under way when one imaginative expert suggested that they should attach some clamps, a method once used to heal human wounds, large clamps made of steel, which would secure the edges, assisting, as it were, and speeding up the process of closing the breach. The idea was approved by the bilateral commission coping with the emergency, the Spanish and French metallurgists immediately began carrying out the necessary tests, checking the alloy, the thickness and the section of the material, the relationship between the size of the spike that would be driven into the ground and the space

covered, in short, technical details intended for the specialist and here mentioned somewhat superficially. The crack swallowed up the torrent of stones and gray sludge as if it were the River Irati pouring into the depths of the land, deep echoes could be heard coming from the earth, it was even speculated that there might be some gigantic hollow down below, a cavern, some kind of insatiable gorge, And if this is the case, there is no point in carrying on, you simply build a bridge over the gap, probably the easiest and most economical solution of all, and bring in the Italians, who have a great deal of experience when it comes to building viaducts. But, after God knows how many tons and cubic meters had been poured in, the sounding line registered a depth of seventeen meters, then fifteen, then twelve, the level of the concrete went on rising, the battle was won. The technicians, laborers, and policemen embraced each other, flags were waved, the television announcers, excited, read the latest bulletins and gave their own opinions, praising this titanic struggle, this collective victory, international solidarity in action, even from Portugal, that tiny country, a convoy of ten concrete mixers set out, they have a long journey ahead, more than one thousand five hundred kilometers, an extraordinary achievement, the cement they are carrying won't be necessary, but history will remember their symbolic gesture.

When the gap had finally been filled in, the general excitement exploded into wild euphoria, as if this were another New Year's Eve, with fireworks and the bullfight of São Silvestre. The air vibrated with the horns of the motorists who had not budged from the spot even after the roadways had been cleared, the trucks let off the hoarse bellowing of their avertisseurs and bocinas, and the helicopters hovered triumphantly overhead, like seraphim endowed with powers that were probably far from celestial. The cameras clicked incessantly, the television crews, overcoming their fears, moved in, and there, close to the edges of the crack that no longer existed, they filmed great layers of the rough concrete, the evidence of man's victory over the vagaries of nature. And this was how spectators, remote from the scene, in the comfort and safety of their own homes, were able to see pictures transmitted directly from the Franco-Spanish frontier at Coll de Pertus, laughing and clapping their hands and celebrating the event as if they themselves had been responsible for its success, this was how they saw, unable to believe their own eyes, the concrete surface, still moist, begin to shift and sink, as if the enormous mass were about to be sucked under, slowly but surely, until the gaping breach became visible once more. The crack had not widened, and this could only mean one thing, namely that the depth of the hole was no longer twenty meters, as before, but much deeper, God alone knew just how deep. The workers drew back in horror, but a sense of professional duty, which had become second nature, kept the cameras turning, shaking in their holders' hands, and the world could now see faces change their expression, in the wild panic shouting could be heard, cries of horror, there was a general stampede, within seconds the parking area was deserted, the concrete mixers were abandoned, here and there some were still working, the drums turning, filled with concrete that three minutes ago ceased to be necessary and was now quite futile.

For the first time, a shudder of fear went through the peninsula and nearby Europe. In Cerbère, not very far away, the people, running impulsively out into the streets like their dogs before them, said to each other, It was written, whensoever they should bark, the world would end, but it was not quite like that, it had never been written, but great moments call for great words and it is difficult to say why this expression, It was written, figures so prominently in books recording prophetic statements. With greater justification than anyone else, the terror-stricken inhabitants of Cerbère began to abandon the town, migrating en masse onto firmer soil, in the hope that they would be safe there from the world's encroaching end. In Banyuls-sur-Mer, Port-Vendrès, and Collioure, to mention only the villages and hamlets dotted along the coastline, there was not a living soul to be seen. The dead souls, having died, stayed behind, with that persistent indifference that distinguishes them from the rest of humanity, if anyone ever said otherwise, or suggested, for example, that Fernando Pessoa visited Ricardo Reis, the one being dead and the other alive, it was his foolish imagination and nothing else. But one of these dead men, in Collioure, stirred ever so slightly, as if hesitating, shall I go or not, but never into France, he alone knew where, and perhaps one day we shall know too.

Amid the thousand items of news, opinions, commentaries, and roundtable conferences that occupied the press, television, and radio the following day, the brief statement by an orthodox seismologist passed almost unnoticed. What I should dearly like to know is why all this is happening without so much as an earth tremor, to which another seismologist, of the modern school, pragmatic and flexible, replied, All will be explained in due course. Now, in a village in southern Spain, a man, listening to these conflicting opinions, left his house and set off for the city of Granada, to tell the television men that he had felt an earth tremor more than a week ago, that he had not spoken up sooner because he feared that no one would believe him, and that he was now here in person, so that people could see how a simple man can be more sensitive than, all the seismologists in the world put together. As luck would have it, a journalist listened to what he had to say, either out of heartfelt sympathy or because he was intrigued by the unusual occurrence, and this latest scoop was summed up in four lines, and, although there were no pictures, the news was given on television that night, with a cautious smile. Next day, Portuguese television, lacking any material of its own, took up the man's story and developed it further by interviewing a specialist in psychic phenomena who, to judge from his one important statement, could add nothing to what was already known on the subject, As in all situations of this kind, everything depends on one's sensibility.

Much has been said here about causes and effects, taking great care to weigh the facts, proceed logically, be guided by common sense, and reserve any judgment, for it must be clear to all that you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. It is only natural and right, therefore, that we should doubt that the line drawn on the ground by Joana Carda with an elm branch was the direct cause of the Pyrenees' cracking open, which is what has been insinuated from the beginning. But one cannot deny this other fact, which is entirely true, that Joaquim Sassa went off in search of Pedro Orce after having heard

his name mentioned in the evening news bulletin, and having listened to what he had to say.

A loving mother, Europe was saddened by the misfortune of her westernmost lands. Along the entire Pyrenean cordillera, the granite split open, the cracks multiplied, other roads appeared to have been severed, other streams and torrents sank into the depths until they disappeared. Seen from the air, a continuous black line suddenly opened up on the snowcapped peaks like a trail of dust, where the snow was sliding and disappearing with the white sound of a tiny avalanche. The helicopters came and went incessantly, observing the summits and valleys as a swarm with experts and specialists of every kind who might prove to be useful, geologists, these present of their own accord, although their habitual domain was currently obstructed, seismologists, perplexed, because the earth insisted on remaining firm, without so much as a tremor, not even a vibration, and also volcanologists, secretly hopeful, despite the clear sky, free of any signs of smoke or fire, the perfect, blue glaze of an August sky. The trail of smoke was merely a comparison, and we should never take comparisons literally, this or any other, unless we learn to treat them with caution. Human strength could do nothing on behalf of a cordillera that was opening up like a pomegranate, with no apparent suffering, and simply, who are we to know, because it had matured and its time had come. Only forty-eight hours after Pedro Orce had said what he said on television, it was no longer possible to cross the frontier at any point from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, either on foot or by surface transport. And in the low-lying coastlands, the seas, each from its own side, began to find their way into new channels, mysterious unknown gorges, increasingly deeper, with those sheer walls, dropping vertically all the way, the clean cut exposing the arrangement of ancient and modern strata, the synclines, the intercalations of clay, the conglomerates, the extensive concretions of soft limestone and sandstone, the beds of shale, the black, siliceous rocks, the granites, and all the rest, which cannot be listed here because of the narrator's lack of knowledge and time. Now we know what reply should have been given to the Galician who asked, Where does this water go. It ends up in the sea, we should tell him, transformed into the finest rain, into dust, into a waterfall, depending on the height from which it drops and on the amount of water, no, no we are not talking about the Irati, that is some distance away, but you can be sure that everything will end up by conforming to the laws of nature, as jets of water, even as a rainbow, once the sun is able to penetrate the somber depths.

On both sides of the frontier, along a narrow strip extending about a hundred kilometers, the population abandoned their homes and withdrew to the relative security of the interior, but matters were complicated in the case of Andorra, which we were inexcusably forgetting, that's what tends to happen to little countries, which could just as easily have turned out to be bigger. At the beginning, as there was great uncertainty about the final outcome of the cracks, they existed on both sides, on the two frontiers, and also because some of the inhabitants were Spanish, others French, and yet others Andorran, each one gravitated to his native soil, so to speak, or was influenced by what seemed right or in his best interests at that moment, even if it meant breaking up families and other relationships. Finally, the continuous line of the fracture settled once and for all on the French border, several thousand French nationals were evacuated by

air, in a brilliant rescue operation that was given the code name Mitre d'Evêque, a name that incurred the grave displeasure of the Bishop of Urgel, who unintentionally provided the inspiration, but this did not detract from his satisfaction when he realized that in future he would become the sole overlord of the principality, provided that the latter, barely encircled by the Spanish side, did not end up in the sea. All that was left in the desert created by the general evacuation were some military detachments who went around with a prayer on their lips, under the constant surveillance of the helicopters hovering overhead, ready to gather up personnel at the slightest sign of any geological instability, and, as one might expect, the inevitable looters, generally alone, for catastrophes always bring snakes out of their lairs, or their eggs, and who, in this case, just like the soldiers who shot them without pity or remorse, also went around with a prayer on their lips, just which prayer depended on the faith they professed, every living being has the right to the love and protection of his god, bearing in mind, in allowance and defense of the robbers, that one could argue that those who have abandoned their homes do not deserve to live there and enjoy them, besides, as the proverb rightly says, All birds eat corn, only the sparrow pays, let each of you decide whether there is any connection to be found between the general principle and this particular case.

This might be the moment to express our regret that this true story is not the libretto of an opera, for if it were we would stage an ensemble the like of which has never been heard before, with twenty voices comprising lyric and dramatic sopranos of every timbre, one by one, or in chorus, in succession or simultaneously, trilling their parts, namely the joint sessions of the Spanish and Portuguese governments, the total disruption of the electric transport system, the resolution adopted by the European Community, the stand taken by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the flight of tourists in panic, the attacks on airplanes, the congestion of traffic on the roads, the meeting between Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço, their encounter with Pedro Orce, the agitation of the bulls in Spain, the nervousness of the horses in Portugal, the disquiet on the coasts of the Mediterranean, the disturbance of tides, the flight of the rich and their fortunes, shortly there will be no singers left onstage. Those who are curious, not to say skeptical, will want to know what is causing all these serious developments, as if the simple breaking up of the Pyrenees were not enough for them, with rivers turning into waterfalls and tides advancing several kilometers inland, after a recession that has lasted millions of years. At this point the hand falters, how can it plausibly write the words that are about to follow, words that will inevitably throw everything into jeopardy, all the more so since it is becoming extremely difficult, should such a thing ever be possible in life, to separate truth from fantasy. But now we must finish off what has remained in suspense, by striving to transform with words what can probably only be transformed with words, the moment has arrived, it has finally come, to reveal that the Iberian peninsula has suddenly broken away, all in one uniform piece, leaving a gap of ten whole meters, who would believe it, the Pyrenees have opened up from top to bottom as if some invisible ax had descended from on high, penetrating the deep cracks, clawing stone and earth down into the sea. Now we can certainly see the Irati dropping a thousand meters, falling headlong into infinity, the Irati

opens to the wind and sun, a crystal fan or the tail of a bird of paradise, the first rainbow poised over the abyss, the first vertigo of the hawk hovering with drenched wings, tinged with seven colors. And we should also be able to see the Visaurin, Monte Perdido, the peaks of the Perdiguer and of Estats, two thousand meters, three thousand meters of steep slopes unbearable to behold, you cannot even trace their descent, because of the misty atmosphere in the distance, and then fresh clouds will appear as the gap widens, as certain as the existence of destiny itself.

Time passes, memories fade, we can scarcely perceive any longer the truth and the truths, once so clear and defined, and then, wishing to confirm what we ambitiously call the accuracy of the official version, we consult the evidence relating to the period, the various documents, newspapers, films, video recordings, chronicles, private diaries, parchments, especially the palimpsests, we question survivors, with much good will on either side, we even succeed in believing what some old man claims to have seen and heard as a child, and from all of this we shall have to draw some conclusion, in the absence of any convincing certainties one has to pretend, but what appears to be beyond question is that until the electric cables burst apart there was no real fear in the peninsula, although it has been stated to the contrary, of course there was some panic, but not fear, which is emotion of another order. Obviously, there are many people who retain a clear picture of the dramatic scenes at Coll de Pertus when the concrete disappeared from the sight of those who were shouting, We are winning, we are winning, but the episode only made an impression on those who were actually there, the others looked on from a distance, sitting at home before their own little stage, their television set, in that small rectangle of glass, that courtyard of miracles where an image sweeps away the previous one without trace, everything is on a reduced scale, even emotions. And those sensitive viewers, for they still exist, those viewers who start shedding tears at the slightest pretext and to disguise the lump in their throat, did what they usually do when they cannot bear it any longer, confronted by famine in Africa and other such calamities, they turned their eyes away. Besides, we must not forget that in vast areas of the peninsula, in the heart of the countryside where newspapers do not arrive and the television reception is poor, there were millions, yes, millions of people who did not see what was happening, or had only a vague idea, formed from words whose meaning they had only half digested, perhaps not even that, an idea that was so unreliable that there really was not much difference between what some people thought they knew and what others did not.

But when all the lights in the peninsula went out at the same time, a blackout they later referred to as apagón in Spain, negrum in a Portuguese village that still invents words, when five hundred and eighty-one square kilometers of land became invisible on the surface of the earth, then there was no longer any doubt, everything was coming to an end. It was just as well that the entire power cut lasted no more than fifteen minutes, then emergency connections were rigged that put domestic energy resources into action, scant at this time of the year, the height of summer, mid-August, dry, low reservoirs, a

shortage of power stations, and these cursed nuclear installations, but the pandemonium was truly peninsular, demons on the loose, cold fear, bedlam, even an earthquake could not have had a worse effect on morale. It was night, the beginning of night, when most people have retired indoors, they are sitting watching television, in their kitchens the women are preparing dinner, one particularly patient father is helping, somewhat tentatively, with the solution of an arithmetic problem, there does not appear to be much happiness, but it soon became clear just how much this terror meant, this pitch-darkness, this ink stain that had fallen on Iberia. Do not take away the light, O Lord, let it return, and I promise you that until my dying day, I shall ask for nothing else, this was what penitent sinners were saying, but then they always exaggerate. Anyone living in a valley would have imagined himself to be inside a covered well, anyone living higher up would have climbed to the top and, for many leagues around, failed to see a single light, it was as if the earth had changed its orbit and was now traveling in a space without any sun. Trembling hands lit candles in the houses, flashlights, paraffin lamps kept for an emergency, but not like this one, brought out candlesticks in wrought silver, those in bronze that were used only as ornaments, brass candlesticks, long-forgotten oil lamps, dim lights that filled the darkness with shadows and allowed one to catch a glimpse of startled faces, as distorted as reflections on the water. There were many women shouting, many men were shaking, as for the children, all one can say is that they were all crying their hearts out. After fifteen minutes, which, as the saying goes, seemed like fifteen centuries, although there was no one who had lived the latter and was thus able to compare them with the former, the electricity came back, little by little, intermittent, the lamps were like sleepy eyes casting surly looks everywhere, ready to fall asleep again, until they could finally stand the light and hold it there.

Half an hour later, radio and television stations went back on the air, gave reports about the blackout, and so we learned that all the high-voltage cables between France and Spain had blown up, some pylons had collapsed, through some inexcusable oversight none of the engineers had remembered to disconnect the lines since it was impossible to cut them. Fortunately, the fireworks caused by the short circuits did not claim any victims, a most selfish way of putting it, for while it is true that no human lives were lost, one wolf, at least, did not escape the electrical discharge and was reduced to smoking cinders. But the blowing up of the cables was only one half of the explanation for the blackout, the other half of the explanation, despite the garbled form in which it was, deliberately, expressed, soon became clear, each man spelling things out to his neighbor, What they don't want to admit is that it's not just the cracks in the ground, otherwise the cables wouldn't have broken. Then you tell me, friend, what do you think happened, It's white and the hen lays it but this time it wasn't an egg, the cables broke because they were stretched, because the earth was pulled apart, that's what happened as sure as God is my Maker, You don't tell me, I'm telling you, I'm telling you, just you wait and see, they'll end up spilling the beans. And they did, but only the following day, when there were so many rumors flying about that one more, even if true, could not have added to the confusion, but they did not explain everything, or put it very clearly, they simply

announced, and these were the exact words, An alteration in the geological structure of the Pyrenean cordillera has resulted in a continuous rupture, in a disjunction of physical continuity, and for the moment all communications by road between France and the peninsula are interrupted, the authorities are carefully monitoring the situation, air connections are being maintained, all airports are open and fully operational, and as from tomorrow the number of daily flights is likely to be doubled.

And how badly they were needed. When it became clear and beyond question that the Iberian peninsula had separated completely from Europe, as people began saying, The peninsula has broken away, hundreds of thousands of tourists, for as we know this was the peak season, hastily left their hotels, pousadas, paradores, inns, hostels, pensions, rented houses and rooms, camping sites, tents and caravans, without paying their bills, suddenly causing the most colossal traffic jams on the roads, which grew even worse when cars were left abandoned everywhere, it took some time but then it was like a lit fuse, people are generally slow in recognizing and accepting the seriousness of situations, the futility of having a car, for example, once the roads to France were cut off. Littered around the airports, like a flood, stood masses of cars of all sizes, models, makes, and colors, obstructing the roads and access ramps, all bunched up, completely disrupting the life of the local communities. The Spaniards and the Portuguese, having recovered from the frightening experience of finding themselves in a blackout, apagón or negrum, looked on in panic, thought it absurd, after all there had been no loss of life, Ah, these foreigners, take them out of their routine and they lose control, that's the price they pay for being so advanced in science and technology, and after passing this damning judgment they went off to choose, from among the abandoned vehicles, the ones that appealed to them most and best reflected their aspirations.

In the airports, the airline counters were assailed by the excited multitude, a furious babel of gestures and shouting, unheard-of bribes were offered and accepted in exchange for a ticket, people were selling and buying everything, jewels, cameras, clothes, drugs, these now being peddled quite openly, My car's outside, here are the keys and the papers, if you can't get me a seat to Brussels I don't mind going to Istanbul, even to hell, this tourist was one of the distracted ones, he couldn't see the forest for the trees. Overloaded, their bloated memories nearly saturated, the computers wavered, mistakes were multiplied, until the entire system was paralyzed. Tickets were no longer sold, the planes were stormed, such ferocity, the men first because they were stronger, then the fragile women and innocent children, a great many women and children were left crushed between the terminal gate and the boarding steps, these were the first casualties, and then there were a second and a third cluster of casualties when someone had the tragic idea of forcing his way through, brandishing a pistol, only to be tackled and knocked to the ground by the police. There were other weapons in the crowd and they were fired, there is little point in stating in which airport this disaster occurred, an abominable affair repeated in several other places, although with less serious consequences, for eighteen people died there.

Suddenly, someone remembered that you could also escape from seaports, this sparked another rush for salvation. The refugees turned back, once more in search of their abandoned cars, sometimes they found them, sometimes they did not, but what did that matter, if there were no keys or they could not be used, people soon put two and two together, anyone who did not know quickly learned, Portugal and Spain were transformed into an earthly paradise for car thieves. When the desperate tourists arrived at the ports they went in search of a small boat or canoe to carry them, or, better still, a trawler, a tugboat, a fast rowboat, a sailboat, and in this way they abandoned their last possessions in this cursed land, they departed with the clothes they were wearing and little else, a grubby handkerchief to blow their nose, a lighter without value or fluid, a tie no one had ever liked, it's not right that we should have profited so outrageously from the misfortune of others, we were like brigands from the coast robbing castaways of everything they possessed. The poor wretches disembarked wherever they could, wherever they were swept, and some were left on Ibiza, Majorca, or Minorca, on Formentera or the islands of Cabrera and Conejera, in the hands of fate, the hapless creatures were stuck, in a manner of speaking, between the devil and the deep blue sea, so far there is no evidence that the islands have moved, but who can tell what tomorrow may bring, the Pyrenees appeared to be solid for all eternity, and look what happened. Thousands upon thousands of refugees ended up in Morocco, having fled from the Algarve or from the Spanish coast, in the latter case from below the Cape of Palos, anyone who might have been north of the cape preferred to be taken straight to Europe, if at all possible, and they would ask, How much do you want to take me to Europe, and the first mate would cock an eye, purse his lips, look the refugee up and down assessing his means, You know, Europe is a hell of a long way from here, it's really halfway around the world, and there was no point in arguing. Such exaggeration, it's only ten meters by water, once when a Dutchman dared to advance this bit of sophistry, and a Swede backed him up, they were cruelly told, Oh, so it's only ten meters, then why don't you swim across, and they were forced to apologize and pay twice as much. The bartering flourished until the various countries jointly agreed to provide shuttles to transport their citizens en masse, but, even after this humanitarian measure got under way, certain sailors and fishermen continued to make a fortune, one must not forget that not all travelers are at peace with the law, some who were not were prepared to pay through the nose, not that they had any choice, for the naval forces of Portugal and Spain were patrolling the coasts assiduously, on full alert and under the discreet surveillance of naval squadrons of the other powers.

Some tourists, however, decided not to leave, they accepted the geological fracture as an irreversible act of fate, saw it as an imperious sign of destiny, and wrote to their families, at least they showed some consideration, to say that they no longer thought about them, that their world had changed, and their way of life, they were not to blame, on the whole they were people with little willpower, the sort of people who cannot make up their mind, leave everything for tomorrow, tomorrow, but this does not mean that they do not cherish dreams and desires, the sad thing is that they die before achieving or

knowing how to achieve even a small part of them. Others opted for silence, they simply disappeared, they forgot and allowed themselves to be forgotten, well, any one of these cases by itself could make a novel, the story of how it turned out in the end, and, even if there is little or nothing to relate, no two human stories are ever the same.

But there are those who carry heavier burdens on their shoulders, burdens from which they cannot escape, so much so that when the nation's affairs are going badly we immediately start asking, Hey, what are you going to do about it, what are you waiting for, these outbursts of impatience are in some measure quite unjust, after all, poor things, they can't escape their destiny either, at best they can go to the President and tender their resignation, but not during a crisis, for that would bring them into dishonor, history would judge severely any man in public life who took such a decision at a time like this when, strictly speaking, everything is going under. On both sides of the frontier, in Portugal and in Spain, the governments began making reassuring statements, they formally assured us that the situation does not give cause for any grave concern, a curious way of putting it, and that all the necessary steps are being taken to safeguard people and their property, finally the heads of government appeared on television, and then, to pacify troubled minds, their King also appeared over there and our President over here, Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears, they said, and the Portuguese and the Spaniards, gathered in their forums, replied with one voice, Of course, of course, words, words, nothing but words. Faced with the hostility of public opinion, the prime ministers of the two nations met at a secret location, first on their own, then accompanied by members of their respective governments. Jointly and separately, they held two days of exhaustive talks, before finally deciding to set up a joint committee to cope with the crisis, whose main objective would be to coordinate civil defense operations in the two countries, which would muster their respective resources, both technical and human, for mutual benefit, and use every expedient in order to deal with this geological challenge that had distanced the peninsula ten meters from Europe. If it doesn't get any worse, people whispered in corridors, the whole thing won't be too serious, you could even say that it will be one in the eye for the Greeks, a channel bigger than that of Corinth, so widely renowned. Even so, we cannot ignore the fact that our problems of communication with Europe, already so complicated in years gone by, will become explosive. Okay, so let's build some bridges, What worries me is that the channel will become so wide that ships will be able to navigate it, especially the tankers, that would be a severe blow for Iberian ports, and with consequences just as important, mutatis mutandis, of course, as those that resulted from the opening of the Suez Canal, in other words, northern and southern Europe would have a direct link, and be able to avoid the Cape route. And we end up watching the ships, a Portuguese commented, the others took him to mean the ships that would be passing through the new channel, but we Portuguese know perfectly well that the ships to which he was referring are altogether different, they carry a cargo of shadows, longings, frustrations, delusions and deceptions, their holds filled to the brim, Man overboard, they shouted, but no one went to his assistance.

During their meeting, as had been agreed beforehand, the European Community issued a solemn declaration, whereby it was made clear that the displacement of the Iberian countries toward the west would not jeopardize the agreements in force, all the more so since the separation was nothing more than a few meters, minimal, really, when compared with the distance that separates England from the continent, not to mention Iceland or Greenland, which have so little in common with Europe. This declaration, with its clear objectives, was what resulted from a heated debate among the members of the commission, during which some delegates displayed what can only be called a detached attitude, there is no more precise adjective, even going so far as to suggest that if the Iberian peninsula wished to go away then let it go, the mistake was to have allowed it to come in. Naturally, this was all said in fun, a joke, in these awkward international gatherings people also have to amuse themselves, there has to be more than just work, work, work, but the Portuguese and Spanish members strongly objected to this blatantly provocative remark, so anti-community in spirit, each quoting in his own language the well-known Iberian proverb, A friend in need is a friend indeed. A declaration of Atlantic solidarity was also requested from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but the reply, without being negative, came to be summed up in an unpublishable phrase, Wait and see, words, moreover, that didn't quite express the whole truth, considering that the bases of Beja, Rota, Gibraltar, El Ferrol, Torrejón de Ardoz, Cartagena and San Turjo de Valenzuela, not to mention smaller installations, had all been put on alert as a precautionary measure.

Then the Iberian peninsula moved a little farther, one meter, two meters, just to test its strength. The ropes that served as evidence, strung from one side to the other like those used by firemen when walls develop cracks and threaten to cave in, broke like ordinary string, some of the stronger ones uprooted the trees and posts to which they were tied. Then there was a pause, a great gust of wind could be felt rushing through the air, like the first deep breathing of someone awakening, and the mass of stone and earth, covered with cities, villages, rivers, woodlands, factories, wild scrub, cultivated fields, with all their inhabitants and livestock, began to move, a ship drawing away from harbor and heading out once more to an unknown sea.

This olive tree is cordovil, or cordovesa, or cordovia, what does it matter, for these three names are used indifferently on Portuguese soil, and the olive fruit it produces, because of its size and beauty, would be referred to here as the queen of olives but not as Cordovan, although we're closer to Cordoba than to the frontier beyond. These seem superfluous details of no real importance, melismatic vocalizations, the ornamental artifices of a plainsong that dreams of wings of sonorous melody, when it is much more important to speak of the three men seated beneath the olive tree, one of whom is Pedro Orce, the second Joaquim Sassa, the third José Anaíço, what prodigious events or deliberate manipulations could have brought them together in this place. But calling the olive tree cordovil will at least serve to show just how remiss the Evangelists were, when, for example, they confined themselves to writing that Jesus cursed the fig tree, this information should be enough for us but it isn't enough, no sir, after all, twenty centuries have passed and we still do not know whether the cursed tree produced white or black figs, early or late, of this or that variety, not that Christian doctrine is likely to suffer because of this omission, but historical truth most certainly suffers. Anyhow, the olive tree is cordovil, and three men are sitting under it. Beyond these hills, and invisible from here, there is a village where Pedro Orce once lived, and by a strange coincidence, the first of them, if this is the first of several coincidences, he and the village bear the same name, a fact that neither diminishes nor increases the verisimilitude of the story, a man can be called Metcalfe or Merryweather without being a butcher or a meteorologist. As we have already observed, these are coincidences and manipulations, but made in good faith.

They are sitting on the ground, in their midst can be heard the nasal twang of a radio that must have weak batteries, and the announcer is making the following statement, According to the latest measurements, the velocity of the peninsula's displacement has stabilized at around seven hundred and fifty meters per hour, more or less eighteen kilometers per day, that may not seem a lot, but if we work it out carefully, that means each minute we move away twelve and a half meters from Europe, and while we should avoid giving way to panic and despair, the situation is truly worrying. And it would be even more worrying if you were to say that we are talking about just over two centimeters and a bit per second, remarked José Anaíço, who was quick at making mental calculations, but incapable of carrying the computations out to tenths and hundredths, Joaquim Sassa asked him to be quiet, he wanted to listen to the announcer, and it was worth his while, According to the latest reports we have received, a great crack has appeared between La Línea and Gibraltar, therefore it is feared, bearing in mind the irreversible outcome of the fractures so far, that El Peñón may end up isolated in the middle of the sea, if this should happen there is no point in blaming the British, we are to blame, yes, Spain is to blame for not having known how to recover in good time this sacred piece of the fatherland, now it is too late, El Peñón itself is abandoning us. This man is an artist with words, said Pedro Orce, but the announcer had already changed his tone, had overcome his emotion. In Great Britain, the Prime Minister's office has issued a statement whereby the government of Her Majesty the Queen reaffirms

what is referred to as British rights over Gibraltar, which have now been confirmed, we are quoting, by the incontrovertible fact that El Peñón or The Rock has detached itself from Spain, and all the negotiations that were proceeding toward an eventual, if somewhat problematic, transfer of sovereignty are thus unilaterally and definitively suspended. There are still no signs of the British Empire's imminent end, quipped José Anaíço. In a statement read in the House of Commons, Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition demanded that the north side of the island be fortified without delay, so as to transform the steep rock all around its perimeter into the wall of an unassailable fortress, proudly isolated in the middle of the now widened Atlantic, as a symbol of the enduring power of Albion. They're mad, Pedro Orce muttered, contemplating the heights of the Sierra de Sagra rising before him. For its part, the government, attempting to reduce the political impact of any claim, replied that Gibraltar, in its new geostrategic conditions would continue to be one of the jewels in the crown of Her Britannic Majesty, a formula that like the Magna Carta has the magnificent virtue of satisfying everyone, this ironic conclusion was provided by the announcer, who took his leave by saying, We'll be back with more news in an hour's time, barring any unforeseen circumstances. A flock of starlings flew past like a hurricane passing over a bare mountain, vruuuuuuuuuuu, Are they yours, asked Joaquim Sassa, and, without even turning around, José Anaíço replied, They're mine, he ought to know, for ever since that first day, amid the green fields of Ribatejo, they have scarcely ever been apart, only to eat and sleep, a man does not nourish himself on worms and scattered grains and a bird sleeps in the trees without any bedclothes. The flock flew around in a wide circle, fluttering, wings trembling, beaks drinking in the air and sunlight, the few clouds, white and piled high, navigated through space like galleons, the men, these like all others, looked at the different things, and, as usual, did not really understand them.

It certainly was not to listen to a transistor radio in one another's company that Pedro Orce, Joaquim Sassa, and José Anaíço gathered here, having traveled from such different places. For the last three minutes we have known that Pedro Orce lives in the village that lies hidden behind these hills, we have known from the outset that Joaquim Sassa came from the shores of northern Portugal, and José Anaíço, we now know for certain, was strolling through the fields of Ribatejo when he came across the starlings, and we would have guessed as much had we paid sufficient attention to the details of the landscape. What remains to be known is how the three men met one another and why they are hidden away here under an olive tree, unique in this spot, among rare and unruly dwarf trees that cling to the white soil, the sun is reflected on all around the plains, the air shimmers, this is the heat of Andalusia, and although we are surrounded by mountains, we suddenly become conscious of these material things, we have entered the real world, or it has forced its way in.

If one thinks about it, there is no beginning for things and persons, everything that began one day had begun before, the history of this sheet of paper, for example, just to take an item at hand, in order to be true and complete, would have to date back to the

origins of the world, the plural has been used here deliberately instead of the singular, yet even so, we could ask whether those first origins were not simply points of transition, sliding ramps, this poor head of ours, subject to such exertions, an admirable head, nevertheless, which for all sorts of reasons is capable of going mad, except for this one.

There is, then, no beginning, but there was a moment when Joaquim Sassa left the spot where he found himself, on a beach in northern Portugal, perhaps Afife, that beach with the enigmatic stones, or better still A-Ver-o-Mar, which means Seaview, to arrive at the most perfect name imaginable for a beach, poets and novelists could not have invented anything better. From there Joaquim Sassa came, having heard that a certain Pedro Orce from Spain could feel the ground shaking beneath his feet when there were no tremors, this is the natural curiosity of someone who threw a heavy stone into the sea with a strength he didn't possess, all the more so since the peninsula wrenched itself away from Europe without any shock or pain, like a hair quietly falling, simply because it was willed by God, as the saying goes. He set out in his old Citroën Deux Chevaux, he did not say good-bye to his family, alas, for he has no family, nor did he give any explanation to the manager of the office where he works. This is vacation time, you can come and go as you please, now they don't even ask to see your passport at the frontier, you simply show your identity card and the peninsula is yours. On the seat, beside him, he carries a transistor radio, distracts himself by listening to music, the prattling of the announcers, sweet and soothing like an acoustic cradle, suddenly irritating, that was in normal times, now the ether is rippling with febrile words, the news coming in from the Pyrenees, the exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea, Napoleon's retreat. Here on the roads of the interior, there is little traffic, nothing in comparison to the Algarve, all that bustle and turmoil, or with Lisbon, and the highways going north and south, Pórtela airport looks now like a besieged stronghold, an invasion of ants, iron filings attracted by a magnet. Joaquim Sassa rolls peacefully through the shady lanes of La Beira, heading for a village called Orce, in the Province of Granada, on Spanish soil, where the aforesaid man lives who spoke on television. I'm going there to see if there is any connection between what happened to me and this business of someone who can feel the ground shaking under his feet, once you start imagining things, you start putting two and two together, more often than not you were mistaken, sometimes you hit the nail on the head, a stone thrown into the sea, the earth shaking, a cordillera that has split open. Joaquim Sassa is also traveling amid mountains, even if they can't be compared with those Titans, but suddenly he feels uneasy. Suppose the same thing were to happen here, suppose A Estrela were to crack, the Mondego to sink into the bowels of the earth leaving the autumn poplars without a mirror in which to reflect themselves, his thoughts have become poetic, the danger has passed.

At this moment, the music stopped, the announcer began to read the news, there was nothing fresh to report, the only item of any interest, was a bulletin from London, the Prime Minister had gone to the House of Commons to state, categorically, that British sovereignty over Gibraltar warrants no discussion, whatever the distance separating the

Iberian peninsula from Europe, to which the leader of the opposition had added a formal guarantee promising the most loyal cooperation from his fellow members and party, At this great moment in our history. But he then introduced a note of irony into his solemn speech, eliciting laughter from all the honorable members, The Prime Minister committed a serious mistake by speaking of a peninsula when referring to what is now unquestionably an island, although by no means as solid as our own, of course. The members of parliament cheered this closing remark, exchanging complacent grins with their opponents, and to be sure, there is nothing like the national interest to unite politicians of opposing tendencies. Joaquim Sassa also grinned, Such a comedy, and then suddenly he caught his breath, the announcer had spoken his name, Senhor Joaquim Sassa, who is traveling somewhere in the country, is kindly requested, we repeat, Senhor Joaquim Sassa is kindly requested, they were asking him kindly to present himself as soon as possible to the nearest officials, in order to assist the authorities with their investigations into the causes of the geological fracture observed in the Pyrenees, for the competent bodies are convinced that the aforesaid Joaquim Sassa can give them information of national interest, we repeat our appeal, Senhor Joaquim Sassa is requested, but Senhor Joaquim Sassa was not listening, he had been obliged to stop the car in order to recover his composure, his sangfroid, so long as his hands continued to tremble like this he would not even be able to drive, his ears were roaring like a seashell, Good heavens, how did they find out about the stone, there wasn't another soul on the beach, at least as far as I could see, and I didn't say a word to anyone, for they would have called me a liar, but someone somewhere must have been watching me after all, although no one usually pays any attention to someone throwing stones into the water, yet they spotted me at once, rotten luck, and then you know what happens, one person speaks to another and adds on what he thought he saw but could not have seen, when this story reached the ears of the authorities, the stone must have been as big as I am, at the very least, and now what am I going to do. He would not answer the appeal, he would not present himself to any civil or military official, just imagine what an absurd dialogue that would be, behind closed doors, the tape recorder playing, Senhor Joaquim Sassa, did you throw a stone into the sea, I did, How much would you say it weighed, I don't know, perhaps two or three kilos, Or more, Yes, it could have been more, Here are some stones, try holding them, and tell me which one comes closest in weight to the stone you threw, This one, Let's weigh it, like so, all right now, please check the weight with your own eyes, I'd never have thought it could weigh so much, five kilos, six hundred grams, Now tell me, have you ever experienced anything like this before, Never, Are you certain, Absolutely, You don't suffer from any mental or nervous disorders, epilepsy, somnambulism, trances of any kind, No sir, We'll take an electroencephalogram later, for the moment try your strength on this machine over here, What is it, A dynamometer, put as much pressure on it as you can, This is all I can do, Is that all, I've never had much strength in my arms, Senhor Joaquim Sassa, you couldn't possibly have thrown that stone, I'm inclined to agree, but I did, We know that you threw it, there are witnesses, persons of the utmost reliability, so you must tell us how you managed it, I've already explained, I was walking along the beach when I saw the stone, I picked it up and threw

it, That's impossible, The witnesses can confirm it, True, but the witnesses cannot say where that strength came from, only you can tell us, I've already told you I don't know, The situation, Senhor Sassa, is very serious, I'd go so far as to say exceedingly serious, the rupture of the Pyrenees cannot be explained by natural causes, otherwise we would be in the midst of a planetary catastrophe, it was on the basis of this evidence that we began to investigate certain unusual events that have taken place in recent days, and yours is one of them, Surely throwing a stone into the water couldn't cause a continent to crack up, I have no desire to engage in idle philosophizing, but do you see any connection between a monkey's descending from a tree twenty million years ago and the making of a nuclear bomb, The connection is, precisely, those twenty million years, Good answer, but now let's suppose that it might be possible to reduce to hours the time between a cause, which in this case would be the throwing of a stone, and an effect, such as the peninsula's separation from Europe, in other words, let us suppose that, under normal conditions, that stone thrown into the sea would only produce its effect twenty million years hence, but that, under other conditions, precisely those of the phenomenon we are now investigating, the effect is observed some hours, or days, later, That's pure speculation, the cause might well be something else, Or a combination of this and another, concurrent, event, Then other unusual events would have to be investigated, That's what we're in the process of doing, and the Spaniards, too, as in the case of the man who could feel the earth shaking, By adopting this method, once you have examined the unusual events, you will have to proceed to the usual ones, The what ones, The usual ones, What do you mean by usual, Usual is the opposite of unusual, its antonym, If necessary, we shall pass from the unusual to the usual events, but we must discover the cause, You have a lot of investigating ahead of you, We're making a start, tell me where you found the strength. Joaquim Sassa made no reply, he silenced his imagination, all the more so since the dialogue was threatening to go around in circles, now he would have to repeat, I don't know, and the rest would be as before, with some minor variations, albeit mostly of form, yet this was precisely where he would have to be careful, because, as we know, through form one arrives at the substance, through the wrapping at the contents, through the sound of the word at its meaning.

He put his Deux Chevaux into gear, into step, if such a thing might be said of a car, he wanted time to think, he needed to give the matter some serious thought. He had been an ordinary traveler heading for the border, a simple man with no particular qualities or importance, that was no longer so, at this very moment they were probably printing posters with his photograph and vital statistics, Wanted in big red letters, a manhunt. He looked into his rearview mirror and saw a police car, it was coming so quickly that it looked as if the car were about to come through the back window, They've caught up with me, he accelerated, then quickly slowed down without braking, all quite unnecessary, the police car overtook him in a flash, it must be rushing to some emergency, they did not so much as look at him, if only those speeding policemen knew who was driving along there, but of course there are lots of Deux Chevaux on the road, the expression is awkward but there is no mathematical contradiction. Joaquim Sassa

took another look in the mirror, this time to have a good look at himself, to acknowledge the relief in his eyes, the mirror reflected little else, a tiny bit of his face, which makes it difficult to know to whom the face belongs, to Joaquim Sassa, as we already know, but who is Joaquim Sassa, a man who is still young, in his thirties, closer to forty than to thirty, the day inevitably comes, his eyebrows are black, his eyes brown like those of most Portuguese, his nose sharply outlined, his features really quite unexceptional, we shall learn more about him when he turns toward us. For the moment, he thought to himself, It's only an appeal over the radio, the worst is still ahead of me, at the frontier, and as if that weren't enough, there's this name of mine, Sassa, which unfortunately means stone, when what I need right now is to be any old Sousa, like that other one from Coll de Pertus, one day he consulted the dictionary to see if the word existed, Sassa, not Sousa, and what did he find, he discovered that it was a massive tree from Nubia, that's a pretty name, Nubia, a name for a woman, near the Sudan, in West Africa, page 93 in the atlas, And tonight, where am I going to sleep, certainly not in a hotel, where people are always turning the radio on, by this time every hotel in Portugal must be looking out for hotel guests who request a room for one night, the refuge of the persecuted, you can imagine the scene, Let's see now, yes sir, we have an excellent room available, on the second floor, Room 201, Pimenta, please show Senhor Sassa to his room, and no sooner is he resting on the bed, still fully clothed, than the manager, nervous and flustered, is on the telephone, He's here, come quickly.

He parked Deux Chevaux at the side of the road, got out to stretch his legs and clear his mind, which, instead of giving him good advice, came up with a dubious proposition, Stay in a bigger city, somewhere where there's plenty of nightlife, look for a brothel, spend the night with one of the prostitutes, you can bet they won't ask to see any identification as long as you pay, and if under the circumstances you don't feel like gratifying your flesh, at least you'll be able to get some sleep, and you'll pay less than you would in a hotel, How ridiculous, said Joaquim Sassa in reply to this suggestion, the solution is to sleep in the car, by the side of some quiet road off the beaten track. But suppose some tramps or gypsies came along, they might attack you, rob you, maybe even kill you, It's peaceful around here, But suppose some arsonist or madman were to set the pine forests on fire, there's a lot of those around these days, you would wake up to find yourself surrounded by flames, end up being burned to death, that must be the worst way to die, from what I've heard, just think of the martyrs of the Inquisition. How ridiculous, Joaquim Sassa repeated, I've made up my mind, I'm going to sleep in the car, and he made the image disappear, easy enough if one is strong-willed. It was still early, he could cover some forty or fifty kilometers along these winding roads, he would camp near Tomar, or Santarem, in one of those dirt roads that open onto cultivated fields, with those deep furrows once made by ox-drawn carts and nowadays made by tractors, no one passes at night, Deux Chevaux can be hidden anywhere around here, I might even sleep out in the open, the night is so warm, his mind did not react to this idea and clearly disapproved.

He did not stop in Tomar, nor reach Santarem, he dined incognito in a town on the banks of the Tagus, the local inhabitants are inquisitive by nature, but not to the extent of saying, point-blank, to the first traveler who arrived, Tell me, what's your name, but if he were to linger here, then certainly they would very soon start asking questions about his past life and his plans for the future. The television was on, as he ate his dinner Joaquim Sassa watched the last part of a documentary about underwater life, with numerous shoals of tiny fishes, undulating rays and sinuous moray eels, and an ancient anchor, then came the commercials, some fast-moving, built of images in dazzling montage, others deliberately, voluptuously, slow, like some aching familiar gesture, there were children's voices shouting loudly, the insecure voices of adolescents, or of women who were somewhat hoarse, the men were all virile-sounding baritones, at the back of the house the pig grunted, fattened on slops and leftovers. At last the news came on, and Joaquim Sassa shuddered, he wouldn't stand a chance if they showed his photograph. The appeal was read, but no photograph appeared, they were not pursuing a criminal, after all, they were simply requesting, with polite insistence, that he make his whereabouts known, thus serving the highest national interest, no citizen worthy of the name would shrink from fulfilling such a duty, would fail to appear before the authorities, who simply wished him to make a statement. Three other guests were eating dinner, an elderly couple, and at another table the usual man, sitting by himself, of whom one always says, He must be a commercial traveler.

The conversation ceased when they heard the first news from the Pyrenees, the pig went on grunting but no one paid any attention, and, all this in an instant, the landlord got up on a chair to turn up the volume, the girl who waited on the tables stood wide-eyed, the guests carefully rested their silverware on the edge of their plates, and little wonder, on the screen they were showing a helicopter that was being filmed from another helicopter, both were entering the fearsome channel, and then they showed the towering walls, so tall that the sky was scarcely visible overhead, the merest thread of blue, Good heavens, it's enough to make you dizzy, the girl said, and the landlord snapped, Be quiet, now extremely powerful floodlights were showing the gaping hole, this is what the Greeks' notion of the entrance to hell must have looked like, but where Cerberus would have barked, a pig is grunting, mythologies aren't what they used to be. These dramatic pictures, the announcer reeled off, were taken under hazardous conditions, human lives were at risk, the voice became husky, muffled, the two helicopters transformed themselves into four, the phantoms of phantoms, Damned aerial, the landlord muttered.

By the time sound and picture were once more stable and intelligible, the helicopters had disappeared and the announcer was reading the same old appeal, now addressed to the public at large, Anyone who may know of any strange events or inexplicable phenomena, of anything that seems suspicious, is requested to inform the nearest authorities at once. Prompted by these words addressed directly to her, the girl remembered how people had gossiped locally when a kid had been born with five legs,

four black and one white, but the landlord shot back, That was months ago, you fool, kids with five legs and chicks with two heads are nothing out of the ordinary, now what's really odd is this business of the teacher's starlings, What starlings, what teacher, Joaquim Sassa asked, The local teacher, his name is José Anaíço, for some days now, wherever he goes, he is followed by a flock of starlings, as many as two hundred of them, Or more, the commercial traveler corrected him, only this morning I saw them as I was arriving, they were circling above the school, and the racket they were making, flapping their wings and screeching, was unbelievable. At this point the elderly man interrupted, Unless I'm mistaken, we should inform the mayor about the starlings, He already knows, the landlord observed, He knows all right, but he doesn't connect the one thing with the other, he can't tell his ass from his elbow, if you'll forgive the expression, Then what should we do, Let's go and talk to him tomorrow morning, besides it would be good publicity for the region if the story were on television, it would be good for our economy, But let's keep it a secret among ourselves, not tell anyone, And that teacher, where does he live, Joaquim Sassa asked as if he were not really very interested in the answer, so the distracted landlord was not in time to prevent the girl from blurting out, He lives in the teacher's house right next to the school, there's always a lighted window even late at night, there seemed to be a note of sadness in her voice. Furious, the landlord scolded the poor girl, Shut your mouth, imbecile, you'd better go and see if the pig needs feeding, hard to imagine a more foolish command, for pigs do not eat at this hour, they are usually asleep, perhaps the landlord's angry outburst was caused by worry, for here, too, in the stables and paddocks around the countryside, the mares neigh and shake their heads, nervous, restless, and in their impatience they paw the loose gravel on the ground, tear at the straw. It must be the moon, in the opinion of the foreman.

Joaquim Sassa paid for his dinner, said goodnight, left a generous tip in recompense for the information the girl had given him, the landlord might pocket it, out of pique rather than greed, people's generosity is no better than their deepest selves, no less subject to eclipses and contradictions, rarely constant, as in the case of this girl, scolded and abruptly dismissed, now trying unsuccessfully to feed a pig that is not hungry, scratching its forehead between the eyes. The evening is pleasant, Deux Chevaux is resting beneath the plane trees, refreshing its wheels in the water that runs idly from the spring, and Joaquim Sassa lets it stay there, goes on foot to look for the school and the illuminated window, people cannot hide their secrets even though they may say they wish to keep them, a sudden shriek betrays them, the sudden softening of a vowel exposes them, any observer with experience of the human voice and human nature would have perceived at once that the girl at the inn is in love. The town is nothing but one large village, in less than half an hour you can walk past all the houses from one end to the other, but Joaquim Sassa will not have to walk quite so far, he asked a little boy he met where the school was and could not have found a better-informed guide, You take that street there, you come to a square, you see a church, you turn left, then you keep to the right, you can't go wrong, you'll see the school right away, And does the teacher live there, Yes sir, he does, there's a light in the window, but there was no hint of love in any

of these words, the boy is probably a bad pupil and school is his first experience of purgatory, but his voice suddenly became cheerful, children are never resentful, that is their saving grace, And the starlings are always flying overhead, and they're always screeching, if he does not abandon his studies too soon, the boy will learn to shape his sentences without repeating the same constructions so insistently.

There is still a clear patch in one half of the sky, the other half has not completely darkened, the sky is blue as if dawn were about to break. But inside the houses the lights are already on, the tranquil voices of weary people can be heard, quiet sobbing from a cradle, people are really so lacking in awareness, you put them out to sea on a raft and they go on living their lives as if they were still on terra firma, babbling like Moses when he floated down the Nile in a little basket made of rushes, playing with the butterflies, so blessed that even the crocodiles could not harm him. At the end of the narrow street is the school, surrounded by its walls, had Joaquim Sassa not been warned he would have thought the house was just a house like any other, at night they all look drab, by day some are still drab, meanwhile darkness has started falling, but some time remains before the street lamps will light up.

In order not to contradict the girl at the inn and the little boy who kept his feelings to himself, there is a light in the window, and Joaquim Sassa goes and knocks on the pane, the starlings are not so noisy after all, they are settling down for the night, with their habitual squabbling and neighborly disputes, but it will not be long before they calm down beneath the enormous leaves of the fig tree where they are roosting, invisible, black amid the inky darkness, only later will the moon rise, some will stir at the touch of its white fingers before going back to sleep, they do not know how far they will have to travel. From inside the house came a man's voice, Who is it, and Joaquim Sassa replied, If you don't mind, magic words that substitute for any formal identification, language is full of these and other more perplexing enigmas. The window has opened, against the light it is not easy to see who lives in this house, but as if in compensation Joaquim Sassa's face is perfectly clear, some of his features we described earlier, the rest conform, dark brown hair, smooth, sunken cheeks, the nose quite commonplace, the lips full only in speech, Forgive me for disturbing you at this hour, It isn't late, said the teacher, but he had to raise his voice because the starlings, now disturbed, sent up a chorus of protest and alarm, It's really because of them that I'd like to talk to you, Them, who, The starlings, Ah, And about a stone I threw into the sea, much heavier than I can manage, What is your name, Joaquim Sassa, Are you the person they keep mentioning on the radio and on television, That's me, Please come in.

They have spoken about stones and starlings, now they are speaking about decisions taken. They are in the yard behind the house, José Anaíço is seated on the doorstep, Joaquim Sassa in a chair since he is a visitor, and because José Anaíço is sitting with his back to the kitchen where the light is coming from, we still do not know what he looks like, this man appears to be hiding himself, but this is not the case, how often have we shown ourselves as we really are, and yet we need not have bothered, there was no one there to notice. José Anaíço poured a little more white wine into their glasses, they are drinking it at room temperature, which is how it should be drunk, in the opinion of experts, rather than this modern fad of chilling the wine, something in any case out of the question here, because there is no refrigerator in the teacher's house. That's enough for me, said Joaquim Sassa, after the red wine I had with dinner, I've already passed my limit. Let's drink to the trip, replied José Anaíço, and he smiled, showing the whitest of teeth, a detail worth noting. It makes good sense to go off in search of Pedro Orce, since I'm still on vacation, no commitments, Me too, and for much longer, until the schools reopen at the beginning of October, I'm on my own, So am I, It wasn't my intention to come here to persuade you to accompany me, I didn't even know you, I'm the one who's asking you to take me along, if there's room in your car, but you've already agreed and you can't go back on your word now. Just imagine all the excitement there'll be when they discover you've gone, most likely they'll call the police at once, start thinking you're already dead and buried, hanging from some tree, or lying at the bottom of the river, obviously they'll suspect me, the stranger with superhuman strength who turned up from nowhere, asked some questions, and disappeared, it's like something out of a book, I'll leave a note on the door of the town hall saying that I had to leave unexpectedly for Lisbon, I hope no one remembers to go and ask at the station if anyone saw me buy a ticket.

For several moments they remained silent, then José Anaíço rose to his feet, took a few steps in the direction of the fig tree as he drank the rest of his wine, the starlings kept on screeching and began to stir uneasily, some had awakened as the men spoke, others, perhaps, were dreaming aloud, that terrible nightmare of the species, in which they feel themselves to be flying alone, disoriented and separated from the flock, moving through an atmosphere that resists and hinders the flapping of their wings as if it were made of water, the same thing happens to men when they are dreaming and their will tells them to run and they cannot. So we'll leave an hour before sunrise, José Anaíço said, and now we must get some sleep. Joaquim Sassa rose from his chair, I'll sleep in the car and come to get you before dawn, Why don't you sleep here, I've only one bed but it's wide, there's plenty of room for both of us. It was a clear night, the vast expanse of the sky dotted with stars, so close, it seemed, that they might have been magically suspended motes of glass dust, or a snow-white veil, and the great constellations shone dramatically, the morning star, the two Bears, the Pleiades, a fine shower of tiny crystals of light fell on the two men's upturned faces and clung to their skin, got caught in their hair, it was not the first time this phenomenon had occurred, but suddenly all the murmurings of the night fell silent, above the trees the first light of the moon appeared,

now the stars must go out. Then Joaquim Sassa said, On a night like this, I might even sleep under the fig tree, if you can lend me a blanket, I'll keep you company. They gathered and then spread enough straw for their beds, as one does for cattle, each one spread out his blanket, lying down on one half and covering himself with the other. The starlings watched their shadowy forms from the branches, Who can that be, beneath the tree, among the branches everything is wide awake, and with a moon like this, getting to sleep is going to be very difficult. The moon is rising swiftly, the squat, rotund crown of the fig tree transforms itself into a black and white labyrinth, and José Anaíço remarks, These shadows are not what they were, The peninsula has moved so little, a few meters, it can't have had much effect, Joaquim Sassa observed, pleased at having understood the remark, It has moved, and that was enough for all the shadows to change, there are branches there that the moonlight is touching for the first time at this hour. Some minutes passed, the starlings began to settle down, and José Anaíço murmured, in a voice that sleep finally interrupted, each word waiting or searching for the next one, Once upon a time, our King, Dom João II, known as the Perfect King and in my opinion the perfect wit, made a certain nobleman a gift of an imaginary island, now tell me, do you know of any other nation where such a thing could happen, and the nobleman, what did the nobleman do, he set out to look for it, now, what I'd like to know is how you can find an imaginary island, That's something I can't tell you, but this other island, the Iberian one, which was once a peninsula but is no longer, I find just as amusing, as if it had set out to sea in search of imaginary men. Nicely phrased, couldn't be more poetic. Well, let me assure you that I've never written a line of verse in my life, Don't worry, if all men were to become poets, none would write verses. That phrase also has a certain charm, We've had too much to drink, I agree. Silence, calm, infinite harmony, and Joaquim Sassa murmured, as if he were dreaming, What will the starlings do tomorrow, will they stay or will they accompany us, When we leave we'll find out, it's always the same, José Anaíço said, the moon is lost among the branches of the fig tree and will spend all night searching for a way out.

It was still dark when Joaquim Sassa rose from his bed of straw to go and look for Deux Chevaux, which had been parked under the plane trees in the square, right beside the fountain. To avoid being seen together by some early riser, of whom there are many in farming communities, they had agreed to meet on the outskirts of the village, at some distance from the last houses. José Anaíço would turn off the main road, take side roads and short cuts, keeping well out of sight, Joaquim Sassa, however, would discreetly take the main road used by everyone, he was one of those travelers who go neither in debt nor in fear, he set out early to enjoy the fresh morning air and to make the most of the day, tourists who are out and about early are like this, at heart troubled and restless, unable to accept life's inescapable brevity, late to bed and early to rise does not make one healthy, but it does prolong life. Deux Chevaux has a quiet engine, the ignition is as smooth as silk, only the few inhabitants who could not sleep heard anything, and these thought they had finally fallen asleep and were dreaming, in the stillness of dawn even the steady noise of a water pump can scarcely be heard. Joaquim Sassa left the village,

passed the first bend, then the second, then brought Deux Chevaux to a halt and waited.

In the silvery depths of the olive grove the trunks started to become visible, there was already a touch of humidity in the air, the faintest hint of a breeze, as if the morning were emerging from a well of clouded water, and now a bird sang, or were his ears deceiving him, for not even the larks sing at this early hour. Time passed and Joaquim Sassa began muttering to himself, Perhaps he's thought it over and decided not to come, but he didn't strike me as being like that, or perhaps he had to take a much more roundabout way than he imagined, that must be the explanation, and then he's carrying a heavy suitcase, that's something I overlooked, I could have carried it to the car myself. Then, from amid the olive trees, emerged José Anaíço, surrounded by starlings, a frenzy of wings ruffling continuously, strident cries, whoever mentioned two hundred is unable to count, this reminds me more of a swarm of big black bees, but what Joaquim Sassa obviously had in mind were the birds in Hitchcock's classic film, although those were wicked assassins. José Anaíço approaches the car with his garland of winged creatures, he comes smiling, which makes him look younger than Joaquim Sassa, for, as everyone knows, a serious expression makes one look older, he has the whitest of teeth, as we discovered last night, and while there is nothing remarkable about any individual feature, there is a certain harmony in those sunken cheeks, besides, no one is obliged to be good-looking. He put his suitcase into the car, climbed in beside Joaquim Sassa, and before closing the door looked out to see the starlings, Let's go, I wondered what they would do, but you can see for yourself, If we had a rifle here and fired a few shots, two cartridges of buckshot would finish them off, Are you a hunting man, No, I'm only repeating what I've heard others say, We don't have a rifle, Perhaps there might be another solution, I'll get Deux Chevaux moving, and the starlings will be left behind, they're a species with short wings and little stamina, Try. Deux Cheveaux changed gear, accelerated on a long stretch of straight road, and, taking advantage of the flat terrain, soon left the starlings behind. The morning light became tinged with contrasting shades of pale and bright pink, colors fallen from the sky, and the air turned blue, we repeat, the air and not the sky, as we also observed yesterday evening, these hours are much the same, the one beginning the day, the other ending it. Joaquim Sassa switched off the headlights and reduced speed, he knows that Deux Chevaux was not destined for such bold exploits, its ancestry is undistinguished, anyway, the car has seen better days and the engine's tameness is nothing more than stoic resignation, Good, that's the end of the starlings, these were the words of José Anaíço, but there was a note of regret in his voice.

Two hours later, in the Province of Alentejo, they stopped for a bite to eat, coffee with milk, cinnamon-flavored sponge cakes, then they returned to the car, chewing over the same old worries, The worst thing that could happen wouldn't be to find myself barred from Spain, it would be much worse if they were to keep me there, You haven't been accused of anything, They can invent some pretext, detain me for questioning. Don't worry, before we reach the frontier we're sure to find some means of getting across, this was their dialogue, which adds nothing to our understanding of the story,

perhaps it was only put here so that we would understand that Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço are already on familiar terms, something they must have decided during the journey. Let's not stand on ceremony, one of them said, and the other replied, I was just about to make the same suggestion. Joaquim Sassa was on the point of opening the car door when the starlings reappeared, that enormous cloud, resembling more than ever some great swarm whirling overhead and making a deafening noise, one could see that they were angry, people standing beneath them stopped and looked up, pointed to the sky, someone declared, I've never seen so many birds together in my whole life, and to judge from his appearance he was old enough to have had this experience and many others, There are more than a thousand of them, he added, and he was right, at least twelve hundred and fifty birds had gathered on this occasion, They've finally caught up with us, said Joaquim Sassa, let them wear themselves out and we'll be rid of them for good. José Anaíço watched the starlings as they flew triumphantly in a great circle, he stood there transfixed, staring at them intently, Let's drive slowly, from now on we'll go slowly, Why, I don't know, it's just a premonition, for some reason these birds won't leave us alone, You could be right, so do me a favor and go slowly, and we'll see what happens.

How they crossed the Alentejo in this blazing heat, under a sky more white than blue, amid shining stubble with the occasional holm oak on the bare land and bundles of straw waiting to be gathered, beneath the incessant chirping of the cicadas, would make a whole story in itself, perhaps even harder to tell than that other one I re-counted on an earlier occasion. It's true that for kilometer after kilometer along this road there is not a living soul to be seen, but the corn has been cut, the grain threshed, and all these tasks required men and women, but on this occasion we shall learn nothing about all this, all too true is the proverb that warns us, Don't count your chickens before they're hatched. The heat is oppressive, suffocating, but Deux Chevaux is in no hurry, is only too pleased to stop wherever there is a little shade, then José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa get out to scan the horizon, they wait as long as they have to, finally it comes, the only cloud in the sky, these stops wouldn't be necessary if the starlings knew how to fly in a straight line, but because there are so many of them, each with its own disposition despite its attachment to the flock, dispersions and distractions are inevitable, some would prefer to rest, others to drink water or to peck at berries, and until their desires coincide, the flock will be scattered and its itinerary upset. Along the route, in addition to the kites, solitary raptors, and members of less gregarious species, other birds of the starling family had been sighted, but they didn't join the flock, perhaps because they were not black but speckled, or perhaps because they had some other destiny in life. José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa got into the car, Deux Chevaux resumed its journey, and so, starting and stopping, stopping and starting, they arrived at the frontier. Then Joaquim Sassa said, And now let's see if they'll allow me to pass, you follow, perhaps the starlings will help.

Just as in those tales about fairies and enchantments, knights and damsels, or in those no less admirable Homeric epics in which, thanks to the bounty of the tree of fables

or through some caprice of the gods or other superhuman beings, anything might happen, however contrary to custom or opposed to nature, it came about that Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço had stopped at the police lookout, or frontier post in technical jargon, and God alone knows how anxious they must have felt as they presented their papers, when the next moment, like a sudden downpour of lashing rain or cyclone sweeping all before it, the flock of starlings swooped down from the heavens like a black meteor, bird bodies transformed into flashes of lightning, hissing, screeching, finally scattering in all directions when they reached the low roofs of the lookout, just like a whirlwind out of control. The terrified policemen waved their arms about, ran to take shelter, Joaquim Sassa saw his chance, got out of the car and retrieved the documents one of the policemen had dropped, there was no one to observe this infringement of customs regulations, and that was that, secret crossings had been made by many routes, but never before like this. Hitchcock is applauding from the wings, the applause of someone who is a master of the genre. The excellence of this method was soon confirmed, showing that the Spanish police, like their Portuguese counterparts, take these avian omens, these black starlings, in all seriousness. The travelers passed with no difficulty, but dozens of birds stayed behind, for there was a loaded shotgun at the customs post across the border, even a blind man would have been able to hit the target, all you had to do was to shoot into the air, and this was needless slaughter, because in Spain, as we know, no one was looking for Joaquim Sassa. Nor is it certain that this is the action the Andalusian guards would have taken, for the starlings were Portuguese by nationality, born and bred in the lands of Ribatejo, and they had come a long way only to die, let us hope that these cruel guards will at least have the decency to invite their colleagues from Alentejo to share the feast of fried starlings in an atmosphere of wholesome conviviality and comradeship.

Accompanied by the canopy of birds overhead, the travelers are heading for Granada and the surrounding region, when they are obliged to seek assistance at the crossroads, for the map they are using does not indicate the village of Orce, how very inconsiderate on the part of the cartographers, I'll bet they didn't forget to indicate their own hometowns, in future they should remember how vexing it is for someone to check out his birthplace on a map only to find a blank space, this has given rise to the gravest of problems for those trying to establish personal and national identities. Along the route, they pass Seat cars and Pegaso trucks, these can be recognized immediately by their insignia and license plates, and the villages through which Deux Chevaux passes have that sleepy air said to be characteristic of the south, the people here are accused by northern tribes of being indolent, facile and arrogant remarks of racial disparagement made by those who have never had to work with the sun beating down on them. But it is true that there are differences between one world and another, everybody knows that on Mars the inhabitants are green, while here on earth they are every color except green.

From an inhabitant of the north we would never hear what we are about to hear, if

we stop to ask the man going by astride a donkey what he thinks about this extraordinary business, the Iberian peninsula's having separated from Europe, he will pull the donkey's reins, Whoa!, and reply without mincing his words, The whole thing's a joke. Roque Lozano judges from appearances, they have helped him to form his own judgment, which is easy to understand, behold the bucolic tranquillity of these fields, the serene sky, the harmony of the rocks, the mountains of Morena and Aracena, which have remained unaltered since they were born, or, if not that long, since we were born. But television has shown the whole world how the Pyrenees have split open like a watermelon, let us say for argument's sake, using a metaphor within the grasp of rustic minds, I don't trust television, unless I can see things with these eyes of mine that the earth will one day devour, I don't believe in them, Roque Lozano replies without dismounting, So what are you going to do, I've left my family to look after my business and I'm off to see if it's true, With these eyes of yours that the earth will devour, With these eyes of mine that the earth hasn't devoured yet, And do you expect to arrive there riding a donkey, When it can't carry my weight any longer, we'll both go by foot, What name does your donkey answer to, A donkey doesn't answer to anything, it's called by its master, So what do you call your donkey then, Platero, and we're both making the journey, Platero and I, Can you tell us where Orce is, No sir, I don't know, It would appear to be a little way beyond Granada, Oh, in that case, you've still got some way to go, and I must bid you gentlemen from Portugal farewell, for my journey is much longer and I'm riding a donkey, Probably by the time you get there, you won't be able to see Europe any longer, If I don't see it, that'll be because the place never existed. Roque Lozano is absolutely right when all is said and done, because for something to exist there are two essential conditions, that a man should see it and that he be able to give it a name.

Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço spent the night in Aracena, following in the footsteps of our King, Dom Afonso III, who conquered the town from the Moors, but his victory was the briefest of false dawns, for those were the Dark Ages. The starlings disappeared into the various trees in the vicinity, being too many to stay together as a flock, as they would have preferred. In the hotel, already lying down, each in his own bed, José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa discuss the threatening images and words they have seen and heard on television, Venice in peril, and that appeared to be true, St. Mark's Square flooded at a time when the water is not normally high, a smooth, liquid surface that reflected in every detail the campanile and the façade of the Basilica, As the Iberian peninsula gradually moves away, the announcer said in solemn, measured tones, the damaging effect on tides is certain to worsen, grave consequences are predicted throughout the entire Mediterranean basin, the cradle of civilization, we must save Venice, this is our plea to humanity, even if it means making one fewer hydrogen bomb, one fewer nuclear submarine, if it is not too late. Joaquim Sassa, like Roque Lozano, has never seen the Pearl of the Adriatic, but José Anaíço could vouch for its existence, it is true that he had not given it either its name or its sobriquet, but he had seen it with his own living eyes, had touched it with his own living hands, What a terrible tragedy if Venice should be lost, he said, and these anguished words affected Joaquim Sassa more than the agitated

waters in the canals, the tumultuous currents, the encroaching tide penetrating the ground floors of the palaces, the flooded quaysides, the awesome spectacle of an entire city sinking, an incomparable Atlantis, a submerged cathedral, the Moors, their eyes blinded by water, striking the bell with their bronze hammers until seaweed and barnacles paralyze the mechanism, liquid echoes, the Christ Pantocrator of the Basilica finally in theological conversation with the seagods subordinate to Jupiter, the Roman Neptune, the Greek Poseidon, and Venus and Amphitrite, now deliberately restored to the waters from which they emerged. Only the God of Christians is without a wife. Perhaps I'm to blame, Joaquim Sassa murmured, Don't overestimate yourself to the point of thinking you're to blame for everything, I'm referring to Venice, the loss of Venice, If Venice should be lost, everyone will be to blame, and that goes for past generations as well, the city has been declining for some time through neglect and speculation, I'm not talking about that, the whole world is suffering on that account, I'm referring to what I did, I threw a stone into the sea and some people believe that that caused the peninsula to break away from Europe. If you should have a son one day, he will die because you were born, no one will absolve you from this crime, the hands that make and weave are the same hands that dismantle and undo, right engenders wrong, wrong produces right, Poor consolation for a man in distress, There is no consolation, I'm afraid, man is a creature beyond consoling.

Perhaps Joaquim Sassa, who voiced this opinion, is right, perhaps man is a creature who cannot and will not be consoled, but certain human actions, with no meaning but that of being to all appearances meaningless, sustain the hope that man will one day come to weep on man's shoulder, probably when it is too late, when there is no longer time for anything else. The television announcer mentioned one of these actions in the news bulletin and tomorrow the newspapers will debate it further, with detailed statements from historians, critics, and poets, this was the secret landing in France, on a beach near Collioure, of a band of Spanish citizens and men of letters, who in the dead hours of the night, fearing neither hooting owls nor ghosts, burst into the cemetery where the poet Antonio Machado had been buried for many years. They had a brush with the gendarmes, who, alerted by some nighthawk, pursued the grave robbers but could not catch up with them. The sack containing the poet's mortal remains was thrown into a launch waiting on the beach, its engine running quietly, and within five minutes the pirate ship was out in the open sea, on the shore the gendarmes fired into the air, just to give vent to their annoyance, not because they felt bereft of the poetic bones. In an interview with France-Presse, the maire of Collioure tried to discredit the deed, even going so far as to insinuate that no one could be sure after all this time that the remains were those of Antonio Machado, nor is it worth inquiring how many years have passed, only through some improbable oversight on the part of the local authorities would they still be found there, despite the particular reverence with which the bones of poets are usually handled.

The journalist, a man of much experience, but so lacking in skepticism that he did not even appear to be French, stated that in his opinion, the cult of relics requires only a

suitable object, its authenticity is of no importance, for the sake of verisimilitude one asks for nothing more than a mild resemblance, consider the Cathedral of Valencia, where in times gone by the faith was promoted with a collection of precious relics, namely, the chalice used by Our Lord during the Last Supper, the shirt He wore as a boy, some drops of Our Lady's milk, locks of Her hair, fair in color, and the comb She used, and also some fragments from the Holy Cross, some indefinable object that had belonged to one of the Holy Innocents, two of those thirty pieces, made of silver after all, with which Judas allowed himself to be bought through no fault of his own, and, to end the list, one of St. Christopher's teeth, four fingers in length and three in width, dimensions undeniably excessive, that will surprise only those unaware of the saint's gigantic proportions. Where will the Spaniards bury the poet now, asked Joaquim Sassa, who had never read Machado, and José Anaíço replied, If, despite the ups and downs of life and the reversals of fortune, everything has its place and every place claims what belongs to it, what remains of Antonio Machado today must be buried somewhere in the fields of Soria, beneath a holm oak, the Castilian word is encina, without any cross or tombstone, nothing but a tiny mound of earth, it doesn't even have to look like a stretched-out corpse, in the fullness of time earth will turn to earth and all will be equal. And we Portuguese, what poet should we go and look for in France, if any of our poets ever stayed there, As far as I know, only Mario de'Sà Cameiro, but in his case there's no point even trying, first of all, because he wouldn't have wanted to come, second, because the cemeteries in Paris are well protected, third, because so many years have passed since he died, the administration of a capital city would not commit the errors of a provincial town, especially one with the additional excuse of being Mediterranean, And besides, what purpose would it serve to remove him from one cemetery in order to put him in another, now that in Portugal it is forbidden to bury the dead in an unauthorized place or in the open air, not even his bones would rest in peace if we were to leave him in the shade of an olive tree in the Parque Eduardo VII, But are there any olive trees left in the Parque Eduardo VII, That's a good question, but I can't give you an answer, and now let's get some sleep, for tomorrow we must go in search of Pedro Orce, the man who can feel the earth shaking. They switched off the light, lay there with open eyes waiting to drop off, but, before sleep arrived, Joaquim asked another question, And what about Venice, what's going to happen there, Believe me, the easiest of all the difficult tasks in this world would be to save Venice, all they would have to do would be to close the lagoon, and link the islands together so that the sea wouldn't be able to enter so readily, if the Italians aren't capable of carrying out the job on their own, let them send for the Dutch, they could dry out Venice in no time at all, We should help, we have certain responsibilities, We are no longer Europeans, well, perhaps that's not entirely true, For the time being you are still in territorial waters, interrupted an unknown voice.

In the morning, as they were paying their bill, the manager started to unburden himself, the hotel was almost empty at the height of the season, such a pity, Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço, absorbed in their own affairs, had not even noticed the dearth of guests. And the grottoes, no one is visiting the grottoes, the man repeated in dismay, for

no one to visit the grottoes was the worst of catastrophes. On the street there was great excitement, the children of Aracena had never seen so many starlings together, not even when they went bird-watching in the countryside, but the pleasure of this novelty did not last long, no sooner had the Portuguese Deux Chevaux started off in the direction of Seville than the starlings took flight as if the entire flock were a single bird, they circled twice as if saying farewell or trying to get their bearings, and disappeared behind the castle of the Knights Templar. The morning is clear, you could touch the sky with your fingers, and today promises to be less hot than yesterday, but the journey is long, From here to Granada it's more than three hundred kilometers, and then we have to go in search of Orce, let's hope we're successful and we find the man, these were the words of José Anaíço, that they might not find the man was a possibility that only now came to mind, And if we do find him, what are we going to say to him, now it was Joaquim Sassa's turn to be doubtful. In the merciless light of another day, or perhaps as a result of night's evil counsel, he suddenly found all these events absurd, could it be true that a continent had divided simply because someone had thrown a stone into the sea, a stone that exceeded the strength of the person who threw it, yet there was no shadow of doubt that a stone had been thrown and the continent had divided, and a Spaniard swears that he can feel the earth shaking, and a flock of demented birds is following a Portuguese schoolmaster everywhere, and who knows what else has happened or is about to happen throughout the peninsula, Let's talk about your stone and my starlings, and he will talk about the earth that shook or is still shaking, And then, Then, if there is nothing more to see, nothing to experience and learn, we'll go home, you to your job, I to my school, pretend it was all a dream, and by the way, you still haven't told me what you do for a living, I work in an office, I also work in an office, I'm a teacher. They both laughed, and Deux Chevaux, ever prudent, pointed out on the gauge that they were running out of gas. They refilled the tank at the first service station they encountered, but they had to wait more than half an hour, the line of vehicles stretched way down the road, everyone was anxious to have a full tank. They got back on the road, Joaquim Sassa was now seriously worried, There's a run on gas, very soon they'll close the pumps, and then what, We should have been prepared for this, gas is a sensitive commodity, unstable, whenever there's a crisis it's the first indication, some years ago there was a ban here on supplies of gas, I don't know if you can remember that or even heard about it, it was utter chaos, I'm beginning to think we'll never reach Orce, Don't be a pessimist, I'm a born pessimist.

They passed through Seville without stopping, but the starlings lingered for a few minutes to admire the Giralda, which they had never seen before. Had there been only half a dozen of them they could have formed a diadem of black angels for the Statue of Faith, but because there were thousands of them, in their avalanche-like descent they covered the statue, transforming it into an indefinable figure, one that could just as easily have been taken for the symbol of Doubt as for the Statue of Faith. The metamorphosis was short-lived, José Anaíço is already speeding through this labyrinth of streets, let's follow him, winged species. Along the way, Deux Chevaux drank wherever possible, some gas stations had notices saying Sold Out, but the pump attendants said Mariana, they're

an optimistic bunch, or perhaps they have simply learned how to make life tolerable. But the starlings had no lack of water, thank God, for Our Lord is much more concerned about birds than about humans, nearby are the tributaries of the Guadalquivir, the lagoons, the reservoirs, more water than those tiny beaks could drink in a million years. It's already mid-afternoon when they arrive in Granada, Deux Chevaux is panting, shuddering after all that effort, while Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço go off to investigate, as if they were carrying sealed orders and the moment had come to open them, now we shall know where our destiny awaits us.

At the tourist office, an employee asked them if they were Portuguese archaeologists or anthropologists, that they were Portuguese could be seen at once, but why anthropologists and archaeologists, Because Orce is generally visited only by the latter, some years ago a discovery was made in nearby Venta Micena, the oldest human remains to be found in Europe, A whole skeleton, asked José Anaíço, Only a skull, but ancient, going back somewhere between one million three hundred thousand and one million four hundred thousand years, And do we know for certain they are human remains, Joaquim Sassa cautiously inquired, whereupon Maria Dolores replied with a knowing smile, Whenever human remains from ancient times are discovered, they always belong to some man, Cro-Magnon Man, Neanderthal Man, Swanscombe Man, Peking Man, Heidelberg Man, Java Man, at that time there were no women, Eve still hadn't been created, she was only created later, You're being ironic, No, I'm an anthropologist by training and a militant feminist by inclination, Well, we're journalists and we want to interview a certain Pedro Orce, the one who felt the earth shaking. How does such news make it to Portugal, Everything comes in Portugal and we go everywhere, this part of the dialogue was conducted solely by José Anaíço, who always has an answer ready, undoubtedly because he's used to coping with schoolchildren. Joaquim Sassa had moved away to examine some illustrated posters of the Courtyard of the Lions, the Gardens of Generalife, the entombed effigies of the Catholic Kings, studying them he had to ask himself if there would be any point in visiting these places after having seen the photographs. Absorbed in these thoughts about perceptions of reality, he lost the drift of the conversation, what could José Anaíço have said to make Maria Dolores laugh so heartily, if every Dolores had not changed her name to Lola, each of those guffaws would have been a scandal. But she no longer showed the slightest hint of feminist aggression, perhaps because this Ribatejo Man was something more than just a mandible, a molar, and a patch of skull, and because there is plenty of evidence, in this age in which we live, that women do exist. Maria Dolores, who works in tourism because she cannot find employment as an anthropologist, draws the missing road on the map for José Anaíço, indicates with a black dot the village of Orce, and that of Venta Micena right beside it, now the travelers may proceed, the sorceress at the crossroads has shown them the way, It's a desert, a lunar landscape, but one can see in her eyes that she regrets not being able to accompany them, to practice her skills in the company of Portuguese journalists, especially that rather more discreet one who moved away to look at the posters, how often life has taught us not to judge by appearances, as Joaquim Sassa himself is now

doing, his mistake, modest man that he is, If we were to stay here you would be getting it on with the lady anthropologist, let us forgive him this vulgar expression, when men are together that's how they talk, and José Anaigo, presumptuous, but also fooled, replied, Who knows.

This world, we shall never tire of repeating, is a comedy of errors. Another proof of this maxim is that the name Orce Man should have been given to some old bones found not in Orce but in Venta Micena, which would make a nice palaeontological label, were it not for that name Venta, which translates as Sale, the sign and symbol of inferior merchandise. The fate of words is truly strange. Unless Micenae was a woman's name, before it became that of a man, like that celebrated Galician woman who gave her name to the town of Golegâ in Portugal, perhaps some Greeks from Mycenae, in flight from the demented Atridae, arrived in these remote parts, and anxious to reestablish the name of their native region, they happened to choose this place, much farther away than Cerbère, at the heart of hell, and never so remote as now, as we go sailing off. However difficult you may find it to believe.

The devil had his first abode in these parts, his were the hooves that scorched the ground and trampled the ashes, amid mountains that shivered with fear then and continue to do so to this day, the ultimate desert where even Christ would have allowed Himself to be tempted by that same devil, had He not already experienced the wiles of Satan, as one reads in the Bible. Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço contemplate, what do they contemplate, the landscape, but this delightful word belongs to other worlds, to other languages, you cannot refer to what one sees here as a landscape, we have called it an infernal abode, but we are not altogether sure, for in places of damnation we're almost certain to find men and women with the animals that keep them company, until the moment comes to slaughter them in order to live, amid disasters and misfortunes, this is the place of exile where the poet who never visited Granada must have written his verses. These are the lands of Orce, which must have soaked up so much Moorish and Christian blood, to speak once more of the Dark Ages, but why speak of those who died so many years ago, if it is the land that is dead, buried within itself.

At Orce, the travelers found Pedro Orce, a pharmacist by profession, older than they would have imagined him, had they given the matter any thought. Pedro Orce did not appear on television, therefore we could not have known that he is a man in his sixties, thin in features and body, his hair almost entirely white, and were it not for his sober taste, which shuns any artifice, he could make up dark and fair hair dyes at will in the secrecy of his laboratory, for he is skilled in these chemical concoctions. When Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço enter the pharmacy, he is filling capsules with quinine powder, an old-fashioned medicament that avoids the powerful concentrations characteristic of modern prescriptions, while astutely preserving the psychological effect of awkward deglutination, followed as if by magic by immediate results. In Orce, which one must inevitably pass through to reach Venta Micena, travelers are rare now that the commotion of excavations and discoveries has passed, we do not even know where the skull of the town's oldest ancestor is kept, there in some museum awaiting a glass case with a label, normally any customers passing through buy aspirin, pills to help their digestion or to cure diarrhea, as for the local inhabitants, they probably die from their first illness, so the pharmacist will most likely never get rich. Pedro Orce has finished sealing the capsules, just like a conjuring trick, after moistening the parts that will serve to seal the capsule, the two brass plates are pressed together, then opened, and the prescription is ready, one last capsule of quinine makes a dozen, and this done he asks them, What can I do for you gentlemen, We are Portuguese, a pointless statement, one need only hear them speak to know at once where they come from, but, after all, it is only natural to declare who we are before saying why we have come, especially in situations of such importance, to travel hundreds of kilometers just to ask, although not necessarily with these dramatic words, Pedro Orce, do you swear on your honor and on the excavated bones that you felt the earth shake when all the seismographs of Seville and Granada, their needles steady, traced the straightest line you ever saw, and Pedro Orce raised his hand and said, with the simplicity of a just and honest man, I do, We would like to have a word in private, Joaquim Sassa added after they had revealed their nationality, and there

and then, since there were no other clients in the pharmacy, they told him about their personal and joint experiences, about the stone, the starlings, crossing the frontier, they could not show him the stone, but as for the birds, you need only stick your head outside the door and look, there, in this square or in the adjacent one, the inevitable flock of birds, all the inhabitants staring up at the sky amazed at this unusual spectacle, now the birds have disappeared, they have descended upon the Castle of the Seven Towers, Arabic in origin. Better not to speak here, Pedro Orce said, get into the car and drive out of town, In which direction, Drive straight ahead, in the direction of Maria, keep going for three kilometers beyond the last houses, there is a tiny bridge, nearby an olive tree, wait for me there, I'll join you shortly, Joaquim Sassa had the impression that he was about to relive a scene from his own life, that morning two days ago, when he had waited for José Anaíço, beyond the last houses in town.

They are seated on the ground, under a Cordoban olive tree, the kind that, according to the popular quatrain, makes the oil yellow, as if olive oil weren't yellow, or only occasionally slightly greenish, and the first words from José Anaíço, he could not suppress them, were, This place is enough to put the fear of God into you, and Pedro Orce replied, It's much worse in Venta Micena, where I was born, an ambiguous formality that means what it appears to be saying as well as the exact opposite, depending more on the reader than on the reading, although the latter is entirely dependent on the former, which explains why we find it so difficult to know who is reading what has been read, or the effect of what has been read on the person who reads it, let us hope that, in this case, Pedro Orce will not think that the curse on the place is the result of his having been born there. Then as their discussion got under way, they gradually started to compare their experiences as discus-thrower, bird-catcher, and seismologist, and they came to the conclusion that all the events that had taken place had been, and continued to be, somehow connected, especially since Pedro Orce insists that the ground has not stopped shaking, I can feel it even at this very moment, and he stretched out his hand to show them what he meant. Drawn by curiosity, José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa touched the hand he kept outstretched, and they could feel, oh yes, beyond the shadow of a doubt they could feel the tremor, the vibration, the drone, and although some skeptic might suggest that it is natural for people to start trembling at a certain age, Pedro Orce is not all that old, and trembling and tremor are not the same thing, whatever the dictionaries might tell us.

Anyone watching from afar would think that the three men had just pledged themselves to some commitment or other, what is certain is that they quickly shook hands, and nothing more. All around, the stones have intensified the heat, the white earth is dazzling, the sky is an open furnace blowing hot air, even in the shade beneath this Cordoban olive tree. So far no olives have appeared, the men are safe for the moment from the voracious starlings, once December comes you will see such plundering, but since there is only one olive tree, the starlings are not likely to frequent these parts. Joaquim Sassa switched on his radio, for suddenly none of the three had

anything more to say, scarcely surprising, after all, they have not known each other for very long, the announcer's voice can be heard, grown nasal from all that broadcasting and because the batteries are low, Judging from the latest measurements, the speed of the peninsula's dislocation has stabilized at around seven hundred and fifty meters per hour, the three men started listening to the news, According to the latest reports to reach the newsroom, an enormous crack has appeared between La Linea and Gibraltar, the voice droned on and on, We shall be back with more news, unless anything unforeseen should happen, in an hour's time, at this very moment the starlings passed in a flurry, vruuuuuuuuu, and Joaquim Sassa asked, Are they yours, and José Anaíço didn't even have to look up before replying, They're mine, he has no difficulty in recognizing them, he knows them, Sherlock Holmes would be bound to say, Elementary, my dear Watson, there isn't another flock like it in these parts, and he is right, for there are few birds in hell, only the nocturnal ones, a matter of tradition.

Pedro Orce follows the flock's flight, initially out of mild curiosity, then his eyes light up with blue sky and white clouds, and, unable to hold back the words, he suddenly proposes, Why don't we go to the coast and see the rock as it passes. This may sound absurd, nonsensical, but it is not, even when we travel by train, we think we see trees passing when they are firmly rooted in the soil, at this moment we are not traveling by train, we are traveling more slowly, on a stone raft that is sailing the sea, unfettered, the only difference being that which exists between solid and liquid. So often we need a whole lifetime in order to change our life, we think a great deal, weigh things up and vacillate, then we go back to the beginning, we think and think, we displace ourselves on the tracks of time with a circular movement, like those clouds of dust, dead leaves, debris, that have no strength for anything more, better by far that we should live in a land of hurricanes. At other times one word is all that is needed, Let's go and see the rock as it passes, and they get to their feet, eager for adventure, they don't even feel the scorching heat, they run laughing down the slope, like children given their freedom, Deux Chevaux is like a burning cauldron, within seconds the three men are bathed in sweat, but they scarcely notice their discomfort, for from these same southern parts men set out to discover the New World, rugged and fierce, sweating like pigs in their armor, steel helmets on their heads, they advanced sword in hand to fight the naked Indians, clad only in feathers and war paint, an idyllic image.

They did not go back through the village, for anyone seeing Pedro Orce and the two strangers traveling in the same car would suspect either that he was being abducted or that the three of them were involved in some conspiracy, better call the police, but some old man, one of the veterans of Orce, would say, We don't want the Civil Guard here. They went by other routes, along roads not marked on the average map, the person we need right now is the sphinx of tourism, to trace out the itinerary of these new discoveries, for she had turned out to be a sphinx, after all, rather than a sibyl, for no sibyl has ever been seen at a crossroads, even if both species are native to the peninsula. Pedro Orce said, First I must show you Venta Micena, the place where I was born, the

phrase came out as if he were mocking himself or deliberately touching a sore point. They passed through a village in ruins called Fuente Nueva, if there ever was a fountain here it has dried up and vanished, and at a wide bend in the road ahead, he called out, There it is.

They take a good look and see so little that they start searching for what must be missing and can no longer be found. There, asked José Anaigo, he has cause for doubt, because there are only a few scattered houses, they merge with the color of the earth, a church tower down below, here at the edge of the road what is unmistakably a cemetery, with a cross and white walls. Under the volcanic sun, the countryside rolls like a petrified sea covered with dust, if things were already like this one million, four hundred thousand years ago, you do not have to be a paleontologist to testify that Orce Man died of thirst, the world was young once, the stream that flows over there would then have been a wide and generous river, great trees would have towered, and grasses taller than man, in the days before hell was located here. At the right season, when there is rain, some greenery will sprout on these ashen fields, nowadays the low verges are cultivated with great effort, the plants dry up and die, then revive and flourish, it's man who still has not learned how cycles repeat themselves, with him it is once and nevermore. Pedro Orce makes a gesture that embraces the blighted village. The house where I was born no longer exists, and then, pointing to the left, in the direction of some flat-topped hills, That's the Cueva de los Rosales, where the bones of Orce Man were discovered. Joaquim Sassa and José Anaigo looked at the livid landscape, one million, four hundred thousand years ago this place was inhabited by men and women who engendered men and women who engendered men and women, destiny, disaster, right up to the present day, one million, four hundred thousand years hence someone will come to carry out excavations in this poor cemetery, and since there is already an Orce Man, perhaps the skull that has just been found will now be returned to its rightful owner and be called Venta Micena Man. No one passes, no dog can be heard barking, the starlings have disappeared, Joaquim Sassa feels a shiver run all the way up his spine, as he tries in vain to suppress his uneasiness, and José Anaigo asks, What's the name of that mountain down there, That's the Sierra de Sagra, And this one here, on our right, That's the Sierra de Maria, When Orce Man died, that must have been the last thing he saw, What would he have called it when he talked with other men from Orce, the ones who left no skulls behind, Joaquim Sassa asked, At that time there were no names, José Anaigo said, How can you look at something without giving it a name, You have to wait for the name to be born. The three men stood there gazing, with nothing more to say, it was time to leave the past to its restless peace.

In order to lighten their journey, Pedro Orce repeated in greater detail the story of his adventures, the scientists had even linked him up to a seismograph in the presence of the authorities, a desperate but useful measure, for then they would be able to establish whether he had been telling the truth, the needle on the dial immediately registered an earth tremor, the line becoming straight again once the guinea pig had been

disconnected from the machine. The inexplicable has been explained, declared the Mayor of Granada, who was looking on, but one of the experts corrected him, The inexplicable will have to wait a little longer, it wasn't a strictly scientific statement but everyone understood what he meant and agreed. They sent Pedro Orce home, instructing him to remain at the disposal of science and the authorities, warning him that he should speak to no one of his extrasensory powers, a recommendation differing little from the decision made by the French veterinary surgeons concerning the mysterious disappearance of the vocal cords of the dogs of Cerbère.

Deux Chevaux has finally turned in a southerly direction, the car is already on well-traveled roads, there seems to be no shortage here of fuel, gasoline, or diesel, but little by little the car is obliged to reduce its lively pace, ahead there is an endless line of traffic crawling at a snail's pace, other cars, trucks and buses carrying freight, motorcycles, bicycles, mopeds, scooters, horse-drawn carts, people riding donkeys, but no Roque Lozano among them, and people on foot, many of these, some asking for a lift, others clearly disdaining any means of transport, as if doing penance, or fulfilling some dream, it is more likely to be a dream, and there is no point in asking them where they are going, you do not need to be called Pedro Orce to share the same thought and want to see Gibraltar pass in the distance, drifting off course, you need only be Spanish, and here Spaniards abound. They come from Cordoba, from Linares, from Jaén, from Guadix, all of them major cities, but also from Higuera de Arjona, from El Tocón, from Bular Bajo, from Alamedilla, from Jesús del Monte, from Alámcegas, delegations appear to have been dispatched from every region, these people have been extremely patient, ever since the year 1704, just imagine, if Gibraltar is not going to belong to us, if we who have become part of these waters must renounce it, then why should it go to the English. The human river grew so wide that the traffic police had to open wherever possible a third lane heading south, few vehicles are traveling north, only in an emergency, sickness or death, and even so they are looked at with mistrust, suspected of Anglophilia, perhaps they want to bury in some remote corner their distress at this geological and strategic separation.

But for most people this is a day of great rejoicing, a week as holy as the official one, and there are trucks carrying statues of Christ, the Virgins of Triana and Macarena, brass bands, their instruments shining in the sun, and on the donkeys' backs can be seen bundles of firewood and mortars, if someone were to put a lighted match anywhere near them, they would soar like Clavileño to the second and third heights of the heavens, and to that of fire, where they would singe Sancho Panza's beard, if, with his gullible nature, he allowed himself to be deceived yet again. The young girls are dressed in all their finery, with mantillas and shawls, and the elderly, when they can walk no farther, are carried by the young on their backs, son you are, father you will be, you will reap as you have sown, until some vehicle stops, any vehicle, and the journey goes on, their weary limbs relaxed, everyone making for the coast, the beaches, better still if they can find some elevation looking out to sea where they might be sure of a good view of that

damned rock, what a pity it's too far to hear the monkeys screeching, disoriented because there's no land in sight. As the sea gets closer, the traffic becomes more congested, some are already abandoning their vehicles and walking, or begging a lift from those traveling in horse-drawn carts or on donkeys, the latter cannot abandon these creatures of nature, they have to tend them, water them, put the baskets of straw and bean pods to their snouts, even the police are aware of the situation, they are all countryfolk, therefore the orders are to leave the trucks and cars at the side of the road, the animals can go on, and motorcycles, bicycles, scooters, and mopeds are also permitted, the latter have ways and means of maneuvering smoothly in and out of traffic because they do not take up much space. The brass bands, on foot, rehearse the first paso dobles, an overenthusiastic vendor of fireworks, or some ardent patriot, prematurely lets off a mighty firecracker, to the annoyance of his friends, not prepared to waste their fireworks without good reason. Deux Chevaux has also come to a halt, it was the only Portuguese car in the procession, the only one with Portuguese registration, that is, watching Gibraltar drifting past does not bother Deux Chevaux one way or the other, his ancient grief is called Olivença and this road does not lead there. You can see people who are already lost, women calling for their husbands, children calling for their parents, but fortunately for all of them they will eventually be reunited, if this is not a day for laughter, it is not one for weeping either, God willing and that Cur of a Son. There are dogs too, sniffing around, few of them bark, except when they start fighting among themselves, not a single one of them from Cerbère. And when two donkeys appeared on the loose, with no sign of their owners, Pedro Orce, Joaquim Sassa, and José Anaíço unwisely decided to make use of them taking turns, one walking, the other two riding, but their comfort was short-lived, the donkeys belonged to a band of gypsies who were traveling north, these last could not have cared less about Gibraltar, and if Pedro Orce had not been Spanish, and of the most ancient and respected lineage, Portuguese blood would have been shed on the spot.

All along the coast the encampment stretches for miles, almost like a small village, thousands and thousands of people looking out to sea, some have clambered onto rooftops and up tall trees, not to mention all the other thousands who did not want to come so far and stayed behind, with spyglasses and binoculars, on the heights of the Sierra Contraviesa or on the slopes of the Sierra Nevada, here we are only interested in the more humble people, those who have to touch things in order to recognize them, they will not get all that close, but they are doing their utmost. José Anaíço, Joaquim Sassa, and Pedro Orce have come with them, spurred by the enthusiasm of Pedro Orce and the good-natured friendliness of the others, now they are seated on some boulders facing the sea, the evening is drawing in, and Joaquim Sassa, the self-confessed pessimist, remarks, If Gibraltar should pass during the night, we will have made the journey in vain. At least we'll be able to see her lights, Pedro Orce argued, and it might actually be even better to watch the rock moving away like a ship all lit up, then we'd have a real excuse for setting off fireworks, pinwheels, silver rain, cascades, or whatever they're called here, while the rock fades away in the distance, disappears into the darkness of night, good-bye, good-bye, never to be seen again. But José Anaíço had

spread out the map on his lap, and with pencil and paper he made some calculations, repeated them one by one to be absolutely certain, checked the scale once again, double-checked his figures, and finally declared, As for Gibraltar, my friends, it will take about ten days to get here, incredulous surprise on the part of his companions, then he showed them his arithmetic, he did not even need to invoke his authority as a certified teacher, knowledge of this kind, fortunately, is within reach of the simplest minds, if the peninsula, or island, or whatever, is moving at a speed of seven hundred and fifty meters per hour, we can figure it will cover eighteen kilometers each day, okay, draw a straight line from the Bay of Algeciras to where we are standing, it's almost two hundred kilometers, so work that out, it's not difficult. Confronted with this irrefutable proof, Pedro Orce bowed his head in submission, And we have come running here with all these people thinking our day of glory has arrived, that today we could have mocked the Evil Stone, and now we'll have to wait ten days, no fire lasts long. And suppose we were to go and meet it, taking the roads along the coast, Joaquim Sassa suggested, No, no, it isn't worth it, Pedro Orce replied, these things have to happen at the right moment, before one's enthusiasm flags, it's right now that the rock should be passing before our very eyes, while we're still feeling excited, we were in the right mood but not any more, Well, what shall we do, then, José Anaiço asked, Let's go, Don't you want to stay, You can no longer live your dream once the dream has gone, In that case, let's leave tomorrow, So soon, I have to get back to school, And I to my office, And I've always got my pharmacy.

They went to look for Deux Chevaux, but while they are searching and having some difficulty finding the car, this is the moment to mention that many thousands of people who achieved neither voice nor vote in this story, who have not made even a brief appearance at the edges of the scene, thousands of people who have not budged for the last ten days and nights, who ate from the provisions they had brought along, who then, when they ran out on the second day, went to buy whatever they could find locally, and cooked in the open air, on great bonfires that were like pyres from another age, and not even those who had run out of money went hungry, where there was food for one there was food for all, we are enjoying a revival of fraternity, if such a thing has ever been humanly possible or is likely to return. Pedro Orce, José Anaiço, and Joaquim Sassa are not about to experience this admirable fraternity, they have turned their backs on the sea, and now it is their turn to be looked at suspiciously by those hordes of people who are still descending.

Meantime darkness has fallen, the first lights go on. Let's go, said José Anaiço Orce will remain silent, sitting on the back seat, looking sad, his eyes closed, it has to be now or never, we shall never have a better opportunity to recall the Portuguese refrain, Where are you going, I'm off to the party, Where have you come from, I've come from the party, even without the help of exclamation points and pauses, one can readily see the difference between the joyful anticipation of the first reply and the disillusioned weariness of the second, they only look alike on the page on which they're written. During the entire journey, only six words were spoken, You must have dinner with me, they came from the

lips of Pedro Orce, he feels obliged to be hospitable. José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa did not feel it necessary to make any reply, some might think they were being impolite by remaining silent, but such people know very little about human nature, those better informed would testify that the three men had become close friends.

They reach Orce in the dead of night. The roads at this hour are a desert of shadows and silence, Deux Chevaux can be left at the door of the pharmacy, and it is no bad thing that they should give it a rest, tomorrow the car will be back on the road carrying the three men, a matter about to be decided indoors as they sit round the table enjoying a simple meal, for Pedro Orce also lives alone and there is not time enough to prepare anything elaborate. They switched on the television, the news is broadcast hourly, and they saw Gibraltar, not simply separated from Spain, but already at a considerable distance, like an island abandoned in the middle of the ocean, transformed, poor thing, into a peak, a sugarloaf, a reef, with its thousand cannon out of action. Even if they should insist on opening new loopholes on the northern side, perhaps to gratify imperial pride, they would be throwing their money into the sea, in both the literal and the figurative senses. Those scenes undoubtedly made an impression, but were nothing when compared to the shock produced by a series of satellite pictures showing the progressive widening of the canal between the peninsula and France, flesh froze and hair bristled at the sight of this great catastrophe, beyond human powers, for this was no longer a canal but open sea, where ships sailed at will, over water that had truly never been sailed before. Obviously, the displacement could not be observed, at this altitude a speed of seven hundred and fifty meters per hour cannot be captured by the naked eye, but for one observing it was as if the great mass of stone were shifting in his head, sensitive people almost fainted, others complained of feeling dizzy. And there were pictures that had been taken from aboard the indefatigable helicopters, the gigantic Pyrenean escarpment, cut vertically, and the minute swarm of ants heading south, like a sudden migration, just to see Gibraltar adrift, an optical illusion, for it is we who are being carried off with the current, and also, to add a colorful detail, an entry worthy of a diary, a flock of starlings, thousands of them, like a cloud obscuring one's field of vision, darkening the sky. Even the birds are responding to the crowd's excitement, that was the verb the announcer used, responding, when we know from natural history that birds have their own good reasons for going whithersoever they choose or must, they act neither for me nor for you, at most for José Anaíço, who ungratefully confesses, I'd forgotten about them.

There were also shots of Portugal, taken on the Atlantic coast, showing the waves beating on the rocks or swirling over the sands, and lots of people watching the horizon, all with the tragic expression of someone who for centuries has been prepared for the unknown and fears that it may not come after all, or may turn out to be no different from the common, banal experiences of everyday life. There they are now, as Unamuno described them, his swarthy face cupped in the palms of his hands, Fix your eyes where the lonely sun sets in the immense sea, all nations with the sea to the west do the same,

this race is swarthy, there is no other particularity, and it has sailed the seas. Lyrical, ecstatic, the Spanish announcer declaims, Look at the Portuguese, all along their golden beaches, once but no longer the prow of Europe, for we have left the European quayside to sail once more the Atlantic waves, what admiral will guide us, what port awaits us, the closing shot showed a young lad throwing a pebble into the sea, practicing the art of ricochet, one that requires no training, and Joaquim Sassa said, He has the strength of his years, the stone couldn't possibly go any farther, but the peninsula, or whatever it might be, appeared to be advancing with even greater vigor over the deep sea, so different from what it normally is in the summer. The final item of news was given by the announcer, in passing, as if he did not consider it very important, Some volatility has been observed among the population, lots of people are leaving their homes, not only in Andalusia, there we know the reason, but, bearing in mind that most of them are heading for the sea, we may assume that they are driven by natural curiosity, in any case we can assure our viewers that there is nothing to see on the coast, as we have just confirmed, all those Portuguese who were staring at the sea, stared and saw nothing, let us not make the same mistake. Then Pedro Orce said, If you have room for me, I'm coming with you.

Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço remained silent, they could not understand why such a sensible Spaniard should want to visit the regions and beaches of Portugal. The question was worth raising, and as the owner of Deux Chevaux, it was up to Joaquim Sassa to ask, and Pedro Orce replied, I don't want to stay here, with the earth shaking under my feet all the time, and people telling me that I'm only imagining things, You might well feel the earth shaking in Portugal too, and very likely people there will say much the same thing, José Anaíço told him, and we have our jobs waiting for us. I won't be a burden to you, just take me with you and leave me in Lisbon, where I've never been, I'll come back here one day, And what about your family and your pharmacy, You must have gathered by now that I have no family, I'm the last survivor, the pharmacy will be all right, I have an assistant who will look after things. There was nothing more to be said, no reason for refusing, We'll be glad of your company, was the phrase Joaquim Sassa used, The worst thing would be if they were to detain you at the frontier, José Anaíço reminded him, I'll tell them I've been touring Spain, so I couldn't possibly have known that anyone was looking for me, and that I'm just about to present myself to the authorities, but it's unlikely there will be any need for explanations, they're sure to be paying more attention to those who are leaving than to those who are entering, Let's cross over at some other frontier post, I'm worried about the starlings, José Anaíço reminded them, and, having spoken, he spread out on the table a map of the whole Iberian peninsula, drawn and colored at a time when everything was terra firma and the ossified callus of the Pyrenees discouraged any temptation to venture beyond, in silence the three men stood looking at the flat area representing this part of the world as if they failed to recognize it, Strabo used to say that the peninsula is formed like the hide of an ox, Pedro Orce muttered these words earnestly, and despite the warm night Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço broke out in goose pimples, as if suddenly confronted by the

Cyclopean beast that was about to be sacrificed and skinned in order to burden the continent of Europe with yet another carcass that would go on bleeding until the end of time.

The open map showed the two countries, Portugal indented, suspended, Spain unhinged to the south, and the regions, the provinces, the districts, the thick rubble of the major cities, the dust of the towns and villages, but not of all of them, for dust is often invisible to the naked eye, Venta Micena being merely one example. Their hands smooth and stroke the paper, they pass over Alentejo and continue northwards, as if they were caressing a human face, from right to left, following the hands of the clock, the direction of time, the Beiras, Ribatejo before them, and then Trás-os-Montes and Minho, Galicia, Asturias, the Basque country and Navarre, Castile and Leon, Aragon and Catalonia, Valencia, Estremadura, both the Spanish and the Portuguese, Andalusia where we still find ourselves, the Algarve, then José Anaíço pointed with his finger to the mouth of the Guadiana and said, Let's enter through here.

Swept away by the volley of gunfire from Rosal de la Frontera of bitter memory, the starlings, prudent on this occasion, made a wide circle northward and crossed to where the air was clear and the circulation free, some three kilometers from the bridge, which was already built by then, and none too soon. The police on the Portuguese side expressed no surprise that one of the three travelers was called Joaquim Sassa, there were clearly more serious matters worrying the authorities, and these soon became apparent from the ensuing dialogue, Where are you gentlemen heading for, the guard inquired, For Lisbon, replied José Anaíço, who was at the wheel, and he in turn asked, Why do you ask, officer, You will run into roadblocks along the highway, follow any orders you may receive, under no circumstances should you try to force your way through or look for ways around, otherwise you'll be in trouble, Has there been some kind of disaster, Depends what you mean by disaster, Don't tell us the Algarve is also breaking away, it had to come sooner or later, they've always thought of themselves as being a separate kingdom, No, it's something else, something more serious, people are trying to occupy the hotels, they claim that if there are no tourists they ought to be given shelter, We've heard nothing about this, when did the occupation begin, Last night, Well I never, exclaimed José Anaíço, had he been French he would have said Ça alors, everyone has his own way of expressing the surprise the next man also experienced, listen to Pedro Orce who gave a resounding Caramba, while from Joaquim Sassa you could scarcely hear the echo of that, Well I never.

The police instructed them to carry on, warned them for a second time, Look out for the roadblocks, and Deux Chevaux was able to cross Vila Real de Santo António while the passengers went on discussing this extraordinary affair, Seriously, who would have believed it, there are two different types of Portuguese, those who take off for the beaches and sand dunes to contemplate the horizon despondently, and others who advance intrepidly on those hotels-cum-fortresses defended by the police, by the Republican Guard, and even, it would seem, by the army itself, Already people have been wounded, this they were told secretly in a café where they decided to stop and gather some information. This was how they learned that in three hotels, one in Albufeira, one in Praia da Rocha, the last in Lagos, the situation is critical, the forces of order are on the point of surrounding the buildings where the insurgents are digging in, barricading doors and windows, blocking all points of access, they are like besieged Moors, infidels without mercy, apostates heeding neither appeals nor threats, they know that the white flag will be followed by tear gas, therefore they refuse to negotiate, they reject the very word surrender. Pedro Orce is shaken, goes on repeating Caramba under his breath, and one can detect a hint of patriotic pique in his expression, deep regret that the Spanish should have failed to take the initiative.

At the first roadblock they were asked to turn off in the direction of Castro Marim, but José Anaíço protested that he had important business in Silves, it must be dealt with urgently, he said Silves to allay any suspicions, Besides, I have to travel along country roads, And keep as far off the beaten track as possible, if you want to avoid

complications, the officer in charge advised him, reassured by the harmless appearance of the three passengers and the jaded respectability of Deux Chevaux, But officer, in a situation like this, with the country going adrift, and the expression could not have been more apt, here we are worrying ourselves about some hotels being occupied, this isn't the kind of revolution that warrants a general mobilization, people get impatient sometimes, that's all, the comment came from Joaquim Sassa, scarcely diplomatic, fortunately the lieutenant was not a man to go back on his word but a soldier who upheld ancient traditions, otherwise they would have found themselves obliged to go through Castro Marim after all. Joaquim Sassa's impertinence was duly reprimanded nonetheless, The army is here to carry out its orders, what would you say if we were to abandon our uncomfortable barracks and occupy the Sheraton or the Ritz, the officer must really have been mad to condescend to giving explanations to a civilian. You're absolutely right, lieutenant, just like my friend to speak without thinking, as I'm always telling him, Well, he should make a point of thinking, he's old enough, the officer retorted sharply. With an abrupt gesture he waved them on, he did not hear what Joaquim Sassa said, and just as well, otherwise they might have ended up behind bars.

They were detained at other roadblocks manned by the Republican Guard, who were not quite so obliging, sometimes they were forced to make detours along bad roads before returning to the main highway. Joaquim Sassa was angry, not without reason, he had been reprimanded twice, That the lieutenant should throw his weight around, I can accept, but you had no right to say that I don't think before speaking, Forgive me, I was only trying to keep the situation from deteriorating, you were being ironic with the man and that was a mistake, you must never be ironic with the authorities, either they don't notice and it's pointless, or they notice, and it only makes things worse. Pedro Orce asked them to explain, slowly, what they were arguing about, and the inevitable change of tone, the repetitions, revealed that it was a matter of no importance, when Pedro Orce understood everything, everything had been understood.

After the road forked at Boliqueime, on a deserted stretch José Anaíço took advantage of a shallow ditch and with no warning drove Deux Chevaux straight into an open field, Where are you going, Joaquim Sassa called out, If we keep to the road, like obedient little children, we'll never get close to any of those hotels, and we do want to see what's going on there, don't we, José Anaíço retorted between one jolt and another, struggling with the unsteady steering wheel as the car bounced over the ruts like something demented. Pedro Orce, sitting on the back seat, was thrown from one side to another with neither pity nor mercy, and Joaquim Sassa, who had burst out laughing, replied in fits and starts, That's really funny, that's really very funny. Fortunately, three hundred meters ahead they found a hidden path among the fig trees, behind a broken-down wall of dry stones, or one that had lost its mortar with time. They were, in a manner of speaking, in the field of operations. Taking every precaution they close in on Albufeira, wherever possible they choose flat terrain, worst of all are the clouds of dust sent up by Deux Chevaux, ill-equipped to act as beater and vanguard, but the police are

already far away, guarding the crossroads, the major road junctions as they are called in the current terminology of communications, besides, the effective strength of the forces of order is not so great that it could strategically cover a province that is as rich in hotels as in locust trees, if such a comparison were permissible. In fact, anyone whose next destination is the city of Lisbon would not need to venture into those parts where subversion reigns, but we might as well confirm whether our information is correct, time and time again one has seen how stories get exaggerated in the telling, there might have been the odd isolated incident, but the roadblocks might turn out in the end to be nothing more than the putting into practice of that wise proverb that warns us that prevention is better than cure. But there were already infiltrations. From among the sparse trees, eagerly tramping over the red soil, came men and women carrying sacks, suitcases and bundles on their shoulders, tiny children in their arms, their intention being to secure a place in a hotel, with these few belongings and the closest members of the family as a guaranty, wife, children, then, if all goes well, they will send for the rest of their relatives, and the bed, the chest, and the table, for want of any other belongings, no one seems to have remembered that there are plenty of beds and tables in hotels, and while there may not be all that many chests, there are wardrobes serving the same purpose.

At the gates of Albufeira preparations were under way for the decisive battle. The travelers had left Deux Chevaux behind, parked tranquilly in the shade, in a situation of this kind one cannot rely on its assistance, a car is a mechanical entity, devoid of emotions, wherever you drive it, it goes, it remains where it is parked, it does not care one way or another whether the peninsula goes sailing off, the peninsula's dislocation is not likely to make distances any shorter. The battle was preceded by a rallying speech, as was common in ancient warfare, with words of defiance and exhortation to the troops, prayers to the Virgin or to their patron, St. James, the words always sound fine at the outset, the outcome is invariably disastrous, at Albufeira, the harangue from the leader of the invading populace was to no avail, and yet how well he harangued, Guards, soldiers, friends, open your ears wide, and give me your attention, you are, and don't you forget it, sons of the people just like us, this much-sacrificed people that builds houses yet remains homeless, that erects hotels yet never earns enough money ever to stay in one, note that we have come here with our wives and children, but we didn't come here to ask for the moon, simply for a better and safer roof over our heads, for rooms where we can sleep with the privacy and respect we deserve as human beings, we're neither animals nor machines, we have feelings, don't we, and those hotels over there are empty, there are hundreds, thousands of rooms, they were built for tourists, now the tourists have gone and they're not coming back, so long as they were here we resigned ourselves to this miserable existence, but now, we beg of you, let us in, we'll pay the same rent we paid for the houses we've abandoned, it wouldn't be right to ask us for more, and we swear, by all that is holy and profane, that you will always find everything clean and tidy, for when it comes to keeping house there have never been women to match ours, I know what you're going to say and you're quite right, what about our children, it's true that kids are a mess, but we'll get ours washed and smartened up right away, there's no problem,

each room has its own facilities, we hear, choice of shower or bath, hot and cold water, this should make it easy to keep clean, and if any of our children have grown up with bad habits, I promise you they'll turn into the cleanest children in the world, all they need is a little time, for that matter, time is all that man needs, the rest is nothing but illusion, this was something no one was expecting, that the rebel leader should suddenly start playing the philosopher.

It is obvious from their features, and their identity cards would confirm it, that the soldiers are truly sons of the people, but either their major has disowned his humble upbringing once he reached the benches of the military academy, or else he was born into those very upper classes for whom the hotels in the Algarve were built. It was difficult to tell from his reply, Get back or I'll smash your face in, for such coarse language is not confined to the lower orders. The troops saw there in the crowd the beloved images of their father and mother, but the call of duty is stronger, You are the light of my eyes, the mother says to her son as he raises his hand to strike her. But the rebel leader called out angrily, turning from pleas to invective in his exasperation, Race of bootlickers, you don't even recognize the breast that gave you milk, poetic license, an accusation with no real meaning or purpose, for there is no son or daughter who remembers such a thing, although there are numerous authorities ready to affirm that deep down in our subconscious we secretly preserve these and other terrifying memories, and that our whole existence consists of these and other fears.

The major was not pleased to find himself accused of bootlicking, and, beside himself with rage, shouted, Charge, just as the fanatical general of the invaders was calling out, Get them, patriots, and they all surged forward at once, fighting hand to hand in a terrible clash. This was the moment when Joaquim Sassa, Pedro Orce, and José Anaíço arrived on the scene, curious but innocent, and they walked straight into trouble, for once things got out of control the troops did not discriminate between actors and spectators, and one could say that the three friends who had no need of a new home suddenly found themselves obliged to fight for one. Pedro Orce, despite his years, fought as if this were his native land, the others did the best they could, perhaps a little less, belonging as they did to a peaceful race. People were injured, they either dragged themselves or were carried to the side of the road, the women burst into tears and cursed the enemy, the infants had been left in the safety of the chariots, for a battle of this nature can only be called medieval and described with the words of that age. A stone thrown from afar by a youth called David knocked Major Goliath to the ground, blood pouring from a deep gash on his chin, his steel helmet was no protection, this is what happens, ever since soldiers stopped using visors and nosepieces. But the worst thing was that, in the confusion of the onslaught, the rebels rushed past the troops, breaking through their ranks on all sides, only to disperse at once in an instinctive but clever tactical move, up steep roads and alleys, thus ensuring that the soldiers surrounding the occupied hotel did not rush to the aid of the defeated battalion, no one could remember such a humiliation since the time of the French agrarian revolts in the Middle Ages. One hotel manager, whether mentally

disturbed or suddenly converted to the popular cause, opened all the doors of his hotel, saying, Enter, enter, I'd rather have you than have the place deserted.

With this unexpected capitulation, Pedro Orce, José Anaíço, and Joaquim Sassa found themselves occupying a room without any real struggle, and two days later they gave it to one of the needier families, with a paralyzed grandmother and wounded relatives requiring treatment. In the upheaval, the like of which had never been seen before, there were husbands who lost their wives, children who lost their parents, but the sequel of these traumatic separations, something no one could ever have invented, which, in itself, confirms the persuasive truth of the story, the sequel, as we were saying, was that members of a given family, scattered but driven by the same dynamism even when apart, ended up in rooms in different hotels, since it had proved extremely difficult to unite under one roof all those who had been demanding that everyone should be under the same roof, and people usually ended up choosing a hotel by the number of stars on its signboard. The police commissioners, army colonels, and captains of the guard asked for reinforcements, for armored cars, for instructions from Lisbon, the government, not knowing where to turn, gave orders and countermanded them, uttered threats and pleas, it was said that three ministers had already resigned. Meanwhile, from the sands and streets of Albufeira jubilant families could be seen at the hotel windows, on those fine, spacious terraces, with their breakfast tables and padded chaises longues, father was hammering the first nails into place and putting up a clothesline, while mother, singing to herself, was already doing her washing indoors in the bathroom. And the swimming pools were teeming with bathers and divers, no one had remembered to explain to the children that they must take a shower before plunging into the blue water, it is not going to be all that easy to make these people change their habits now that they have left their slums.

Bad example has always prospered and borne more fruit than good advice, and who can tell by what rapid means bad example is transmitted, for within a few hours this popular movement of occupation had jumped over the border and spread throughout Spain, you can imagine what it must have been like in Marbella and Torremolinos, where the hotels are like cities and three are enough to form a megalopolis. Europe, upon receiving these alarming reports, began shouting Anarchy, Social Chaos, Invasion of Private Property, and a French newspaper, influential in forming public opinion, prophetically spelled out in bold print across its front page, You Can't Change Human Nature. These words, however unoriginal, struck a chord in the hearts of Europeans, whenever they spoke of the former Iberian peninsula, they would shrug their shoulders and say to each other, What can you do, they're like that, you can't change human nature, the only exception to this accusing chorus came from a certain modest but Machiavellian newspaper published in Naples, Housing Problem Solved in Portugal and Spain.

During the remaining days the three friends spent in Albufeira, the riot police, bolstered by a special squad, tried to clear one of the hotels by force, but the joint and coordinated resistance of the new arrivals and the owners, the former resolved to hold

out to the last, the latter fearful of the havoc usually caused by the so-called rescuers, resulted in the suspension of the operations, which were postponed until another opportunity might arise when time and promises would have weakened the rebels' vigilance. By the time Pedro Orce, Joaquim Sassa, and José Anaíço resumed their journey to Lisbon there already existed democratically elected residents' committees in the occupied buildings, with subcommittees responsible for such matters as hygiene and maintenance, kitchen and laundry, entertainment and recreation, cultural activities, education and counseling, gymnastics and sports, everything, in short, that is essential for the smooth and efficient running of any community. On their own improvised flagpoles the squatters hoisted banners and pennants of every conceivable color, they used anything that came to hand, flags of foreign countries, of sports clubs, of various associations, under the aegis, as it were, of the national colors fluttering at the top, there were even bedspreads hanging from the windows, in admirable imitation of these decorations.

However, an adversative adverb that invariably denotes opposition, restriction, or difference, and that, applied to this situation, reminds us that even the things that are good for some are precisely those that disadvantage others, the savage occupation of these hotels was the drop of water that caused the disquiet that from the outset gripped the rich and powerful to overflow. Many of them, afraid that the peninsula might sink, sweeping away their property and their lives, had fled at once during the exodus of tourists, which obviously does not mean that the former were suddenly foreigners in their own country, although people can belong in various degrees to the country that is naturally and administratively theirs, as history has shown time and time again.

Now, amid the general condemnation of these outrages, which was more universal than general, if we leave aside the incongruous attitude of that insignificant Neapolitan paper, there occurred a second emigration, so massive one feels justified in thinking that it had been carefully planned once it became clear to all that the wounds inflicted on Europe would never heal, that the physical structure of the peninsula had split, who would ever have believed it, just where it seemed strongest. The huge bank accounts suddenly dwindled, leaving a bare minimum, just a token sum, about five hundred escudos in Portugal, about five hundred pesetas in Spain, or perhaps a little more, current accounts were practically wiped out, time deposits were closed with some loss of interest, and everything, all of it, gold, silver, precious stones, jewels, works of art, bonds, everything was carried off by the strong gusts of wind that swept the fugitives' personal property over the sea, in all thirty-two directions of the compass, they hoped to recover the rest one day, with time and patience. Clearly, these great removals could not be achieved within twenty-four hours, but a week was all that was needed for the social physiognomy of these two Iberian countries to be transformed from top to bottom, from side to side. Any observer unaware of the facts and motives, and allowing himself to be taken in by appearances, would have come to the conclusion that the Portuguese and the Spaniards had been reduced to poverty from one minute to the next, when in fact all that

had happened was that the rich had gone away, and without them the demographics soon showed a dramatic decline.

To those observers who can see an entire Olympus of gods and goddesses where there are nothing but passing clouds, or to those who have Jupiter Tonans before their eyes but refer to him as atmospheric vapor, we shall never tire of pointing out that it is not enough to speak of circumstances, with their bipolar division into antecedents and consequences, as one does to reduce the mental effort, but that one must rather consider what is infallibly situated between the former and the latter, let us spell them all out in the right order, time, place, motive, means, person, deed, manner, for unless we measure and ponder everything, we are bound to make some fatal mistake in the very first opinion we offer. Man is undoubtedly an intelligent being, but not as intelligent as one would like, and this is a proof and confession of humility, which should always begin at home, as one says of charity in the proper sense of the word, before you reproach us.

They arrived in Lisbon as night was falling, at that hour when the gentle light fills souls with sweet remorse, now one sees how right that admirable judge of sensations and impressions was when he maintained that landscape was a state of mind, what he was not able to tell us was what it looked like in the days when there was nothing but pithecanthropus in the world, with as yet scant soul, and not just scant but confused as well. Thousands of years later, and thanks to evolution, Pedro Orce can now recognize in the apparent melancholy of the city the faithful image of his own intimate sadness. He had grown accustomed to the company of these Portuguese who had come to look for him in those inhospitable parts where he was born and lived, soon they will have to go their separate ways, each man to his own destination, not even families can resist the erosion of necessity, so what are mere acquaintances to do, friends of recent vintage and delicate roots.

Deux Chevaux crosses the bridge slowly, at the lowest speed permitted, to give the Spaniard time to admire the beauty of the views of land and sea, and also the impressive feat of engineering that links the two banks of the river, this construction, we are referring to the sentence, is periphrastic, and is used here to avoid repeating the word bridge, which would result in a solecism, of the pleonastic or redundant kind. In the various arts, and above all in that of writing, the shortest distance between two points, even if close to each other, has never been and never will be, nor is it now, what is known as a straight line, never, never, to put it strongly and emphatically in response to any doubts, to silence them once and for all. The travelers were so absorbed in the wonders of the city, so thrilled by this prodigious achievement, that they did not even notice how the starlings suddenly took fright. Drunk on altitude, gliding dangerously close to the enormous pillars that rose from the waters to support the sky, on this side the city with its windowpanes aflame, beyond the sea and the sun, and below the great river flowing past, like a sluggish current of lava burning beneath the ashes, the birds abruptly changed course, with a rapid cascade of wing-flaps, and it was as if the earth were rotating around the bridge, the north becoming east and then south, the south west and then north, where in the world shall we end up when we ourselves are forced one day to move just as much or even more. As we have already stated, men, even when they see these things, fail to understand them, nor did these men understand what they saw on this occasion.

They were halfway across the bridge when Pedro Orce murmured, Nice city, words as amiable as these call for no reply, except perhaps for a modest, Yes, isn't it. There would still be enough time to leave Pedro Orce settled in a hotel and continue their journey, at least as far as the town in Ribatejo where José Anaíço lives, and where Joaquim Sassa could if he wished spend another night beneath the fig tree, but it would have been impolite to abandon their visitor, so the two Portuguese had made a joint decision, they would remain there for a few days, sufficient time for the Spaniard to get to know the city and once back in Orce to make his own the words of that old saying that innocently boasts, Lisbon the lovely, Lisbon the fair, Never to see her's to miss something rare,

praise be to God who has given us rhymes without denying us His blessings.

Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço are not short of money, they had gathered what they had for their excursion across the border and back, and they had managed to economize, as we know, sleeping on one occasion under the moonlight, on another spending the night at the home of an Andalusian pharmacist, and, profiting from the anarchy and disorder in the Algarve, they received no bill for their stay in a hotel. Here in Lisbon, hotels have only been besieged and occupied on the outskirts of the city, the more central hotels were spared, two countervailing factors came into play, first, this being the capital, as in most countries you are likely to find the greatest concentration of the forces of law and order, or repression, here, second, that timidity peculiar to the city-dweller, who often becomes uneasy, withdrawing once he senses that he is being observed and judged by his neighbor, and vice versa, the protozoa in the drop of water certainly disturb the lens and the eye behind it that observes and disturbs them. Because of the lack of clients, nearly all the hotels had closed their doors, for repairs, this was their excuse, but some continued to function, offering low-season tariffs and special reductions, to the point where some large families seriously considered abandoning the houses for which they were being charged colossal rents, and taking up residence in the Méridien or some such hotel. The aspirations of the three travelers did not rise to so dramatic a change of status, which is why they decided to install themselves in a modest hotel, at the end of the Rua do Alecrim, on the left as you go down, the name has no bearing on this story, once was enough and perhaps even superfluous.

Starlings are starlings, and the word is also used for people who are frivolous and giddy, in other words people who rarely reflect on their actions, who are incapable of foreseeing or imagining anything beyond the here and now, which is not incompatible with certain acts of generosity, even the sacrifice of one's own life, as we saw in the episode at the frontier, when so many tender little bodies dropped dead, shedding their blood for the sake of others, remember we're speaking about birds, not people. But frivolity and giddiness are the least one can attribute to these thousands of birds who foolishly go and perch on a hotel roof, attracting the attention of the crowd and of the police, of ornithologists and of gourmets who relish a tasty meal of little fried birds, and thus betray the presence of the three men who, with no guilt weighing on their conscience, have nevertheless become the target of some unwelcome attention from the authorities. For unbeknownst to the travelers, the Portuguese papers, on the page that regularly features unusual events, had reported the irresistible attack the starlings waged on the unsuspecting border guards, invoking, as one might have expected, though with scant originality, the Hitchcock film we mentioned earlier. Now the newspapers, the radio and television stations, informed promptly about the strange happenings at the Cais do Sodré, sent reporters, photographers, video technicians to the scene, which might have had no consequences beyond enriching the Lisbon folklore, if the methodical and, why not say it, scientific mind of a certain journalist had not led him to consider a possible connection between the starlings outside on the roof and the guests inside the hotel,

either permanent or simply passing through. Unaware of the danger literally hovering over their heads, Joaquim Sassa, José Anaíço and Pedro Orce, each in his own room, were unpacking the little luggage they were carrying, within a few minutes they would be down on the street, having decided to take a quick look around the city, until it was time for dinner. But at this precise moment the quick-witted journalist is consulting the guest list, running through the names of those registered, and suddenly two of those names begin to set the wheels of memory in motion, Joaquim Sassa, Pedro Orce, he would not be much of a journalist had those names escaped his eye, the same thing might have happened with another name, Ricardo Reis, but the book where that name was once registered, many, many years ago, is stored away in the archives, covered with dust in the attic, written on a page that may never come to light, and if it should, most likely the name will be illegible, the line will be faded, or even the entire page, that's one of the effects of time, to blot out everything. To this day there has been no greater achievement in the art of hunting than killing two rabbits at one blow, from now on the number of rabbits within the scope of the hunter's skill will be increased from two to three, this will mean reversing all the books of proverbs, so where you see two, read three, and perhaps we won't stop here.

Requested to come down to reception, then installed in the lounge before the great mirror of truth, when pressed by the journalists Joaquim Sassa and Pedro Orce had no choice but to confirm that they were, respectively, the one who threw the stone into the sea and the living seismograph. But there are the starlings, it's surely not by chance that so many starlings have gathered here, the observant reporter remarked, whereupon José Anaíço, loyal to his friends and true to the facts, made a statement, The starlings are accompanying me. Most of the questions addressed to Joaquim Sassa, and the corresponding answers, coincided with the dialogue he had imagined between himself and the civil authorities, which explains why they aren't repeated here, but Pedro Orce, who hadn't exactly been a prophet in his own country, talked at length about the recent events in his life, Yes sir, he could still feel the earth tremor, deep and intense, as if his bones were vibrating, and in Granada, Seville, and Madrid he had undergone multiple tests to check his emotions and intellect, his sensory reactions and movements, and here he was, prepared to subject himself to similar or different checks if the Portuguese authorities should consider them necessary. Meanwhile, darkness had fallen, the starlings responsible for this investigation had dispersed into the trees of the nearby gardens, the journalists, having run out of questions and slaked their curiosity, departed with their cameras and flashlights, but this did not restore peace in the hotel, waiters and porters invented excuses for coming to the reception desk and looking into the lounge to see what these freaks were like.

Worn out by the endless upheaval, the three friends decided not to go out but to dine in the hotel. Pedro Orce was worried about the consequences of having allowed himself to get carried away and of having talked so much, After they warned me over and over in Spain not to say a word about my situation, they won't like it when they find out,

but perhaps if I stay on here for a few days they will forget all about me. José Anaíço was doubtful, Tomorrow our story will be in all the newspapers, they might even have it on television this evening, and those newscasters on the radio won't keep their mouths shut, they never get tired, and Joaquim Sassa retorted, Even so, among the three of us, you're the best off, you can always argue that you're not to blame if the starlings follow you, you don't whistle to them or feed them, but we're both in a tight spot, people stare at Pedro Orce as if he were some crank, the Portuguese scientists won't want to lose this guinea pig, and they won't let up on me with this story about the stone, You two have the car, Pedro Orce reminded them, you can leave at the crack of dawn, or even tonight, I'm staying on, if they ask me where you've gone, I'll say I don't know, It's much too late now, the moment I appear on television someone will telephone from the town where I live just to say that they know me, that I'm the local schoolmaster, and that they've been suspicious for some time, some people thirst for glory, this is what José Anaíço had to say, and he added, It's better for us to stick together, we just won't say very much and they'll get tired pretty quickly.

As predicted, there was a full report on the final news bulletin on television, they showed the starlings in flight, the façade of the hotel, the manager making statements we know to be false, as will soon become clear, These events are without precedent in the history of this hotel, and the three prodigies, Pedro, José, and Joaquim, answering questions.

As always when it is thought necessary to have the additional backing of some reliable authority, there was an expert in the studio, in this instance a specialist in the modern discipline of psychodynamics, who, among other speculations about the nature of the matter at hand, declared that there was always the possibility that one was dealing with out-and-out charlatans. It's well known, he declared, in moments of crisis such as this, you can always rely on some impostor or other to turn up, tellers of tall tales who are out to take advantage of the gullible masses, often intent upon destabilizing the political scene or furthering plots for an eventual coup d'état. If people believe him, we've had it, Joaquim Sassa observed, And what about the starlings, what's your opinion about the starlings, the announcer wanted to know, This is indeed a fascinating enigma, either the person the birds are following is carrying some irresistible bait, or it's a question of collective hypnosis, It can't be easy to hypnotize birds, On the contrary, a hen can be hypnotized with a simple piece of chalk, even a child can do it, But here we have two or three thousand starlings all at once, how could they fly if they were hypnotized, Observe that for each bird that forms part of it the flock is already a hypnotic agent, agent and result simultaneously, Allow me to remind you that some of our viewers will have difficulty in following such technical jargon, Well, to put it more simply, I'd say that the entire group tends to constitute itself in homogeneous hypnosis, I doubt whether that will be any easier to understand, but I'd like to thank you just the same for coming to the studio, there are sure to be further developments and we'll have another opportunity to discuss the matter in greater depth, I'm at your disposal, the expert smirked. The one

person who was not amused was Joaquim Sassa, who muttered, The man's a fool, He certainly looks like one, but there are times when even fools must be heeded, José Anaíço replied, and Pedro Orce confided, I didn't understand a word, this was the first time the Portuguese tongue had left him completely baffled, if we take the meaning of his words literally, what a splendid conversation there must have been between those ancient Portuguese warriors, Viriato and Nuno Alvares Pereira, heroes of the same fatherland, as we're led to believe. While these grave matters were being discussed in the hotel lounge, in his private office the manager was receiving a delegation of restaurateurs from the vicinity who had come to offer him a deal. How much would you charge us to set up some nets on the roof, sooner or later the starlings will come back and settle there again, we don't want to put nets on the trees, within everyone's reach, that would be just like getting other men's wives pregnant, these are the kind of men who believe that the only innermost meaning of things is that they have no innermost meaning, the manager wavers, he's afraid he might damage the roof tiles, but he finally agrees, suggests a figure, That's a lot of money, the others say, and start haggling over the price.

Early the next morning, another delegation of solemn-faced gentlemen, neatly turned out, extremely formal, came to ask Joaquim Sassa and Pedro Orce if they would be so good as to accompany them, they were acting on government orders, among the officials there was also a counselor from the Spanish Embassy who greeted Pedro Orce, but with such manifest hauteur as could only stem from outraged patriotism. They wished to carry out a brief investigation, they explained, all very straightforward, the time it takes for a routine inquiry, which will be added to the already voluminous dossier on the rupturing of the peninsula, to all appearances irremediable, if we take into account its continuous displacement, fatal, in other words. They ignored José Anaíço, probably doubting that he could be endowed with powers of attraction and enticement comparable only to those of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, besides, the starlings are nowhere to be seen, they are flying back and forth, together, getting to know the city, inside the nets that had treacherously been set up on the roof only four stray sparrows lay trapped awaiting their fate, but now destiny decreed a different end to their life, Which fate, asks an ironic voice, and thanks to this unexpected intervention we learn that there is more than one fate, contrary to what we are told, in fados and folk music, No one escapes his fate, it is always possible that some other person's fate might befall us, that's what happened to the sparrows, they met the fate of the starlings.

José Anaíço stayed in the hotel, quietly awaiting the return of his companions, he ordered some newspapers, the interviews made all the front pages, with explosive photographs and dramatic headlines, Enigmas Baffle Science, The Unknown Forces of the Mind, Three Dangerous Men, The Mystery of the Hotel Bragança, we had been careful not to specify the name, only to find it published by some treacherous reporter, Will Spaniard Be Extradited, question mark, We're up the creek, this is not a headline but what José Anaíço was thinking. The hours passed, it was time for lunch, there was no news from

Joaquim Sassa and Pedro Orce, no message, have they been arrested, thrown into prison, a man loses his appetite with so much worry. I don't even know where they were taking them, how stupid of me, I should have asked, what am I talking about, what I should have done was to go with them, not to leave them on their own, calm down, even if I'd wanted to go, they probably wouldn't have let me, but how can one be sure, I was quite happy to be left out of it, cowardice is worse than an octopus, an octopus can both contract and extend its arms, cowardice can only contract them, from these barbed words one can see just how annoyed José Anaíço is with himself, but who can tell where sincerity lies in these contradictory impulses and thoughts, best to wait, as in all human affairs, to see what he does. First he went to ask the manager whether he had heard any revealing remark, an address, a name, but the manager replied, Nothing at all, sir, I didn't know any of the gentlemen, I was seeing them for the first time, and that goes for the two Portuguese as well as the Spaniard, suddenly José Anaíço had a brainstorm, and about time too, he would go to the Spanish Embassy, the Embassy is bound to know, and then he had another brainstorm, these never came singly, the press, of course, he need only turn to one of those newspapers and within a few hours all the sleuths of the press, be they named Argos, Holmes, or Lupin, would be on the trail of the missing men, necessity is indeed the mother of invention, in this instance the father is called caution, but not always.

Wasting no time, José Anaíço his room, he wanted to change his shoes, to brush his teeth, these mundane things are not incompatible with a resolute spirit, take Othello, for example, who, suffering from a cold and without realizing what he was doing foolishly blew his nose before killing Desdemona, who, for her part, notwithstanding her dark premonitions, didn't lock her door, for a wife never refuses her husband even if she knows he is about to strangle her, and besides, Desdemona knew very well that the room had only three walls, in the present drama, then, José Anaíço is cleaning his teeth with a brush and rinsing out his mouth when he hears someone knocking, Who is it, he asked, although it doesn't sound like his voice the tone is one of happy anticipation, Joaquim Sassa is about to reply, We're back, but the deception was short-lived, May I come in, so it's the maid after all, One moment, he finished rinsing his mouth, wiped his hands and his mouth, dried them, and finally went to open the door. The maid is an ordinary hotel employee with such individual traits and so specific a role that this is the only moment in her life in which she will impinge, ever so superficially, and only for as long as it takes to deliver a simple message, on the existence of José Anaíço and his companions, both present and future, this often happens in the theater and in life, we need someone to come and knock on our door simply to tell us, There is a lady downstairs looking for you, sir. José Anaíçows his surprise, Looking for me, and the maid adds what she had felt would be necessary, The lady asked to speak to all three of you, but since the others aren't here, She must be a journalist, José Anaíço thought to himself before replying, I'll be down at once. The maid retreated like someone withdrawing from life, we won't need her any more, there's no reason why we should remember her, even with indifference. She came, knocked on the door, delivered the message, which for some strange reason

wasn't given over the telephone, perhaps life enjoys cultivating from time to time this sense of the dramatic, if the telephone rings we think, What can it be, if someone's knocking at our door, we think to ourselves, Who can it be, and we give voice to our thoughts by asking, Who is it. We already know it was the maid, but the question was only half answered, perhaps not even that, which is why José Anaíço can it be, he has forgotten his suspicion that it might be a journalist, some of our thoughts are like this, they serve only to occupy, as if in anticipation, the place of others that would give us much more food for thought.

The hotel is so very peaceful, like an empty house bereft of restless activity, but it has not yet aged from neglect, there are still the echoes of footsteps and voices, a sob, a whispered farewell that lingers on the upper landing. The manager is on his feet, behind the counter hangs the key rack with its pigeonholes for messages, letters, and bills, he is writing in a ledger or copying figures from it onto a sheet of paper, the type of man who keeps himself busy even when there is not much work to be done. As José Anaíço is about to pass, the manager nods in the direction of the lounge, and José Anaíço responds with an assenting nod, I know, is what this nod implies, while the first nod had implied at greater length, There's a lady in there waiting to see you. José Anaíço paused in the entrance to the lounge, he saw a young woman, a mere girl, it can only be her, there's no one else here, although she's sitting in the shadow of the awnings, she seems pleasant, even pretty, she is wearing blue slacks and a matching jacket, of a color that might be described as indigo, she might or might not be a journalist, but beside the chair where she is sitting there is a small suitcase and on her lap a stick that is neither large nor small, some where between a meter and a meter and a half in length, the effect is disturbing, a woman dressed like this doesn't walk through the city carrying a stick in her hand, She can't be a journalist, José Anaíço thought to himself, at least there's no sign of the tools of that profession, notebook, ballpoint pen, tape recorder.

The woman got up, and this gesture was unexpected, for according to the rules of etiquette and good manners a lady should remain seated until the gentleman approaches and greets her, at which point she will extend her hand or offer her cheek, and depending on her confidence, degree of intimacy, and disposition, the lady's smile will be polite, insinuating, conniving, or revealing. This gesture, or perhaps not so much the gesture as the fact that four paces away a woman is standing there waiting, or rather the sudden awareness that time has stopped and is waiting for someone to make the first move, it is true that the mirror is a witness, but of an earlier moment, in the mirror José Anaíço and the woman are still two strangers, not here on this side, for they are about to know each other, they know each other already. This gesture, this gesture that could not be fully described earlier, caused the wooden floor to sway like a deck, like the pitching of a ship amid the waves, slow and wide, an impression not to be confused with the familiar tremor that Pedro Orce talks about, José Anaíço's bones don't shake, but his whole body has felt, physically and materially felt, that the peninsula, so called out of habit and convenience, is really and truly sailing away, before he only knew it from external

observation, now he can actually feel it. And so, because of this woman, unless it was because of the hour when she turned up, for most important of all is the hour when things happen, José Anaíço be merely the unwilling lure of demented birds. He goes up to her, and this movement, launched in the same direction, will be added to the force that pushes, without remedy or resistance, the raft of which the Hotel Bragança at this very moment is the figurehead and forecastle, if you'll forgive the blatant inappropriateness of these terms. Is that too much to ask.

My friends aren't here, José Anaíço explained, some scientists came this morning and took them away for questioning, I'm beginning to get worried at the delay, in fact I was just getting ready to go out and look for them, José Anaíço is aware that, to say what mattered, there was no need for all these words, but he could not restrain himself. She responds, and her voice is pleasing, low but clear, What I have to say can be said just as well to one of you as to all three, in fact it might make it easier to explain things more clearly. Her eyes are the color of a new sky, What is a new sky, what color might that be, where did I dig out that idea, José Anaíço thinks to himself, while saying in a loud voice, Please be seated, there's no need to stand. She sat down, he sat down, Are you called José Anaíço, My name is Joana Carda, Delighted to meet you. They didn't shake hands, that would look silly now that they were seated, besides, in order to shake hands they would both have to lean forward in their chairs, even sillier, or perhaps only he would have to do so, which would halve the silliness, if being half silly were not exactly the same as being completely silly. She is indeed pretty, and her hair, which is almost black, doesn't clash with her eyes, the color of a new sky by day, the color of a new sky by night, they go well together, What can I do for you, his intimate thoughts were translated by this polite inquiry. I'm not sure if it's safe to speak here, Joana Carda murmured, We're alone, no one can hear us, But people are watching, look out. Walking in a somewhat unnatural manner, the manager passed in front of the entrance to the lounge, he passed then passed once more, seemingly absorbed, as if he had just invented a new task, because the previous one had proved useless. José Anaíço glared at him but to no avail, he lowered his voice, making their conversation look even more suspicious, I can't invite you up to my room, aside from the attention it would attract, it's almost certainly forbidden for guests to receive visitors in their rooms. That wouldn't bother me, I wouldn't feel threatened by someone who obviously has no intention of assaulting me, In fact nothing could be further from my mind, especially since you're carrying a weapon. They both smiled, but there was something forced about their smiles, a certain inhibition, a sudden disquiet, indeed, the conversation had become much too intimate considering that they had only known each other for three minutes, and only by name. In an emergency this stick could be useful, Joana Carda observed, but that's not the reason why I carry it with me, to tell the truth, the stick is carrying me. This revelation, so unexpected, cleared the air, reduced the pressure, that of the atmosphere as well as that of the blood. Joana Carda rested the elm branch on her lap, waited for his reply, José Anaíço finally spoke, We'd better go out, we can talk on the street, in a café, or if you like in a public park. She reached for her suitcase, he took it from her, We can leave this in

my room, along with the stick, The stick stays with me, and the suitcase too, it might be better not to come back here. As you wish, what a pity your suitcase is so small, otherwise you could have put the stick inside, Not everything is made to fit something else, Joana Carda replied, a somewhat obvious statement, which nonetheless embraces a world of meaning.

As they were leaving, José Anaíço said to the manager, If my friends should arrive, tell them I'll be back soon, Yes sir, leave it to me, the man replied, without taking his eyes off Joana Carda, but there was no desire in his eyes, only that vague suspicion one finds in all hotel managers. They went down the stairway, at the bottom, on the finial of the banister, there was an ornamental statuette in bronze, modeled on a knight or a page from some opera, here is an effigy that would look right, with its illuminated globe, on any of the great Portuguese or Galician capes, that of São Vicente, Espichel, Roca, or Finisterre, and others of less importance, which nonetheless have just as much work to do breaking the waves, but the destiny of this knight is to be ignored, perhaps once upon a time someone may have looked at him closely, but not Joana Carda or José Anaíço, undoubtedly because they have greater worries on their mind, although, if asked, they probably wouldn't know what they are. Anyone inside that hotel, with its cool atmosphere and secular penumbra, cannot imagine just how hot it is out in the street. This is August, as you may recall, the climate hasn't changed just because the peninsula has traveled a mere one hundred and fifty kilometers, assuming that the speed has remained steady as reported by the National Radio of Spain, no more than five days have passed and it already seems like a year. José Anaíço would expect, Walking around in this heat, carrying a suitcase in one hand and a stick in the other, isn't much fun, we'll be worn out in no time, it would be better to go into a café and have a cool drink, Better still to find a park, a bench in some quiet, shady corner, There's a park nearby, at the Praça de Dom Luís, do you know it, I'm not from Lisbon, but I know it, Oh, you're not from Lisbon, José Anaíço repeated idly. They went down the Rua do Alecrim, he was carrying the suitcase and the stick, people on the street wouldn't think much of him were he not to carry the suitcase or have much respect for her if she were to carry the stick, for we are all such relentless busybodies, malicious whenever we get the chance, and for no good reason. In response to José Anaíço's cry of surprise, Joana Carda simply told him that she had arrived that same day, by train, and had gone straight to the hotel, the rest we are about to learn.

They are seated, fortunately in the shade of some trees, and he has asked her, What brought you to Lisbon, then, why did you come to look for us, and she told him, Because it must be true that you and your friends have something to do with what is happening, Happening, to whom, You know very well what I'm referring to, the peninsula, the breaking up of the Pyrenees, this voyage, the like of which has never been seen before. Sometimes I think the same, that we're to blame, at other times I think we must all be mad, A planet that goes around a star, turning and turning, one minute day, the next night, one minute cold, the next hot, and an almost empty space where there are

gigantic things that have no names other than the ones we give them, and a thing we call time that no one can really fathom, all this must also be crazy, Are you an astronomer, José Anaíço asked her, suddenly remembering Maria Dolores, the anthropologist from Granada, I'm neither an astronomer nor a fool, Forgive my rudeness, we're all rather nervous, words don't express what they're meant to, we talk either too much or too little, do forgive me, You're forgiven, I probably strike you as being rather skeptical because nothing has ever happened to me except the starlings, although, Although, Not so long ago, in the hotel, when I saw you in the lounge, I felt as if I were on a ship at sea for the first time, And I saw you as if you were coming from a distance, And yet you were only three or four paces away.

Appearing from everywhere on the horizon, the starlings suddenly alit on the trees in the park. From the nearby streets, people came running, looking upward, pointing, They're back again, José Anaíço sighed impatiently, and worst of all, we won't be able to speak with all these people around. At this moment, the starlings all took flight together, they covered the park with a great fluttering, a black cloud, people were shouting, some with annoyance, others with excitement, yet others with fear, Joana Carda and José Anaíço stared unable to grasp what was happening, then the huge flock dwindled away to form a wedge, a wing, an arrow, and after circling rapidly three times, the starlings disappeared in a southerly direction, crossed the river, vanished into the distance, over the horizon. The assembled crowd, both curious and frightened, let out cries of amazement, of disappointment too, within minutes the park was deserted, the heat was back, on the bench sat a man and a woman all alone, they had an elm branch and a suitcase. José Anaíço didn't think they'll ever come back, and Joana Carda replied, Let me tell you what happened to me.

Once the seriousness of the facts related had been established, prudence decreed that Joana Carda should not lodge in that famous hotel where nets had been spread out on the roof, in the vain hope that the starlings would settle there. It was a wise decision on her part, and at least forestalled any further modification of the proverb about killing two birds with one stone, in other words, it prevented this woman well versed in metaphysical skirmishing from falling into the same trap as the three suspects, if they have not already been found guilty. Putting what has been written into somewhat less baroque language and using less convoluted syntax, Joana Carda installed herself further up the street in the Hotel Borges, right in the heart of the Chiado, with her suitcase and her elm branch, which unfortunately is neither telescoping nor easily packed away, so that people stare in amazement when she passes, and the receptionist at the desk, jesting to disguise his genuine curiosity, but without being impolite, makes a discreet reference to wands that are not walking sticks, Joana Carda responded with silence, after all, there is no law to prohibit guests from taking even a branch of holm oak into their room, much less a thin little stick, not even two meters long, which fits easily into the elevator and can be neatly stored away out of sight in a corner.

José Anaíço and Joana Carda carried on their conversation until well after sunset, can you imagine, they discussed the matter from every possible angle, and invariably came to the same conclusion, since it was all so unnatural, things were happening as if a new state of normality had taken the place of what once passed for normal, but without any convulsions, shocks, or changes of color, not that these, if they were to occur, would explain anything. The mistake is entirely ours, with this taste for drama and tragedy, this need for the sublime and the theatrical, we marvel, for example, at the sight of a birth, all the moaning and groaning and shouting, the body opening up like a ripe fig to expel another body, and this is undoubtedly marvelous, but no more marvelous than what we cannot perceive, the burning discharge inside the woman, the fatal marathon, and then the protracted formation of a human being by itself, albeit with some assistance, who will that become, let us stay where we are, the one who is now writing this, inevitably ignorant of what happened to him then, and, let us be frank, not very clear about what is happening to him now. Joana Carda neither knows nor is able to say any more, The stick was lying there on the ground, I drew a line with it, if these things are happening because of what I did, who am I to swear it, you must go there and see for yourself. They went on debating and discussing and darkness was falling when they went their separate ways, she to the Hotel Borges up the street, he to the Hotel Bragança further down, and José Anaíço is smitten with remorse, he did not have the courage to try and find out what happened to his friends, what a jerk, a woman has only to appear and tell him some fairy tale or other for him to spend nearly the entire afternoon listening to her, You should go there and see for yourself, she repeated, slightly modifying the phrase, perhaps to convince him once and for all, repeating oneself in different words is often the only solution. At the entrance to his hotel José Anaíço raises his eyes, no sign of any starlings, that winged shadow that passed, fleeting and gentle as a discreet caress, was only a bat chasing mosquitoes and moths. The little nobleman on the banister has his lamp lit, he is

there to welcome guests, but José Anaíço does not even give him so much as a weary glance, he is certainly in for a bad night if Pedro Orce and Joaquim Sassa have not returned.

They have returned. They are waiting in the hotel lounge, seated in the same chairs in which Joana Carda and José Anaíço had sat, and to think that there are people who do not believe in coincidences, when one is constantly discovering coincidences in the world and is beginning to wonder if coincidences are not the very logic of this world. José Anaíço pauses in the doorway of the lounge, it's as if everything were about to be repeated, but no, not just yet, the wooden floor has remained firm, the distance of four paces is no more than a distance of four paces, there is no interstellar void, no leap of death or life, legs moved by themselves, then mouths spoke to say what one might expect, Were you out looking for us, Joaquim Sassa asked, but José Anaíço cannot give a simple answer to such a simple question, Yes, No, both answers would be true, both would be false, he would need a great deal of time to explain, so he replied with a question of his own, as reasonable and natural as the other, Where the hell have you two been all this time. One can see that Pedro Orce is tired, and little wonder, the years, whatever people might say to the contrary, take their toll, but even a young and vigorous man would have come away a wreck from the hands of the doctors, one examination after another, analyses, X rays, questionnaires, tiny hammerblows on the tendons, hearing tests, eye tests, electroencephalograms, no wonder his eyelids feel as heavy as lead, I must lie down, he says, these Portuguese specialists have almost killed me off. It was decided there and then that Pedro Orce should retire to his room until dinnertime, when he could come down and have some broth and breast of chicken despite his poor appetite, he felt as if his stomach were still full of X-ray pap, But you didn't have your stomach X-rayed, Joaquim Sassa reminded him, That's true, but I feel as if I had, Pedro Orce replied, his smile as wan as a withered rose. Have a good rest, José Anaíço suggested, Joaquim and I will eat at some restaurant nearby, we'll talk things over, and when we come back we'll knock on your door and see how you're feeling, Don't knock, I'll almost certainly be asleep, all I want right now is to sleep with no interruptions until tomorrow morning, and off he went shuffling his feet. Poor fellow, what a nice mess we've got him into, this comment was made by José Anaíço, They tormented me as well, with their cross-examining and their endless questions, but that's nothing compared to what they did to him, shall I tell you what this reminds me of, a story I read years ago entitled At the Mercy of the Quacks, Do you mean the story by Rodrigues Miguéis, That's the one.

Once outside, they decided to go for a long drive in Deux Chevaux, they had plenty of time before dinner, and they could talk freely. People are totally bewildered, began Joaquim Sassa, and if they're latching onto us like this, it's because they've nothing else to go on, or rather, now they're beginning to have almost too much, probably because of the news on television yesterday, and today's reports in the press, did you see the headlines in the evening paper, people are taking leave of their senses, they're turning up

from everywhere claiming to have felt the earth trembling, saying that they threw pebbles into the river and a nymph came out of the water, and that their pet budgies are making strange noises, It's always the same, news creates news, but we probably won't see our budgies again, Why not, what's happened, I think they've gone, Just gone, just like that, after following you everywhere all week, So it would appear, Did you see them, Yes, I saw them, they crossed the river heading south and never returned, How did you know they were going away, were you standing near the window in your room, No, I was in a public park nearby, Instead of hanging around there, you might have tried to find out where we were, That was the idea, but then I strolled into the park and stayed there, Getting some fresh air, Speaking to a woman, Well, how about that, a fine friend you've turned out to be, here we are suffering the tortures of the damned and you're putting the moves on a woman, after you got nowhere with the archaeologist from Granada, you're making up for lost time, She wasn't an archaeologist, she was an anthropologist, What's the difference, This one is an astronomer, You're joking, To be honest, I don't know what she does, this business about her being an astronomer comes from something I said to her, Well, that's your business, and I've got no reason to interfere in other people's lives, You've got every reason, what she told me concerns both of us, I know what you're going to tell me, she's also been throwing pebbles, No, Then she can feel the earth shaking, You still haven't got it, Her canary has changed its color, If you start being sarcastic, you'll never find out, Forgive me, but to tell you the truth, I'm really very annoyed, I cannot forget that you didn't bother to come and look for us, I've already explained to you that I meant to, but then this woman appeared just as I was getting ready to leave, my idea was to start making inquiries at the Spanish Embassy, then she appeared and she told me this story, she showed up carrying a stick in one hand and a suitcase in the other, she was wearing blue slacks and a jacket to match, she had black hair and the whitest of skin, her eyes were strange and difficult to describe, These are interesting details for the history of the peninsula, I suppose you're now going to tell me that this woman is beautiful, Yes, she is, Young, Yes, she does look young, although not exactly a girl. From the way you're talking, you're infatuated, Infatuation is a big word, but it's true that I could feel the floor of the hotellounge shaking, I've never heard it described like that before, Lay off, Unless you've been drinking and you don't remember, Lay off, will you, All right, I'll lay off, but what did Lady Strange Eyes want, and what kind of stick was it, The branch of an elm tree, I don't know much about trees, what's an elm, Elm is the common word for ulmus, and if you'll allow me to digress for a moment, I must say you're pretty skilled when it comes to asking questions. Joaquim Sassa laughed, I must have learned something from those smartalecks who were pestering me earlier, I'm sorry, do finish telling me about the woman, does she have any other name apart from Strange Eyes, She's called Joana Carda, Now that she's been introduced, let's get to the point, Imagine that you find a stick by the road and in a moment of distraction, without any conscious aim, you draw a line on the ground, As a boy I did that quite often, And what happened, Nothing, nothing ever happened, unfortunately, Now imagine that through some magical effect, or something like that, this line produced a crack in the Pyrenees, and that the said Pyrenees split open from top to bottom and the Iberian peninsula began

to sail out to sea, Your Joana is mad, There have been other mad Joanas, but this one hasn't come to Lisbon to tell us that because she drew a line on the ground the peninsula broke away from Europe, Thank God there's still some common sense left in the world. What she does say is that the line she drew can't be made to disappear, whether in the wind or by pouring water over it, by scraping it or sweeping it with a brush, or by trampling it underfoot, Nonsense, As nonsensical as your being the most powerful shot-putter of all time, six kilos hurled five hundred meters without cheating, even the great Hercules, demigod that he was, couldn't have beaten your record, Are you trying to tell me that a line drawn on the ground, you said on the ground, didn't you, can resist wind, water, and a sweeping brush, And that even if you rake the soil, the line reappears, That's impossible, You're not being very original, I also used that word, and Little Joana Strange Eyes simply replied, You Must Go There And See For Yourself or You Should Go There And See For Yourself, I can't remember her exact words. Joaquim Sassa fell silent, at this point they were passing through Cruz Quebrada, which means Broken Cross. What sacrilege might these words conceal, words that have now become so innocuous, and José Anaíço said, All this would be absurd if it weren't happening, whereupon Joaquim Sassa asked, But is it really happening.

There was still some daylight, not much, barely enough to glimpse the sea as far as the horizon, from this summit where one descends to Caxias you can judge the scale of these immense waters, perhaps that's why José Anaíço murmured, It's different, and Joaquim Sassa, who had no idea what he was referring to, asked him, What's different, The water, the water is different, life transforms itself like this, it has changed and we haven't even noticed, we were calm, we thought we hadn't changed, an illusion, pure deception, we were moving on with life. The sea pounded against the parapet of the road, and no wonder, for these waves are also different, they are accustomed to having freedom of movement, and no witnesses, except when some tiny vessel passes, not this leviathan that is ploughing the ocean. José Anaíço suggested, Let's eat a little farther down at Paço de Arcos, then we can go back to the hotel, see how Pedro is, Poor guy, they nearly did him in. They parked Deux Chevaux in a side street, went in search of a restaurant, but before they entered, Joaquim Sassa said, During the inquiries and cross-examinations I heard something we never thought of, it was only a word but that was enough, the person who let it slip may have thought I wasn't listening, What are you talking about, Until now, the peninsula, It isn't a peninsula, Then what the hell should we call it, anyway, it has dislocated itself almost in a straight line, staying between the thirty-sixth and forty-third parallels, So what, You may be a good teacher in most subjects, but you're weak when it comes to geography, I don't understand, You'll understand at once if you remember that the Azores lie between the thirty-seventh and fortieth parallels, What the hell, That's what it's going to be, hell, The peninsula is about to collide with the islands, Precisely, It will be the greatest catastrophe in history, Maybe, maybe not, and, as you said yourself a little while ago, all this would be absurd if it weren't happening, now let's go and eat.

They found a place, sat down, and ordered, Joaquim Sassa was starving, he fell on the bread, the butter, the olives, the wine, with a smile that begged for indulgence, This is the last meal of a man condemned to die, and some minutes passed before he asked, And the lady with the wand, where is she at this moment, She's staying at the Hotel Borges, the one on the Chiado, Oh, I thought she lived in Lisbon, No, she doesn't live in Lisbon, that much she did confide, without saying where she comes from, nor did I ask her, probably because I thought we would be taking her there, To do what, To examine the line on the ground, So you also have your doubts, I don't think I'm in any doubt, but I want to see the line with my own eyes, to touch it with my own hands, You're like the man with Platero the donkey, between the Sierra Morena and the Sierra Aracena, If she's telling the truth, we'll see more than Roque Lozano, who will find nothing but water when he reaches his destination, How do you know he was called Roque Lozano, I don't remember our asking him his name, the name of his donkey, yes, but not his. I must have dreamed it, And what about Pedro, will he want to come with us, A man who can feel the ground trembling beneath his feet needs company, Like the man who felt the wooden floor swaying, Peace, Poor Deux Chevaux is going to be too small to carry so many people, four passengers with luggage, even if it's only knapsacks, and the car is old, poor thing, No one can hope to live beyond his last day, You're a prophet, About time you realized it, It looked as if our travels were over, that each of us would go home, back to our normal existence, Let's turn our back on all this and see what happens. So long as the peninsula doesn't collide with the Azores, If that's the end that awaits us, our life is guaranteed until it happens.

They finished their dinner, resumed their journey without haste, at the slow pace of Deux Chevaux, there was little traffic on the road, probably because of the scarcity of gasoline, they were fortunate in having a car that got such good mileage, But we would still run the risk of grinding to a halt somewhere or other, then our journey would really be over, Joaquim Sassa remarked, then suddenly remembering, he asked, Why did you say the starlings must have gone away, Anyone can tell the difference between farewell and so long, what I saw was definitely farewell, I can't explain it, but there is a coincidence, the starlings went away the moment Joana appeared, Joana, That's her name, You could have said the lady, the woman, the girl, that's how male diffidence refers to the opposite sex, when to use their names might seem much too familiar, Compared to your wisdom, mine is rudimentary, but, as you've just seen, I spoke her name quite naturally, proof that my inner self has nothing to do with this matter, Unless, at heart, you're much more Machiavellian than you appear, trying to prove the opposite of what you really think or feel so that I will think that what you think or feel is precisely what you only appear to be trying to prove, I don't know if I've made myself clear, You haven't, but never mind, clarity and obscurity cast the same shadow and light, obscurity is clear, clarity is obscure, and as for someone being able to say factually and precisely what he feels and thinks, don't you believe it, not because he doesn't want to, but because he cannot, Then why do people talk so much, Because that's all we can do, talk, perhaps not even talk, it's all a question of trial and error, The starlings went away, Joana

arrived, one form of companionship went, another took its place, you should consider yourself fortunate, That remains to be seen.

At the hotel there was a message for Joaquim Sassa from Pedro Orce, his companion in torment, Don't disturb me, and another from Joana Carda, this time by telephone, for José Anaíço, So it's all true, he hadn't dreamed it. Over José Anaíço's shoulder, the voice of Joaquim Sassa seemed to be mocking him, Lady Strange Eyes assures you she's real, therefore don't waste your time dreaming about her tonight. They went upstairs to their rooms, José Anaíço said, Tomorrow, first thing in the morning, I'll call her to say we'll go with her, if that's all right, Fine, and don't pay too much attention to what I said, as you've probably guessed, I'm jealous. To be jealous of what only appears to exist is a waste of effort, My wisdom secretly tells me that everything only appears to exist, nothing actually exists, we must be satisfied with that, Good night, prophet, Pleasant dreams, comrade.

People neither knew nor suspected what was going on, such was the secrecy with which governments and scientific institutions set about investigating the subtle movement that was carrying the peninsula out to sea with enigmatic persistence and constancy. To discover how and why the Pyrenees had cracked was no longer a matter for discussion, any hope of redressing the situation was abandoned within days. Despite the vast amount of accumulated information, the computers coldly demanded fresh data or gave preposterous results, as in the case of the famous Massachusetts Institute of Technology, whose programmers blushed with embarrassment upon receiving on their terminals the peremptory diagnosis, Overexposure to the sun, would you believe. In Portugal, perhaps because of the difficulty, even today, of ridding everyday speech of certain archaisms, the nearest conclusion we could reach was, The pitcher goes so often to the well that the handle finally stays there, a metaphor that only served to confuse people, since it wasn't a question of handles or wells or pitchers, but it is not difficult to perceive in it a reference to the effects of repetition, whose very nature, making allowances for frequency, is such that one never knows where it might end. Everything depends on the duration of the phenomenon, on the accumulated effect of these actions, something along the lines of A steady fall of water wears away the hardest stone, a formula that curiously has never been output by a computer, although it might well be, for between the one and the other there are similarities of all kinds, in the first instance there is the heavy weight of the water in the pitcher, in the second instance there is water once more but this time drop by drop, dripping freely, and there is time, that other common ingredient.

These are popular philosophies that we could go on discussing forever, but they are of no great interest to men of science, to geologists or oceanologists. For the sake of simple souls, the matter could even be put in the form of an elementary question, one that in its ingenuousness brings to mind that of the Galician confronted by the River Irati, sinking into the earth, Where does this water go, he wanted to know, as you may recall, now we shall phrase it differently, What is happening beneath this water. Out here, where we stand with our feet firmly on the ground, looking at the horizon, or from the air where observation continues indefatigably, the peninsula is a mass of earth that seems, note the verb, seems to float on the waters. But obviously it cannot float. In order to do so it would need to have detached itself from the bottom, which means it would inevitably end up at that same bottom, this time reduced to rubble, for even supposing that under the circumstances a sufficient force could be applied without producing any greater deviation or damage, the disintegrating effect of the water and the maritime currents would progressively reduce the thickness of the navigating platform until the entire layer was dissolved. Therefore, by a process of elimination, we must conclude that the peninsula is sliding over itself at an unknown depth, divided now along a horizontal fault into two slabs, the lower one still part of the earth's crust, the upper one, as already explained, gliding slowly through the darkness of the waters, amid clouds of mud and startled fish, this is how the Flying Dutchman, of unhappy memory, must be navigating through the depths, somewhere in the ocean. The notion is intriguing and mysterious, with a little more imagination it could provide the most fascinating chapter of all for

Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea. We live in another age, however, science is much more exacting, and since it has not proved possible to discover what is causing the peninsula to displace itself above the seabed, someone should go down there to witness the phenomenon with his own eyes, to film the dragging of this great mass of stone, to record, perhaps, the whale's cry, that squeaking, that interminable laceration. For this is the moment for the deep-sea divers.

As everybody knows, divers holding their breath cannot go down very deep or for very long. Fishers of pearls, sponges, or coral can dive to fifty feet, the best of them perhaps even to seventy, and they can stay under for three or four minutes, it's all a question of training and motivation. Here the depths are greater and the waters much colder, even when the body is protected by one of those rubber wet suits that transform anyone, man or woman, into a black Triton, with yellow stripes and dots. So one must have recourse to diving gear, to cylinders of compressed air, and with these more recent techniques and apparatus, taking a thousand and one precautions, one can reach depths on the order of two or three hundred meters. Better not tempt Providence by attempting to go any farther down, but send down unmanned machines instead, equipped with film and television cameras, sensors, tactile and ultrasonic probes, all the appropriate instruments for the job at hand.

At a given hour, to enable subsequent comparison of results, simultaneous operations began on the coasts to the north, south, and west, discreetly passed off as naval maneuvers within the scope of North Atlantic Treaty Organization training programmes, lest the announcement of these investigations provoke fresh outbursts of panic, for, inexplicably, it had not occurred to anyone so far that the peninsula might be sliding over what for millions of years had been its plinth. The moment has come to reveal that the experts intend to keep quiet about another nagging anxiety stemming, almost inevitably, from this same hypothesis of a deep horizontal cut, it can be summed up in this other question of terrifying simplicity, What will happen if an abyss lies in the path of the peninsula, an end to that continuous surface over which it is sliding. Judging from experience, which is always desirable for a better understanding of the facts, in this case our experience as swimmers, we will understand perfectly what this must mean if we recall the novice swimmer's panic and distress when he unexpectedly loses his footing. Should the peninsula lose its footing or its balance, it will inevitably sink, go to the bottom, suffocate, drown, who would have thought that after so many centuries of miserable existence we would be doomed to the fate of Atlantis.

Let us spare ourselves the details, these will one day be divulged for the enlightenment of all those interested in submarine life, for the time being shrouded in the utmost secrecy they are to be found in ships' logs, confidential reports, and various records, some in code. All we shall say is that detailed examination of the continental platform yielded no results, no new crack was found, no abnormal friction was picked up by the microphones. This initial hypothesis having failed, examination of the depths was the next step, and the cranes lowered instruments built to withstand high pressures, to

scan and search the depths of the silent waters, but these found nothing. The research submarine Archimedes, a jewel of technology French-manned and French-owned, descended to the maximum peripheral depths, from the euphatic to the pelagic zone, and from there to the bathypelagic zone, deployed lamps, pincers, bathometers, sounding lines of various kinds, scanned the subaquatic horizon with its panoramic sonar, to no avail. The vast versants, the steep escarpments, the vertical precipices were exposed in their somber majesty, in their unspoilt beauty, the instruments registered continuously, with much clicking and switching on and off of lights, the ascending and descending currents, they photographed the fish, the shoals of sardines, the colonies of hake, the brigades of tuna and bonito, the flotillas of mackerel, the armadas of swordfish, and if the Archimedes had been carrying in its belly a laboratory equipped with the necessary reagents, solvents, and other chemical paraphernalia, it would have been able to identify the elements dissolved in the waters of the ocean, namely, in diminishing order in terms of quantity, and for the cultural benefit of the masses who have not the faintest idea how much exists in the sea where they swim, chlorine, sodium, magnesium, sulfur, calcium, potassium, bromine, carbon, strontium, boron, silicon, fluorine, argon, nitrogen, phosphorus, iodine, barium, iron, zinc, aluminum, lead, tin, arsenic, copper, uranium, nickel, manganese, titanium, silver, tungsten, gold, such riches, dear God, and with all the things we lack on terra firma, the only thing we cannot trace is the crack that would explain the phenomenon, which does exist, after all, and is plain for all to see. In desperation, a North American expert, and one of the most distinguished, went so far as to proclaim before the winds and the horizon, standing on the deck of the hydrographic ship, I hereby declare that the peninsula cannot possibly be moving, whereupon an Italian expert, much less knowledgeable but armed with a historic and scientific precedent, muttered, but not so quietly that he could not be heard by that providential Being who hears all things, Eppur si muove. Their researchers empty-handed and chapped by all that salt, humiliated and frustrated, the governments simply announced that under the auspices of the United Nations they had carried out an investigation of possible changes in the habitat of the ichthyic species brought about by the peninsula's dislocation. It was not the mountain that had conceived a mouse, but rather the ocean that had given birth to a tiny sardine.

The travelers heard this news as they were leaving Lisbon but did not consider it important, just one more report among others pertaining to the separation of the peninsula, which itself seemed to be of no great importance. A person can get used to anything, as can nations with even greater ease and speed, when all is said and done it is as if we were now traveling in an immense ship, so big that it would even be possible to live aboard for the rest of one's life without ever seeing the prow or the stern, the peninsula was not a ship when it was still attached to Europe and there were still plenty of people who knew no country other than that of their birth, so tell me, if you please, what's the difference. Now that Joaquim Sassa and Pedro Orce appear to have escaped at last from the obsessive prying of the scientists and there is nothing more to fear from the authorities, they can return to their respective homes, and José Anaíço too, for the

starlings have unexpectedly lost interest in him, but the apparition, so to speak, of this woman has sent everything back to square one, this being fairly characteristic of women, although not always in so radical a manner. It was after a meeting in that same park where Joana Carda and José Anaíço had been the day before that the four of them decided, after reexamining the facts, to make the journey together that will take them to the spot marked with a line on the ground, one of those lines we have all had to make in life, but one with singular features, to judge from the agent and witness, coincidently one and the same person. Joana Carda had still not revealed the name of the place or even that of the nearest city, but merely indicated the general direction, We'll take the highway north, then I'll show you how to get there. Pedro Orce had taken José Anaíço discreetly aside to ask him if he thought it was a good idea to set out like this, blindly falling in with the whims of an eccentric woman with a stick in her hand, suppose this were a snare, a plot to kidnap them, a cunning ruse, On whose part, José Anaíço wanted to know, That I can't tell you, perhaps they want to take us to the laboratory of some mad scientist, as you see in films, some Frankenstein or other, Pedro Orce replied smiling, No wonder people are always talking about the Andalusian imagination, it doesn't take much water to start boiling, José Anaíço commented, It's not because there isn't much water, it's because there's so much fire, Pedro Orce replied, Forget it, José Anaíço concluded, what must be, will be, and they rejoined the others, who had started a discussion more or less in this vein, I don't know how it happened, the stick was lying on the ground, I picked it up and drew a line, Did it ever occur to you that it might be a magic wand, It seemed rather big for a magic wand, and I've always heard it said that they are made of shimmering gold and crystal, with a star on top, Did you know it was an elm branch, I know very little about trees but in this case I'm sure a matchstick would have produced the same effect, Why do you say that, What has to be, has to be, and that's something you can't fight, Do you believe in fate, I believe in what must be, Then you're just like José Anaíço, said Pedro Orce, he also believes in fate. The morning, with a light wind that blew like a playful mouthful of air, gave little promise of a warm day, Shall we go, José Anaíço asked, Let's go, they all replied, including Joana Carda who had come to look for them.

Life is full of little episodes that seem unimportant, while others at a certain moment absorb all our attention, when we reappraise them later, in the light of their consequences, we find that our memory of the latter has faded while the former have come to seem decisive or, at least, a link in a chain of successive and meaningful events, to give the example one expects, there will not be any frenetic loading and unloading, apparently so much to be expected when the luggage of four passengers is packed into a car as small as Deux Chevaux. This tricky operation engages everyone's attention, each of them makes some suggestion or proposal, tries to lend a hand, but the main question latent in all this, which may well determine the final constellation of the four people in the car, is at whose side Joana Carda will travel. That Joaquim Sassa should drive Deux Chevaux seems right, on the first leg of a journey a car should always be driven by its owner, this is an undisputed fact that bespeaks prestige, prerogative, a sense of

possession. The alternative driver, when the right moment comes, will be José Anaíço, since Pedro Orce, not so much because of his age but because he lives in a terrain disturbed by excavations and his job keeps him behind a counter, has never ventured into the complex mechanics of a steering wheel or gearshift, and it is rather soon to be asking Joana Carda if she knows how to drive. In the light of these details, it seems inevitable that these two should travel in the back seat, with the pilot and copilot logically seated in front. But Pedro Orce is Spanish, Joana Carda is Portuguese, neither of them speaks the other's language, and besides they've only just met, later on, when they've had time to become acquainted, things will be different. The seat beside the driver, although considered by the superstitious and proved by the statistics to be the dead man's seat, is generally regarded as a place of honor and should therefore be offered to Joana Carda, putting her on Joaquim Sassa's right, with the other two men behind, and they should not have much difficulty understanding each other after sharing so many experiences. But the elm branch is much too big to go in front, and Joana Carda has made it clear that nothing will induce her to part with it. So, there being no alternative, Pedro Orce will sit in front for two explicable reasons, each more excellent than the other, first, as we have already said, because it is a place of honor, second, because Pedro Orce is the oldest person here, the one closest to death, on account of what we term, with black humor, the nature of life. But what really counts, more than this twofold reasoning, is that Joana Carda and José Anaíço want to ride together in the back seat, and by means of gestures, pauses, and feigned distractions they've managed it. Let us be seated, then, and get on our way.

The journey was uneventful, that's what novelists in a hurry always say when they think that, in the ten minutes or ten hours they are about to eliminate, nothing has taken place that would warrant any special mention. Strictly speaking, it would be much more correct and honest to put it like this, As in all journeys, whatever their duration and length, there have been a thousand incidents, words and thoughts, and for a thousand you could read ten thousand, but the narrative is dragging, so I'm allowing myself to abbreviate, using three lines to cover two hundred kilometers, bearing in mind that the four people inside the car have traveled in silence, with neither thought nor gesture, pretending that by the end of the journey they will have nothing to relate. In our case, for example, it would be impossible not to derive some meaning from the fact that Joana Carda had quite naturally accompanied José Anaíço when he took over from Joaquim Sassa, who wanted a rest from driving, and that she had managed, God knows how, to squeeze the elm branch into the front, without hampering the driver or blocking his vision. And needless to say, when José Anaíço returned to the back seat, Joana Carda went with him, and so wherever José happened to be Joana was there too, although neither of them could yet say for what reason or purpose, or they knew but cannot bring themselves to say it, each moment has its own flavor and the flavor of this moment has not yet been lost.

There were few abandoned cars on the roads, and those they saw invariably had parts missing, having been stripped of their wheels, headlights, rearview mirrors,

windshields, a door, sometimes all the doors, the seats, some cars were even reduced to a bare shell like crabshells with no meat left inside. But the gasoline shortage meant that traffic was thin and there were long intervals between one passing car and the next. Certain incongruities also hit one in the eye, like a cart being drawn by a donkey along the highway, or a squadron of cyclists who even at full speed were far below the minimum speed the signs foolishly continued to impose, indifferent to the force of reality. And there were also people traveling on foot, usually with a knapsack on their back, or, in rustic fashion, with two sacks loosely tied together at the top and strung over one shoulder like a saddlebag, the women with baskets on their heads. Many people were alone, but there were also families, to all appearances entire families with old and young and babes in arms. When Deux Chevaux had to leave the highway farther ahead, the number of pedestrians diminished only in proportion to the relative importance of the road. Three times Joaquim Sassa tried to ask people where they were going, and they all gave him the same answer, We're on our way to see the world. They must have known that the world, the immediate world, strictly speaking, was now much smaller than before, perhaps for this very reason their dream of knowing all of it had become much more feasible, and when José Anaíço asked, But what about your home and your job, they calmly replied, Our home will be waiting for us and work we can always find, those are the priorities of the past and they must not be allowed to hinder the future. And perhaps it was just as well that people did not ask him the same question, whether too discreet or simply too absorbed in their own affairs, otherwise he would have been forced to explain, We're accompanying this woman to examine the line she drew on the ground with this stick, and as far as their jobs were concerned they would have made a poor impression, perhaps Pedro Orce would have confessed, I've left my patients to look after themselves, and Joaquim Sassa argued, Let's face it, office clerks are a dime a dozen, I won't be missed, besides I'm enjoying a well-deserved vacation, and José Anaíço, I'm in the same situation, if I were to go back to school now I wouldn't find any pupils, until October my time is my own, and Joana Carda, I've nothing to tell you about myself, if I've revealed nothing so far to these men with whom I'm traveling, there's no reason why I should confide in strangers.

They had passed the town of Pombal when Joana Carda informed them, Just ahead there is a road to Soure, that's the one we have to follow, since leaving Lisbon this was the first indication she had given of a specific destination, until now they had felt as if they were traveling through mist, or, adapting this particular situation to general circumstances, they were ancient and ingenuous mariners, We are being carried along by the sea, where will she carry us. They would soon find out. They did not stop in Soure, they went through narrow roads that crossed and forked into two or three branches, and sometimes they seemed to be going around in circles, until they finally reached a village that had a signpost at the limits bearing the name Ereira, and Joana Carda announced, It's here.

Taken by surprise, José Anaíço, who was driving Deux Chevaux at that moment, put

his foot down sharply on the brake, as if the line were right there in the middle of the road and he were about to run over it, not that there was any danger of destroying this prodigious bit of evidence, which Joana Carda had described as indestructible, but because of that holy terror that strikes even the most skeptical of men when routine is broken like the thread that broke as we ran it through our hand, confident and with no responsibility but that of preserving, strengthening, and prolonging this thread, and our hand too, as far as possible. Joaquim Sassa looked outside, he saw houses with trees above the rooftops and low-lying fields, the marshes and rice paddies are visible, it's the gentle Mondego, better than arid rock. Had this been what Pedro Orce was thinking, then Don Quixote of the sad countenance would inevitably come into the story, the one he possessed and the one he presented, when, stark naked, he began jumping up and down like a madman amid the peaks of the Sierra Morena, it would be absurd to draw a comparison with such episodes of knight-errantry, therefore Pedro Orce, on getting out of the car and putting his feet on the ground, simply confirms that the earth is still shaking. José Anaíço walked round Deux Chevaux, went, perfect gentleman that he is, to open the door on the other side, he pretends not to notice the ironic, patronizing smile of Joaquim Sassa, and taking the elm branch from Joana Carda, he extends his hand to help her out, she gives him hers, they clasp hands for longer than is necessary in order to guarantee firm support, but this is not the first time, the first and only other time so far was on the back seat, an impulse, but they did not utter a word either then or now, in a louder or softer tone of voice that might embrace the word spoken by the other with equal force.

This is indeed the hour for explanations, but Joaquim Sassa's question demands others, like the ship's captain who opens sealed orders suspecting that he may find nothing except a blank page, Now where do we go, Now we take this road, Joana Carda replied, and on the way I'll tell you the rest of my story, not that it has anything to do with our coming here, but there's little point in continuing to act like strangers when we've traveled all this way together, You could have told us sooner, either in Lisbon or during the journey, José Anaíço remarked, I don't see why, either you came with me because you were convinced by a single word, or many more words would have been needed to convince you, and then it wouldn't have done much good, As a reward for having believed in you, It's for me to decide your reward and when it should be given, José Anaíço refrained from answering, he played for time, started looking at a row of poplars in the distance, but she heard Joaquim Sassa murmur, What a girl, Joana Carda smiled, I'm no girl, and I'm not the bitch you think I am, I don't think you're a bitch, Domineering, stubborn, conceited, affected, Good heavens, what a list, why not say mysterious and leave it at that, Well, there is a mystery, and I wouldn't have brought anyone here who didn't believe without seeing, not even you in whom no one believes, They're beginning to believe in us now, But I was more fortunate and only needed to say one word, Let's hope many more won't be necessary now. This dialogue was conducted entirely between Joana Carda and Joaquim Sassa, given Pedro Orce's difficulty in understanding and the obvious impatience of José Anaíço, who had been excluded from the conversation through his own fault. But observe how this curious situation, with the

differences that always distinguish situations, simply repeats what happened in Granada, when Maria Dolores conversed with one Portuguese but would have preferred to be conversing with another, in this particular case, however, there will be time to explain everything, the man who is really thirsty will have his thirst quenched.

They are now walking along the path, which is narrow, Pedro Orce is obliged to follow the others, they will explain everything to him later, if the Spaniard is truly interested in the fortunes of these Portuguese. I don't live here in Ereira, Joana Carda began, my home was in Coimbra, I've only been here since separated from my husband about a month ago, for what reasons, well, why bother discussing the reasons, sometimes one is enough, at other times not even lumping them all together will do it, if your own lives haven't taught you this, too bad for you, and I repeat, lives not life, for we all have several, and fortunately they kill each other off, otherwise we wouldn't be able to survive. She leapt over a wide ditch, the men followed her, and when the group reassembled, now treading on soft, sandy terrain where the earth had been waterlogged, Joana Carda went on, I'm staying with some relatives, I wanted time to think, but not the usual self-questioning, have I done the right thing, have I done the wrong thing, what is done is done, I wanted time to think about life, what is its purpose, what's my purpose in life, yes, I reached a conclusion, the only possible conclusion, I simply do not understand life. The expression on the faces of José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa is one of bewilderment, this woman, who came down to the city carrying a stick in her hand to proclaim impossible feats of land surveying, has now turned philosopher here in the fields of Mondego, a philosopher of the negative kind, and to complicate matters, in that special category that says yes after saying no, and that will say no after having said yes. Having been trained as a teacher, José Anaíço is better qualified to understand these contradictions, but this does not apply to Joaquim Sassa, he simply senses them and therefore finds them twice as bewildering. Joana Carda continues to speak, having come to a halt because they are now close to the spot she wants to show them, she still has something to say to them, other things will have to wait, I didn't go to Lisbon to find you because of the strange happenings that attracted so much attention but because I saw you as people detached from any apparent logic in the world, and that's precisely how I feel about myself, I would have been very disappointed if you hadn't accompanied me all this way, but you came, perhaps something still has some meaning, or will regain it after having lost all meaning, now come with me.

They enter a clearing away from the river, a circle surrounded by ash trees that appear never to have been pruned, such places are less rare than one imagines, set foot in them and time seems to stand still, the silence seems different, you can feel the breeze all over your face and hands, no, we're not talking about witchcraft and sorcery, this is not a witches' coven or a gate to the other world, that is simply the impression created by these trees in the form of a circle and the ground that appears to have lain undisturbed since the beginning of time, the sand simply came and made it soft, but the soil is heavy beneath the humus, whoever planted the trees like this is entirely to blame.

Joana Carda has nothing more to tell them. This is where I used to come to think things over, there can be no more peaceful place on earth, but it's disturbing too, you don't have to answer, but if you hadn't come here you wouldn't be able to understand, and one day, two weeks ago to be precise, as I was walking across the clearing to sit down under that tree over there, I found this branch lying on the ground, I was seeing it for the first time, I'd been here the day before and it wasn't here, it was as if someone had put it here deliberately, but there were no footprints to be seen, the marks you can see there are mine, or else were left by people who passed this way a long, long time ago. They are standing on the edge of the clearing, Joana Carda detains the men a bit longer, these are her final words, I picked up the stick from the ground, the wood seemed to be living as if it were the whole tree from which it had been cut, or rather this is what I now feel as it comes back to me, and at that moment, with a gesture more like a child's than an adult's, I drew a line that separated me forever from Coimbra and the man with whom I lived, a line that divided the world into two halves, as you can see from here.

They advanced to the middle of the clearing, drew close, there was the line, as clear as if it had just been drawn, the earth piled up on either side, the bottom layer still damp despite the warmth of the sun. They remain silent, the men are at a loss for words, Joana Carda has nothing more to say, this is the moment for a daring gesture that could make a mockery of her wonderful tale. She drags one foot over the ground, smooths the soil as if she were using a level, stamps on it and presses it down, as if committing an act of sacrilege. The next moment, before the astonished gaze of all the onlookers, the line reappears, it looks exactly as it was before, the tiny particles of soil, the grains of sand resume their previous shape and form, return to where they were before, and the line is back. Between the part that was obliterated and the rest, between one side and the other, there is no visible difference. Her nerves on edge, Joana Carda says in a shrill voice, I've already swept away the entire line, I've covered it with water, yet it keeps reappearing, try for yourselves if you wish, I even put stones on top, and when I removed them the line was still there, why don't you try if you still need convincing. Joaquim Sassa bent down, buried his fingers in the soft earth, scooped up a handful of soil, threw it into the distance, and the line reconstituted itself immediately. Then it was José Anaíço's turn, but he asked Joana Carda to lend him her stick and he drew a deep line alongside the original one, then smoothed it out along its entire length. The line didn't come back. Now you do the same, José Anaíço told Joana Carda. The tip of the stick dug into the soil, was dragged along the ground, opened an extensive wound, which closed up at once like a defective scar when they pressed it down, and so it remained. José Anaíço said, It's got nothing to do with the stick or the person, it's the moment, it's the moment that counts. Then Joaquim Sassa did what had to be done, he lifted up from the ground one of the stones that had been used by Joana Carda, similar in weight and appearance to the one he had thrown into the sea, and gathering all his strength he hurled it as far as he could into the distance, it fell where one expected it to fall, several paces away, that's as much as human strength can achieve.

Pedro Orce had witnessed these trials and experiments without wishing to participate, probably he had enough to contend with as the earth went on shaking under his feet. He took the elm branch from Joana Carda's hands and said, You can break it, throw it away, burn it, they're no longer useful, your stick, Joaquim Sassa's stone, José Anaíço's starlings, they no longer serve any purpose, they're like those men and women who were useful only once, José Anaíço is right, what counts is the moment, we only serve the moment, That may be so, Joana Carda retorted, but this stick will stay with me forever, moments give us no warning when they're coming. A dog appeared among the trees, on the far side. It gave them a long stare, then crossed the clearing, it was a large powerful animal, its tawny coat caught by a sudden ray of sunlight appeared to burst into flames. Taking fright, Joaquim Sassa aimed a stone, the first stone that came to hand, I don't like dogs, but he missed. The dog stopped in its tracks, not the least bit intimidated, not at all menacing, it simply stopped to look, not even barking. As it reached the trees, the dog turned its head, it seemed bigger when seen from a distance, then it went off slowly and disappeared. Joaquim Sassa tried to relieve the tension with a wisecrack, Joana Carda might as well hold onto her stick, it might come in handy if such huge beasts are prowling around.

They returned by the same route, now there were certain practical matters to settle, for example, since it was too late to go back to Lisbon now, where are the men going to spend the night. But it isn't all that late, said Joaquim Scissa, even without rushing we can get back to Lisbon in plenty of time for dinner, As far as I'm concerned, the best solution would be to stay here in Figueira da Foz, or in Coimbra, tomorrow we can come back this way, Joana might need something, José Anaíço said, and there was a note of deep concern in his voice. As you prefer, Joaquim Sassa said with a smile, and the rest of the sentence was no longer in words but in his look, I know exactly how you feel, you want some time to think this evening, you want to decide what to say tomorrow, certain moments arrive without any warning. Pedro Orce and Joaquim Sassa are now leading the way, the afternoon is so peaceful that one is overcome with emotion directed at no one in particular, only at the light, the pale sky, the inert trees, the gentle river whose presence one senses before it looms into sight, a smooth mirror that the birds slowly traverse. José Anaíço takes Joana Carda by the hand, and says, We're on this side of the line, together, but for how long, and Joana Carda replies, We'll soon find out.

As they approached the car they saw the dog, Joaquim Sassa grabbed another stone, but decided not to throw it. The animal, despite this threatening gesture, did not stir. Pedro Orce went up to it, held out his hand as a gesture of peace, as if about to caress it, but the dog remained impassive, its head raised. It had a chewed thread of blue wool hanging limply from its mouth. Pedro Orce stroked its back, then rejoined his companions. There are moments that warn you when they are coming, the earth is shaking beneath the dog's paws.

Man proposes, dog disposes, this very latest maxim is just as valid as the old one, we must give some name to whoever decides in the final analysis, for decisions don't always come from God, as is generally believed. There they took their leave of one another, the men heading for Figueira da Foz, which is nearest, the woman for the home of her hospitable relatives, but when Deux Chevaux, the brake already released, started moving, to everyone's astonishment the dog was seen to stand in front of Joana Carda, preventing her from passing. It didn't bark, it didn't bare its teeth, the gesture she made with the stick made no impression, after all, it was only a gesture. José Anaíço, who was driving, thought his beloved might be in danger, and, once more the knight-errant, he brought the car to a sudden halt, jumped out, and ran to her assistance, a dramatic but somewhat ineffectual act, as he was soon to realize, for the dog simply lay down on the road. Pedro Orce drew near, Joaquim Sassa too, the latter disguising his antipathy with an air of detachment. What does the beast want, he asked, but no one could give him an answer, not even the dog itself. Pedro Orce, as he had done before, went up to the animal and laid his hand on its huge head. The dog closed its eyes in a wistful manner at this caress, should such an adjective be appropriate here, we are talking about dogs, not about sensitive people who display their sensibility, and then it got up, stared at them one by one, gave them enough time to understand, and started walking. It walked about ten meters, stopped, waited.

Now experience has taught us, and movies and romances are full of similar scenes, Lassie mastered the technique to perfection, for example, experience tells us that a dog always behaves like this when it wishes us to follow. In this instance, the dog was obviously preventing Joana Carda from passing in order to oblige the men to get out of the car, and if, now that they are together, it is showing them the way that its canine instinct suggests they must follow, it is because, pardon these further repetitions, the dog wants them to follow it together. You don't have to be as intelligent as a man in order to grasp this, if an ordinary, simpleminded dog can convey it so easily. But men, having been deceived so often, have learned to put everything to the test, principally by means of repetition, the easiest method of all, and when, as in this case, they have attained a modicum of culture, they are not content with a second experience just like the first, they introduce minor variations that do not radically alter the basic facts, to give an example, José Anaíço and Joana Carda got into the car while Pedro Orce and Joaquim Sassa stayed where they were, now we'll see what the dog does. Let us say that it did what it had to. The dog, which knows perfectly well that it cannot stop a car except by getting in front of it, but that would mean certain death and there is not a single driver whose love for our animal friends is so great that he would stop to witness its last moments or move its pitiful corpse into the gutter, the dog prevented Joaquim Sassa and Pedro Orce from passing just as it had prevented Joana Carda before. The third and decisive proof came when all four of them got into the car and started moving, because Deux Chevaux happened to be facing in the right direction, the dog got in front of it, this time not to obstruct its progress, but to lead the way. All these maneuvers took place without any inquisitive spectators looking on because, as on other occasions since this narrative

began, certain important episodes have invariably befallen people entering or leaving towns and cities, and not those inside them, as happens in most cases. This undoubtedly warrants some explanation, but alas, we're unable to give one.

José Anaíço brought the car to a standstill, the dog stopped and looked around, and Joana Carda concluded, It wants us to follow. They were slow in seeing something that had been obvious from the moment the dog crossed the clearing, let us say that this was the crucial warning, but people do not always pay attention to these omens. And even when there is no longer any reason for doubt, they still persist in ignoring the warning, like Joaquim Sassa when he asks, And why should we follow it, how ridiculous for four grown-ups to go tagging along after a stray dog without even a disk on its collar saying Rescue me, or a name tag, My name is Pilot, please return me to my owners, Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So, at such and such an address, Don't wear yourself out, José Anaíço told him, this episode is as absurd as all the others that keep happening and appear to make no sense, They don't make much sense to me, Don't worry about things not making sense, said Pedro Orce, a journey only makes sense if you finish it, and we're still only halfway there, or perhaps only at the beginning, who knows, until your journey on earth has ended I cannot tell you its meaning, Fine, and until that day arrives, what are we going to do. There was silence. The light fades, the day is drawing to a close, leaving shadows among the trees, the singing of the birds is already different. The dog goes and lies in front of the car, three paces away, resting its head on its outstretched front paws and waiting patiently. Then Joana Carda says, I'm ready to go wherever the dog may lead us, we'll find out if that's what it came for when we reach our destination. José Anaíço took a deep breath, he was not sighing, although people do sigh with relief. So am I, was all he said. And you can count on me, Pedro Orce added, If you're all in agreement, I won't be a killjoy and keep you from walking behind the pilot, we'll go together, I might as well make the most of my vacation, concluded Joaquim Sassa.

Reaching a decision means saying yes or no, the merest whisper on one's lips, the difficulties come later when one puts that decision into practice, as we learn from human experience, gained with time and patience, with few hopes and even fewer changes. We'll follow the dog, yes indeed, but one has to know how, since our guide can't give explanations, it cannot travel inside the car, telling us to turn left, then right, go straight until the third set of traffic lights, besides, and this is a real drawback, how could an animal this size fit into a car where all the seats are already occupied, not to mention the luggage and the elm branch, although the latter is scarcely noticeable when Joana Carda and José Anaíço are sitting side by side. And speaking of Joana Carda, her luggage has yet to come, in fact, it must be collected before they tackle the problem of finding rooms, she must explain her sudden departure to her cousins, but three men, Deux Chevaux, and a dog cannot suddenly appear on the doorstep, to say I'm going with them would be the innocent truth, but surely a woman so recently separated from her husband should give some explanation of her conduct, especially in a place as small as Ereira, a mere village, broken marriages are all very well in capitals and large cities, but even then God alone

knows what traumas, what trials of body and soul, they entail.

The sun has already gone down, night is almost here, this is not an hour to be starting a journey into the unknown, and it would be wrong of Joana Carda to disappear without any warning, she told her relatives that she was traveling to Lisbon to attend to some business, she would go and return by train. These are difficulties and complications that we are led into by social conventions and family ties. No sooner had Pedro Orce got out of the car than the dog got up and watched him approach, and there in the twilight they held a conversation, at least that's how we describe it, although we know that this dog is not even capable of barking. When their dialogue ended, Pedro Orce went back to the car and told them, I think Joana Carda can go home now, the dog is staying with us, let's settle where to spend the night and decide how and where to meet tomorrow. No one doubted this assurance, Joaquim Sassa spread out the map and in three seconds they decided they would spend the night in Montemor-o-Velho, in some modest boardinghouse. And if we don't find one, asked Joaquim Sassa, We'll go to Figueira da Foz, José Anaíço replied, actually, better to play it safe, it's probably wiser to spend the night at Figueira, tomorrow you take the bus and we'll wait for you in the parking lot near the casino, needless to say these instructions were addressed to Joana Carda, who accepted them without questioning the competence of the person giving them. Joana said, See you tomorrow, and at the last moment, with one foot already on the ground, she turned and kissed José Anaíço on the lips, this was no little peck on the cheek or at the side of the mouth, these were two lightning flashes, one of speed, the other of impact, but the effects of the latter lingered, something that wouldn't have happened if the contact between their lips, so heavenly, had been prolonged. Her cousins in Ereira would comment, You can't imagine what people are saying, She's nothing but a slut, and to think we believed her husband was to blame, he must have had the patience of a saint, a man you've only known since yesterday and you're already kissing him, you didn't even wait for him to take the initiative, as a wise woman would, for when all is said and done, you have to think about your self-respect, and besides you said you were going and coming back on the same day but you spent the night in Lisbon away from home, what are people going to think. But when everyone's asleep, the wife gets out of bed and goes to Joana's room to ask her what happened, Joana tells her she doesn't really know, and it's the truth, Why did I do what I did, Joana Carda asks herself as she retreats into the deep shadows beneath the trees, her hands are free so that she can lift them to her lips like someone trying to suppress her feelings. Her suitcase had remained in the car to reserve a place for the rest of her luggage, the elm branch is in safe keeping, guarded by three men and a dog, the latter, summoned by Pedro Orce, got into the car and settled down in Joana Carda's seat, when everyone is already asleep in Figueira da Foz, two women will still be conversing in a house in Ereira at dead of night, How I'd love to go with you, Joana's cousin confided, her own marriage far from happy.

Next morning the sky was overcast, one cannot count on the weather, yesterday afternoon was like a foretaste of paradise, bright and pleasant, the branches of the trees

gently swaying, the Mondego as smooth as the surface of the sky, no one here would think this was the same river under the low clouds, the sea throwing up spray, but the elderly shrug their shoulders, First of August, first day of winter, they say, most fortunate that the day should have come almost a month late, Joana Carda arrived early but José Anaíço was already waiting for her in the car, this had been agreed to by the other two men so that the lovers could be alone together before they all set out on their journey, in which direction we still don't know. The dog had spent the night inside the car, but it now was strolling along the beach with Pedro Orce and Joaquim Sassa, discreet, rubbing its head against the leg of the Spaniard, whose company it already preferred.

In the parking lot, among the larger vehicles, Deux Chevaux looks insignificant, that's the first point, and moreover, as has already been explained, it's a wild morning, there's no one around, and that's the second point, therefore it is only natural that José Anaíço and Joana Carda should fall into each other's arms as if they had been separated for a whole year and had been longing for each other all that time. They kissed with passion and desire, this was no single flash of lightning but one flash after another, there were fewer words, it is difficult to speak while kissing, but after several minutes they could hear each other at last, I really like you, I believe I'm in love with you, said José Anaíço in all sincerity, I really like you too, and I also believe I'm in love with you, that's why I kissed you yesterday, no, no, what I mean to say is that I wouldn't have kissed you if I hadn't felt that I loved you, but I'm capable of loving you much more, You know nothing about me, If one couldn't like another person before getting to know him, it would take a lifetime, Don't you believe that two people can get to know each other, Do you, I'm asking you, First you must tell me what you mean by knowing, I don't have a dictionary here, In this case, consulting the dictionary would simply mean discovering what one already knew, Dictionaries only provide information that is likely to be useful to everyone, I must repeat the question, what do you mean by knowing, I'm not sure, And yet you can love, I can love you, Without knowing me, So it would appear, Where did you get the name Anaíço, One of my grandfathers was called Inácio, but back there in the village they got his name wrong, they started calling him Anaíço, after a while Anaíço became the family name, and you, why are you called Carda, In the distant past, the family name was Cardo, which also means thistle, but when one of my grandmothers lost her husband and found herself with a family to support, people started calling her Carda, for she richly deserved the feminine form, a surname in her own right, I thought you might be a carder who combed wool for a living, I might have been, and something else too, for I once went to look the word up in the dictionary and saw that carder also meant an instrument of torture used for skinning animals, poor martyrs, skinned, burned, beheaded, and carded, Is that what awaits me, If I were to go back to using the name Cardo you wouldn't benefit from the change, Would you still prick me, No, I'm not the name I bear, Who are you, then, I'm me, José Anaíço stretched out his hand, caressed her cheek, murmured, You, she did the same, repeated in a whisper, You, and her eyes filled with tears, probably because she is still conscious of her wicked past, now, as was only to be expected, she will want to know about his life, Are you married, do you have any

children, what do you do for a living, I was married, I have no children, I'm a teacher. She took a deep breath or was it a sigh of relief, then she said, smiling, We'd better call the others, poor things, they must be dying of cold, José Anaíço said, When I told Joaquim about our first encounter, I tried to describe the color of your eyes, but I couldn't, I told him they were the color of a new sky, difficult to describe, and he latched onto that phrase, and started to call you just that, Just what, Lady Strange Eyes, of course he wouldn't dare to say it in your presence. I adore that name, I adore you, and now we'd better call the others.

One arm waving, another waving back in the distance, Pedro Orce and Joaquim Sassa came walking slowly across the sand, the large docile dog between them. Judging from the way he waved, Joaquim Sassa said, their meeting went well, anyone listening who had any experience of life would have no difficulty in detecting a note of subdued melancholy in these words, a noble sentiment, tinged with envy, or resentment, if you prefer a more refined word. Are you in love with the girl too, Pedro Orce asked sympathetically, No, no, it's not that, although it could be, my problem is that I don't know whom to love or how one goes on loving. Pedro Orce couldn't think of an answer to such a negative statement. They got into the car, good morning, how nice to see you, welcome aboard, where will this adventure lead us, good-natured platitudes, the last of them mistaken, it would have been more appropriate to inquire, Where will this dog lead us. José Anaíço started the engine, since he's at the wheel he might as well stay there, he maneuvered the car out of the lot, Now what, do I turn right, do I turn left, he pretended to hesitate, playing for time, the dog turned completely around, then at a controlled but rapid trot, so regular as to appear mechanical, started heading in a northerly direction. With the blue thread hanging from its mouth.

This was the memorable day on which the latest recorded measurements placed the already remote Europe at a distance of some two hundred kilometers, a Europe that found itself shaken from top to bottom by a psychological and social convulsion that seriously endangered its identity, deprived at that decisive moment of its very foundations, of those individual nationalities so laboriously created over the centuries. Europeans, from the power elite to ordinary citizens, soon became accustomed, one suspects with an unspoken feeling of relief, to the lack of any territories to the extreme west, and if the new maps, rapidly circulated to bring the public up to date, still provoked some dismay, it could only have been for aesthetic reasons, that indefinable feeling of disquiet people must have experienced and still experience today when they see that there are no arms on the Venus of Milo, for that is the precise name of the island where the statue was found, So Milo is not the sculptor's name, No sir, Milo is the island where the poor creature was discovered, she rose from the depths like Lazarus, but no miracle occurred to make her arms grow again.

As the centuries pass, if they continue to pass, Europe will no longer remember the time when she was great and sailed the seas, just as we today can no longer imagine the Venus with arms. Obviously, one cannot ignore the disasters and sorrows that continue to

plague the Mediterranean with high tides, the coastal cities destroyed at their maritime fringe, hotels that once had steps leading down to the beach and now have neither steps nor beach, and Venice, Venice is like a swamp, the piles supporting it threatened with collapse, the tourist boom is over, my friends, but if the Dutch should set to work quickly, within several months the city of the doges, the Aveiro of Italy, will be able to reopen its doors to the anxious public, much improved, no longer in danger of catastrophic flooding, for the systems of balancing sluice valves, dikes, locks, pressure and suction pumps will ensure a constant water level, now it's up to the Italians to assume responsibility for reinforcing the city's foundations, otherwise Venice will end up tragically, burying itself in the mud, the most difficult part, permit me to say, is under way, let us give thanks to the descendants of that brave lad who, with just the tender tip of his index finger, prevented the town of Haarlem from disappearing from the face of the earth, destroyed by flooding and deluge.

The restoration of Venice will also afford a solution for the problems facing the rest of Europe. This fascinating region has been stricken time and time again by plague and war, earthquakes and fires, only to rise again from dust and ashes, transforming bitter suffering into sweet existence, barbaric lust into civilization, a golf course and a swimming pool, a yacht in the marina and a convertible on the quayside, man is the most adaptable of creatures, especially when it is a question of moving up in the world. Although it may not be very polite to say so, for certain Europeans, seeing themselves rid of those baffling western nations, now sailing adrift on the ocean, where they should never have gone, was in itself an improvement, a promise of happier times ahead, like with like, we have finally started to know what Europe is, unless there still remain other spurious fragments that will also break away sooner or later. Let us wager that we will ultimately be reduced to a single nation, the quintessence of the European spirit, a simple and perfect sublimation, Europe, namely, Switzerland.

But if there are such Europeans, there are others as well. The race of the restless, the devil's spawn, but not so easily extinguished, however much the soothsayers may wear themselves out with prophecies, all those who watch the train passing and grow sad with longing for the journey they will never make, all those who cannot see a bird in the sky without feeling the urge to soar like an eagle, all those who, seeing a ship disappear over the horizon, give a tremulous sigh from the bottom of their hearts, in their rapture they had thought it was because they were so close, only to realize it was because they were so far apart. It was thus one of those restless nonconformists who first dared to write the scandalous words, *Nous aussi, nous sommes ibériques*, he wrote them on a corner of the wall, timidly, like someone who is still unable to express his desire but cannot bear to conceal it any longer. Since the words were written, as you can see, in the French language, you will think this happened in France, all I can say is, Let each man think what he will, it could also have been in Belgium or Luxembourg. This inaugural declaration spread rapidly, it appeared on the façades of large buildings, on pediments, on pavements, in the subway corridors, on bridges and viaducts, the loyal conservatives

of Europe protested, These anarchists are mad, it is always the same, the anarchists are blamed for everything.

But the saying jumped frontiers, and once it had jumped them it became clear that the same thought had already appeared in other countries, in German Auch wir sind iberisch, in English We are Iberians too, in Italian Anche noi siamo iberici, and suddenly it caught fire like a fuse, ablaze all over the place in letters of red, black, blue, green, yellow and violet, a seemingly inextinguishable flame, in Dutch and Flemish Wij zijn ook Iberiërs, in Swedish Vi också aro iberiska, in Finnish Me myöskin olemme iberialaisia, in Norwegian Vi også er iberer, in Danish Også vi er iberiske, in Greek Είμαστε ίβηραι κι εμείς, in Frisian Ek Wv Binne Ibeariërs, and also, although with ostensible reticence, in Polish, My też jeteśmy iberyjczykami, in Bulgarian Nie sachto sme iberytzi, in Hungarian Mi is ibérek vagyunk, in Russian Mi toje iberitsi, in Rumanian Si noi'sîntem iberici, in Slovak Ai my sme iberčania. But the culmination, the climax, the crowning glory, a rare expression we're not likely to repeat, was when on the Vatican walls, on the venerable murals and columns of the Basilica, on the plinth of Michelangelo's Pietà, inside the dome, in enormous sky-blue lettering on the hallowed ground of St. Peter's Square, that same declaration appeared in Latin, Nos quoque iberi sumus, like some divine utterance in the majestic plural, a Mene, mene, tekel upharsin of the new era, and the Pope, at the window of his apartments, blessed himself out of sheer terror, made the sign of the cross in midair, but to no avail, for this paint is guaranteed to last, not even ten whole congregations armed with steel wool, bleach, pumice stones, scrapers, solvents for removing paint would suffice to erase those words, they would have work enough to keep them busy until the next Vatican Council.

From one day to the next, these slogans spread throughout Europe. What probably started as little more than the futile gesture of an idealist gradually spread until it became an outcry, a protest, a mass demonstration. Initially, these manifestations were dismissed with contempt, the words themselves treated with derision. But it wasn't long before the authorities became concerned about this course of events, which could not be blamed on interference from abroad, also a source of much subversive activity, at least the homegrown nature of the graffiti campaign saved the authorities the trouble of investigating and naming the foreign power they had in mind. It had become the fashion for subversives to parade through the streets with stickers in their lapels or, more daringly, stuck on their front or back, on their legs, on every part of their body and in every conceivable language, even in regional dialects, in various forms of slang, finally in Esperanto, but this was difficult to understand. A joint strategy of counterattack adopted by the European governments consisted of organizing debates and roundtable discussions on television, mainly with the participation of people who had fled the peninsula when the rupture was complete and irreversible, not the unfortunate people who had been there as tourists and who, poor things, still had not recovered from the fright, but the so-called natives, more precisely those who, despite close ties of tradition and culture, of property and power, had turned their backs on this geological madness and opted for the

physical stability of the continent. Speaking with deep compassion and knowledge of the facts, these people painted a black picture of the Iberian situation, they offered advice to those restless spirits who were unwisely about to put Europe's identity at risk, and each of them ended his turn in the debate with a definitive phrase, staring the spectator in the eye and assuming an attitude of utter sincerity, Follow my example, opt for Europe.

The result was not particularly productive, save for the protests of the partisans of the peninsula, who claimed that they had been the victims of discrimination, and who, if neutrality and democratic pluralism were not just empty words, should have been invited to appear on television to express their views, if they had any to express. An understandable precaution. Armed with reasons, which any discussion about reason always supplies, these youths, for it was chiefly youths who were carrying out the most spectacular deeds, could have made their protests with greater conviction, whether in the classroom or in the street, not to mention in the home. It is even debatable whether these youths, once armed with reasons, would have dispensed with direct action, thus allowing the calming effect of their intelligence to prevail, contrary to what people have believed since the beginning of time. The question is debatable but scarcely worthwhile, for in the meantime the television studios were stoned, shops selling television sets were ransacked in the presence of the dealers, who cried out in despair, But I'm not to blame, their comparative innocence did not help them, picture tubes exploded like firecrackers, packing cases were piled up on the street, set alight, reduced to ashes. The police arrived and charged, the rebels dispersed, and this standoff has lasted for the past week, right up until today, when our travelers leave Figueira da Foz led by a dog, three men, and the lover of one of them, who was his lover without yet being his lover, or who, not yet being his lover, was already his lover, anyone with experience of the affairs and intrigues of the heart will understand this muddle. As the latter are heading north, and Joaquim Sassa has already suggested, If we pass through Oporto we can all stay at my house, hundreds of thousands, millions of youths throughout the continent have taken to the streets, armed not with reasons but with clubs, bicycle chains, grappling irons, knives, awls, scissors, as if driven insane with rage, as well as with frustration and the sorrow of things to come, they are shouting, We too are Iberians, with that same despair that has caused the shopkeepers to cry out, But we're not to blame.

When tempers have subsided, days and weeks from now, the psychologists and sociologists will come forward to prove that, deep down, these youths didn't really want to be Iberian, what they were doing, taking advantage of a pretext afforded by the circumstances, was giving vent to that irrepressible dream that lasts as long as life itself, but which usually erupts for the first time in one's youth with an outburst of sentiment or violence, either the one or the other. Meanwhile, battles were fought in the field, or in the streets and squares to be more precise, hundreds of people were injured, there were several deaths, although the authorities tried to suppress reports about serious casualties by issuing confusing and contradictory bulletins, the mothers of August never got to know for certain how many of their sons had disappeared, for the simple reason that they didn't

know how to organize themselves, there are some who always remain outsiders, absorbed in their grief, or caring for the son who survived, or busy gratifying their menfolk in their efforts to conceive another son, which explains why mothers always lose out. Tear gas, water cannon, batons, shields, and visors, stones dislodged from the pavements, crossbars from the roadblocks, spikes from park railings, these are just some of the weapons used by both sides, while certain new strategies of persuasion with more painful effects are tried out by the various police forces, wars are like disasters, they never come singly, the first is a trial run to test the ground, the second to improve performance, the third to secure victory, each of them being, according to where you start counting, third, second, and first. For the catalogs of memoirs and reminiscences there remained those dying words of the handsome young Dutchman hit by a rubber bullet, which because of a manufacturing fault turned out to be more deadly than steel, but legend will soon take this episode in hand and every nation will swear that the youth was theirs, on the other hand no one will be anxious to lay claim to the bullet, unlike those dying words, not so much for their meaning, but because they are beautiful, romantic, incredibly youthful, and nations relish such phrases, especially when they are dealing with a lost cause like this one, At last, I'm Iberian, and with these words he expired. The boy knew what he wanted, or thought he knew, which for want of anything better is just as good, he was not like Joaquim Sassa, who does not know whom he should love, but then he is still alive, perhaps his day will come if he watches out for the right moment.

Day turned to evening, evening will turn to night, along this winding road barely skirting the sea the guide dog trots at a steady pace, but it's no greyhound, even Deux Chevaux, decrepit as the car is, could travel more quickly, as has been proved quite recently. And this pace does not suit it at all, Joaquim Sassa is at the wheel and feeling uneasy, if there should be engine trouble, better that the car should be in his hands. The radio, its batteries renewed, reported the disastrous events in Europe, and referred to well-informed sources confirming that international pressure would be put on the Portuguese and Spanish governments to bring the situation to an end, as if it were in their power to achieve this desirable objective, as if controlling a peninsula adrift at sea were the same thing as driving Deux Chevaux. These representations were firmly rejected, with manly pride on the part of the Spanish and feminine haughtiness on the part of the Portuguese, we have no intention of shaming or exalting either sex, with the announcement that the Prime Ministers would speak that same night, each addressing his own country, of course, by mutual agreement. What has caused a certain bewilderment is the cautious attitude of the White House, usually so ready to intervene in world affairs, whenever the Americans sense it might be to their advantage, there are those who argue, however, that the Americans are not prepared to comment before seeing, literally speaking, where all this is going to end. Meanwhile, supplies of fuel have been coming in from the United States, with some irregularity, it is true, but we should be grateful that it is still possible to find the odd gas pump in remote areas. Were it not for the Americans, these travelers would have to go on foot, if they were determined to follow the dog.

When they stopped at a restaurant for lunch, the animal resigned itself to being left outside, it must have understood that its human companions needed to nourish themselves. As they finished their meal, Pedro Orce went out before the others, carrying some leftovers, but the dog refused to eat, and then the reason became clear, there were traces of fresh blood on its hair and around its mouth. The dog has been hunting, José Anaíço said, But it still has the blue thread in its mouth, Joana Carda pointed out, a much more interesting observation than the previous one, after all, our dog, if that's how we are to think of it, has been leading this vagabond existence for nearly two weeks and has crossed the entire peninsula on foot all the way from the Pyrenees to here, and who knows where else, and there couldn't have been anyone to fill his bowl regularly with water or to console him with a bone. As for the blue thread, it can be dropped on the ground and picked up again, like the hunter who holds his breath to take aim and then starts breathing naturally again. Joaquim Sassa, who after all was a kind man, said, Good dog, if you're as capable of looking after us as you are of looking after yourself, you'll do a good job of protecting us. The dog shook its head, a gesture we have not learned to interpret. It then went down to the road and started walking again without once looking back. The afternoon turns out to be better than the morning, there is sunshine, and this devil of a dog, or dog of the devil, resumes its indefatigable trot, head lowered, its nose protruding, its tail straight, its coat tawny. What breed can it be, asked José Anaíço, Were it not for the tail, it could be a cross between a setter and a sheepdog, Pedro Orce remarked, It's going faster, Joaquim Sassa observed with satisfaction, and Joana Carda, perhaps for the sake of saying something, asked, What shall we call it, sooner or later we inevitably come to the question of names.

The Prime Minister addressed the Portuguese and said, Citizens of Portugal, during recent days and most noticeably during the last twenty-four hours, our country has been subjected to pressures, which without exaggeration I consider unacceptable, from nearly all those European countries that have suffered, as we know, severe disruptions of the public order, but through no fault of ours, with vast numbers of demonstrators pouring into the streets with great enthusiasm, anxious to show their solidarity with the nations and peoples of the peninsula. These developments have exposed the serious internal contradiction in the debates among the governments of Europe, to which we no longer belong. Confronted with the profound social and cultural developments in these countries, they see in this historic adventure on which we find ourselves launched the promise of a happier future or, to put it in a nutshell, the hope of regenerating humanity. But instead of supporting us and showing their true humanity and genuine awareness of European culture, those governments decided to make us the scapegoats for their internal problems, with their absurd demands that we arrest the drifting peninsula, although it would have been more fitting and accurate to speak of navigating. Their attitude is all the more deplorable since everyone knows that with each passing hour we move an additional seven hundred and fifty meters away from what are at present the western shores of Europe, and those very European governments that in the past never showed any desire to have us with them are now trying to force us into doing what they don't really want and, moreover, know is beyond our powers. Unquestionably a place of history and culture, Europe in these troubled times has shown itself in the end to be lacking in common sense. It is up to us as the legitimate and constitutional government, entrusted with preserving the peace of the strong and just, forcefully to reject pressures and interventions of every kind and from any quarter by declaring before the world that we shall allow ourselves to be guided by the national interest alone, or, in a wider context, by the interests of the peoples and nations of the peninsula, and this I here solemnly affirm with the utmost conviction, now that the governments of Portugal and Spain have begun coordinating their efforts, as they will continue to do in order to examine and discuss the measures required to ensure a happy outcome to the chain of events set in motion by the historic separation of the Pyrenees. A word of acknowledgment is due the humanitarian spirit and political realism of the United States of America, thanks to whom reasonable levels of fuel supplies and also of foodstuffs have been maintained, which, within the framework of community relations, we previously imported from Europe. Under normal conditions, such matters would obviously be dealt with through the competent diplomatic channels, but in a situation of such gravity, the government over which I preside has decided to present the situation to the people without delay, thereby expressing its confidence in the dignity of the Portuguese, who will respond, as on other historic occasions, by closing ranks around their legitimate representatives and the sacred symbol of the Fatherland, presenting the world with the image of a united and determined people, at a particularly difficult and delicate moment in the nation's history, Long live Portugal.

The four travelers were already on the outskirts of Oporto when they heard this

speech, they had gone into a café that served light refreshments and they lingered there long enough to see television coverage of the mass demonstrations and the counterattacks launched by the police, shivers ran up their spines when they saw those noble youths holding up posters and banners bearing that formidable phrase written in their own language. Why, asked Pedro Orce, should they be so concerned with us, and José Anaíço, echoing unknowingly but more directly the Prime Minister's sentiments, replied, All they're concerned about is themselves, and he probably couldn't have explained any better what he was thinking. They finished eating and left, this time the dog accepted the leftovers Pedro Orce brought him, and, having set Deux Chevaux in motion, now more slowly because the guide can scarcely be seen ahead, Joaquim Sassa said, Before crossing the bridge, let's try to coax the dog into the car, it can travel in the back on Joana and Jose's laps, we can't go around the city as we've been doing so far, and the dog certainly won't want to go on traveling through the night.

The forecast turned out to be correct and Joaquim Sassa's wish was gratified, as soon as it understood what was required of it, the dog got into the car, slow and ponderous, it stretched out on the laps of the passengers in the back seat, rested its head on Joana Carda's forearm, but the dog did not fall asleep, it traveled with its eyes open, the lights of the city danced over them as if over a surface of black crystal. Let's stay at my house, Joaquim Sassa suggested, I've got a wide bed and a sofa that opens out to sleep two people if they're not too fat. One of us, he was referring to the three men, of course, will have to sleep in a chair, but that's no problem, since it's my house, I'll use the chair or spend the night in a boardinghouse nearby. The others made no reply, their respectful silence indicating that they agreed, or perhaps preferred to settle this delicate matter discreetly later on, the atmosphere had suddenly become tense, there was an awkward feeling of embarrassment, almost as if Joaquim Sassa had done it on purpose, and he was perfectly capable of doing such a thing simply to amuse himself. But within minutes Joana Carda spoke up and announced, We two are sticking together. Really, what is the world coming to when women start taking this kind of initiative, in the past there were rules, one always started at the beginning, a few warm, encouraging looks from the man, a subtle lowering of the woman's eyes, a furtive glance darting from under her eyelashes, and then, until that first touching of hands, the courtship proceeded slowly, there were letters, lovers' tiffs, reconciliations, the waving of handkerchiefs, discreet coughs, naturally the final outcome was always the same, in bed with her on her back, him on top of her, in or out of wedlock, but never for a moment this outrageous behavior, this lack of respect in the presence of an old man, and if anyone thinks the women of Andalusia are hot-blooded, they should take a look at this woman from Portugal, no woman has ever dared to say in Pedro Orce's presence, We two are sticking together. But times have changed, and not for the better if Joaquim Sassa was trying to tease them, the conversation had turned sour, unless Pedro Orce had misunderstood, perhaps the words, sticking together, do not mean the same thing in Castilian as in Portuguese. José Anaíço did not open his mouth, what could he say, he would look ridiculous if he were to play the lover, even more so if he were to appear scandalized,

best to keep his mouth shut, it does not take much to realize that only Joana Carda could have uttered those compromising words, imagine the bad impression he would have made if he had said those words without first consulting her, and even so, even if he had asked her if she was willing, there are certain attitudes that only a woman can adopt, depending on the circumstances and the moment, that's it, the moment, that precise second poised between two others that would result in confusion and disaster. Joana Carda and José Anaíço rest their clasped hands on the dog's back, Joaquim Sassa furtively watches the lovers through the rearview mirror, they are smiling, the joke has been well received after all. This Joana is quite a girl, Joaquim Sassa feels another twinge of jealousy, but he admits he is to blame because he can never decide whom he should love.

The house is no palace, it has a tiny interior bedroom, and an even tinier living room where there is a sofa bed, a kitchen, a bathroom, clearly a house for someone on his own, but he considers himself fortunate and at least he does not have to keep moving from one furnished room to another. The larder is empty, but they had satisfied their hunger at their last stop before arriving here. They watch television in the hope of catching up on the news, so far there have been no reactions from the European embassies, but just to remind them the Prime Minister has given another interview on the late news program, Citizens of Portugal, he said, the rest we have already heard. Before they went to bed there was a council of war, not that there was any immediate need for decisions, those were left to the dog who was snoozing at Pedro Orce's feet, but they speculated in turn, Perhaps our journey ends here, Joaquim Sassa said hopefully, Or farther north, José Anaíço suggested, thinking of something else, I think it will be further north, added Joana Carda, who was thinking of the same thing, but Pedro Orce was right when he told them, The dog is the only one who knows, whereupon he yawned and said, I feel sleepy.

Now there was no longer any uncertainty as to who would be sleeping with whom, Joaquim Sassa opened out the sofa bed assisted by Pedro Orce, Joana Carda retired discreetly, and José Anaíço lingered for a few minutes longer, embarrassed, as if none of this had anything to do with him, but his heart was thumping in his breast like a drum beating, causing the whole building to shake to its very foundations, although this tremor is quite different from the other one, finally he said, Good night, see you tomorrow, and withdrew. There is no doubt that words never match up to the grandeur of certain moments. The bedroom is next door, the window extends almost to the ceiling, one way of prolonging daylight, and it doesn't even have a curtain, this apparent lack of privacy is understandable, the house is only for one person, and even if Joaquim Sassa were to have such perverted tastes he could scarcely spy on himself, although it has to be said that it would be very interesting as well as revealing, if we could spy on ourselves from time to time, although we might not like what we would see. With these words of caution, we're not trying to insinuate that Joaquim Sassa and Pedro Orce are thinking of playing childish games, such poor taste, but that window, now the mere shadow of a

window, barely visible in the darkness of the room, is disturbing, it chills the blood, as if this were all one room, a dormitory, uncomfortably promiscuous, and Joaquim Sassa, lying on his back, prefers not to think, but raises his head from the pillow to create an aura of silence and to be better able to hear, his mouth is dry but he stoically resists the temptation to get up and go into the kitchen to drink some water and eavesdrop on the whispering on the way. As for Pedro Orce, he was so exhausted he fell asleep immediately, his face turned away from the wall, his arm reaching down to rest on the dog's back as it lay on the floor beside him, the trembling of the one is that of the other, their sleep probably one and the same. No sound comes from the bedroom, not even so much as an indecipherable word, not so much as a sigh, a stifled moan, Such silence, Joaquim Sassa thinks to himself, and he finds it strange, but he neither imagines nor is likely ever to suspect or know just how strange, for these things usually remain the secret of those who have experienced them, José Anaíço penetrated Joana Carda and she received him without any other movement, he hard, she most gentle, and there they stayed, their fingers clasped, their lips absorbing kisses in silence, as one mighty wave shakes the innermost fibers of their bodies, noiselessly, right to the very last vibration, to the last imperceptible drop, let us put it discreetly lest anyone accuse us of crudely portraying scenes of coition, an ugly word that has fortunately become obsolete. Tomorrow, when Joaquim Sassa wakes up, he will think that those two had the patience to wait, God knows at what cost, if God knows about these sublimations of the flesh, that they had waited until the other couple next door were asleep, he's deceiving himself, for just as he is about to fall asleep, Joana Carda receives José Anaíço once more, this time they won't be as quiet as before, certain feats cannot be repeated, The others must be asleep by now, one of them whispered, at last they could abandon themselves to passionate love, their patience rewarded.

Pedro Orce was the first to awaken, through a narrow chink in the window the ashen finger of morning touched his parched lips, then he dreamed that a woman was kissing him, oh how he struggled to make that dream last, but his eyes opened, and his mouth was dry, no mouth had deposited the truth of saliva, its fertile humidity, in his. The dog lifted its head, raised itself on its paws, and gazed steadily at Pedro Orce in the dense shadows of the room, it was impossible to see where the light that shone in its eyes was coming from. Pedro Orce stroked the animal, and it responded by giving his bony hand a lick. Disturbed by the noise, Joaquim Sassa woke up, initially without any idea of his whereabouts, even though he was in his own home, perhaps because he felt strange finding himself in a bed he rarely used, and because there was someone in the room beside him. Lying on his back, with the dog's head lying on his chest, Pedro Orce said, Another day begins, what's going to happen, and Joaquim Sassa thought, Perhaps he's become confused after sleeping, it's not uncommon, people fall asleep and that in itself has changed everything, we are the same as before yet fail to recognize ourselves. In this case they did not appear to have changed. The dog had got to its feet, big, heavy, and had walked to the closed door. One could see its blurred outline, its shadowy form, the gleam in its eyes, The dog's waiting for us, said Joaquim Sassa, you better call him, it's

still too early to get up. The dog came when Pedro Orce called and obediently lay down, the men were now conversing in a whisper, Joaquim Sassa was saying, I'm going to take out all the money I have in the bank, it isn't much but I can borrow some more, And what happens when that runs out, Perhaps our little adventure will come to an end before the money does, Who can tell what awaits us, We'll find some means of surviving, even by stealing if we have to, Joaquim Sassa said smiling. But perhaps it won't be necessary to resort to such drastic measures, José Anaíço will also pay a visit to the bank here in Oporto where he has his savings, Pedro Orce has brought all his pesetas, and as for Joana Carda we don't know anything about her financial situation, but to all appearances she is not the type of woman who lives off charity or is kept by some man. It is doubtful whether the four of them will find any work, if work requires permanency, stability, normal residential status, when their immediate destiny is to walk behind a dog who we can only hope knows something about its own destiny, but this is not the age when animals could speak and therefore, as long as they had vocal cords, could say where they wanted to go.

In the next room, the exhausted lovers were asleep in each other's arms, sheer ecstasy but alas short-lived, as one would expect, after all, one's body is this body and not the other, a body has a beginning and an end, it begins and ends with the skin, what's inside belongs to it, but the body needs its rest, independence, autonomy in its functioning, to sleep in each other's arms demands a harmony of tongue and groove that may be disturbed by the sleep of either partner, one of them may awaken with a cramp in her arm, or because there is an elbow sticking into his ribs, whereupon we say in a whisper, with all the tenderness we can muster, Dearest, move over just a little. Joana Carda and José Anaíço are asleep from exhaustion, for during the night they have had sexual intercourse three times, their love affair has only just begun, therefore they respect the golden rule of never refusing the body what the body in its wisdom demands. Making as little noise as possible, Joaquim Sassa and Pedro Orce went out with the dog, they've gone to look for some provisions for breakfast, Joaquim Sassa refers to it as pequeno almoço rather like the French petit déjeuner, Pedro Orce as desayuno in the Spanish, but their mutual hunger will resolve the linguistic differences. By the time they return, Joana Carda and José Anaíço will be out of bed, we can hear them in the bathroom, the shower is running, a blissful pair, and such great walkers, for in a very short time they have come a long way.

When it was time to set out and resume their journey, the four of them started looking at the dog with the perplexed air of someone awaiting orders who is as uncertain of their reliability as of the wisdom of obeying them. Let us hope that in order to get out of Oporto the dog entrusts itself to us as it did when we came in, said Joaquim Sassa, and the others understood the reason for that observation, just imagine if the dog Faithful, faithful to its instinct to head north, were to start taking one-way streets here in the city where north was precisely the direction you couldn't follow, there would be endless trouble with the police, accidents, traffic jams, with the entire population of

Oporto turning out to enjoy the fun. But this dog isn't any old sheepdog of suspect or clandestine paternity, its genealogical tree has its roots in hell, which, as we know, is the place where all knowledge ends up, ancient knowledge is already there, modern and future knowledge will pursue the same path. For this reason, and perhaps also because Pedro Orce has repeated the trick of whispering into the dog's ear words that we still have not been able to make out, the dog got into the car as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if it had always traveled this way, all its life. But, look out, this time the dog hasn't rested its head on Joana Carda's forearm, this time it sits up attentively as Joaquim Sassa drives Deux Chevaux along curves and bends in the road, in every direction, anyone who happened to be there watching would think, They're heading south, but soon he would change his mind and decide, They're going west, or, They're going east, and these are the main or cardinal directions but if we were to mention the entire compass card we would never get out of Oporto or this confusion.

There is an agreement between this dog and these travelers, four rational beings consent to being led by brute instinct, unless they are all being drawn by some magnet located to the north, or being pulled by the other end of a blue thread identical to the one the dog won't let go. They left the city, one knows that despite its curves the road is going in the right direction, the dog gives signs of wanting to get out of the car, they open the door and off it goes, refreshed after a night's rest and the large meal it had been given at the house. The dog goes at a brisk trot, Deux Chevaux cheerfully accompanies it, feels no need to keep a tight rein. The road no longer skirts the sea, it wends inland, and for this very reason we won't see the shore where Joaquim Sassa acquired more strength than Samson at a given moment in his life. Joaquim himself remarked, What a pity the dog decided not to follow the coastline, then I could have shown you where the episode of the stone took place, not even the Samson mentioned in the Bible could have done what I did, but out of modesty he would say no more. What was and continues to be a much greater feat was that of Joana Carda there in the fields of Ereira, and even more enigmatic is the tremor felt by Pedro Orce, and if our guide here on earth is a dog from the underworld, what shall we say of the thousands of starlings that accompanied José Anaíço for so long and only abandoned him when it was time to take flight once more.

The road slopes upward, descends, then starts rising again, and goes on rising, and whenever it goes down, it is only to take a short pause, these mountains are not all that high, but they affect Deux Chevaux's heart, causing it to struggle for breath on the slopes while the dog travels on at a nimble pace. They stopped to have lunch at a snack bar at the roadside, once more the dog disappeared in search of its own food and when it returned there was blood on its mouth, but we already know why, there's no mystery, if no one is around to fill the bowl, a dog has to make do with what it can find. Back on the road, they kept heading north, at one point José Anaíço quipped, If we carry on like this we'll find ourselves in Spain, in your native country. My native land is Andalusia, Country and land are one and the same thing, No they're not, we may not know our country but

we always know our own land, Have you ever been to Galicia, No, I've never been to Galicia, Galicia is the land of others.

Whether they will get there remains to be seen, because they will spend the night in Portugal. José Anaíço and Joana Carda signed the hotel register as man and wife, in order to economize Pedro Orce and Joaquim Sassa shared a room, and the dog had to sleep with Deux Chevaux, the huge beast terrified the landlady, I don't want a monster like that in my hotel, it can sleep outdoors where dogs belong, the last thing I need is to have the place infested with fleas, The dog hasn't got any fleas, Joana Carda protested to no avail, for that wasn't the main point. In the middle of the night Pedro Orce got out of bed, hoping to find that the front door wasn't locked, as indeed it wasn't, so he went to sleep for a couple of hours in the car with the dog in his arms, when one has no one to love, in this case for obvious impediments of nature, friendship is the next best thing. It seemed to Pedro Orce as he got into the car that the dog was whimpering, but he must have been hallucinating, as we often do when we dearly want something, our wise body takes pity on us, simulates within itself the satisfaction of our desires, this is what dreaming means, what do you think, If it weren't so, tell me how we could ever bear this intolerable life, comes the commentary from the unknown voice that intervenes from time to time.

When Pedro Orce returned to the bedroom, the dog followed him, but when told not to enter, it lay down in the doorway and there it remained. There are no words to describe the terror and outcry at first light of day, when the landlady arrived early to begin her daily chores, she opens the shutters to the freshness of the dawn, and lo and behold, here on the doormat the Nemean lion springs to its feet with bared fangs, it was simply the yawn of a dog that hadn't had enough sleep, but even yawns should be treated with caution when they expose such formidable teeth and a tongue so red that it appears to be bleeding. Such was the uproar that the guests' departure had all the appearance of expulsion rather than peaceful withdrawal, Deux Chevaux was already at some distance, almost turning the corner, and the landlady was still on the doorstep yelling at the silent beast, for these are the worst beasts of all if one is to believe the proverb that says, Dogs that bark don't bite, it's true that this one hasn't bitten yet, but if those powerful jaws are in direct proportion to its silence, God protect us from the beast. Once on their way, the travelers laugh at the episode, Joana Carda, out of feminine solidarity, didn't find it amusing, Had I been in that woman's position, I'd also have been terrified, and you needn't think you're all such heroes, let alone feel obliged to show how brave you are, her words made a deep impression, each man quietly pondered his own cowardice, the most interesting case was that of José Anaíço, who decided he would confess his fear to Joana Carda at the first possible opportunity, for real love means keeping no secrets from one's beloved, the worst comes later when the romance is over and the lover who has confided his secrets regrets having spoken while the beloved abuses his confidence, it's up to Joana Carda and José Anaíço to arrange their affairs so as to keep anything like this from happening.

The frontier isn't far away. By now accustomed to the scouting talents of their guide, the travelers have not even noticed the speedy manner, without a moment's hesitation or pause for thought, with which Faithful or Pilot, he'll have to be given some name or other one day, chooses the right fork in the road he must follow, and to make things even more difficult, this is not simply a fork but a crossroads. Even if this cunning animal has covered this same route from north to south, and of this no one can be sure, the experience will not be of much help, if we bear in mind the difference in the point of view, on which, as we are fortunately aware, everything depends. It is all too true that people live alongside things wondrous and prodigious, but they do not fathom even half of these marvels, they nearly always deceive themselves about the half they know, mainly because they desire with all their might, like our Lord God, that this and other worlds should be made in their own image and likeness, not that it matters who created them. This dog is guided by instinct, but we have no way of telling what or who guides instinct, and if we should ever be able to start explaining the strange episode narrated here, in all probability any such explanation would be no more than the semblance of an explanation, unless from that explanation we can derive another and then another, until there comes a moment when there would be nothing left with which to explain the primary source of the things explained, presumably beyond that there is nothing but chaos, but we are not speaking about the formation of the universe, we do know that much, we are only discussing dogs.

And people. These people who are following a dog and heading for the frontier just ahead. They are about to leave Portuguese territory, at sunset, and suddenly, perhaps because of the approaching twilight, they realize that the animal has disappeared, and they suddenly feel like children lost in the forest, Now what are we going to do, Joaquim Sassa seizes the opportunity to express his disdain for canine loyalty, but Pedro Orce's serene judgment, based on his experience of life, prevailed. The dog has probably swum across the river to wait for us on the opposite side, if these people had really paid attention to the ties and bonds that link existence and alchemy they would have realized it at once, we are referring to José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa, for the dog's motives may be the same as those of a thousand starlings, if Faithful came from the north and passed this way, perhaps he may not wish to repeat the experience, without collar or muzzle, he could be suspected of having rabies and might even find himself being peppered with bullets.

The customs officers examine their papers distractedly, wave them on, it is obvious that these officials are not exactly overworked, as we have seen, people do a great deal of traveling, but for the moment it is more within national frontiers, they seem to be afraid of straying from their home in the wider sense, namely their native land, even if they have abandoned the family home where they have lived their humdrum lives. On the other side of the Minho there is the same boredom, all one detects is a glimmer of detached curiosity as the officials watch these Portuguese arrive with a Spaniard of

another generation, were this a period of greater traffic to and fro they wouldn't even be noticed. Joaquim Sassa drove for a kilometer, drew Deux Chevaux over to the side of the road and came to a halt, Let's wait here, if the dog, as Pedro claims, knows what it is doing, it will come to look for us. They didn't even have time to become impatient. After ten minutes, the dog appeared in front of the car, its coat still damp. Pedro Orce had been right, and if we hadn't been quite so skeptical, we would have waited on the riverbank to witness the dog's heroic crossing, which we could then have described with relish, instead of this banal crossing of frontiers with guards whose only difference is their uniforms, Carry on, You may pass, this summed up the episode, even the glimmer of curiosity was no more than a feeble invention to fill out the narrative.

Further and somewhat better inventions would now be in order, to enhance what remains of the journey, with two nights and two days in between, the former spent in rural lodging houses, the latter on old roads that once went north, always toward the north, the land of Galicia and mist, with light showers announcing the arrival of autumn, this is all one feels like saying and no invention was needed. The rest would be the nocturnal embraces of Joana Carda and José Anaíço, the intermittent insomnia of Joaquim Sassa, Pedro Orce's hand resting on the dog's back, for here the dog was allowed inside the bedrooms to spend the night. And the days on the road, heading right toward a horizon that seemed to move farther and farther away. For the second time, Joaquim Sassa said that this was utter madness, trailing after a stupid dog to the ends of the earth without knowing why or for what purpose, to which Pedro Orce replied abruptly, betraying his annoyance, Scarcely to the ends of the earth, we'll reach the sea before then. The dog is clearly beginning to tire, its head is drooping, its tail has dropped, and the pads on its paws, despite their hard skin, must be hurting by now after all that rubbing against soil and gravel, that same night Pedro Orce will examine them and find open sores bleeding, no wonder he responded so sharply to Joaquim Sassa, who looks on and says, as if trying to excuse himself, Some compresses with hydrogen peroxide should do them good, it's rather like teaching your grandmother how to suck eggs, Pedro Orce is familiar with all the skills of pharmacy, he doesn't need any advice from Joaquim Sassa. Nevertheless, this conciliatory gesture was enough to restore the peace.

In the vicinity of Santiago de Compostela the dog veered in a northeasterly direction. It must be nearing its destination, this could be seen from the renewed vigor with which it was now trotting along, from its firm gait, the way it held its head, its bristling tail. Joaquim Sassa was forced to accelerate a little so that Deux Chevaux could keep up with the dog, and they got so close that they were almost touching the animal. Joana Carda exclaimed, Look, look at the blue thread. They all turned around. The thread didn't look the same. The other one had become so dirty that it could have been either blue or black, but this one was as blue as blue could be, and quite unlike the blue of the sky or the sea, who could have dyed and combed it, or who could have washed it, if it was the same thread, and put it back into the dog's mouth with the words, Off you go. The road has become narrow, it's almost like a footpath skirting the hills. The sun is about to set

over the sea, which still cannot be seen from here, nature is masterly when it comes to composing spectacles attuned to human circumstances, this morning and all afternoon the sky had been overcast and somber as it sprinkled the land with Galician drizzle, and now the countryside is bathed in a coppery light, the dog glows like a jewel, an animal made of gold. Even Deux Chevaux no longer looks the worse for wear and the passengers inside are suddenly transformed, the light is shining on them and they go forth like the beatified. José Anaíço observes Joana Carda and shudders at the sight of such beauty, Joaquim Sassa lowers the rearview mirror in order to gaze into his own sparkling eyes, and Pedro Orce contemplates his wrinkled hands, they are no longer wrinkled, no, they've been restored by alchemy, they've become immortal, even if the rest of his body should die.

Suddenly, the dog stops. The sun is level with the summit of the mountains, the sea can be glimpsed on the other side. The road goes winding down, two hills appear to cut it off down below, but this is an optical illusion due to distance. In front, halfway down the slope, there is a large house, an austere building with an air of neglect, very old, despite signs that the surrounding fields are being farmed. Part of the house is already in the shade, the light is waning, the whole world appears to be sinking into inertia and solitude. Joaquim Sassa brought the car to a halt. They all got out. The silence can be heard vibrating like one last echo, perhaps it is only the distant thrashing of the waves against the rocks, that is always the best explanation, the interminable memory of the waves echoes even inside the shells, but this is not the case, what can be heard here is silence, no one should die before experiencing it, silence, have you heard it, now you may go, you know what it sounds like. But that hour still has not arrived for any of these four. They know that their destination is that house, this amazing dog has brought them here, mute as a statue, waiting. José Anaíço is at Joana Carda's side but he does not touch her, he knows that he must not touch her, she knows it too, these are moments when even love must resign itself to its own insignificance, forgive us for reducing the greatest of affections to almost nothing, that affection that on other occasions can be almost everything. Pedro Orce was the last to get out of the car, he puts his feet on the ground and feels the earth vibrating with terrifying force, here every seismograph needle would snap, and these hills appear to sway with the movement of the waves that surge one upon the other in the sea beyond, pushed by this stone raft, throwing themselves against it with the reflux of the powerful currents we are cutting through.

The sun has disappeared. Then the blue thread fluttered in the air, almost invisible in its transparency, searching for some support, grazing hands and faces, Joaquim Sassa held it, was this a coincidence or destiny, let us leave these hypotheses aside, even though there are a number of reasons for not giving credence either to the one or to the other, and now what will Joaquim Sassa do, he cannot travel in the car, with one hand outside holding and accompanying the thread, for a thread at the mercy of the wind does not necessarily follow the line of the road. What should I do with this, he asked, but while the others could not give him an answer the dog could, it left the road and began to

descend the gentle slope, Joaquim Sassa followed it, his raised hand followed the blue thread as if it were stroking the wings or the breast of a bird above his head. José Anaíço went back to the car with Joana Carda and Pedro Orce, put it into gear, and, keeping a watchful eye on Joaquim Sassa, began slowly going down the road, he did not want to arrive before him, or for that matter much after him, the potential harmony of things depends on their equilibrium and the time when they occur, not too soon, not too late, which explains why it is so difficult for us to attain perfection.

When they stopped in the square in front of the house, Joaquim Sassa was ten paces from the door, which was ajar. The dog gave a sigh that seemed almost human and lay down, stretching its neck over its paws. It dislodged the thread from its mouth with its paws and let it fall to the ground. A woman emerged from the dark interior of the house, she had a thread in her hand, the same as the one Joaquim Sassa was still holding. She stepped down from the last step at the front door and said, Come in, you must be tired. Joaquim Sassa was the first to move, his end of the blue thread tied round his wrist.

One day, Maria Guavaira told them, about this hour and with much the same light, the dog appeared, looking as if it had come from afar, its coat was filthy, its paws bleeding, it came and knocked on the door with its head, and when I went to open it, thinking it might be one of those beggars who travel from place to place, who arrive tapping their stick and plead, Whatever you can give, ma'am or miss, what do I find but the dog, panting as if it had come running from the end of the world and the blood staining the ground under its paws, the most surprising thing of all was that I didn't feel frightened, though there was every reason to take fright, anyone who didn't know just how harmless the dog is would think he was looking at the wildest of beasts, poor creature, the moment it saw me, the dog lay down on the ground as if it had been waiting until it reached me before attempting to rest, and it seemed to be crying, as if trying to speak but unable to, and all the time the dog was here I never once heard it bark. It's been with us now for six days and it hasn't barked once, Joana Carda said. I took it in, cleaned it up, nursed it, it's not a stray, you can tell from its coat, and the dog's owners obviously fed it properly, showed it love and affection, if you want to see the difference you need only compare it with Galician dogs, who are born hungry and die from starvation after a lifetime of being deprived, beaten, and stoned, that's why the Galician dog can't lift its tail, but hides it between its legs in the hope of going unnoticed, it takes its revenge, when it gets the chance, by biting. This one doesn't bite, Pedro Orce assured them, As for knowing where it came from, we'll probably never know, José Anaíço remarked, perhaps it's not all that important, what surprises me is that it should have come to look for us in order to bring us here, you have to wonder why. I don't know, all I know is that one day it went off with a piece of thread in its mouth, looking at me as if to say, Don't move from here until I return, and off it went up the hill there from which it has just descended, What is this thread, Joaquim Sassa asked, as he wound on his wrist, then unwound, the end of the strand that still tied him to Maria Guavaira. I wish I knew, she replied, winding her end between her fingers and stretching the thread like the taut string of a guitar, while neither he nor she appeared to notice that they were tied together, the others did as they stood there looking on, what they were thinking they kept to themselves although it wouldn't be all that difficult to guess. For I did nothing but unravel an old sock, one of those socks people used to keep their money in, but the sock I unraveled would have given only a handful of wool, while the amount of wool here is what you would get from shearing a hundred sheep, not to say a thousand, and how is one to explain such a thing. For days, two thousand starlings kept following me, said José Anaíço, I threw a stone into the sea that weighed almost as much as I did, and it landed far off in the distance, Joaquim Sassa added, aware that he was exaggerating, and Pedro Orce simply said, The earth is trembling, and trembled.

Maria Guavaira got up and opened a door and said, Look, Joaquim Sassa was standing beside her, but it wasn't the thread that had drawn him, and what they saw was a blue cloud, of a blue that darkened and became almost black in the middle, If I leave this door open there are always ends sticking out, just like the one that went up the road and brought you here, Maria Guavaira said, addressing Joaquim Sassa, and the kitchen

where they all had gathered was now deserted, except for these two, joined together by a blue thread, and the blue cloud that appeared to be breathing, firewood could be heard crackling in the hearth where some cabbage soup is on the boil flavored with scraps of meat, not as heavy as the Galician recipe.

Joaquim Sassa and Maria Guavaira must not remain tied together like this for too long, otherwise this union will begin to look suspicious, so she winds up all the thread and on reaching his wrist she pulls the thread around it as if she were invisibly attaching him to her once more, and then holds the tiny ball of wool against her breast, only a fool would be in any doubt about the gesture, but he would be an even bigger fool not to be in doubt. José Anaíço moved away from the fire burning in the hearth, Although it may seem absurd, we've come to the conclusion that there is some connection or other between what has happened to us and the separation of Spain and Portugal from Europe, you must have heard about it, Yes, I have, but in these parts no one gave it another thought, if we go over the mountains and down to the coast the sea is always the same. It was shown on television, I don't have television, It was broadcast in the news bulletin, News is nothing but words, and you can never really tell if words are news.

On this skeptical note the conversation was interrupted for several minutes. Maria Guavaira went to fetch some bowls from the shelf, ladled out the soup, the last bowl but one for Joaquim Sassa, the last one of all for herself, for a moment everyone thought there would be one spoon too few, but no, there were enough to go around, so Maria Guavaira did not have to wait for Joaquim Sassa to finish his soup. Then he asked her if she was living alone, for so far they had seen no one else in the house, and she told him that she had been a widow for three years, and that hired hands came to work the land, I'm between the sea and the mountains, without children or family, my brothers emigrated to Argentina, my father died, my demented mother is in an asylum in La Coruña, there can't be many women in this world as lonely as I am, You could have remarried, Joana Carda pointed out, but immediately regretted having spoken, she had no right to say such a thing, she who only a few days ago had broken up her marriage and was already keeping company with another man, I was worn out, and if a woman remarries at my age, it's on account of any land she may own, men are more interested in marrying land than a woman, You're still young, I was young once but I can scarcely remember that time, and with these words she leaned over the hearth so that the flames lit up her face, she looked up at Joaquim Sassa as if to say, This is what I'm like, take a good look at me, you turned up on my doorstep tied to a thread I was holding in my hand, I could, if I so wished, draw you to my bed, and I'm certain you would come, but beautiful I shall never be, unless you can transform me into the most desirable woman who ever lived, that's something only a man can do, and does, but what a pity it can't last forever.

Joaquim Sassa watched her from the other side of the fire and saw that the flames as they danced kept on changing her expression, one moment making her cheeks look sunken, the next moment smoothing away the shadows, but the gleam in her dark eyes

did not change, perhaps a suspended tear had been transformed into a membrane of pure light. She isn't pretty, he thought, nor is she ugly, her hands are rough and worn, quite unlike mine, the smooth hands of an office clerk enjoying paid leave, which reminds me that tomorrow, unless I'm mistaken, is the last day of the month, the day after tomorrow I'm due back at work, but no, how can I, how can I possibly leave José and Joana, Pedro and the Dog, they've no reason for wanting to come with me, and if I take Deux Chevaux they're going to find it extremely difficult to get back to their respective homes, but they probably don't want to go back, the only real thing that exists at this moment on earth is our being here together, Joana Carda and José Anaíço conversing in whispers, perhaps about their own life, perhaps about each other's life, Pedro Orce with his hand on Pilot's head, no doubt measuring vibrations and tremors no one else can feel, while I watch and go on watching Maria Guavaira who has a way of looking that isn't exactly looking but rather a way of showing her eyes, she is dressed in black, a widow whom time has consoled but whom custom and tradition restrict to wearing black, fortunately her eyes shine, and there is the blue cloud that doesn't seem to belong to this house, her hair is brown, and she has a rounded chin and full lips, and her teeth, I caught a glimpse of them a moment ago, are white, thank God, this woman is pretty after all and I didn't even notice, I was tied to her and didn't realize, I must decide whether to return home or remain here, even if I get back to work a few days late I'll be excused, with all this upheaval in the peninsula who's going to pay any attention to employees who are a few days late in returning to work, one can always say there was no transportation. One minute she looked common, the next quite pretty, and now, right now, standing beside Maria Guavaira, Joana Carda looks terrible, My woman is much more attractive, Senhor José Anaíço, how can you compare your lady from the city, and her affectations, to this wild creature who clearly tastes of the salty air the breeze carries over the mountains and whose body must be white underneath that black dress, If I could, Pedro Orce, I'd tell you something, What would you tell me, That I now know whom I should love, Congratulations, there are people who have taken much longer, or have never come to know, Do you know any such person, Take me, for example, and with this reply, Pedro Orce then said out loud, I'm going to take the dog for a walk.

Darkness has not yet fallen, but it is cold. In the direction of the mountain that hides the sea there is a path that begins to wend its way up the slope ahead in one bend after another, left and right like a winding thread until it disappears from sight. Soon the valley will be plunged into darkness, as on the night of the blackout, although it would be more accurate to say that in the valley where Maria Guavaira lives every night is like a blackout, so there was no need for all the electric cables of civilized and cultured Europe to break down. Pedro Orce left the house because he wasn't needed there. He walks on without looking back, at first as quickly as his strength permits, then, beginning to tire, he slows down. He does not feel the least bit nervous in this silence amid the great walls formed by the mountains, he's a man who was born and bred in a desert, in a land of dust and stones, where one is never surprised to find a horse's skull, a hoof with the metal shoe still attached, there are some who say not even the horsemen of the

Apocalypse could survive there, the warhorse died in war, the infected horse died of infection, the starved horse of starvation, death is the supreme *raison d'être* of all things and their infallible conclusion, what deceives us is this line of the living along which we find ourselves, which advances toward what we call the future, simply because we had to give it a name, where we are constantly gathering in new beings while constantly leaving old ones behind, we are obliged to refer to these as the dead lest they emerge from the past.

Pedro Orce's heart is already starting to grow old and weary. He now has to rest more often and for longer, but he does not give up, the dog's presence consoles him. They exchange signs with each other, like a code that even though undeciphered is enough, for the simple fact of existing is enough, the animal rubs its back against the man's thigh, the man's hand strokes the soft skin inside the dog's ear, the world is filled with the sound of footsteps, breathing, friction, and now the muffled clamor of the sea can unmistakably be heard behind the summit of the mountain, growing louder, louder, getting clearer and clearer, until the immense surface looms up before one's eyes, vaguely sparkling beneath the night sky that is bereft of moonlight and has few stars, and below, like the living line separating night and death, the dazzling whiteness of spume constantly dissolving and renewing itself. The rocks are blacker where the waves are lashing, as if the stone there had greater density or had been soaked in water since the beginning of time. The wind comes in from the sea, on the one hand it is blowing normally, on the other it can scarcely be felt, this must be due to the peninsula's displacement on the water, it is no more than a breeze, as we well know, and yet there has never been such a typhoon since the world began.

Pedro Orce measures the dimension of the ocean and at that moment finds it small, because on taking a deep breath he feels his lungs expand so much that all the chasms of liquid could rush in and still leave space for the raft that with its stone battering rams is forcing its way through the waves. Pedro does not know if he is man or fish. He goes down to the sea, the dog goes ahead to sniff out and choose the path, and this prudent and astute guide was much needed, for without daylight, Pedro Orce on his own could not have found entrance or exit in this labyrinth of stones. At last they reached the great slabs of rock that descend to the sea, there the roar of waves breaking is deafening. Beneath this pitch-black sky and the cries of the sea, should the moon now appear, a man could die of rapture, while believing himself to be dying of anguish, of fear and solitude. Pedro Orce no longer felt cold. The night became clearer, more stars appeared, and the dog, which had been gone for a moment, came running back, it had not been trained to tug its master's trousers, but we know it well enough to be certain that it is perfectly capable of making its wishes known, and now Pedro Orce must accompany it to examine its discovery, a castaway swept up on the shore, a treasure chest, some vestige of Atlantis, the wreckage of the Flying Dutchman, an obsessive memory, and when he arrived he saw that it was nothing but stones, but since this was a dog not easily fooled, there had to be something unusual there, that was when he noticed that he was actually

standing on it, the thing, an enormous stone, roughly in the form of a boat, and there was another one, long and narrow like a mast, and yet another, this must be the helm with its tiller, although it was broken. Thinking that the dim light was deceiving him, he started walking around the stones, touching and probing them, and then he was no longer in any doubt, this side, tall and pointed, is the prow, this other flat one is the stern, the mast is unmistakable, and the helm, for example, could only be made for a giant, were it not for the fact that this is definitely a stone ship standing here. A geological phenomenon, to be sure. What Pedro Orce knows about chemistry is more than enough to explain the discovery, an ancient wooden vessel brought here by the waves or abandoned by mariners, stranded on these rocks since time immemorial, then the fragments were covered by earth, their organic material petrified, once more the earth has retreated, thousands of years will be needed, until today, to blunt the edges and reduce these volumes, wind, rain, the erosion of cold and heat, the day will come when one stone will be indistinguishable from another. Pedro Orce sat right inside the boat, from where he's sitting he can see nothing but sky and the distant sea, if this ship were to pitch ever so slightly he would imagine himself to be sailing, and then, which shows you what the imagination can do, he absurdly began to imagine that this petrified ship was indeed sailing and towing the peninsula, one cannot trust these flights of fantasy, obviously it is not impossible, one has witnessed even more difficult feats, but as it happens the ship's stern is facing out to sea as if ironically, no reputable vessel would ever sail backward. Pedro Orce stood up, he now feels cold, and the dog has jumped onto the parapet, Time we were going home, master, you're rather old for these late nights, if you didn't go in for them when you were young, it's too late now.

When they reached the summit of the mountains, Pedro Orce could scarcely walk, and his poor lungs, which only a short time ago could have inhaled the entire ocean, gasped like a punctured bellows, the harsh air chafed his nostrils, parched his throat, these mountain tracks are not for a pharmacist getting on in years. He sank down onto a boulder, had to rest, his elbows resting on his knees, holding his head in his hands, the sweat glistening on his forehead, the wind ruffling loose strands of hair, he's a physical wreck, weary and dejected, alas, no one has yet discovered ways of petrifying a human being in the flower of youth and transforming him into an eternal statue. His breathing is more relaxed, the air has softened, it comes and goes without that grating noise like sandpaper. Aware of these changes, the dog, which had been stretched out waiting, made as if to get up. Pedro Orce raised his head, looked down into the valley where the house stood. There seemed to be an aura hovering over it, a diffused radiance, a kind of light without any luminosity, if this phrase, which like all others can be formed only with words, can be understood without ambiguity. Pedro Orce suddenly remembered that epileptic back in Orce who, in the wake of those fits that left him prostrate, tried to explain the confused sensations that preceded them, it could be a vibration of the invisible particles of the air, the radiation of energy, like heat in the distance, the distortion of luminous rays just beyond his reach, this night was truly filled with wonders, the thread and the cloud of blue wool, the stone ship grounded on the rocks on the shore,

and now this house that is shaking, or so it appears to us, seen from here. The image flickers, the outline blurs, it appears to recede until it becomes an almost invisible point, then it returns, slowly vibrating. For an instant, Pedro Orce was afraid of being left abandoned in this other desert, but the fear passed, just enough time to realize that down there Maria Guavaira and Joaquim Sassa had got together, times have changed a lot, nowadays a man no sooner sets eyes on a woman than he is poking the fire, if you'll pardon this crude metaphor, both plebeian and obsolete. Pedro Orce had risen to start going down the slope, but sat down again and patiently waited, shivering with cold, for the house to return to his image of a home, where there would be no flames other than that last one still burning in the hearth, if he lingers here too long he is much more likely to find only ashes instead of the fire.

Maria Guavaira woke up with the first light of morning. She was in her room, in bed, and there was a man asleep at her side. She could hear him breathing deeply, as if he were drawing renewed strength from the marrow of his bones, and semiconscious, she wanted her own breathing to accompany his. It was the different rhythm within her breast that made her feel that she was naked. She ran her hands over her body, from her thighs to her crotch, then over her belly and up to her breasts, and suddenly she remembered her cry of surprise when her orgasm had dawned inside her like a sun. Now completely awake, she bit her fingers in order to suppress that same cry, but in that stifled sound she would have liked to recognize those sensations, to capture them forever, or perhaps it was reawakened desire, perhaps remorse, the anguish that utters that familiar phrase, Now what is to become of me, thoughts cannot be isolated from other thoughts, impressions are not untainted by other impressions, this woman lives in the country, remote from the amatory arts of civilization, and any moment now, two men will arrive who have come to work on Maria Guavaira's land, what is she going to say to them, her house filled like this with strangers, there is nothing like the light of day to alter the appearance of things. But this man sleeping beside her threw a stone into the sea, and Joana Carda cut the earth in two, and José Anaíço became the king of starlings, and Pedro Orce can cause the earth to tremble with his feet, and the Dog has come from who knows where to bring these people together, And it brought me closer to you than to the others, I pulled the thread and you came to my door, to my bed, you penetrated my body, even my soul, for only from my soul could that cry have come. She closed her eyes for several minutes, when she opened them she saw Joaquim Sassa awake, she could feel his firm body, and sobbing with desire she opened herself to him, she did not cry out, but wept smiling, and day broke. There is no point in making indiscreet revelations about the words they spoke, let people form their own idea, try to imagine it for themselves, they are unlikely to succeed, however limited the language of love may appear to be.

Maria Guavaira got up and her body is as white as Joaquim Sassa had dreamed, she told him, I didn't want to wear my widow's clothes, but now I haven't got time to look for something else to wear, the farmhands will be here any minute. She dressed, returned to the bed, covered Joaquim Sassa's face with her hair and kissed him, then rushed out of the bedroom. Joaquim Sassa rolled over on the bed, closed his eyes, he's going back to sleep. There's a tear on one of his cheeks, it could have been shed by Maria Guavaira or it could be his own, for men also weep, it's nothing to be ashamed of, and weeping only does them good.

This is the room where Joana Carda and José Anaíço spent the night, the door is closed, they're still asleep. The other door is ajar, the dog came to look at Maria Guavaira, then went back inside and lay down again, keeping vigil over the sleeping Pedro Orce who is resting from his adventures and discoveries. One can tell from the atmosphere that it will be a hot day. The clouds are coming in from the sea and appear to be moving more swiftly than the wind. Near Deux Chevaux are two men, these are the hired laborers who have arrived for work, they are commenting to each other that the

widow, who is always complaining about how little she earns from farming, has finally bought herself a car, Once the husband is out of the way, these women manage very nicely, this sarcastic remark came from the older man. Maria Guavaira called out to them, and as she set about lighting the fire and heating up the coffee she explained that she had offered shelter to some travelers who had lost their way, poor people, You aren't safe living here all by yourself, the younger man said, but this phrase, so full of concern, is simply a variant of many others that have been spoken with somewhat different intentions, You should have remarried, you need a man to keep an eye on the house, no exaggeration, you couldn't have found a better man than me, when it comes to work and all the rest, Believe me when I say I'm very fond of you, One day you'll see me come through that door and you'd better believe I'll be here to stay. You're driving me out of my mind, You think men have no feelings, that we're made of wood, whereupon Maria Guavaira threatened him, If you come any closer, I'll know for sure, because you'll get a live coal in your face, and the younger man had no choice but to rephrase his opening sentence, You should have a man here to look after you, but even expressing it like this has not helped him to get what he wants.

The farmhands went into the fields and Maria Guavaira returned to the bedroom. Joaquim Sassa was fast asleep. Slowly, so as not to awaken him, she opened her trunk and began sorting out clothes in the light colors she used to wear before going into mourning, shades of pink, green, blue, white, and red, orange or lilac, and all the other color combinations popular with women, not that this was any stage wardrobe or that she was a wealthy landowner, but as everyone knows, two dresses are enough to strike a festive note, and two skirts with two blouses create a rainbow. The clothes smell of mothballs and staleness, Maria Guavaira will hang them out in the sun to allow the miasma of chemicals and the musty smell to evaporate, and just as she is about to go down, her arms a riot of color, she bumps into Joana Carda, who has also left her man tucked snugly between the sheets and who, seeing at once what is happening, offers to help. The two of them laugh at the display, the wind blows their hair about, the clothes make a smacking sound and flutter like flags, one feels like shouting, Long live liberty.

They go back into the kitchen to prepare food, the place smells of freshly brewed coffee, there is milk, bread, no longer fresh but edible, some hard cheese, jam, these appetizing odors will rouse the men, first José Anaíço appeared, then Joaquim Sassa, next to appear was not a man but a dog, it appeared in the doorway, had a good look, and went away. It's gone to call its master, said Maria Guavaira, who in theory has more claims to ownership, but she has already given them up. Pedro Orce finally appeared, said good morning, and sat down in silence, there's a hint of resentment in his expression when he observes the still very discreet gestures of affection with which the other four express themselves, whether as couples or all together. The world of contentment has its own distinctive sun.

Pedro Orce's resentment may look bad, he knows he is an old man, but we must try to understand his feelings if he is still not resigned to the idea. José Anaíço tries to

include him in the conversation, asks if he enjoyed his nocturnal stroll, if the dog had been good company, and Pedro Orce, already mollified, is inwardly grateful for the olive branch offered, it came at just the right moment before any bitterness could further complicate the feeling of privation, I walked as far as the sea, he said, and this caused great surprise, most of all in Maria Guavaira, who knows perfectly well where the sea lies and how difficult it is to get there. But if I hadn't taken the dog with me I couldn't have managed, Pedro Orce explained, and suddenly the stone ship came to mind, he felt uneasy, incapable of deciding for a few seconds whether he had seen it in a dream or whether it had been concrete and real, If I wasn't dreaming, if it wasn't some vision in a dream, it exists, it's there at this precise moment, I'm sitting here drinking coffee and the ship is there, and, such are the powers of imagination, despite his having seen it only under the feeble light of those few stars, he could now visualize it in full daylight with the sun and the blue of the sky, the black rock beneath the petrified ship. I've found a ship, he said, and without thinking he might be deceived, he expounded his theory, explained the chemical process without always knowing the precise terms, but little by little words began to fail him, Maria Guavaira's look of disapproval had disturbed him, and he wound up defensively with another cautious theory, Of course, this could also be an unusual effect due to erosion.

Joana Carda said she wanted to go and take a look, José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa agreed at once, only Maria Guavaira remained silent, she and Pedro Orce looked at each other, gradually the others fell silent, they realized that the last word remained to be said, if there really exists a last word for everything, which raises the delicate question of knowing how things will stand after everything has been said about them. Maria Guavaira held Joaquim Sassa's hand as if she were about to take an oath, It's a stone ship, you said, That's right, it turned to stone with time, perhaps through petrification, but perhaps it is just a coincidence that it has taken on this form because of the wind and other atmospheric agents, the rain, for example, and even the sea, for there must have been a time when the sea level was higher, It's a stone ship that was always made of stone, it's a ship that came from afar, and there it remained after all the persons sailing in it had disembarked. Persons, asked José Anaíço, Or person, of this I can't be sure, And of what you claim as being certain, what certainty is there, Pedro Orce asked skeptically, The ancients used to say, for their forefathers had told them, as their forefathers in turn had told them, some saints landed on this coast in ships of stone, coming from the deserts on the other side of the world, some arrived alive, others dead, as in the case of St. James, the ships have been stranded since that time and this is only one of them. Do you believe in any of what you're saying, It's not a question of believing or not believing, everything we go on saying is added to what is, to what exists, first I said granite, then I said ship, when I get to the end of what I'm saying, I have to believe in my having said it, that's often all that's needed, just as water, flour, and yeast make bread.

Joaquim Sassa now saw her as a wise shepherdess, a Minerva from the Galician mountains, we generally fail to notice, but the truth is that people know much more than

we think, the majority of people do not even suspect how much knowledge they possess, the trouble is that they try to pass for what they are not, they lose their knowledge and wit, they would do better if they were like Maria Guavaira, who simply says, I've read a number of books in my life, the wonder is that I profited so much from them, this woman is not so presumptuous as to say this of herself, it is the narrator, a lover of justice, who cannot resist making this comment. Joana Carda is about to ask when they will go to see the stone ship when Maria Guavaira, perhaps so as to cut short this discussion, which is above her head, when, as we were saying, Maria Guavaira switched on the radio she keeps in the kitchen, the world must have some news to report, it is like this every morning, and the news is always startling, even when one has not caught the opening words, these can be reconstructed later. Since last night the speed of the peninsula's displacement has inexplicably altered, the latest measurement registers more than two thousand meters per hour, practically fifty kilometers each day, that is, three times the daily displacement recorded since the drift began.

At this moment there must be silence everywhere in the peninsula, people are listening to the news in their homes and in the public squares, but there are some who will find out only later what has happened, such as those two men who are working for Maria Guavaira, they are way out in the fields, remote from everything, I'll bet the younger one will forget the compliments and flattery and think of nothing except his own life and safety. But there's worse to come, when the announcer reads a bulletin from Lisbon, the news had to be leaked sooner or later, the secret has lasted for a long time, There is grave concern in official and scientific circles in Portugal, since the archipelago of the Azores is situated precisely on the route the peninsula has been following, the first signs of the population's anxiety are already in evidence, for the moment one cannot speak of panic, but it is expected that within the next few hours steps will be taken to evacuate people living in those cities and towns along the coast that are at greatest risk in the event of a collision, as for those of us here in Spain, we can consider ourselves safe from any immediate effects, insofar as the Azores are distributed between the thirty-seventh and fortieth parallels, while the entire region of Galicia lies north of the forty-second parallel, it is fairly obvious that unless there are modifications in the route, only our neighboring country, ever unfortunate, will suffer the direct impact, without forgetting, of course, the no less unfortunate islands themselves, which, because of their lesser dimensions, run the risk of disappearing under the great mass of stone that is now being displaced, as we mentioned, at the terrifying speed of fifty kilometers each day, although it is just possible that those very islands could form a providential barrier, halting this approaching peril that has so far proved relentless, we are all in the hands of God, since human might is not sufficient to avoid the catastrophe should it happen, fortunately, we repeat, we Spaniards are more or less safe, there's no place for excessive optimism, however, the secondary consequences of the collision are always to be feared,

so the utmost vigilance is called for and only those whose duties and obligations prevent them from moving inland should remain on the Galician coast. The announcer broke off, then there was music composed for an altogether different occasion, and José Anaíço, suddenly remembering, said to Joaquim Sassa, You were right when you spoke of the Azores, and such is human vanity, even when one's life is at such serious risk, that Joaquim Scissa was very pleased that his judgment should be publicly acknowledged in the presence of Maria Guavaira, albeit the merit was not his, it was just something he had picked up when he was taken around the laboratories with Pedro Orce.

As in a recurring dream, José Anaíço made calculations, he had asked for paper and pencil, this time he would not say how many days Gibraltar would take to pass in front of the battlements of the Serra de Gàdor, that had been a time of festivity, now it was necessary to ascertain how many days lay ahead before the Cabo da Roca crashed into the island of Terceira, one shudders just to think of that horrendous moment, once the island of São Miguel has been buried like a spike in the soft earth of Alentejo, truly, truly I tell you, nothing but evil can come of it. Having made his calculations, José Anaíço tells them, So far we've gone about three hundred kilometers, all right, since the distance from Lisbon to the Azores is more or less twelve hundred kilometers, we still have nine hundred to go, and nine hundred kilometers at fifty kilometers a day, rounding off, makes eighteen days, in other words, we'll reach the Azores around the twentieth of September, perhaps even sooner. The blandness of this conclusion was a forced and bitter irony that did not bring a smile to anyone's face. Maria Guavaira reminded him, But we're here in Galicia, beyond its reach, You can't rely on it, Pedro Orce cautioned her, it only needs to change course ever so slightly toward the south, and we are the ones who will take the full impact, the best thing, the only thing to do is to escape inland, as the announcer said, and even then we can't be sure, Abandon our homes and lands, If what they're telling us should happen, there won't be any homes or lands. They were seated, for the time being they could remain seated, they could remain seated for eighteen days. The fire was burning in the hearth, the bread was on the table, there were other things too, milk, coffee, cheese, but it was the bread that attracted everyone's gaze, half of a large loaf, thick-crust and firm in the center, the taste lingered on their palates, even after a while, but their tongues recognized the crumbs that were left after chewing, when the last day of the universe comes we shall look at the last ant with the painful silence of someone who knows he is taking his leave for the last time.

Joaquim Sassa said, My vacation ends today, if I'm going to stick to the rules, I should be back at work in Oporto tomorrow morning, these objective words were only the beginning of a statement, I don't know if we'll keep on together, that's a matter we must decide here, but speaking for myself, I want to be with Maria, if she agrees and wants to be with me. And so that everything should be said at the right moment and each piece fitted into the right order and sequence, they waited for Maria Guavaira, who had been summoned, to speak first, and she said, That's what I want too, without needless elaboration. José Anaíço said, If the peninsula should collide with the Azores, the schools

won't reopen all that soon, in fact they might never open again, I'll stay with Joana and with the rest of you if she decides to remain. Now it was the turn of Joana Carda, who like Maria Guavaira said no more than five words, women have so little to say for themselves, I'm staying with you, these were her words, for she was looking straight at him, but everyone understood the rest. Last of all, because someone had to be last, Pedro Orce said, Wherever we go, I go, and this phrase, which obviously offends grammar and logic with its excess of logic and very likely of grammar too, must stand uncorrected, exactly as it was said, perhaps there is some special meaning that will justify and absolve it, anyone who knows anything about words knows to expect anything from them. Dogs, as everyone knows, do not speak, and this one cannot even give a loud bark as a sign of jovial approval.

That same day they walked all the way to the coast to see the stone ship. Maria Guavaira was wearing her brightest clothes, she had not even bothered to iron them, the wind and light would smooth out the creases after their years in darkest limbo. Pedro Orce, their experienced guide, led the way, although he trusts the dog's instinct and scent more than his own eyes, to which everything in the light of day looks like a different route. While we cannot expect any guidance from Maria Guavaira, her route is another one, everything with her is an excuse to hold hands with Joaquim Sassa and draw near to him until their bodies touch long enough to steal a kiss, a variable time span as we know, which explains why they do not so much accompany the expedition as trail behind it. José Anaigo and Joana Carda are more discreet, they have been together for a week now, have sated their initial hunger, slaked their initial thirst, desire comes to them when they summon it, and if truth be told, they do so frequently. Even last night, when Pedro Orce saw that splendor in the distance, it was not just Joaquim Sassa and Maria Guavaira who were making love, there could have been ten couples sleeping in that house and all making love at the same time.

The clouds come from the sea and speed away in haste, they form and disintegrate rapidly as if each moment lasted no more than a second or a fraction of a second, and all the gestures of these men and women are, or appear to be, at the very same instant, both slow and swift, one would think the world had gone crazy, if one could ever fully grasp the meaning of such an impoverished but popular expression. They reach the top of the hill and the sea is tempestuous. Pedro Orce scarcely recognizes these places, the enormous rounded boulders that are piled up, the almost invisible ox cart descending in stages, how could he have taken this route by night, even with the dog's guidance, this is a feat he simply cannot explain. He tries to make out the stone ship but it is nowhere to be seen, now it is Maria Guavaira who leads the group, and none too soon, because she knows these paths better than anyone. They arrive at the spot, and Pedro Orce is about to open his mouth to say, It's not here, but he has stopped himself in time, he has before his eyes the stone of the helm with its broken tiller, the great mast looks even thicker in daylight, and as for the ship, this is where he finds the greatest change, as if the erosion of which he had been speaking that morning had accomplished in one night the work of

thousands of years, where is it, I cannot see it, the tall pointed prow, the concave belly, the stone certainly has the broad outline of a ship, but not even the most glorious of saints could work the miracle of keeping such a precarious vessel afloat without bulwarks, there is no doubt that it is made of stone, but somehow it seems to have lost the form of a ship, after all, a bird only flies because it looks like a bird, Pedro Orce thinks to himself, but now Maria Guavaira is saying, This is the ship in which a saint came from the east, here you can still see the marks of his feet when he disembarked and started walking inland, the marks were some cavities in the rock, now tiny puddles that the ebb and flow of the waves at high tide would constantly renew, clearly any doubts are legitimate, but things depend on what one accepts or refutes, if a saint came from afar sailing on a slab of stone, then why should it not be possible for his fiery feet to have marked the rock up to the present day. Pedro Orce has no choice but to accept and confirm, but keeps to himself the memory of another ship that he alone saw on a night almost without stars yet inhabited by sublime visions.

The sea splashes over the rocks as if struggling against the advance of this irresistible tide of stones and earth. They no longer look at the phantom ship, they look at the thrashing waves, and José Anaíço says, We're on the road, we know it but we don't feel it. And Joana Carda asked him, The road to where. Then Joaquim Sassa said, There are five of us and a dog, we won't fit into Deux Chevaux, this is a problem we must solve, one solution would be for us two, for José and me, to go and search for a bigger car among the vehicles abandoned all over the place, the difficulty will be finding one in good condition, the ones we've seen always had some part missing, We can decide what we're going to do once we get home, José Anaíço said, there's no hurry, But what about the house, the land, Maria Guavaira muttered, We have no choice, either we get away from here or we all die, these words were spoken by Pedro Orce and they were final.

After lunch Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço set off in Deux Chevaux in search of a bigger car, preferably a jeep, an army jeep would be fine, or, better still, one of those transport trucks, a moving van that might be transformed into a house on wheels with sleeping accommodations, but just as Joaquim Sassa had surmised, they found nothing suitable, besides this region where we are is not particularly well provided with parking lots. They returned in the late afternoon along the roads that little by little became congested with vehicles traveling from west to east, it was the beginning of the exodus of the coastal population, there were cars, carts, once more the traditional donkeys, and bicycles, although not many of them on the bumpy roads, and motorcycles, and long-distance buses seating fifty or more that were transporting entire villages, it was the greatest migration ever in the history of Galicia. Some people stared in amazement at these travelers going in the opposite direction, they even tried to stop them, didn't they know what had happened, Yes we know, many thanks, we're only going to look for some people, meanwhile there's no real danger, and then José Anaíço said, If it's like this here, what must it be like in Portugal, and suddenly the perfect way out occurred to them, How stupid we are, the solution is very simple, let's make the journey twice, or three times, as

many times as it takes, we can choose some place in the interior to move into, a house, it shouldn't be difficult, people are leaving everything behind. This was the good news they brought, and it was deservedly given a warm welcome, next day they would start to sort out and put aside what they thought they should take, and to speed up the task they held a lengthy discussion after dinner, made an inventory of their needs, drew up lists, chopping and changing as they went along, Deux Chevaux had a long journey ahead and a heavy load to transport.

The following morning, the farmhands didn't appear and Deux Chevaux's engine wouldn't start. Putting it like this, we might give the impression that there is some connection between the two facts, perhaps that the absentee farmhands have stolen some essential part from the car, whether out of desperate need or with sudden malice. Not so. Both the older and the younger man had been swept away in the exodus that was depopulating the entire coastal region for more than fifty kilometers inland, but three days from now, when the inhabitants of the house have already departed, the younger man will return to this spot, the one who coveted Maria Guavaira and her land, in this order or the other way around, and we will never know if he is returning to attain his dream of becoming a landowner, even if only for a few days before he is killed in a geological disaster that will carry off both the land and his dream, or if he has decided to stay here standing guard, fighting loneliness and fear, risking everything to gain everything, the hand of Maria Guavaira and her possessions, if the terrifying threat should somehow fail to materialize, Maria Guavaira may come back here one day, if she should return she will find a man digging the soil or sleeping soundly after all that labor, in a cloud of blue wool.

All day long Joaquim Sassa struggled with the unwilling engine, José Anaíço helped as best he could, but what they knew between them was not enough to solve the problem. There were no parts missing, there was no lack of power, but somewhere deep down in the engine something had been damaged or broken, or had gradually worn out, it happens to people, it can also happen to machines, one day, without any warning, the body says no, or the soul, or the spirit, or the will, and nothing will move it, Deux Chevaux had also reached this point, it had brought Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço all this way, it did not dump them in the middle of the road, so let them at least be grateful, there is no point in losing their temper, throwing punches solves nothing, kicking gets you nowhere. Deux Chevaux was finished. When they came indoors feeling discouraged, covered with grease, their hands filthy after struggling, in the near-total absence of tools, with nuts, bolts, and gears, and went to clean themselves up, with the loving assistance of their womenfolk, the atmosphere was tense. How are we going to get out of this place now, asked Joaquim Sassa who, as the owner of the car, felt himself not only responsible but at fault, he saw it as an ungrateful act of destiny, a personal affront, certain susceptibilities about one's honor are no less irritating simply because they happen to be absurd.

Then a family council was convened, it promised to be a troubled session, but Maria

Guavaira immediately took the initiative and made a proposal, I've got an old wagon here that we could use and a horse that's seen better days, but if we handle it carefully perhaps it'll get us there. Several moments of bewilderment followed, a natural reaction on the part of people accustomed to traveling by car and suddenly finding themselves obliged in a crisis to revert to old-fashioned means of transport. Is the wagon covered, Pedro Orce inquired, being a practical man and of an older generation, The awning must be worn by now but it can be patched if necessary, I've got some strong material that will do the job, And if we need to, said Joaquim Sassa, we can always strip away the canvas from Deux Chevaux since it won't be needed any more, and that'll be the last favor I owe it. They're all on their feet, cheerful, this promises to be a real adventure, traveling around the world in a wagon, the world in a manner of speaking, and they say, Let's go and see the horse, let's go and look at the wagon, Maria Guavaira has to explain that the wagon is not a carriage, it has four wheels, an axle in front for pulling it, and under the awning that will shelter them from the weather there's enough room for a family, with a little planning and economizing, this won't be so very different from living in a house.

The horse is old, it saw them coming into the stable and turned around to stare at them with its enormous black eyes, startled by the light and commotion. The wise man's saying is true, While there's life, there's hope, so do not despair.

From our distant vantage point, we know little about the twists and turns of the present crisis, latent since the breaking away of the peninsula but becoming ever more serious in government circles, especially since the celebrated invasion of the hotels when the ignorant masses trampled on law and order, insofar as no one can see how to resolve the situation in the immediate future and restore all property to its rightful owners, as the higher interests of morality and justice dictate. Above all, because no one knows if there will be any immediate future. The news that the peninsula is rushing at a speed of two kilometers per hour in the direction of the Azores was used by the Portuguese government as a pretext for resigning in view of the seriousness of the situation, the imminence of collective danger, which leads one to believe that governments are only capable and effective at times when there is no real need to put their ability and effectiveness to the test. The Prime Minister, in his speech to the nation, saw the one-party system of his government as an obstacle to the broad national consensus he considered indispensable if this terrible crisis was to be overcome and a state of normality restored. In keeping with this line of thought, he had proposed to the President of the Republic the formation of a government of national salvation with the participation of all political forces, with or without parliamentary representation, bearing in mind that one could always find a position, deputy undersecretary to the deputy secretary to some deputy minister, to give to a political crony who in normal circumstances would not even be entrusted with opening the door. Nor did he forget to make it quite clear that he and his ministers considered themselves at the service of the nation, ready to collaborate, in whatever new or different capacity, in the salvation of the fatherland and to contribute to the prosperity of the nation.

The President of the Republic accepted the government's resignation and, complying with the constitution and the established norms governing the democratic functioning of institutions, he invited the resigning Prime Minister, as the leader of the party most often elected, a party that so far had governed alone, without alliances, he invited him, as we were saying, to form the proposed government of national salvation. Because there can be no doubt that governments of national salvation are also perfectly valid, and one could even go so far as to say they are the best governments of all, the sad thing is that countries need them only very rarely, therefore we do not normally have governments that know how to govern nationally. On this most delicate issue there have been interminable debates among constitutionalists, political analysts, and other experts, and in all this time precious little has been added to the obvious meaning of these words, namely that a government of national salvation, because it is national and concerned with salvation, is one of national salvation. That is how any simpleton would put it, and he could not do better. The most interesting thing about all of this is that the moment the formation of the aforesaid government was announced, the masses suddenly felt they had been saved, or soon would be, although certain manifestations of innate skepticism are inevitable when the list of ministerial appointments is announced and their photographs appear in the newspapers and on television. At the end of the day they are the same old faces, and why should we have expected otherwise, since we are so

unwilling to put ourselves forward.

We have already mentioned the danger Portugal is facing should she collide with the Azores, and also the secondary consequences, unless they turn out to be direct, threatening Galicia, but the situation of the population of the islands is obviously much more serious. What is an island, after all. An island, in this instance an entire archipelago, is the emergence of a submarine cordillera, and very often just the sharp peaks of rocky needles that miraculously remain upright through thousands of feet of water, an island, in short, is the most fortuitous of events. And now here is something that, although no more than an island, is so enormous and fast-moving that we are in great danger of witnessing, let us hope from a distance, the decapitation of São Miguel followed by that of the islands of Terceira, São Jorge, and Faial, and other islands of the Azores, with widespread loss of life, unless the government of national salvation, which is due to take office tomorrow, comes up very quickly with a way to evacuate thousands and millions of people to regions of reasonable safety, if such places exist. The President of the Republic, even before the new government started to function, has already appealed for international solidarity, thanks to which, as we are reminded, and this is only one of the many examples we could give, famine was once avoided in Africa. The countries of Europe, where, fortunately, a certain lowering of the tone in official references to Portugal and Spain has been evident ever since the serious identity crisis that arose when millions of Europeans resolved to declare themselves Iberian, received the appeal sympathetically and have already inquired how we would like to be helped, although, as usual, everything depends on their ability to meet our needs from whatever surplus they may have at their disposal. As for the United States of America, which should always be named in full, despite having sent word that the plan for a government of national salvation is not to its liking, it has declared that given the circumstances, it is nevertheless willing to evacuate the entire population of the Azores, which is just under two hundred and fifty thousand people, although there is still the problem of where to settle all those people, certainly not in the philanthropic United States, because of the strict immigration laws. The ideal solution, if you want to know, and this is the secret dream cherished by the State Department and the Pentagon, would be for the islands to stop the peninsula in its path, at whatever cost in death and destruction, for it would then be stuck in the middle of the Atlantic, with obvious strategic benefits for world peace and Western Civilization. The people will be told that the American squadrons are under orders to head for the Azores and upon arrival to pick up many thousands of the islanders, the rest will have to wait for the air lift that is currently being organized, Portugal and Spain will have to deal with any local problems, the Spanish less so than we Portuguese, for history and fortune have always treated the former with all too obvious partiality.

Leaving aside the case of Galicia, a case and a region that are purely peripheral, or, to adopt other criteria, appendicular, Spain is protected from the more fatal consequences of the collision, since Portugal essentially acts as a screen or buffer. Problems of some logistic complexity have yet to be resolved, such as that posed by the

important cities of Vigo, Pontevedra, Santiago de Compostela, and La Coruña, but, as for the rest, the people who live in villages are so accustomed to a precarious existence that, almost without waiting for orders, advice, or information, they have started retreating farther inland, peaceful and resigned, using the means of transport already described, and others as well, starting with the most primitive means of all, their own feet.

Portugal's situation, however, is quite different. Note that the entire coast, excepting the southern part of the Algarve, now finds itself in danger of being stoned by the islands of the Azores, the word stoned is used here because the outcome is much the same whether a stone hits us or we hit our head against a stone, it is all a question of speed and inertia, not forgetting that in this case, the head, even though wounded and cracked, will reduce all the stones to splinters. Under the circumstances, with a coastline like this, nearly all of it flat, and with the proximity of the larger cities to the sea, and taking into account the unpreparedness of the Portuguese for the slightest catastrophe, earthquake, flood, forest fire, or drought, it is doubtful whether the government of salvation will know how to do its duty. The best solution, actually, would be deliberately to stir up panic, to rush people into abandoning their homes and force them to seek refuge farther inland. The worst thing of all will be if people start to run out of food, either during the journey or wherever they decide to settle, then there will be so much indignation and frustration that all hell will break loose. We are worried, naturally, but frankly we would be much more worried if we happened to be in Galicia watching the travel preparations of Maria Guavaira and Joaquim Sassa, Joana Carda and José Anaíço, Pedro Orce and the Dog, the relative importance of topics is variable, it depends on the point of view, the humor of the moment, one's personal sympathies, the objectivity of the narrator is a modern invention, we need only reflect that our Lord God didn't want it in His Book.

Two days have passed, the horse, after being near starvation, has been given extra rations of food, as much oats and beans as it likes, Joaquim Sassa even suggested giving it soup laced with wine, and the wagon, now that the holes have been patched with the canvas removed from Deux Chevaux, not only is more comfortable inside but will protect them from the weather as the light showers give way to constant rain, for September is here and we're in a region that is invariably wet. Meanwhile, one can reckon that the peninsula has sailed about a hundred and fifty kilometers since José Anaíço made his precise calculations, So there are still seven hundred and fifty kilometers to go, or fifteen days, for those who prefer more empirical measurements, at the end of which, give or take a minute, the first collision will take place, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, those poor wretches in Alentejo, it's just as well they are used to disasters, they are like the Galicians, their skin is so tough that we would be fully justified in using another word, let us say leather instead of skin and dispense with any further explanation. Here in these northern territories, in the Elysian valleys of Galicia, there is plenty of time for our travelers to get out of harm's way. The wagon is already equipped with mattresses, sheets, and blankets, all the luggage is on board, along with basic cooking utensils, food already prepared for the first few days, omelettes to be precise, and various foodstuffs,

such as white and red beans, rice and potatoes, a barrel of water, a cask of wine, two laying hens, one of them mottled, its neck bald, salt cod, a pitcher of olive oil, a bottle of vinegar, and some salt, for we cannot live without it unless we refuse baptism, pepper and saffron, all the bread they had in the house, a bag of flour, hay, bran and bean pods for the horse, the dog presents no problem, it knows how to look after its own needs, when it accepts any help, it is only to please others. Maria Guavaira, without explanation, but then perhaps she could not have explained even if asked, wove bracelets of the blue thread for them all, and collars for the horse and dog. There is such a quantity of wool there that no one noticed any difference. Besides, one must admit that, even if they'd wanted to take it with them, there's no room for the wool in the wagon, nor was it ever foreseen that there would be, otherwise where would he sleep, that young farmhand who is about to arrive.

On the last night in the house, they were late getting to bed, they sat up talking for hours on end, as if the following morning was to be one of sad farewells, with each of them going his separate way. But staying together like this was one way of keeping up their spirits, it is a well-known fact that canes start to break the moment they are separated from the bundle, everything breakable has already been broken. They spread out the map of the peninsula on the kitchen table, as drawn here it is still incongruously joined to France, and they marked out the first day's itinerary, the inaugural route, taking care to choose the least bumpy roads, in view of the feeble strength of their scraggy horse. But they would have to make a side trip to the north, as far as La Coruña, where Maria Guavaira's demented mother was in a mental institution, daughterly love decrees that she go and rescue her from that pandemonium, for one can imagine the panic in that bedlam, an enormous island bursting through the front door, hurling itself onto the city and sweeping before it the anchored boats, and all those glass-paned windows on the avenue on the waterfront shattering to smithereens at the same time, and the demented inmates thinking, if they are capable of thinking in their lunacy, that the Day of Judgment has finally come. Maria Guavaira will have the honesty to say, I don't know what life is going to be like with my mother in the wagon, even if she isn't really violent, bear with me, it's only until we reach a place of safety. They promised to be patient, they would arrange things as best they could, but as we know very well not even the greatest love can withstand its own madness, so how will it cope with another's madness, in this case that of the insane mother of one of the insane. Just as well that José Anaíço had the fortunate idea of telephoning for information from the first place where it was possible, the health authorities might well have transferred or be about to transfer the inmates to a place of safety, for this is not one of your classical shipwrecks, the first to be rescued here are those who are lost.

The couples finally withdrew to their rooms, they did what people normally do on these occasions, who knows if we will ever come back, so let the vibrations of carnal love between humans remain, that love with no equal among the species, made as it is of sighs, murmurings, impossible words, saliva and sweat, anguish, implored martyrdom,

Not just yet, one is dying of thirst yet refuses the water of freedom, Now, now, my love, and this is what old age and death will steal from us. Pedro Orce, who is old and already bearing the first sign of death, which is solitude, left the house once more to go and take a look at the stone ship, accompanied by the dog, which has every name and none, and in case you are about to say that if the dog accompanied him then Pedro Orce is no longer alone, do not forget the animal's remote origins, the hounds of hell have already seen everything, and because they have such a long life they accompany no one, it is the humans who live for such a short time who accompany dogs. The stone ship stands there, the prow is as tall and pointed as on the first night, Pedro Orce is not surprised, each of us sees the world with the eyes he possesses, and eyes see what they choose to see, eyes create the world's diversity and fabricate its wonders, even if they're only made of stone, its tall prows, even if they're only an illusion.

The morning awoke overcast and drizzly, a familiar figure of speech but one that is incorrect, because mornings do not awaken, it is we who awaken in the mornings, and then, going to the window, see that the sky is covered with low clouds and the rain is drizzling down, tiresome for anyone caught in it, but such is the power of tradition that if there were a ship's log book on this journey of ours, the clerk would inscribe his first paeon as follows, The morning awoke overcast and drizzly, as if the skies were gazing down with disapproval on this adventure, the skies are always invoked in these instances, whether it rains or shines. Deux Chevaux, with one mighty heave, replaced the wagon under the tiled roof, or rather the thatch, for this is not a garage but a lean-to exposed to the elements. Abandoned like this and without its canvas hood, which was used to patch the awning on the wagon, the car already looks like a wreck, objects suffer the same fate as people, when they have outlived their usefulness they are discarded, they are discarded once they no longer serve any purpose. The wagon, on the other hand, despite being ancient, has been rejuvenated after being taken out into the open air, the wagon is restored as the rain washes it down, being put into action has always had this admirable effect, just look at the horse, covered with an oilcloth to protect its back and looking almost like a charger in a joust, caparisoned for battle.

These descriptive interludes should cause no surprise, they're ways of showing how difficult it is to uproot people from places where they have been happy, all the more so since these people are not fleeing in panic, Maria Guavaira is now closing the doors carefully, she sets free the hens that are being left behind, releases the rabbits from their hutch, the pig from the sty, these are animals accustomed to being fed and now left to God's mercy, if not to the wiles of Satan, for the pig is quite capable, should the mood take it, of attacking the other animals. When the younger of the two farmhands arrives he will have to break a window to enter the house, there is no one for leagues around to see him break in. If I break in, there's good reason for doing so, these are his words, and perhaps it is true.

Maria Guavaira climbed into the driver's seat, beside her sat Joaquim Sassa with open umbrella, his duty is to accompany the woman he loves and to protect her from the inclement weather, he cannot do her job for her, because of the five persons here only Maria Guavaira knows how to drive a wagon and horse. Later in the afternoon when the sky clears, she will teach them. Pedro Orce will insist upon being the first to receive some basic training, a thoughtful gesture on his part, so that the two couples may relax under the awning with no unwelcome separations, the driver's seat is spacious enough for three, an ideal solution that allows the other two to be together, even if this only means sitting quietly side by side, in silence. Maria Guavaira shook the reins, the horse, hitched between the shafts of the wagon with no partner at its side, gave the first pull, felt the harness tugging, then the weight of the load, memories came flooding back to its old bones and muscles, and the almost forgotten sound returned, that of the earth being crushed beneath the rotating metal rims of the wheels. You can learn, forget, and learn everything anew, when forced by necessity. For several hundred meters the dog accompanied the wagon in the rain. Then it saw that it could travel in the shelter of that great encumbrance while still on foot. It got under the wagon, fell into step with the horse's rhythm, and that is how we will see the dog for the rest of the journey, come rain or shine, since it has no wish to act as guide or to amuse itself with all those senseless comings and goings that make men and dogs seem so similar.

That day they did not travel far. They had to conserve the horse's strength, all the more so since the bumpy road demanded constant effort, whether pulling the wagon on the way up or slowing down in the descents. There was not a living soul as far as the eye could see. We must have been the last people to leave these parts, Maria Guavaira said, and the clouded sky, the leaden atmosphere, the gloomy landscape were like the dying breath of a world at its end, desolate, expiring after so much sorrow and weariness, so much living and dying, so much resolute life and subsequent death. But new loves travel in this wagon, and new loves, as those who have observed them know, are the greatest force in this world, they fear no misfortune, since by their very nature new loves are themselves the greatest misfortune of all, a sudden flash of lightning, joyful surrender, disquieting confusion. But one must not put too much trust in first impressions, in this almost funereal appearance of this departure, in the dreary rain, from a deserted country it would be better, were we not so discreet, to listen carefully to the conversations between Joana Carda and José Anaíço, between Maria Guavaira and Joaquim Sassa, Pedro Orce's silence is even more discreet, it is almost as if he were not here at all.

The first village they passed through had not been completely abandoned. Some of the elderly had reassured their worried children and relatives that dying for the sake of dying was preferable to dying of hunger or some malignant disease, if a person has been so gloriously chosen to die along with the whole of his world, be he a Wagnerian hero or not, he will accede to that sublime Valhalla to which all great catastrophes lead. Elderly

Galicians and Portuguese, for they belong to the same race, know nothing about such matters, but for some strange reason were capable of saying, I'm staying put, you can leave if you're frightened, and this doesn't mean that they felt all that courageous, simply that at this point in their lives they have finally come to realize that courage and fear are the two pans on the scale that oscillate while the pointer remains still, paralyzed by amazement at the useless invention of emotions and feelings.

As the wagon passed through the village, curiosity, which is probably the last human trait to disappear, brought the elderly out in the road, they waved slowly, and it was as if they were bidding themselves good-bye. Then José Anaíço suggested that it would be wise to seize this opportunity to get some sleep by making use of one of the empty houses, here or in some other village, or in some deserted spot, they were certain to find beds and greater comfort than in the wagon, but Maria Guavaira announced that she would never set foot in a strange house without the owner's consent, some people have such scruples, while others if they see a locked window smash it in and then say, It was all for the best, and whether it is for their own good or that of someone else, there will always be some doubt about the first and ultimate motive. José Anaíço regretted having made the suggestion, not because it was a bad one, but because it was absurd, Maria Guavaira's words were enough to define a code of self-respect, Try to be self-sufficient as far as you can, then confide in someone deserving of your trust, better still if this is someone deserving of you. As matters stand, these five appear to deserve one another, in every sense, so let them stay in the wagon, eat their omelettes, talk about the journey they have made so far and the journey that lies ahead of them. Maria Guavaira will reinforce the practical driving lessons she has given with a little theory, beneath a tree the horse goes on munching its ration of hay, the dog satisfies itself on this occasion with domestic provisions, it prowls around sniffing and startling the nightjars. It has stopped raining. A lantern illuminates the inside of the wagon, anyone passing this way would say, Look, a theater, they are certainly characters but not actors.

When Maria Guavaira finally succeeds in contacting the asylum in La Coruña by telephone tomorrow, she will be told that her mother and the other inmates have already been transferred inland, And how is she, As mad as ever, but this response could refer to anyone. They will continue their journey until the land becomes populated once more. There they will wait.

The Portuguese government of national salvation was formed and got down to business without delay, the Prime Minister himself had appeared on television and uttered a phrase that will certainly go down in history, words like Blood, sweat, and tears, or, Burying the dead and cherishing the living, or, Honor your country for your country is relying on you, or, The sacrifice of our martyrs will sow the seed of future harvests. In this instance, and bearing in mind the peculiar circumstances of the situation, the Prime Minister thought it best simply to say, Sons of Portugal, Daughters of Portugal, salvation lies in retreat.

But to find accommodation deep in the interior for the millions of people who live along the coastal strip was a task of such extreme complexity that no one had the presumption, absurd to say the least, to put forward a national plan of evacuation, comprehensive and capable of integrating local initiatives. With regard, for example, to the city and region of Lisbon, both the initial analysis of the situation and the subsequently adopted measures started from an assumption, both objective and subjective, that could be summed up as follows, The great majority, let us be frank, the overwhelming majority of Lisbon's inhabitants were not born there, and those who were are linked to the others by family ties. The consequences of this fact are broad and decisive, the first being that both the former and the latter will have to betake themselves to their places of origin, where many still have relatives, with some of whom they may have lost touch through various circumstances, let them take advantage of this enforced opportunity to restore harmony to their families, healing old wounds, patching up quarrels caused by contentious inheritances and unfair allocations that resulted in brawling and cursing. The great misfortune that has befallen us will have the merit of bringing hearts together again. The second consequence, which naturally stems from the first, concerns the problem of feeding the people evacuated. For here too, obviating the need for state intervention, the extended family will play a crucial role, speaking quantitatively, one could express this with a macroeconomic updating of the old saying, Three can eat as cheaply as two, the well-known arithmetic of resignation in any family where a child is expected, now one can say with even greater authority, Ten million can eat as cheaply as five, and with a quiet smile, A nation is nothing but a great big family.

Those living on their own, whether bereft of family or merely misanthropic, would be without recourse, but even they would not be excluded automatically from society, one has to have confidence in spontaneous solidarity, in that irrepressible love for one's neighbor that manifests itself on so many occasions, take train journeys, for example, especially in the second-class compartments, when the moment comes to open the basket of provisions, the mother of the family never forgets to offer some food to the other passengers occupying the nearby seats, Would you care for something to eat, if someone accepts she does not mind, even though she may be counting on a polite chorus of refusals, Not for me, thank you, but do enjoy your meal. The most awkward problem will be that of accommodation, it is one thing to offer someone a fish cake and a glass of wine, but it is quite a different matter to have to give up half of the bed we are sleeping

in, but if we can get it into the heads of people that these solitary and abandoned people are reincarnations of Our Lord, as when He wandered the world disguised as a beggar in order to test the generosity of mankind, then someone will always find them a cupboard under the stairs, a corner in the attic, or, in rustic terms, a loft and a bundle of straw. This time God, however He may multiply Himself, will be treated as someone responsible for creating humanity deserves to be treated.

We have spoken of Lisbon in terms differing only quantitatively from those we could have used in speaking of Oporto or Coimbra, or of Setúbal and Aveiro, of Viana or Figueira, without forgetting those innumerable little towns and villages one finds everywhere, although in some cases the perplexing question arises of knowing where those people must go who live in the exact place where they were born, or those who, living somewhere on the coast, were born somewhere else on the coast. After these difficulties had been discussed by the cabinet ministers, their spokesman brought the reply, The government is confident that private initiative will find a solution, perhaps something truly original that will ultimately benefit everyone, to those problems not covered by the national program for the evacuation and resettlement of the population. Having been thus authorized from on high to put aside these individual destinies, we shall simply mention, with regard to Oporto, the case of Joaquim Sassa's employers and colleagues. Suffice it to say that if he, mindful of discipline and professional integrity, had rushed from the Galician mountains at the drop of a hat, abandoning love and friends to fate, he would have found his office closed and a notice on the door with the latest instructions from the management, Employees returning from vacation should report for work at our new premises at Peñafiel, where we hope to continue to satisfy the needs of our esteemed clients. And Joana Carda's cousins, the ones from Ereira, now find themselves in Coimbra, at the home of an abandoned cousin, who was not exactly overjoyed to see them, it stands to reason, he is the one who is aggrieved, after all, he still had a glimmer of hope, he thought that his cousins had gone ahead to prepare the ground for the returning fugitive, but when nothing happened he asked them, And what about Joana, his cousins confessed sorrowfully, We don't know, She was there in our house, but she disappeared even before the commotion began, we heard no more from her, what the cousin knows about the rest of the story she cautiously keeps to herself, for if he was astonished at what little he was told, what would he say if he were to learn everything.

And so the world is in a state of suspense, anxiously awaiting what is or is not about to happen to the western shores of Portugal and Galicia. But we must repeat, tiresome though it may be, that It is an ill wind that bloweth no man good, that at least is the attitude of the governments of Europe, because from one moment to the next, along with the salutary results of the repression mentioned earlier, they are seeing the revolutionary fervor of youth fade and almost disappear, youth whose wise parents are now insisting, Do you see what you were risking if you had insisted on being Iberian, repentant youth now dutifully responding, Yes, Dad. As these scenes of domestic reconciliation and social

appeasement are enacted, the geostationary satellites, each kept in place over a single point on the equator as it circles the earth, transmit photographs and measurements to earth, the first of these naturally showing no variation in the form of the moving object, the second registering with every passing minute a reduction of almost thirty-five meters in the distance that separates the large island from the small ones. In an age like ours with its acceleration of particles, seeing thirty-five meters per minute as a cause for concern would be laughable, unless we remind ourselves that behind these pleasant, sandy beaches, this deeply etched and picturesque coastline, these jagged promontories overlooking the sea, over five hundred and ninety thousand square kilometers of surface area is approaching, and an incalculable, astronomical number of millions of tons, to count only the sierras, cordilleras, and mountains. Let us just try to imagine what the inertia of all the orographic systems of the peninsula now set in motion will amount to, not to mention the Pyrenees, even reduced to half their former size, then we can only admire the courage of these peoples, who unite so many ancestral strains, and applaud their existential fatalism, which, with the experience of centuries, has been condensed into that most notable precept, From among the dead and wounded, someone must get away.

Lisbon is a deserted city. Army patrols are still circulating, with air support provided by helicopters, just as in Spain and France when the breakaway occurred and during the turbulent days that followed. Until they are withdrawn, which is expected to happen twenty-four hours before the anticipated moment of collision, the soldiers' mission is to be vigilant, on the *qui vive*, although they were really wasting their time since all the valuables had already been removed from the banks. But no one would forgive a government for abandoning a city as beautiful as this one, perfect in its proportions and harmony, as will inevitably be said of it once the city has been destroyed. That's why the soldiers are here, serving, in the people's absence, as their symbolic representatives, the guard of honor that would fire the customary salvos, if there should still be time, at that sublime moment when the city sinks into the sea.

Meanwhile, the soldiers fire a few shots at the looters and thieves, they offer advice and guidance to the odd person who refuses to abandon his home or who has finally decided to get out, and when, as happens from time to time, they meet a harmless madman wandering through the streets, one who has had the misfortune to be allowed out of the asylum on the day of the exodus and, not having known about or understood the order to return, has ended up being left to his fate, they tend to adopt either of two courses of action. Certain officers argue that the madman is always more dangerous than the looter, on the grounds that the latter, at least, is as rational as they are. In such a case they don't think twice, but order the troops to open fire. Other officers, less intolerant and, above all, aware of the desperate need to relieve nervous tension in time of war or catastrophe, order their men to have a bit of fun at the idiot's expense before sending him on his way in peace, unless it happens to be a madwoman rather than a madman, for there is always someone, whether in the army or elsewhere, who is

prepared to abuse the elementary and obvious fact that sex, instrumentally speaking, is not in the head.

But now that there is no longer a living soul to be seen in this city, along the avenues, in the roads and squares, in the neighborhoods and public parks, now that faces no longer appear at the windows, now that those canaries not yet dead of hunger and thirst sing in the deathly silence of the house or on the verandah overlooking the empty courtyards, now that the waters of the fountains and springs still sparkle in the sunlight but no hand is dipped, now that the vacant eyes of the statues look around in search of eyes that might be returning their gaze, now that the open gates of cemeteries show that there is no difference between one absence and another, now, finally, that the city is on the brink of that anguished moment when an island will come from the sea and destroy it, now let the wonderful story of the lonely navigator and his miraculous salvation unfold.

For more than twenty years the navigator had been sailing the seven seas. He had inherited or bought his ship, or it had been given to him by some other navigator who had also sailed in it for twenty years, and before him, if the memory does not finally become confused after such a long time, yet another solitary navigator had apparently ploughed the oceans. The history of ships and those who sail them is full of unexpected adventures, with terrible storms and sudden lulls as terrifying as the worst hurricanes, and, to add a touch of romance, it is often said, and songs have been composed on the theme, that a sailor will find a woman waiting for him in every port, a somewhat optimistic picture, which the realities of life and the betrayals of women nearly always contradict. When the lonely navigator disembarks, it is usually to get a fresh supply of water, to buy tobacco or some spare part for the engine, or to stock up on oil and fuel, medicine, sewing needles for the sails, a plastic raincoat to keep out the rain and drizzle, hooks, fishing tackle, the daily newspaper to confirm what he already knows and is not worth knowing, but never, never, never, did the lonely navigator set foot on land in the hope of finding a woman to accompany him on the voyage. If there really is a woman waiting for him in port, it would be foolish to turn her down, but it is usually the woman who makes the first move and decides for how long, the lonely navigator has never said to her, Wait for me, I'll come back one day, that's not a request he would permit himself to make, Wait for me, nor could he guarantee that he will be back on this or any other day, and, on returning, how often he finds the harbor deserted, or should there be a woman waiting there, she is waiting for some other sailor, although it often happens that if he does not turn up, any sailor who appears will do just as well. One has to admit that neither the woman nor the sailors are at fault, solitude is to blame, solitude can sometimes become unbearable, it can even drive the sailor into port and bring the woman to the harbor.

These considerations, however, are spiritual and metaphysical, we could not resist making them at some point, whether before or after relating these extraordinary events, which they do not always help elucidate. To put it simply, let us say that far away from this peninsula, now turned into a floating island, the lonely navigator was sailing with his

sail and engine, his radio and binoculars, and with the infinite patience of someone who one day decided to divide his life into one part sky and one part sea. The wind suddenly stopped blowing and he lowered the sail, the breeze suddenly dropped, and the great billows carrying the ship gradually start losing their force, the surge dwindles, within an hour the sea will be smooth and calm, we find it incredible that this chasm of water, thousands of meters deep, should be able to maintain its balance, falling neither to one side nor to the other, the observation will seem foolish only to those who believe everything in the world can be explained by the simple fact that it is as it is, something one obviously accepts but which is not enough. The engine is running, chug-chug chug-chug, nothing but water as far as the eye can see, it corresponds sparkle for sparkle to the classical image of the mirror, and the navigator, despite many years' mastery of a strict routine of sleep and vigil, suddenly closes his eyes, drugged by the heat of the sun, and falls fast asleep, he woke up shaken by what seemed to be a mighty blast, thinking, perhaps, that he had slept for several minutes or hours but it was only seconds, in that fleeting moment of sleep he dreamt that he had collided with the corpse of an animal, with a whale. Startled, his heart beating furiously, he tried to discover where the sound was coming from, but did not immediately notice that the engine had stopped. The sudden silence had woken him, but in order to awaken more naturally, his body had invented a sea monster, a collision, thunder. Broken-down engines, on land and sea, are much more common, we know of one that is beyond repair, it has a broken heart and has been dumped under a lean-to and exposed to the elements, up north where it is gathering rust. But this navigator, unlike those motorists, is experienced and knowledgeable, he stocked up on spare parts the last time he touched land and woman, he intends to dismantle the engine as far as possible and to examine the mechanism. Such a waste of effort. The damage is right down in the piston rod, the horsepower of this engine is mortally wounded.

Despair, as we all know, is human, there is no evidence in natural history that animals despair. Yet man, inseparable from despair, has become accustomed to living with it, endures it to its extremes, and it will take more than an engine's breaking down in mid-ocean for the sailor to start tearing out his hair, to implore the heavens or rail at them with curses and abuse, one gesture being as useless as another, the solution is to wait, whoever carried off the wind will bring it back. But the wind that departed did not return. The hours passed, serene night came, another day dawned, and the sea remains motionless, a fine thread of wool suspended here would drop like a plumb line, there isn't the tiniest ripple on the surface of the water, it is a stone ship on a stone slab. The navigator is not greatly concerned, this is not the first lull he has experienced, but now the radio has stopped working for some inexplicable reason, all one can hear is a buzzing sound, the carrier wave, if such a thing still exists, which is carrying nothing but silence, as if beyond this circle of stagnant water the world has become silent in order to witness, unseen, the navigator's mounting agitation, his madness, perhaps his death at sea. There is no lack of provisions or drinking water, but the hours are passing, each one increasingly prolonged, silence tightens its grip on the ship like the coils of a slippery cobra, from time

to time the navigator taps the gunwale with a grappling iron, he wants to hear a sound unlike that of his own thick blood coursing through his veins, or the beating of his heart, which he sometimes forgets, and then he awakens after having thought he was already awake, for he was dreaming that he was dead. The sail is raised against the sun, but the still air retains the heat, the lonely navigator is sunburnt, his lips are cracked. The day passed, and the following day is no different. The navigator finds refuge in sleep, he has descended into the tiny cabin, now furnace-like, there is only one bunk there, narrow, proof that this navigator is truly alone, and he is stark naked, the sweat pouring off him at first, then, his skin dry, covered with goose pimples, he struggles with his dreams, a row of very tall trees swaying beneath a wind that pushes the leaves back and forth, then dies away before returning to attack them once more, on and on. The navigator gets up to drink some water and the water is finished. He goes back to sleep, the trees no longer stir, but a seagull has come to settle on the mast.

From the horizon there advances an enormous dark mass. As it gets closer, houses become visible along its shores, lights resembling white fingers outstretched in midair, a thin line of spume, and beyond the wide mouth of a river a great city built on hills, a red bridge joining the river's banks, and from this distance it looks like an etching in delicate lines. The navigator goes on sleeping, he has sunk into a state of extreme torpor, but the dream suddenly came back, a sudden breeze shook the branches of the trees, the ship swayed in the choppy waters of the channel, and, swallowed up by the river, it ran aground, rescued from the sea, still immobile, while the earth is still moving. The lonely navigator could feel the swaying in his bones and muscles, he opened his eyes and thought, The wind, the wind's come back, and, almost without strength, he slipped down from his bunk, dragged himself on deck, he felt as if he were dying with each moment and with each moment being reborn, the light of the sun hurt his eyes, but it was the light of earth, bringing whatever it could extract from the green foliage of the trees, from the obscure depths of the countryside, from the soft colors of the houses. He was safe, and at first he did not know how, the air was still, the breath of wind had been an illusion. It took him some time to understand that a whole island had saved him, the former peninsula, which had sailed to meet him and opened the river's arms to receive him. This all seemed so unlikely that the lonely navigator himself, who so many years ago had heard rumors about the geological rupture, while knowing that he was in the course of the terrestrial ship, had never imagined that he might be saved in this way, for the first time ever in the history of shipwrecks and losses at sea. But on land there was no one to be seen, on the decks of the anchored and moored ships no face appeared, the silence was once more that of the cruel sea, This is Lisbon, the navigator murmured, but where are the people. The windows of the city are gleaming, cars and buses can be seen at a standstill, a great square surrounded by arcades, a triumphal arch at the far end with figures in stone and crowns in bronze, they must be bronze because of the colors. The lonely navigator, who is familiar with the Azores and knows how to find them whether on the map or at sea, then remembered that the islands are on a collision course, what saved him will destroy them, what is about to destroy them will destroy him too, unless

he gets away from these parts without delay. With no wind and a broken engine, he cannot go upriver, the only way out is to inflate the rubber dinghy, to lower the anchor to secure the boat, a useless gesture, to row ashore. Strength always returns with one's hopes.

The lonely navigator had dressed to go ashore, shorts, singlet, a cap on his head, sandals, everything a dazzling white, this is a point of honor with sailors. He hauled the rubber dinghy up the harbor steps, stood there watching for several seconds, waiting too to get his strength back, but above all to allow time for someone to appear from the shadows of the arcades, for the cars and buses suddenly to start moving again, and for the square to fill up with people, who knows, perhaps some woman might approach smiling, gently swaying her hips as she walks, without overdoing it, simply that insinuating appeal which affects a man's sight and speech, mainly because he has just come ashore. But the desert remained a desert. The navigator finally understood what had to be understood. Everyone had left because of the imminent collision with the islands. He looked back, saw his boat in the middle of the river, he felt certain he was seeing it for the last time, not even a battleship could withstand the tremendous head-on collision, so what chance would there be for a sailing nutshell abandoned by its owner. The navigator crossed the square, his legs still stiff from lack of exercise, he looks like a scarecrow with his tanned skin, his hair sprouting from his cap, his sandals hanging off his feet. He looks up as he approaches the great arch, reads the Latin inscription *Virtutibus Majorum ut sit omnibus documento P.P.D.*, he had never studied Latin, but vaguely understands that the monument is dedicated to the virtuous ancestors of the people who live here, and he proceeds along a narrow street with identical buildings on either side until he comes out into another square, smaller, with a Greek or Roman building at one end, and in the middle of the square there are two fountains with naked women cast in iron, the water is playing, and suddenly he feels very thirsty, feels the urge to plunge his mouth into that water and his body into those naked forms. He walks with outstretched arms, as if delirious, sleepwalking or in a trance, he mutters as he goes, has no idea what he is saying, only knows what he wants.

The patrol appears on the corner, five soldiers under the command of a second lieutenant. They spotted the madman twitching in his madness, they heard him raving, there was no need to give the order. The lonely navigator lay stretched out on the ground, there is still some way to go before reaching the water. The women, as we know, are made of iron.

These were also the days of the third exodus. The first, which was fully reported at the appropriate moment, was of the foreign tourists who fled in terror from what then, how time passes, still seemed no more than the possible danger that a crack would cleave the Pyrenees as far down as sea level, and what a pity this unexpected misfortune didn't stop there, just imagine how proud Europe would have felt to find itself endowed, as it were, with a geological canyon compared to which the one in Arizona would look no bigger than a tiny ditch. The second exodus was that of the rich and powerful when the fracture became irreparable, when the peninsula's course, although still slow, seemed to be gathering speed, showing, in a manner we believe definitive, the precariousness of established structures and ideas. It then became clear how the social edifice, with all its complexity, is no more than a house of cards, solid only in appearance, we need only shake the table on which it stands and the house collapses. And the table in this instance, and for the first time in history, had moved by itself, dear God, let's save our precious possessions and precious lives and get away from here.

The third exodus, the one we were discussing before summing up the first two, had in a sense two components or parts, which some believe should be referred to, in view of their essential differences, as the third and the fourth exodus. Tomorrow, that is to say in the distant future, those historians who will devote themselves to the study of events that have changed the face of the earth, in both an allegorical and a literal sense, will decide, let us hope with the reflection and impartiality of whoever dispassionately observes the phenomena of the past, whether or not this division should be made, as some people now maintain. The latter claim that it betrays a serious lack of critical judgment or sense of proportion to equate the retreat of millions of people from the coastal regions inland and the flight of a few thousand people abroad, simply an account of the undeniable coincidence in the timing of the one exodus and the other. And although we have no intention of taking sides in the debate or of expressing any opinions, it costs us nothing to recognize that while the two groups of people might have experienced the same fear, their methods and means of remedying this fear were quite different.

In the first case, they were nearly all people with few possessions, who, finding themselves forced to move elsewhere by the authorities and the harsh realities of their situation, hoped at most to save their lives by trusting in some miracle, luck, chance, fate, good fortune, prayer, faith in the Holy Ghost, by wearing an amulet around their neck, the Star of David, or a holy medal, and by holding onto all those other traditional beliefs and customs too numerous to mention here but which can be summed up in that other well-known saying, My hour has not yet come. In the second case, the refugees were people with assets and wealth at their disposal who had held out to see how things would go, but now there was no longer any doubt, the planes operating the new shuttle service were full, the mail boats, cargo vessels, and other smaller craft carried their maximum load. Let us draw a discreet veil over certain unedifying episodes, bribes, intrigues, and treacherous betrayals were common, even crimes, and some people were

murdered for a ticket, it was a sorry sight, but, the world being what it is, we would be ingenuous to expect anything better. In short, all things considered, most likely the history books will record a fourfold rather than a triple exodus, not for the sake of precise classification, but lest we should confuse the wheat with the chaff.

But they will nevertheless exclude anything in the summary analysis given here that might reflect, however involuntarily, a certain mental attitude tainted by Manichaeism, a tendency, that is, to give an idealized picture of the lower orders and a superficial condemnation of the upper classes, who are readily but not always correctly labeled as being rich and powerful, which naturally provokes hatred and dislike, along with base feelings of envy, the source of all evils. Of course the poor exist, and their presence cannot be ignored, but we must not overrate them. Especially since they are not and never have been models of patience, of resignation, of the self-imposed discipline needed in this crisis. Anyone remote from these events and locations, who imagined that the Iberian refugees who crowded into houses, shelters, hospitals, barracks, warehouses, or whatever army tents or huts it was possible to requisition, along with those relinquished and set up by the military, and the even greater number of people without accommodation, huddled here and there under bridges and trees, inside abandoned cars, or even out in the open, anyone who imagined that these angels were visited by God may know a great deal about angels and God, but he knows little about mankind.

Without fear of exaggeration one can say that the inferno, in mythical times, distributed uniformly throughout the entire peninsula, as we recalled in the opening of this narrative, is now concentrated into a vertical strip about thirty kilometers wide, extending from northern Galicia to the Algarve, along with the uninhabited lands to the west, which few people regard as effective buffers. For example, if the Spanish government had no need to leave Madrid, so comfortably positioned inland, anyone wishing to locate the Portuguese government will now have to travel to Elvas, which is the city farthest from the coast, if you draw a straight line, more or less latitudinal, from Lisbon. Among the starving refugees, exhausted from lack of sleep, with old people dying, children screaming and crying, the men without work, the women supporting the entire family, quarrels inevitably break out, insults are exchanged, there is disorder and violence, theft of clothes and food, people are kicked out and assaulted, and also, would you believe, there is so much loose living that these settlements are transformed into mass brothels, really shameful, an appalling example for the older children who may still know their father and mother but have no idea what children they themselves will engender, or where or by whom. This aspect of the situation is less important, clearly, than it appears at first sight, consider how little attention today's historians give to periods that, for one reason or another were somewhat similar, especially the present one. When all is said and done, perhaps in moments of crisis indulging the flesh is what best serves the deeper interests of humanity and of human beings, both habitually harassed as they are by morality. But since this is a controversial hypothesis, let's move on, the mere allusion is enough to satisfy the scruples of the impartial observer.

Amid this tumult and confusion, however, there exists an oasis of peace, these seven creatures who live in the most perfect harmony, two women, three men, a dog, and a horse, although the last of these may have to swallow several reasons for complaint regarding the distribution of labor, having to pull on its own a loaded wagon, but even this will be remedied one day. The two women and two of the men constitute two happy couples, only the third man is without a partner, perhaps he does not mind this privation given his age, so far, at least, there have been none of those unmistakable signs of edginess that betray an excess of blood in the glands. As for the dog, whether it seeks and finds other pleasures when it goes in search of food, we cannot say, for even though the dog is in this respect the greatest exhibitionist among animals, certain species are discreet. Let us hope no one takes it into his head to follow this one, certain unwholesome prying must be curbed in the name of hygiene. Perhaps these considerations about relationships and forms of behavior would be less imbued with sexuality were not the newly formed couples, whether out of intense passion or because their love is so new, so exuberantly demonstrative, which, let it be said before anyone thinks evil, does not mean that they kiss and embrace each other without regard for their surroundings, they are restrained to this extent, what they cannot conceal is the aura that surrounds them or that they exude. Only a few days ago Pedro Orce saw the glow of the brazier from the summit of the mountain. Here on the edge of the forest where they now live, sufficiently remote from the settlements to imagine themselves alone, but sufficiently close to ensure supplies of provisions, they might believe in happiness were they not living, for who knows how much longer, under the threat of a cataclysm. But they are taking advantage of each moment, they would claim, as the poet exhorted, *Carpe diem*, the merit of these old Latin quotations is that they contain a world of secondary and tertiary meanings, not to mention the latent and undefined ones, so that when one starts to translate, *Enjoy life*, for example, it sounds feeble and insipid, not worth the effort. Therefore we insist on saying *Carpe diem*, and we feel like gods who have decided not to be eternal in order to be able, in the precise meaning of the expression, to take advantage of their time.

What time still remains, one cannot say. Radios and television sets are going twenty-four hours a day, there are no longer news bulletins at certain hours, programs are interrupted every second to read the latest news flash, and there are endless announcements, *We're now at a distance of three hundred and fifty kilometers*, *We're now at a distance of three hundred and twenty-seven*, *We're able to report that the islands of Santa Maria and São Miguel have been completely evacuated*, the evacuation of the remaining islands has been stepped up, *We're at a distance of three hundred and twelve kilometers*, A small team of American scientists has remained at the base in Lajes, they will leave, by plane of course, only at the last minute, in order to witness the collision from the air, let's use the word collision without any adjectives. A request from the government of Portugal that a Portuguese be included as an observer in the aforesaid team went unheeded. There are three hundred and four kilometers to go, those responsible for the recreational and cultural programs on television and radio discuss

what should be broadcast, some insist on classical music given the seriousness of the situation, others argue that classical music is depressing, that it would be preferable to broadcast some light music, French chansons of the thirties, Portuguese fados, Spanish malagueñas and other popular airs from Seville, lots of rock and folk music, the top tunes from the Eurovision song contest. But surely such cheerful music will shock and upset people who are living through this terrible crisis, retort the classical buffs. It would be worse if we were to play funeral marches, the advocates of lighter music allege, and the argument raged on with neither side giving an inch, two hundred and eighty-five kilometers to go.

Joaquim Sassa's radio has been used sparingly, he has some batteries in reserve, but is reluctant to use them, No one can tell what tomorrow will bring, a popular saying that tells us a good deal, here we could almost bet on what tomorrow will bring, death and destruction, millions of corpses, half the peninsula going under. But those moments when the radio is switched off soon become unbearable, time grows tangible, viscous, it grips your throat, you sense that you are about to feel the impact at any moment although we are still far away, the tension is intolerable, Joaquim Sassa switches on the radio, E uma casa portuguesa com certeza é com certeza uma casa portuguesa, the delightful voice sings of life, Dónde vas de mantón de Manila dónde vas con el rojo clavel, the same delight, the same life, but in another language, then they all sigh with relief, they're twenty kilometers closer to death, but what does that matter, death has yet to be announced, the Azores are not in sight, Sing, girl, sing.

Seated in the shade of a tree, they have just finished eating, and they could pass for nomads in their habits and dress, they have changed so much in so short a time, the result of having no comforts, their clothes are creased and stained, the men are unshaven, but let us not reproach them or the women, whose lips are now their natural color, turned pale from anxiety, perhaps when their last hour comes they will put on some lipstick and prepare themselves to receive death with dignity, ebbing life does not warrant so much effort. Maria Guavaira is leaning against Joaquim Sassa's shoulder, she grips him by the hand. Several tears appear among her eyelashes, but not because she is afraid of what is about to happen. These are tears of love that come springing to her eyes. And José Anaíço cradles Joana Carda in his arms, kisses her on the forehead, then her eyelids close, If only I could take this moment with me where I am going, I would ask no more, only one moment, not this moment as I am speaking, but that previous one, and the one before that, now almost vanished, I failed to grasp it as I experienced it and now it is too late. Pedro Orce has got up and walks away, his white hair gleams in the sun, he too carries the aura of cold light. The dog has followed him with lowered head. But they won't go very far. They now keep together as much as possible, neither of them wishes to be alone when the disaster occurs. The horse, as the experts claim, is the only animal that does not know it is going to die, it feels contented despite the great trials it has endured on its long journey. It munches the hay, shakes off the gadflies with a shudder, sweeps its grizzled flank with the long hair of its tail, probably unaware that it

had been about to end its days in the semidarkness of a dilapidated stable, among cobwebs and dung, its infected lungs gasping for breath, how true that the misfortune of some is the fortune of others, however short-lived.

The day passed, another came and went, one hundred and fifty kilometers to go. You can sense the terror growing like a black shadow, the panic becomes a flood seeking out weak spots in the dike, corroding the stone foundations until they finally give way, and those who so far had remained more or less peacefully in their camps, began to move farther eastward, now realizing that they were far too close to the coast, only some seventy or eighty kilometers away, they could visualize the islands tearing through the land as far as where they were, and the sea inundating everything, the mountain on the island of Pico like some ghostly presence, Who knows, perhaps with the impact the volcano will become active once more, But there is no volcano on Pico, but no one listened to this or any other explanation. Naturally, the roads became congested, each crossroads a knot impossible to untie, at one point one could neither advance nor retreat, people were trapped like mice, but scarcely any were willing to give up the few possessions they were carrying in order to seek salvation by taking to the fields. In order to arrest this influx by its own good example, the Portuguese government abandoned the security of Elvas and installed itself at Evora, while the Spanish government settled more conveniently at León, whence they issued communiqués countersigned respectively by the President of our Republic and by the Sovereign of their Realm, for we should have mentioned that our President and their King have accompanied their respective Prime Ministers at every stage of the crisis, even offering to go and confront the hysterical mobs with extended arms, exposing themselves to some act of violence or aggression, and to address them once more, Friends, Romans, countrymen, and so on and so forth. No Your Majesty, no Mr. President, crowds in a state of panic, and ignorant crowds to boot, would not understand, people have to be extremely cultured and civilized to meet a king or a president with extended arms in the middle of the road and stop to ask him what he wants. But there was also one who in an outburst of anger turned around and shouted, Better to be dead than to survive so briefly, let's put an end to this once and for all, and they stayed there waiting, contemplating the serene mountains in the distance, the rosy morning, the deep blue of the hot afternoon, the starry night, perhaps the last, but when my hour comes, I won't look away.

Then it happened. About seventy-five kilometers away from the easternmost point of the island of Santa Maria, with no warning, no one felt the slightest shock, the peninsula began to sail in a northerly direction. For several minutes, while observers in all the geographical institutes of Europe and America analyzed in disbelief the satellite data and hesitated about making them public, millions of terrified people in Portugal and Spain had already been saved from death, without knowing it. During those minutes, tragically, some began quarreling in the hope of being killed, and perhaps had their wish granted, and some, frightened out of their wits, committed suicide. Some implored pardon for their sins, while others, thinking there was no time for repentance, inquired of God and the

Devil what new sins they might still commit. There were women who gave birth hoping that their offspring would be stillborn, and others who knew they were carrying children they would never deliver. And when a universal cry echoed throughout the world, They're saved, they're saved, some would not believe it and went on lamenting the approaching end until there could be no more doubt, governments swore to it in every tone, the experts started giving explanations, the reason advanced for their salvation was a mighty current, artificially produced, and a great debate ensued as to whether the Americans or the Russians were responsible.

Rejoicing spread like wildfire, filling the entire peninsula with laughter and dancing, especially on that great strip of land where millions of displaced persons had gathered. Fortunately, this occurred at midday, when those who still had some provisions were about to eat, the confusion and chaos would otherwise have been dreadful, the authorities maintained, but they were soon to regret this hasty judgment, for no sooner had the news been confirmed than thousands and thousands of people began the long trek home. It became necessary to circulate the cruel hypothesis that the peninsula might revert to its original route, now a little farther north. Not everyone believed the news, especially since another worry was quietly creeping into people's thoughts, in their mind's eye they could see abandoned cities, towns and villages, their own native city, town, or village, the street and the house where they once lived, their home ransacked by opportunists who didn't believe in old wives' tales or who accepted the hypothetical risk with the naturalness of the acrobat who must attempt a triple somersault night after night, these visions were not the fantasies of a sick mind, for throughout all those deserted places thieves, robbers, and scoundrels of every age were warily mustering, ready to pounce, and passing the word along. The first to arrive helps himself and anyone who comes later must look for another house to loot, don't start bickering, there's plenty for everyone. But let no one, say we, be tempted to break into Maria Guavaira's house, it's the worst thing anyone could do, for the man inside is armed with a shotgun, and he will open the door only to the mistress of the house to assure her, I've guarded your property, now marry me, unless, dazed and exhausted after so many nights of vigil, he might have fallen asleep on a pile of blue wool, and thus have wasted the best years of his manhood.

Exercising prudence, the inhabitants of the Azores still had not returned to their homes on the islands, let us try to put ourselves in their shoes, it is true that any immediate danger has passed, yet it continues to lurk there, this is like a new version of the tale about the iron pan and the clay pan, with the important difference that the clay in this case was only good for making the mugs typical of these islands, there was not enough to make the pan of a continent, which, if it ever existed, sank to the bottom and was called Atlantis. We would be very foolish were we not to learn from experience, or our memory of it, however false both may be. But the sentiment that causes the five people under that tree to linger is not prudence, now that everyone has set off in the direction of the coasts of Portugal and Galicia, in triumphant reentry, as it were, bearing

branches and flowers, with bands playing, fireworks exploding, bells pealing as they pass in procession, families return to their homes, perhaps there are things missing, but they have brought life with them and that is the most important thing, life, the table where we eat, the bed where we sleep and where this night, out of sheer happiness, we will make the most wonderful love in the world. Underneath the tree, their wagon waiting and the horse's strength restored, the five who have remained behind look at the dog as if expecting some sign or mandate, You who came from we know not where, you who turned up one day so weary from your travels that you collapsed into my arms, you who passed and stared as I was showing the men where I drew a line on the ground with a stick, you who waited for us beside the car we parked beneath the lean-to, you who had a blue thread hanging from your mouth, you who guided us along so many roads and paths, you who accompanied me to the sea where we found the stone ship, tell us by some movement, gesture, or sign, since you cannot even bark, tell us where we must go, for none of us wishes to return to the house in the valley, for all of us it would mean the beginning of that final return, the man who wants to marry me would say, Marry me, the office manager where I work would tell me, I need that invoice, my husband would say to me, So you've finally come back to me, the father of my worst pupil would inform me, Schoolmaster, I've given him a few paddlings, the notary's wife who complains of headaches would plead, Give me some pills for my headache, so do tell us where we should go, arise and walk and that will be our destination.

The dog, who was lying under the wagon, lifted its head as if hearing voices, jumped up briskly, and ran to Pedro Orce, who held its head between his hands, Would you like to come with me, he asked the dog, and these were the only words he spoke. Maria Guavaira owns the horse and wagon and she still has not made up her mind, but Joana Carda looked at José Anaíço, who read her thoughts, Whatever you may decide, I'm not going back. Then Maria Guavaira said in a loud, clear voice, There's a time for staying and a time for leaving, the time hasn't yet come to return, and Joaquim Sassa asked, Where do we want to go. Nowhere in particular. Let's go to the other side of the peninsula, Pedro Orce suggested, I've never seen the Pyrenees. Nor are you likely to see them now, half of them were left behind in Europe, José Anaíço reminded them. What difference does it make, you can recognize a giant by looking at his finger. They were delighted with this decision, but Maria Guavaira warned them, The horse has carried us all this way on its own, but it can't do the rest of the journey by itself, the horse has seen better days and the wagon should really be drawn by a pair, with only one horse, it's lopsided. So what are we going to do, asked Joaquim Sassa. We'll need to find another horse, It can't be easy to find horses around here, besides a good horse costs a lot of money, and we probably can't afford it.

The problem appears to be insoluble, but here we will see further evidence of how adaptable the human spirit can be. Only a few days ago, Maria Guavaira flatly rejected the idea of spending the night in an abandoned house, her words still echo in the ears of those with a good memory, yet such is the force of circumstance that Maria Guavaira is

about to turn her back on a lifetime of moral integrity, let us hope no one will taunt her with this lapse from grace, We won't buy it, we'll steal it, those were her very words, and now Joana Carda, concerned not to offend their sensibilities, tries indirectly to ease their conscience, I've never stolen anything in my life. There was an awkward silence, people need time to adapt to new codes of morality, here the first move was made by Pedro Orce, contrary to the custom of the elderly, such staunch believers in traditional values, We've never stolen anything in our life, it's always in the life of others, this could be the maxim of a cynical philosopher, but is merely a statement of fact, said Pedro Orce with a smile, but the words had been spoken. All right, we've made up our minds, let's steal a horse, but how do we go about it, let's toss a coin to see who should go on this expedition. I'd better go, said Maria Guavaira, you don't know anything about horses, and you'd never be able to get it here. I'll come with you, said Joaquim Sassa, but perhaps we should take the dog with us to protect us from any danger we might encounter.

That night the three of them left the encampment and set out for the east, a region that had remained relatively tranquil and where there was greater likelihood of finding what they wanted. Before departing, Joaquim Sassa said, We don't know how long we'll be, wait for us here. Come to think of it, perhaps we should have brought a bigger car with room for everyone and the luggage and the dog too, commented José Anaíço. There are no such cars, what we need is a truck, besides don't forget that we didn't find a single vehicle that was running and fit to put on the road, and now that we have a horse we can't just abandon it somewhere. In their time the musketeers declared, One for all and all for one, they were four, now they are five, without counting the dog. Or the horse.

Maria Guavaira and Joaquim Sassa set off, the animal trotting in front, sniffing out the winds and investigating the shadows. The expedition is faintly absurd, chasing off in search of a horse. A mule would do just as well, Maria Guavaira had said, without knowing if such an animal existed within five leagues, perhaps it would be easier to find an ox, but you don't hitch an ox and a horse to a wagon together, or a donkey, with such a heavy load it would be like trying to make something strong from combined weakness, something that happens only in parables, like the one about the rushes we quoted earlier. They walked and walked, left the road whenever they glimpsed any dwellings or farmhouses amid the fields, if there were any horses around that is where they would find them, for what we need are beasts of burden rather than horses bred for show or for bullfighting. The moment they approached dogs started barking, but they were soon quiet again, we will never know what secret powers the Dog possessed to make even the loudest and most excitable watchdog suddenly fall silent, and not because some wild beast from the underworld had savaged it, in that case there would have been signs of a struggle, cries of pain, the silence is not sepulchral simply because no one is dying.

By the early hours of morning, Maria Guavaira and Joaquim Sassa could scarcely lift their feet, they were so tired, he had said, We must go on searching, and they searched so hard that they found rather than discovered what they were looking for, and it came about in the simplest way imaginable. Dawn was already breaking, the night sky to the

east had turned a deep blue, when they heard a muffled neigh coming from a hollow by the road, a sweet miracle, I'm here, they went to look and found a tethered horse, it was not the Good Lord who had put it there to enhance His catalog of miracles, but the beast's rightful owner, whom the blacksmith had instructed, Put this ointment on the sore and leave the horse out to catch the morning dew, do this for three consecutive nights starting on a Friday, and if the horse isn't cured, I'll give you back your money and stake my reputation. A fettered horse, unless one has a sharp knife to cut the rope, cannot be carried off on one's shoulders, but Maria Guavaira knows how to deal with animals, and despite the beast's nervousness at being handled by a stranger, she succeeded in coaxing it into the shadows of the trees, where at the risk of being trampled or receiving a mighty kick, she managed to untie the awkward knot. Usually in such cases one makes a simple knot, one easily undone, but perhaps that's a skill people do not practice in these parts. Fortunately, the horse also realized that they were trying to free it, and freedom is always welcome, even when we're facing the unknown.

They returned by roads well off the beaten track, trusting more than ever in the dog's ability to foresee anything suspicious coming in their direction, and in its effectiveness in dealing with any inopportune visitors. When day broke, already remote from the scene of the crime, they began meeting people in the fields and along the roads, but no one appeared to recognize the horse, and even if they did, perhaps they would not have given it another thought, for they made such a lovely and innocent picture, the damsel sidesaddle on the palfrey, to put it in medieval terms, and the knight-errant walking ahead, laboriously leading the horse by the reins they had fortunately remembered to bring. The mastiff completed this heavenly vision, which some mistook for a dream, others as a sign of the change of life, the former and latter both unaware that all they are seeing go past are two wicked horse thieves, how true that appearances can deceive, what is generally overlooked is that they can deceive twice, perhaps a reason for trusting first impressions and inquiring no further. That's why some will be claiming before the day is out, Why, this morning I saw Amadís and Oriana, she on horseback, he on foot, and they had a dog with them, It can't have been Amadís and Oriana, for they were never seen with a dog, Well, I saw it, and that's a fact, one witness is as good as a hundred, But in the lives, loves, and adventures of those two, no dog is ever mentioned, Then let their stories be rewritten, and as often as may prove necessary until nothing has been left out. Nothing, Well, almost nothing.

They reached the encampment early that evening and were received with much hugging and laughter. The gray horse looked askance at the sorrel, which was gasping for breath. It has a sore on its back that is almost dry, they've obviously rubbed on some ointment and left it outdoors for three nights, starting on a Friday, an infallible remedy.

As people return to their homes and life gradually returns, as one is wont to say, to normal, the arguments rage on among the scientists about possible causes for the peninsula's deviation at the very last minute, just when it appeared that nothing could avert the catastrophe. The theories vary, nearly all of them irreconcilable, thus contributing mathematically to the irreducibility of experts locked in controversy.

A first theory considers the peninsula's new course to be entirely random, forming as it does a perfect right angle with the previous one, and thus rules out any explanation that might assume, shall we say, an act of volition. Besides, to whom could such an act be attributed, since no one is likely to suggest that the incessant swarming, on an enormous mass of stone and earth, of tens of millions of people could somehow be added or multiplied to engender an intelligence or power capable of acting with a precision one can only describe as diabolical.

Another theory maintains that the peninsula's advance or, to put it more accurately, its progression, and we shall soon see why this is the better word, will result time and time again in another right angle, which ipso facto allows for the amazing possibility that the peninsula will return to its point of departure after a succession or, we repeat, progression of displacements, which after a certain point could be less than a millimeter in length, until it finally settles in precisely the right place.

The third theory advances the existence on the peninsula of a magnetic field, or some other force, capable on approaching an alien body of sufficient volume of unleashing an aversive process of a rather special nature, since as we have seen the aversive motion does not reverse the direction of the original movement, but is instead essentially a skid, to borrow a mundane example from the familiar realm of the automobile, but what determines whether this should be to the north or to the south is something the experts forgot to consider.

Finally, a fourth and more heterodox theory has recourse to what it terms metapsychic powers, affirming that the peninsula was diverted from collision by a vector formed in less than a tenth of a second from the concentration of the stricken population's sheer terror and the desire for salvation. This explanation gained wide popularity mainly because its author, in his efforts to make the theory accessible to simple minds, borrowed an example from physics and demonstrated how the incidence of solar rays on a biconvex lens causes those rays to converge on a focal point, resulting, as one would expect, in heat, combustion, and fire, the intensifying effect of the lens having an obvious parallel in the power of the collective mind, through which so many chaotic individual thoughts are stimulated, concentrated, and worked up in a moment of crisis to a state of paroxysm. The incongruity of this explanation troubled no one, on the contrary, many people began proposing that all problems concerning man's psyche, spirit, soul, will, and creation should henceforth be explained in physical terms, even if only by simple analogy or dubious inference. The theory is even now being studied and developed with a view to applying its fundamental principles to daily life, in particular to the functioning of

political parties and competitive sports, to cite two familiar examples.

Some skeptics argue, however, that the real test of all these hypotheses, since that is all they are, will be seen in a few weeks' time, if the peninsula continues to follow its present route, which will cause it to stall between Greenland and Iceland, inhospitable territories for Portuguese and Spaniards accustomed to the mildness and languor of a temperate climate that is generally warm for the greater part of the year. If this were to happen, the only logical conclusion to be drawn from all we have witnessed so far is that the journey was not worthwhile. Which, on the other hand, would, or will, be much too simple a way of confronting the problem, for no journey is but one journey, each journey comprises a number of journeys, and if one of them seems so meaningless that we have no hesitation in saying it was not worthwhile, our common sense, were it not so often clouded by prejudice and idleness, would tell us that we should verify whether the journeys within that journey were not of sufficient value to have justified all the trials and tribulations. Bearing all this in mind, we will refrain from making any final judgments or assumptions. Journeys succeed each other and accumulate like generations, between the grandson you were and the grandfather you will be, what father will you have been. Therefore a journey, however futile, is necessary.

José Anaígo studied the details of the journey they are about to make, along paths that will not be direct if they are to avoid the great slopes of the Cantabrian mountains, and he explained what he had worked out, From Palas de Rei, which is about where we are now, to Valladolid must be about four hundred kilometers, and from there to the frontier, forgive me, but on this map I still have a frontier, there are another four hundred, making eight hundred kilometers altogether, a long journey at a horse's pace, Not a horse's pace, that's a thing of the past, and it won't be so much a pace as a trot, Maria Guavaira corrected him. Then Joaquim Sassa spoke, With two horses pulling, he broke off in mid-sentence with the expression of someone on whom a light is dawning, and then bursts out laughing, Isn't it ironic, we've abandoned Deux Chevaux and now we're traveling with two horses, I suggest we call the wagon Deux Chevaux, de facto et de jure, not that I've ever studied Latin, but I've heard others use the expression, as one of my grandfathers used to say who also didn't know the language of his ancestors. The Deux Chevaux are munching hay behind the wagon, the sore on the sorrel's back is now completely healed, and the gray horse, if not exactly rejuvenated, looks fitter and stronger, it can't lift its head as high as the sorrel, but they don't make a bad pair. Joaquim Sassa repeated his question once the laughter had subsided. As I was saying, with two horses pulling, how many kilometers will we cover in an hour, and Maria Guavaira replied, About three leagues, So about fifteen kilometers as we say nowadays, Right, Ten hours at fifteen kilometers an hour makes one hundred and fifty, within three days we'll be in Valladolid, and three days after that we'll reach the Pyrenees, it won't take long. Looking dismayed Maria Guavaira replied, That's quite a schedule unless we're trying to work the horses to death in no time, But you said, I said fifteen kilometers, but that was on flat land and in any case the horses will never keep going for ten hours each

day, They can rest, Just as well you haven't forgotten they need to rest. From the sarcastic tone in her voice it was clear that Maria Guavaira was close to losing her temper.

At such moments, even when horses are not at issue, men become submissive, a fact women generally ignore, they only notice what they take to be male resentment, that is how mistakes and misunderstandings arise, perhaps the root of the problem lies in the inadequate hearing of human beings, in particular of women, who nevertheless pride themselves on being good listeners. I must admit, I know nothing about horses, I belong to the infantry, Joaquim Sassa muttered. The others eavesdrop on this duel of words, they smile because it's not to be taken seriously, the blue thread is the most powerful bond in the universe, as we shall soon see. Maria Guavaira said, Six hours a day is the most we can hope for, at best we'll cover three leagues in an hour, or whatever the horses can manage. Do we leave tomorrow, José Anaícone agrees, Maria Guavaira told him, and softening her tone she inquired of Joaquim Sassa, Is that all right, and taken by surprise he smiled and said, That's fine by me.

That night they counted their money, so many escudos, so many pesetas, some foreign currency belonging to Joaquim Sassa who had acquired it when they left Oporto, only a few days ago and yet centuries seem to have passed, scarcely an original thought but as irresistible as most banal statements. The provisions they brought with them from Maria Guavaira's house have almost run out, their supply of food will have to be replenished and that will not be easy, given the chaos and disruption and the marauding horde in whose wake not even cabbage stalks remained, not to mention the plundered chicken coops, the angry response of starving people asked to pay a fortune for a scraggly chicken. Once the situation began to return to normal, prices fell a little, but not to what they were before, for as we know they never do. And now there is a shortage of everything, even finding anything to steal would be a problem, if anyone should want to resort to such wickedness. The horse's was a special case. Had it not been for that sore, it would still be adorning the stables and assisting the labors of its former owner, who knows nothing of the beast's fate except that it was taken away by two scoundrels and a dog who left abundant evidence behind. People say time and time again that out of evil comes good, it has been said so often and by so many that it might well be a universal truth, so long as we take the trouble to distinguish evil from good, and those who have experienced the one or the other. Then Pedro Orce said, We'll have to work to earn some money, it seemed a sensible idea, but after taking stock of their skills they arrived at the depressing conclusion one might have expected. For Joana Carda, after getting a degree in humanities, never taught but married and became a housewife, here in Spain there is not a great deal of interest in Portuguese literature and, besides, the Spaniards have more important things on their minds right now, Joaquim Scissa, as he declared with some annoyance, belongs to the infantry, which, coming from his lips, meant that he holds the lowly rank of office clerk, a useful profession undoubtedly, but only in times of social stability and normal trading, Pedro Orce has spent his life making up prescriptions,

when first we met him he was filling capsules with quinine, what a pity he didn't remember to bring his pharmacy with him, he could now be offering consultations and earning good money, for in these rural districts the pharmacist and doctor are one and the same, José Anaíço is an elementary schoolteacher, and that tells us everything, let alone the fact that he is in a country with a different geography and history and how could he explain to Spanish children that the Battle of Aljubarrota was a victory when they are usually taught to forget that it was a resounding defeat. Maria Guavaira is the only person in the group who could look for work on one of these farms and be equal to it, if only in proportion to her strength and experience, which are limited.

They look at each other not knowing what to do and Joaquim Sassa says hesitantly, If we have to stop every five minutes to make some money we'll never reach the Pyrenees, money made like this never lasts, it's no sooner made than spent, the ideal solution would be for us to travel like gypsies, I mean those who wander from country to country, they must live on something, he was asking a question, expressing his doubt, perhaps manna fell from heaven on the gypsies. Pedro Orce answered him, hailing as he did from the south where the gypsy race abounds, Some of them trade in horses, others sell clothes in the market, others hawk their wares from door to door, the women tell fortunes, Let's not hear any more about horses, we'll never live this one down, besides, it's a profession we know nothing about, and as for telling fortunes, let's hope our own won't give us cause for concern, And not to mention that in order to sell horses one has to start by buying them. Their money would not stretch that far, even the horse they have had to be stolen. Silence fell, no one knew how, but when it passed, Joaquim Sassa, who is beginning to reveal that he has a practical mind, told them, I can see only one way out of this situation, let's buy clothes from one of those wholesalers, there are bound to be some in the first big town we come to, and then we can sell them in the villages at a reasonable profit, I can look after the accounts. It seemed a good idea for want of a better one, and they might as well give it a try. Since they could not be farmers or pharmacists or teachers or landlords, they might as well be peddlers and traveling salesmen, selling clothes for men, women, and children is no dishonor, and with careful bookkeeping they'd be able to live.

Having drawn up this plan for survival, they settled down for the night, the moment having arrived to decide how the five of them should accommodate themselves in the wagon, now called Deux Chevaux, which is as follows, Pedro Orce sleeps in front, lying crosswise on a narrow pallet just big enough for him, then Joana Carda and José Anaíço, lengthwise in an empty space amid some of the luggage, and the same for Maria Guavaira and Joaquim Sassa further back. Improvised curtains create imaginary compartments and some semblance of privacy, if Joana Carda and José Anaíço, who sleep in the middle of the wagon, need to go outside during the night, they pass alongside Pedro Orce, who does not mind, here they share discomfort as they share everything else. And what about the kisses, embraces, and sexual intercourse, inquisitive spirits will inquire, endowed by nature with a perverse taste for malice. Let us say that

the lovers had two ways of satisfying the sweet impulses of nature, either they go through the fields in search of some lonely and pleasant spot, or they take advantage of the temporary and deliberate absence of their companions to do what need not be spelled out, the signs speak for themselves unless we choose to ignore them, and while they might lack money they are not without understanding.

They did not set out at break of day, as poetry would demand, for why get up early when they have all the time in the world now, but this was not the only or the most persuasive reason, they took their time in getting ready, the men clean-shaven, the women neat and tidy, their clothes carefully brushed, in a suitable corner of the wood, having carried a bucket to draw water from the stream, the couples washed one after the other, perhaps stark naked for there was no one to look on. Pedro Orce was the last to wash and he took the dog with him, they looked like two animals, I'm tempted to say the one laughed as much as the other, the dog pushing Pedro Orce and Pedro Orce splashing water on the dog, a man of his age should not make such a fool of himself in public, anyone passing by would have said at once, That old man ought to show more self-respect, he is certainly old enough to know better. Few traces remain of the encampment, nothing except the trampled ground, the water splashed from their ablutions under the trees, ashes among blackened stones, the first gust of wind will sweep everything away, the first heavy shower will flatten the soil and dissolve the ashes, only the stones will reveal that people have been here, and if needed they will serve for another campfire.

It is a good day for traveling. From the slope of the hillock where they had taken shelter they descend the road, Maria Guavaira is in the driver's seat for she does not trust anyone else with the reins, one has to know how to talk to horses, there are boulders and potholes in the road and if one of the axles should break that would be the end of all their endeavors, God protect us from any such misfortune. The chestnut sorrel and the gray horse still make an ill-matched pair, Chess seems uncertain about the steadiness of Grizzly's legs, and Grizzly once harnessed and yoked tends to pull outward as if trying to get away from its companion, forcing Chess to make an even greater effort. Maria Guavaira is watching their goings-on, once they are on the road she will bring Chess under control with a skillful combination of whipping and tugging on the reins.

Joaquim Sassa had dreamed up the names Chess and Grizzly, always bearing in mind that these Deux Chevaux are not like those of the car, the latter were so closely knit that they were indistinguishable and wanted the same thing at the same time, while these two differ in everything, color, age, strength, size, and temperament, so it seems only right and proper that each one have a name. But Grizzly in English usually refers to bears, Chess is a game, complained José Anaíço, whereupon Joaquim Sassa retorted, We're not in England, the gray horse has been baptized Grizzly and the sorrel Chess and I'm their godfather. Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira exchange smiles at the men's childishness. And Pedro Orce unexpectedly joins in, If these were a mare and a stallion and they had a foal, we might end up with a chess-playing bear.

On the first day they traveled no more than seventy kilometers, first because it did not seem right to put pressure on the horses after they had been idle for so long, one of them because suffering from sores, the other because awaiting certain decisions that were slow in coming, and second because, to go through the town of Lugo, where they would go to stock up on the merchandise from which they hoped to earn their living, they had to depart from their northeast route. They bought a local newspaper to catch up with the latest news, the most interesting item of all being a photograph taken yesterday of the peninsula. Its displacement to the north, one day after its departure from its previous route, was clearly indicated by a superimposed dotted line. No doubt about it, it was unmistakably a right angle. But the conflicting theories we summarized earlier had made little progress, and as for the views held by the newspaper itself, one could detect a note of caution and skepticism, perhaps justified in the light of previous disappointments but also typical of the narrow-mindedness one tends to find in the provinces.

In the wholesale warehouses the women, for naturally it was left to them to choose the clothes, with Joaquim Sassa on hand to negotiate the prices, could not decide what to buy, whether they should select garments for the approaching winter, or plan ahead for the following spring. Joaquim Sassa referred to midterm planning but Joana Carda insisted it should be mid-season, whereupon Joaquim Sassa told her curtly, Back in the office that was the expression we used, we always referred to short-, mid-, or long-term planning. The final choice was dictated by their own needs, for they were all badly in need of some new clothes for the autumn, besides it was inevitable that Maria Guavaira and Joana Carda should be tempted to buy what they themselves wanted. All in all, they completed their purchases to everyone's satisfaction, and there were healthy profits in store if demand should match up to the stock they now had to offer. Joaquim Sassa expressed some disquiet, We've tied up more than half our money, and unless we recoup half of what we've spent within a week, we'll be in trouble, in our situation, with no funds in reserve and no chance of obtaining a bank loan, we must manage our stock so as to maintain a steady turnover and bring our income into line with our investment. Joaquim Sassa delivered this little speech, in his capacity as bookkeeper, at the first stop they made after leaving Lugo, and it was benevolently received by the others.

They soon realized that this business would not be a bed of roses when a woman who knew how to strike a bargain obliged them to lower the price of two skirts so far as to deprive them of any profit. As it happened, Joana Carda was doing the selling, and she later apologized to her trading partners and promised that in future she would be the most intransigent saleswoman operating in the peninsula. Repeating his warning, Joaquim Sassa told them, Unless we're cautious from the outset, we'll find ourselves bankrupt, with neither money nor goods, and besides, it's not just a question of our livelihood, we have three more mouths to feed, the dog's and the horses'. The dog looks after itself, interrupted Pedro Orce. So far it has managed to look after itself, but should it ever be unable to hunt for its own food, it will come back to us with its tail between its legs, and if we have nothing to give it, what then, Half of everything I own is for the dog,

That's a kind thought but our main concern should be to share wealth instead of poverty. Wealth and poverty is one way of expressing it, José Anaíço observed, but at this moment in our lives we find ourselves poorer than we really are, it's an odd situation, we're living as if we had chosen to be poor. If it were a matter of choice, I don't believe it would be in good faith, it was a question of circumstances only some of which we accepted, those that served our personal aims, we're like actors, or mere characters, said Joana Carda before asking, For example, if I were to go back to my husband, who would I be, the actor outside the character, or a character playing the part of an actor, and where would I stand between the one and the other. Maria Guavaira had been listening in silence and now she began speaking like someone beginning another conversation, perhaps she had not fully grasped what the others had said, People are reborn each day, but they can decide whether to go on living the previous day or to make a fresh start. But there is experience, all that we've learned, Pedro Orce pointed out. Yes, you're right, Joaquim Sassa said, but we usually live our lives as if we had no previous experience, or make use only of that part of life that allows us to go on making mistakes, quoting examples and the fruits of experience, I've just thought of something that you may find absurd and nonsensical, perhaps experience has a greater effect on society as a whole than on individuals, society takes advantage of everyone's experience, but no one wishes, knows, or is able to take full advantage of his own experience.

They debate these interesting problems in the shade of a tree while having their lunch, a frugal one as befits traveling salesmen who have not yet finished their day's work, and lest anyone find this discussion unlikely in these circumstances and in such a place, we must remind him that in general the level of learning and culture typical of pilgrims fosters without blatant impropriety, a conversation whose drift, from the exclusive point of view of literary composition in search of strict verisimilitude, should in fact betray some flaws. But everyone, independent of whatever skills he may possess, has at one time or another said or done things far above his nature and condition, and if we could remove those people from the dull humdrum existence in which they gradually lose their identity, or if they were to throw off their fetters and chains, how many more wonders would they be able to perform, how many fragments of deep knowledge would they be able to communicate, for we all know infinitely more than we think, and others know infinitely more than we are prepared to acknowledge. Five individuals are assembled here for the most extraordinary reasons and it would be most surprising if they were not to say some astonishing things.

In these parts there is rarely a car to be seen. Now and then a big truck goes by carrying provisions, mainly foodstuffs, to the villages. With everything that has happened local food supplies have been disrupted, shortages are common, with an occasional sudden glut, but there is always some excuse, remember, the human race has never experienced a similar situation. As for sailing, man has always sailed, but in small ships. Many refugees are on foot, others ride donkeys, and if the road were not so uneven there would be more bicycles around. People here are usually good-natured and peaceable, but

envy is probably the one trait to be found in every social class and indeed in most human beings, so it was no surprise that the sight of Deux Chevaux passing along the road, when nearly everyone was without transport, should have provoked some jealousy. Any determined and violent gang of brigands would soon have disposed of the occupants, one is an old man, the others could hardly be mistaken for Samson or Hercules, and as for the women, once their men had been overpowered, they would be easy prey, true, Maria Guavaira is a woman who can stand up to any man, but not without a firebrand in her hand. It might well have happened, therefore, that our traveling salesmen should be suddenly attacked and then left to their fate, the poor women raped, the men injured and humiliated. But the dog was there, if anyone appeared it came out from under the wagon, and whether in front or behind, stationary or walking, its nose down like that of a wolfhound, with its icy stare it transfixed the passersby, these were nearly always harmless, but they felt every bit as afraid as any would-be assailants. If we consider everything this dog has done so far, it would deserve to be called guardian angel, despite the continuous innuendo about its infernal origins. Objections will be raised that cite the traditional teachings of doctrine, Christian and non-Christian, according to which angels have always been depicted with wings, but in all those cases where the necessary angel would not be required to fly, what harm would be done if it were to appear now and then in the guise of a dog, without being obliged to bark, which would in any case be quite unfitting for a spiritual being. At least let us acknowledge that dogs that do not bark are just as good as angels.

They set up camp that evening on the banks of the river Minho, near a village called Portomarín. While José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa untied and attended to the horses, kindled the fire, peeled the potatoes, and prepared the salad, the women, accompanied by Pedro Orce and their guardian angel, took advantage of the remaining twilight to visit some houses in the village. Because of the language barrier, Joana Carda did not say a word, it was probably the problem of communication that had foxed her last time, but she is gaining experience for the future, which is the only place where mistakes can be corrected. Business was fair and they sold their goods at the right price. When they got back the camp looked like home, the campfire crackled among the stones, the lamp hanging from the wagon cast a semicircle of light in the open space, and the smell coming from the bubbling pot was as consoling as the Lord's presence.

As they conversed around the fire after they had eaten, it suddenly occurred to Joaquim Sassa to ask, Where did you get this name Guavaira, what does it mean, and Maria Guavaira told him, As far as I know there is no one else with this name, my mother dreamed it when I was still inside her, she wanted me to be called Guavaira and nothing else, but my father insisted that I should be called Maria, so I ended up with a name I was never meant to have, Maria Guavaira. So you don't know what it means, My name turned up in a dream. Dreams always have some meaning. But not names that turn up in dreams, now the rest of you tell me your names. They told her, one by one. Then, poking the fire with a stick, Maria Guavaira said, The names we possess are dreams, what will I

be dreaming about if I should dream your name.

The weather has changed, an expression of admirable concision that informs us in a soothing and neutrally objective manner that, having changed, it has changed for the worse. It is raining, a gentle rain now that autumn is here, and until the ground becomes muddy we will be tempted to stroll through the countryside in rubber boots and raincoats receiving that gentle spray of moisture on our faces, and absorbing the melancholy of the distant haze, the first trees shedding their leaves, looking bare and cold, as if they might suddenly beg to be caressed, there are some one would like to press to one's bosom with tenderness and pity, we rest our cheek against the moist bark and it feels as if the tree were covered in tears.

But the canvas of the wagon goes back to the origins of such coverings, which were solidly woven and made to last rather than to keep out the rain. It dates from an age when people were accustomed to letting their clothes dry out on their bodies, their only protection, if they were lucky, a glass of aquavit. Then there was the effect of the seasons, the drying out of the fibers, the fraying of the stitches, it is easy to see that the canvas removed from the car is not enough to patch up all the damage. And so the rain continually leaks into the wagon, despite Joaquim Sassa's reassurances that the soaking and enlarging of the threads, and the consequent tightening of the weave, will make things better, if only they would be patient. In theory nothing could be truer, but in practice it clearly does not work. If they had not taken the trouble to roll up the mattresses to protect them, it would have been some time before they could sleep on them.

When the rain turns heavy and the opportunity arises, the travelers take shelter under a viaduct, but these are rare, this is only a country road, off the main highways that, to eliminate intersections and permit high speeds, are bridged by secondary roads. One of these days it will occur to José Anaíço to buy some waterproofing varnish or paint, and he will get some, but the only suitable paint he will find is a bright red and not even enough to cover a quarter of the canvas. If Joana Carda had not come up with the better and more feasible idea of sewing large strips of plastic together to make a cover for the wagon and then a second one for the horses, once they realized that they probably would not find any more waterproof paint in the same shade of red for the next thirty kilometers, the wagon might well have found itself traveling the wide world with a hood, all the colors of the rainbow with stripes, circles and squares in green and yellow, orange and blue, violet, white on white, brown, and perhaps even black, according to the artist's whim. Meanwhile it is raining.

After their brief, inconclusive dialogue about the meaning of names and the significance of dreams, they began discussing what name they should give to the dream that this dog is. Opinions are divided, they are, as we ought to know, simply a matter of preference, we might even say that an opinion is nothing but the reasoned expression of preference. Pedro Orce suggests and upholds such rustic and traditional names as Pilot or Faithful, both very suitable if we consider the animal's character, an infallible guide and utterly loyal. Joana Carda wavers between Major and Rookie, names with military

overtones that don't quite fit the temperament of the woman making the suggestion, but the feminine soul possesses unfathomable depths, Goethe's Marguerite will struggle all her life at the spinning wheel to repress the urge to behave like Lady Macbeth, and to her dying hour she will not be certain of having won. As for Maria Guavaira, although unable to explain why, and not for the first time, she proposed, somewhat embarrassed by her own suggestion, that they call the dog Guardian Angel, and she blushed as she spoke, aware of how ridiculous it would sound, especially in public, to summon one's guardian angel, and to have appear, instead of some heavenly being, garbed in white robes and descending with a flutter of wings, a ferocious mastiff, covered with mud and the blood of some poor rabbit, and respecting only its masters, if they deserve that name. José Anaíço was quick to silence the laughter provoked by Maria Guavaira's suggestion, and proposed that the dog be named Constant, For if I've understood the meaning of that word, it embraces all the qualities evoked by those other names, Faithful, Pilot, Major, Rookie, and even Guardian Angel, for if any of them should be inconstant, all trust is lost, the pilot loses his way, the major abandons his post, the rookie surrenders his arms, and the guardian angel allows himself to be seduced by the young girl he was supposed to be shielding from temptation. They all applauded, although Joaquim Sassa felt that it would still be preferable simply to call the animal Dog, for as the only dog around, there was little danger of his mistaking any summons or response. So they've decided to call the dog Constant, but they needn't have taken so much trouble christening it, the animal answers to whatever name they care to use once it knows it's being called, but there is another name that lingers in its memory, Ardent, but no one here remembers that one. The man who once said that a name is nothing, not even a dream, was right, even if Maria Guavaira believes otherwise.

Unknown to them, they are following the old route of Santiago, they pass through places that bear names of hope or past misfortune, depending on what travelers experienced there in bygone days, Sarriá, Samos, or the privileged Villafranca del Bierzo, where any sick or weary pilgrim who might knock on the door of the apostle's church received dispensation from completing the journey to Santiago de Compostela, and gained the same indulgences won by those going all the way. So even in those days faith made concessions, although nothing like today when the concessions are more rewarding than faith itself, the Catholic faith or any other. At least these travelers know that if they wish to see the Pyrenees, they will have to go all the way there and lay their hand on the crest, a foot is not enough, since it is less sensitive, and the eyes are more easily deceived than one imagines. Little by little, the rain has started to abate, there is the odd drizzle now and then, until it finally stops altogether. The sky has not cleared, night is rapidly falling. They camp under some trees to shelter from any further showers, although Pedro Orce could quote the Spanish proverb that goes something like this, Shelter under a tree and you'll get soaked twice. The fire wasn't easy to light, but Maria Guavaira's know-how finally conquered the damp twigs, which crackled and flared up at the ends as if the sap were spilling out. They ate as best they could, enough to prevent their stomachs from rumbling with hunger during the night, for as another proverb tells us, Go

to bed without a bite, you'll be restless all the night. They had their meal inside the wagon, by the light of the smoking oil lamp, the atmosphere heavy, their clothes damp, the mattresses rolled up and stacked away, their remaining possessions in a heap, any self-respecting housewife would have had a fit at such untidiness. But since there's no evil that lasts forever or rain that never stops, let's wait for a ray of sunshine to appear and then they'll tackle the washing, the mattresses opened out so that they can dry down to the last fine wisp of straw and the clothes spread over the bushes and boulders, when we gather them in they'll give off that fresh, warm smell the sun always leaves behind, and all this will be done while the women, creating a cosy domestic scene, adjust and sew the long strips of plastic that will solve all their problems with leaking rain, blessed be whoever invented progress.

They remained there, conversing with the ease and indolence of people whiling away the hours, until it was time to go to bed, and then Pedro Orce interrupts what he was saying and starts telling them, I once read somewhere that the galaxy to which our solar system belongs is heading toward some constellation, I can't remember the name, and that constellation is heading in its turn to a certain point in space, I wish I knew more, the details escape me, but what I wanted to say is this, look, we're on a peninsula, the peninsula is sailing on the sea, the sea goes around with the earth to which it belongs, and the earth spins around on its own axis but also goes around the sun, and the sun also spins around, and the whole thing is heading in the direction of the aforesaid constellation, so I wonder whether maybe we're not the last link in this chain of movements within movements. And what I'd like to know is what moves inside us and where does it go, no, I'm not talking about worms, microbes, bacteria, those living creatures that inhabit us, I'm referring to something else, to something that moves and perhaps moves us at the same time, just as constellation, galaxy, solar system, sun, earth, sea, peninsula, and Deux Chevaux move and move us with them, what is the name, finally, of the thing that moves all the rest, from one end of the chain to the other, or perhaps there is no chain and the universe is a ring, at once so thin that apparently only we and what is inside us fit into it and so thick that it can accommodate the maximum dimension of the universe, which is the ring itself, what is the name of what follows after us. The nonvisible begins with man, came the surprising answer of José Anaíço, who spoke without thinking.

Passing from leaf to leaf, large drops of water come trickling down onto the canvas. Outside, Grizzly and Chess can be heard stirring under their plastic sheets, which do not quite cover them, this is where total silence can be useful, allowing us to hear the slightest noise. Everyone here believes it to be his or her duty to contribute to this solemn council whatever knowledge they possess, but they are all terrified that if they open their mouths, what comes out, even if it is not the little toads of the fable, will be no more than random banalities about existence, ontological pronouncements, however doubtful the relevance of that word in the context of wagon, drops of rain and horses, without forgetting the dog, now fast asleep. Maria Guavaira, having the least education,

was the first to speak, Perhaps we should call the nonvisible God, but it is curious how a certain note of interrogation crept into the phrase, Or willpower, suggested Joaquim Sassa, Or intelligence, added Joana Carda, Or history, and this closing remark was made by José Anaíço. Pedro Orce had no suggestion to make, he simply commented, Anyone who thinks this is easy is profoundly mistaken, there are endless answers just waiting for questions.

Prudence cautions us that any investigation of such complex matters should stop here lest those participating start saying something different from what they said before, not because it is necessarily wrong to change one's mind, but because the difference can sometimes be so great that the discussion goes back to its jumping-off point and those debating the issue fail to notice. In this instance, that first inspired statement by José Anaíço, after having circulated among his friends, degenerated into trivial and excessively obvious reminders of the invisibility of God, or willpower, or intelligence, and, perhaps a little less trivial and obvious, of history. Putting his arms around Joana Carda, who complains of feeling cold, José Anaíço tries not to fall asleep, he wants to reflect on his idea, to ponder whether history is really invisible, if the visible witnesses of history confer sufficient visibility on it, if the visibility of history, which is so relative, is anything more than a covering like clothes worn by the invisible man while he continues to be invisible himself. He could not bear to have these thoughts going around and around in his head for much longer, and it was just as well that during those final moments before he fell asleep, his mind had foolishly concentrated on making out the difference between the invisible and the nonvisible, which, as will be obvious to anyone who stops to think about it, had no particular bearing on the case. In the light of day all these entanglements seem much less important, God, the most famous example of all, created the world because it was night when He thought about it. At that sublime moment He felt that He couldn't stand the darkness any longer, but had it been day God would have left everything as it was. And just as the sky here dawned bright and clear and the sun came out unhindered by clouds and stayed that way, all the nocturnal philosophizing dissipated and all attention is now concentrated on the smooth passage of Deux Chevaux over a peninsula, whether it is drifting or not makes no difference, for even if my life's journey should lead me to a star, that has not excused me from traveling the roads of this earth.

That afternoon, as they were selling their wares, they learned that the peninsula, after having traveled in a straight line to a point due north of the northernmost island of the Azores, the island of Corvo, and from this summary description it should be clear that the extreme southern tip of the peninsula, the Punta de Tarifa, found itself on another meridian to the east, north of the northernmost point of Corvo, the Ponta dos Tarsais, the peninsula, then, after what we have tried to explain, immediately resumed its displacement to the west in a direction parallel to that of its initial route, or rather, let us see if we are making ourselves clear, resumed it some degrees higher. When this happened, those who had put forward and defended the theory of displacement along rectilinear paths at right angles to one another were fully vindicated. And since no

movement had yet been confirmed that might support the conjecture of an eventual return to the point of departure, stated, moreover, as a demonstration of the sublime rather than as a foreseeable corollary of the general thesis, which merely left open the possibility of return, there was even a possibility that the peninsula might never again come to a halt but drift forevermore over the seven seas, like the oft-cited Flying Dutchman, and the peninsula is currently going by another name, tactfully suppressed here to avoid any outbursts of nationalism and xenophobia, which would be a tragedy under the circumstances.

The village where the travelers now found themselves did not hear of these matters, the only news that came was that the United States of America had promised, in a statement made by the President himself, that the approaching countries could count on the support and solidarity, both moral and material, of the American people, If they continue to move in this direction they will be received with open arms. But this declaration, which showed remarkable perceptiveness, as much from a humanitarian as from a geostrategic viewpoint, faded somewhat from public view with the sudden bedlam in tourist agencies throughout the world, besieged by clients who wanted to travel to Corvo without delay, regardless of means or expense, and why, because unless it changed course the peninsula was about to pass within sight of the island, a spectacle not to be spoken of in the same breath as the insignificant parade of the Rock of Gibraltar when the peninsula broke away, abandoning the rock to the waves. Now it is a huge mass that is about to pass before the eyes of those privileged enough to find a spot on the northern half of the island, but despite the vastness of the peninsula, the event will last only a few hours, two days at the most, bear in mind the peculiar outline of this raft, only the extreme southern part will be visible and only if it is a clear day. The rest, because of the earth's curvature, will pass well out of sight, just imagine what it would be like if instead of that angular shape the peninsula's southern coast formed a straight line, I hope you can visualize my drawing, it would take sixteen days to watch it pass, an entire vacation, if the speed of fifty kilometers daily were to be maintained. Be that as it may, in all likelihood more money will flow into Corvo than has ever been seen there before, obliging the island's inhabitants to order locks for their doors and to hire locksmiths to fit them with crossbars and alarm systems.

From time to time there are still light showers, at worst a rapid cloudburst, but for most of the day it is sunny, with blue skies and high clouds. The great plastic cover was put up, sewn and reinforced, and now that it looks like rain their progress is arrested, and in three stages, the cover is first unfolded, then stretched, and finally tied down, the awning is protected. Inside the wagon are the driest mattresses ou ever saw, the musty smell and dampness have gone, the interior neat and tidy, things could not be cosier. But now one can see just how much rain there has been in these parts. The land is waterlogged and one has to be careful with the wagon, testing the soft ground at the edge of the road before passing, otherwise it would be a hell of a job to move it, two horses, three men, and two women are not as effective as a tractor. The landscape has

altered, they have left the mountains and hills behind, the last undulations are disappearing from sight, and looming up before one's eyes is what looks like an endless plain with such a vast sky overhead that one begins to doubt that the sky is all one, more likely each location, if not each person, has its own sky, greater or smaller, higher or lower, and this has been an amazing discovery, yes indeed, the sky like an infinite succession of encrusted domes, the contradiction in terms is only apparent, you need only look. When Deux Chevaux reaches the summit of the last hill one thinks the world will come to an end before the earth rises again, and since it is quite common for different causes to have the same effect, we have to struggle for breath up here as if we had been carried to the top of Everest, as anyone will tell you who has also been there, unless he has had the same experience as we have had on this flat ground.

Pedro reckons without his host. But let it be said at once that this Pedro is not Orce, nor does the narrator know who he is, even if he admits that behind the aforementioned Pedro is the apostle of the same name who denied Christ three times, and these are the same calculations God made, probably because he was Triune, and not very good at arithmetic. In Portugal it is customary to say that Pedro knows his sums when the sums done by all Pedros come out wrong, this is a popular and ironic way of saying that some people should leave decisions to others, in other words, Joaquim Sassa was wrong when he estimated they would cover one hundred and fifty kilometers each day. Maria Guavaira was also wrong when she reduced it to ninety. The trader knows about trading, horses know about pulling a wagon, and just as one says, or used to say, Bad money drives out good, so the pace of the old horse moderated that of the young one, unless the latter was showing pity, kindness, human respect, because for the strong to brag about their strength in the presence of the weak is a sign of moral perversion. We have deemed all these words necessary in order to explain that we have been traveling more slowly than was predicted, concision is not a definitive virtue, on occasion one loses out by talking too much, it is true, but how much has also been gained by saying more than was strictly necessary. The horses go at their own pace, they had set off at a trot and they obey the whims or demands of the driver, but little by little, so subtly that no one even notices, Grizzly and Chess start reducing their pace, how they can manage it so harmoniously is a mystery, for no one heard the one say to the other, Slow down, or the other reply, When we get past that tree.

Fortunately, the travelers are not in a hurry. In the beginning, when they left the already distant lands of Galicia, they felt that they had dates to meet and itineraries to respect, there was even a certain feeling of urgency, as if each of them had to save a father from the gallows, to reach the scaffold before the executioner let the trapdoor fall. Here it is not a question of father or mother, for we know nothing about the one or the other, except for Maria Guavaira's mother, who is senile and no longer lives in La Coruña, unless she returned there once the danger had passed. About the other mothers and fathers, ancient and modern, nothing has been revealed, when children fall silent, questions must also be silenced and inquiries suspended, for when all is said and done,

the world begins and ends with each one of us, although this statement might deeply offend the family spirit as showing disrespect for one's heritage and lineage. Within several days, the road became a world outside the world, as with any man who, finding himself in the world, discovers that he is himself a world, nor is this difficult, one need only create a little solitude around oneself, like these travelers who while traveling together travel alone. That is why they are not in a hurry, that is why they stopped measuring the distance they have covered, any stops they make are for selling or taking a rest, and they often feel tempted to stop for no reason other than that same appetite, for which there may always be reasons but we generally do not waste time looking for them. We all end up where we want to be, it is only a question of time and patience, the hare goes faster than the tortoise, perhaps it will arrive first, so long as it does not cross the path of the hunter and his shotgun.

We have left the barren plain of León, have entered and are traveling through Tierra de Campos where that famous preacher Fray Gerúndio de Campazas was born and flourished, whose words and deeds were recounted in detail by the no less celebrated Padre Isla, as an example to long-winded orators, relentless bores who never stop quoting, compulsive rhymers and tiresome scribblers who go on and on, what a pity we have not learned from their example, which could not be clearer. Let us therefore prune this rambling exordium right at the outset, and say quite simply that the travelers will spend the night in a village called Villalar, not far from Toro, Tordesillas, and Simancas, all of them touching closely on Portuguese history in terms of a battle, a treaty, archives. A teacher by profession, José Anaíço finds these names evocative, but little else. His knowledge of history is only general, other than the rudiments he knows only a few more details than his Spanish and Portuguese audience who must have learned some thing, or can't have forgotten everything, about Simancas, Toro, and Tordesillas, given the wealth of information and patriotic lore to be found in the history books of both countries. But no one here knows anything about Villalar except Pedro Orce who, although a native of Andalusia, has the enlightenment of someone who has traveled throughout the peninsula, the fact that he said he did not know Lisbon when he arrived there two months ago does not rule out this hypothesis, perhaps he simply did not recognize the place, just as the city would no longer be recognized today by its Phoenician founders, its Roman colonizers, or its Visigothic rulers, the Muslims might look on it with a glimmer of recognition, the Portuguese with increasing bewilderment.

They are sitting in pairs around the bonfire, Joaquim and Maria, José and Joana, Pedro and Constant, the night is a little chilly, but the sky is serene and clear, there are scarcely any stars to be seen, for the early-rising moon floods with light the flat countryside and the nearby rooftops of Villalar, whose friendly mayor raised no objections when this band of Spanish and Portuguese migrants sought to camp so close to the village, despite their being vagrants and peddlers and therefore likely to steal trade from local shopkeepers. The moon is not high but has already taken on that appearance we so enjoy admiring, that luminous disk that inspires trite verses and even more trite

sentiments, a silken sieve sprinkling white dust over the submissive landscape. Then we exclaim, What lovely moonlight, and we try to forget the shudders of fear we experience when the heavenly body first appears, enormous, red, threatening, over the curving earth. After thousands and thousands of years, the nascent moon continues even today to dawn like a threat, like a sign of the approaching end, fortunately the anxiety lasts only a few minutes, the moon has risen, become small and white, we can breathe more easily. The animals, too, are fretful, a short time ago when the moon appeared the dog stood there staring at it, tense, rigid, perhaps it might have howled had it not been without vocal cords, but the dog bristled all over as if a frozen hand had ruffled its coat while stroking its back. There are moments when the world leaves its axis, we sense that nothing is secure, and if we could fully express what we are feeling, we would say, with an expressive absence of rhetoric, That was a close call.

What Pedro Orce knows about the history of Villalar we are about to find out once they finish their meal. As the flames of the bonfire dance in the still air, the travelers look at them pensively, stretch out their hands as if they were imposing them on or surrendering them to the flames, there is an ancient mystery in this relationship between us humans and fire, even under the open sky, as if we and the fire were inside the original cave, grotto, or matrix. Tonight it is José Anaíço's turn to wash up, but there is no hurry, the hour is peaceful, almost gentle, the light of the flames flickers on their weather-beaten faces, the color of sunrise, the sun is of another order and alive, not dead like the moon, that is the difference.

And Pedro Orce tells them, You may not know this but many, many years ago, in 1521 there was a great battle here in Villalar, greater for its consequences than for the number of dead, because had it been won by the one who lost it, those of us who are alive today would have inherited a very different world. José Anaíço is well informed about the great battles of history, and if the question were fired at him, he would be able to run off without a moment's hesitation some ten names, beginning classically with Marathon and Thermopylae and proceeding, without regard for chronology, through Austerlitz and Borodino, Marne and Monte Cassino, Ardennes and El Alamein, Poitiers and Alcàcer Quibir, and also Aljubarrota, which means nothing to the world and everything to us, these were paired for no special reason, But I've never heard of the Battle of Villalar, concluded José Anaíço, Well, that battle, explained Pedro Orce, took place when the communes of Spain rebelled against Emperor Charles V, a foreigner, but not so much because he was a foreigner, for in past centuries it was the most natural thing in the world for nations to find a king sneaking in through the back door, someone who spoke another language, the whole business was left to royal houses who gambled away their own countries along with those of others, I don't mean dice or cards, but they played for dynastic interests, entering into fake alliances and marriages of convenience, which is why one cannot really say that the communes rebelled against an unwanted king, nor should anyone imagine it was the eternal war of the poor against the rich, if only things were that simple, the fact is that the Spanish nobility did not approve, not in the

slightest, of the Emperor's having conferred appointments on so many foreigners, and one of the first measures taken by these new masters was to raise taxes, an infallible means of paying for luxuries and further ventures, in any event the first city to rebel was Toledo, and others soon followed its example, Toro, Madrid, Avila, Soria, Burgos, Salamanca, and so on and so forth, but the motives of some were not the motives of others, sometimes they coincided, yes indeed, but at other times they were in conflict, and if this was true of the cities it was even more true of the people living in them, certain nobles simply defended their own interests and ambitions and therefore changed sides depending on how the wind was blowing and what would benefit them. Now, as always happens, the people were involved in this for their own reasons, but especially for those of others, this has been the case since the world began, if people were all one, that would be fine, but people are not all one, that's something we cannot get into our heads, not to mention that the masses are generally deceived, how often have their representatives ridden to parliament on their votes and once there, receiving bribes and threats, voted contrary to the will of those who sent them, and strange as it may seem, despite all these divergencies and contradictions, the communes were able to organize militias and fight the king's army, needless to say battles were won and lost, the last battle was lost here in Villalar, and why, habit, mistakes, incompetence, betrayals, people got tired of waiting to be paid and deserted, battle ensued, some won, others lost, it was never discovered exactly how many members of the communes died here, by modern statistics not all that many, some put the figure at two thousand, others swore that there had been fewer than a thousand casualties, perhaps even as few as two hundred, we don't know, nor are we ever likely to know, unless the graves are moved elsewhere one day and the skulls counted, because to count the other bones would only add to the confusion, three of the commune leaders were tried the following day, sentenced to death, and beheaded in the main square of Villalar, their names were Juan de Padilla, born in Toledo, Juan Bravo from Segovia, and Francisco Maldonado from Salamanca. This was the Battle of Villalar, and had it been won by those who lost, Spain's destiny would have changed course. With moonlight such as this, one can imagine what the night and day of battle must have been like, it was raining, the fields were flooded, they fought up to their knees in mud, by modern standards, undoubtedly, few lost their lives, but one is tempted to say that the few who lost their lives in the wars of old had greater influence on history than the hundreds and thousands and millions who died in the twentieth century, the moonlight is the one thing that doesn't change, it covers Villalar just as it covers Austerlitz or Marathon, or, Or Alcàcer Quibir, interrupted José Anaiço, What battle was that, Maria Guavaira asked, If that, too, had been won instead of lost, I can't imagine what Portugal would be like today, replied José Anaiço, I once read in a book that your King Dom Manuel fought in this war, said Pedro Orce, In the textbooks I teach from there's no mention that the Portuguese went to war with Spain at that time, It wasn't fought by the Portuguese themselves, but by fifty thousand crusaders lent by your king to the Emperor, I see, said Joaquim Sassa, with fifty thousand crusaders in the royal forces the communes were bound to lose, for the crusaders always win.

This night Constant dreamed that it went to unearth bones on the battlefield, it had already gathered one hundred and twenty-four skulls when the moon went down and the earth turned dark, then the dog went back to sleep. Two days later, some boys playing soldiers in the fields reported to the mayor that they had found a heap of skulls in a field of wheat, and no one ever discovered how they came to be there, all gathered into a pile. But the housewives of Villalar have nothing but good to say of those Portuguese and Spaniards who came with a wagon and have already left, For price and quality they were the most honest peddlers who had ever passed this way.

Overcome evil with good, the ancients used to say, and with good reason, at least they put their time to good use by judging facts that were then new in the light of facts that were already old. Nowadays we make the mistake of adopting a skeptical attitude toward the lessons of antiquity. The President of the United States of America promised that the peninsula would be welcome, and Canada, as we will see, was not pleased. As the Canadians point out, Unless the peninsula changes course, it is we who will be playing host and then we'll have two Newfoundlands here instead of one, little do the people on the peninsula know, poor devils, what awaits them, biting cold, frost, the only advantage for the Portuguese is that they will be close to supplies of that cod they're so fond of. They will lose their summers but have more to eat.

The spokesman at the White House hastened to explain that the President's speech had been prompted fundamentally by humanitarian considerations without aspiring to political supremacy, especially since the countries of the peninsula had not ceased to be sovereign and independent just because they had gone floating off over the waters, they will have to come to a halt one day and be like every other country, and then added, For our part, we solemnly guarantee that the traditional good-neighbor policy between the United States and Canada will not be affected by any eventuality, and as proof of America's desire to maintain friendly relations with the great Canadian nation, we propose setting up a bilateral committee to examine the various problems arising in the context of this dramatic transformation of the world's political and strategic physiognomy, which certainly constitutes a first step toward the birth of a new international community comprising the United States, Canada, and now the Iberian countries, who will be invited to participate as observers at this meeting since they are still not physically close enough for there to be any immediate prospect of specifying the eventual form of this integration.

Canada publicly expressed its satisfaction with this explanation but let it be known that it considered an early meeting to be inopportune, arguing that any terms proposed might well offend patriotic sensitivities within Portugal and Spain, and suggesting as an alternative a quadrilateral conference to examine what measures should be taken to deal with any violent opposition once the peninsula reached the Canadian coast. The United States agreed forthwith, and its leaders silently thanked God for having created the Azores, for if the peninsula had not veered northward but had moved consistently in a straight line after breaking away from Europe, the city of Lisbon would definitely have remained with its windows facing toward Atlantic City, and after much reflection they came to the conclusion that the more it veered north the better, just imagine what it would be like if Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Providence, and Boston were to be transformed into inland cities with the inevitable decline in the standard of living. There is no doubt that the President had been much too hasty when he made that initial statement. In a subsequent exchange of confidential diplomatic notes, followed by secret meetings of high-ranking officials, Canada and the United States agreed that the best solution would be to arrest the peninsula en route, if at all possible at a point sufficiently close for it to remain outside the European sphere of influence but sufficiently remote to

avoid causing any immediate or indirect damage to Canadian and American interests, and meanwhile to set up a committee charged with amending their respective immigration laws so as to strengthen discretionary clauses and discourage the Spanish and Portuguese from thinking that they can enter the North American countries at will on the pretext that we are all close neighbors now.

The governments of Portugal and Spain protested at the discourtesy of these powers that thus presumed to dispose of their interests and destinies, the Portuguese government with greater vehemence in view of the oaths it swore as a government of national salvation. Thanks to initiatives on the part of the Spanish government, contact will be established between the two peninsular countries to draw up a joint plan for exploiting the new situation to the fullest, in Madrid it is feared that the Portuguese government will enter these negotiations with the tacit hope that sometime in the future it will derive special benefits from its greater proximity to the coasts of Canada and the United States, but that depends. And it is known, or believed to be known, that in certain Portuguese political circles there is a campaign in favor of a bilateral agreement, albeit of a nonofficial nature, with the region of Galicia, which evidently won't please the central powers in Spain at all, intolerant as they are of irredentism, however disguised. There are even some who cynically claim and spread the word that none of this would have happened if Portugal had been on the other side of the Pyrenees, or, better still, had clung to the Pyrenees when the rupture occurred. That would have been one way of ending once and for all this habit of reducing the peninsula to a single country, this problem of being Iberian, but the Spaniards are deceiving themselves, for the problem will persist, and we need say no more. The days before reaching the shores of the New World are counted, a plan of action is under way so that negotiations may get under way at the right moment, neither too soon nor too late, this, after all, is the golden rule of diplomacy.

Unaware of the political intrigues being played out behind the scenes, the peninsula continues sailing westward, so steadily and easily that the various observers, whether millionaires or scientists, have already withdrawn from the island of Corvo, where they had positioned themselves in the front rows, as it were, for the sight of the peninsula passing. The spectacle was breathtaking, suffice it to say that the extreme tip of the peninsula passed less than five hundred meters away from Corvo, with great seething of waters. It was like watching the climax of a Wagnerian opera or, better still, like being at sea in a tiny vessel and seeing the enormous hulk of an unloaded oil tanker passing a few meters away, with most of its keel out of the water, it was enough, in short, to strike terror into us and make us dizzy, to send us to our knees to beg a thousand pardons for our heresies and evil deeds and to exclaim, God exists. Such is the power of primitive nature over the spirit of man, however civilized.

But while the peninsula is playing its part in the movements of the universe, our travelers are already proceeding beyond Burgos, so successful with their trading that they have decided to put Deux Chevaux on the highway, which is unquestionably the fastest

route. Farther ahead, after passing Gasteiz, they will return on to the roads that serve the smaller villages, there the wagon will be in its element, a cart drawn by horses on a country road rather than this unusual and startling exhibition of dawdling along a road designed for high speeds, this lazy trot at fifteen kilometers an hour, provided they are not going uphill and provided the animals are in a good mood. The Iberian world is so greatly altered that the traffic police who witness this do not order them to stop, they impose no fine, mounted on their powerful motorcycles they give them a nod to wish them a good journey, at most they ask about the red paint on the awning if they happen to be on the side where the patch is visible. The weather is good, there has been no rain for days, you would think summer had returned were it not for the autumnal wind that can sometimes be extremely cold, especially since we are so close to high mountains. When the women started complaining about the chill in the air, José Ana if o remarked, as if in passing, on the consequences of getting too close to high latitudes, telling them, if we end up in Newfoundland, our journey is finished, to live outdoors in that climate you have to be an Eskimo, but the women paid no attention, perhaps they weren't looking at the map.

And perhaps because they were talking, not so much about the cold they were feeling, as about a greater cold that someone else, but who, might be feeling, not they themselves who had the comfort of their partners every night, even during the day when the circumstances were favorable. Many a time one couple kept Pedro Orce com pany in the driver's seat, while the other couple lay down inside the wagon, allowing themselves to be lulled by the swaying of Deux Chevaux and then seminaked, satisfying their sudden or postponed desire. Knowing that five people were traveling in that wagon thus divided by sex, anyone with any experience of life would get a good idea of what was going on under that awning simply by looking to see who was up front in the driver's seat, if there were three men there, for example, you could be sure that the women were doing their household chores, especially the mending, or if, as we said before, there were two men and a woman in the seat together, the other woman and man would be enjoying an intimate moment, even if dressed and doing no more than talking. Clearly, these were not the only possible combinations, but neither of the women ever sat in the driver's seat unless she was with her own partner and the other woman was with her man under the awning, for they didn't want people to start gossiping. This tactful behavior came about of its own accord. There was no need to convene a family council to decide on ways and means of safeguarding morality inside and outside the awning, and working it out combinatorially, it was inevitable that Pedro Orce nearly always had to travel in the driver's seat, except on the rare occasions when the three men rested at the same time while the women took the reins, or when, all their urges satisfied, one couple sat in front while the other, their privacy restricted, refrained from engaging in any acts under the awning that might embarrass or disturb Pedro Orce, who lay stretched out on his narrow pallet arranged crosswise. Poor Pedro Orce, Maria Guavaira murmured to Joana Carda when José Anaço spoke of the frost in Newfoundland and of the advantages of being an Eskimo, and Joana Carda agreed, Poor Pedro Orce.

They nearly always set up camp before nightfall, they liked to choose a pleasant spot with water nearby, if possible within sight of some village, and if some place took their fancy they stopped there even if there were two or three hours of sunshine left. The lesson of the horses had been well learned to the advantage of all, now the animals enjoyed a longer rest, the travelers lost that human trait of haste and impatience. But ever since that day when Maria Guavaira said, Poor Pedro Orce, a different atmosphere surrounds the wagon on its journey and the people inside. This gives food for thought if we recall that only Joana Carda heard those words being spoken and that when she repeated them only Maria Guavaira was listening, and since we know they kept them to themselves, for this was not a matter for amorous dialogue, then we can only conclude that a word, once spoken, lasts longer than the sound and sounds that formed it, the word remains, invisible and inaudible, in order to be able to keep its own secret, a kind of hidden seed below the surface of the earth that germinates out of sight until suddenly it pushes the soil aside and emerges into the light, a coiled stem, a crumpled leaf slowly unfolding. They set up camp, unhitched the horses, released them from their harnesses, lit the fire, everyday actions and gestures that all of them were now capable of doing with equal skill, depending on whatever tasks they were assigned each day. But contrary to their behavior since the journey's outset, they now conversed very little and they themselves would be taken by surprise were we to tell them, Not one of you has uttered a word in the last ten minutes, then they would be aware of the special nature of that silence, or they would reply like someone unwilling to acknowledge an obvious fact and looking for some futile justification. It sometimes happens, and frankly one cannot be talking all the time. But were they to look at one another at that moment, each would see on the others' faces, as if in a mirror, the reflection of his own disquiet, the embarrassment of someone who knows that explanations are but empty words. Although it has to be said that the looks exchanged between Maria Guavaira and Joana Carda convey such explicit meanings for them that they cannot stand it for very long and soon turn their eyes away.

After finishing his chores Pedro Orce was in the habit of going off with the dog Constant, telling the others that he was off to get to know the neighborhood. He was always gone for some time, perhaps because he walked slowly, perhaps because he wandered off the main road, or, remote from the gaze of his companions, ended up resting on a boulder watching the evening draw to a close. One day recently, Joaquim Sassa had said to him, You want to be alone, are you feeling unhappy, and José Anaíço commented, If I were in his shoes, I'd probably do the same. The women had finished washing some clothes and had hung them up to dry on a rope stretched between the frame of the awning and the branch of a tree, they listened and kept silent, for they were not included in the conversation. This was some days after Maria Guavaira, because of the frosts of Newfoundland, had said to Joana Carda, Poor Pedro Orce.

They are alone, how strange that four people should give the impression of being alone, they are waiting for the soup to be ready, there is still daylight and rather than

waste time José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa check the harnesses, while the women read over and make a tally of the day's takings, which Joaquim Sassa as bookkeeper will later transfer into the ledger. Pedro Orce has wandered off, he disappeared among the trees about ten minutes ago, accompanied as usual by Constant the dog. He no longer feels cold, the breeze that is blowing is probably the last tepid waft of autumn, at least that's what it feels like after the cold we've experienced recently. Maria Guavaira says, We must buy aprons, we haven't many left in stock, and as she spoke she looked up at the trees, she stirred as she sat there, as if repressing some urge before giving way, only the harsh noise of the horses' champing could be heard, then Maria Guavaira stood up and walked toward the trees where Pedro Orce had disappeared. She did not look back, not even when Joaquim Sassa asked her, Where are you going, but in fact, he did not even finish the question, but left it suspended in midair, as it were, for the reply had already been given and could not be amended. A few minutes later the dog appeared, it went and lay down under the wagon. Joaquim Sassa was standing some meters away, as if scanning some hills in the distance. José Anaíço and Joana Carda avoided looking at each other.

Maria Guavaira finally returned, with the first shadows of evening. She arrived alone. She walked up to Joaquim Sassa but he turned away abruptly. The dog came out from under the wagon and disappeared. Joana Carda lit the oil lamp. Maria Guavaira removed the soup from the fire, poured some oil into a frying pan that she then placed on the trivet, waited for the oil to sizzle, meantime she had cracked some eggs, she scrambled them, adding some slices of sausage, soon a smell would fill the air that at any other time would have made mouths water. But Joaquim Sassa did not come to eat. Maria Guavaira called him but he refused to come. There was food left over, Joana Carda and José Anaíço didn't feel hungry, and when Pedro Orce returned the camp was already in darkness apart from the dying embers of the bonfire. Joaquim Sassa had lain down underneath the wagon, but it was a bitterly cold night, the chill comes from the mountains, there is no wind, just a mass of cold air. Then Joaquim Sassa told Joana Carda to go and sleep beside Maria Guavaira, he didn't refer to her by name, but said, Lie down beside her, I'll stay with José, and since it seemed a good moment for a bit of sarcasm, he added, There's no danger, we're decent people, there's nothing promiscuous about us. When he returned, Pedro Orce climbed into the driver's seat, who knows how but the dog Constant managed to get up there beside him. It was the first time this had happened.

All the next day Pedro Orce traveled in the driver's seat. José Anaíço and Joana Carda sat beside him and Maria Guavaira remained alone in the wagon. The horses were kept at a steady pace. When they tried to please themselves by breaking into a trot, José Anaíço restrained their impetuous speed. Joaquim Sassa traveled on foot, lagging far behind the wagon. They covered only a few kilometers that day. It was still midafternoon when José Anaíço brought Deux Chevaux to a halt in a place that looked exactly like the other, it was as if they had never got around to leaving or had come full circle, even the trees looked the same. Joaquim Sassa did not appear until much later, as the sun was

setting over the horizon. On seeing him approach, Pedro Orce withdrew, the trees soon concealed him and the dog went after him. The campfire sent up great flames, but it was still too early to prepare supper. Besides, the soup was ready and there were sausages and eggs left over. Joana Carda remarked to Maria Guavaira, We didn't buy any aprons and we only have two. Joaquim Sassa told José Anaíço, I'm leaving tomorrow, I'll need my share of the money, show me where we are on the map, there ought to be some sort of railroad around here. Then Joana Carda got up and headed toward the trees where Pedro Orce had disappeared with the dog. José Anaíço didn't ask her, Where are you going. The dog reappeared after a few minutes and went and lay down under the wagon. Time passed, and Joana Carda returned. Reluctantly, Pedro Orce came with her, but she led him gently as if there were no need for much force, or perhaps it was another kind of force. They arrived in front of the campfire, Pedro Orce with lowered head, his white hair disheveled, and the flickering light of the flames appeared to dance on top of his head. And Joana Carda, whose blouse was unbuttoned and not tucked into her slacks, said quite openly and naturally, tucking her blouse in when she realized how untidy she looked, The stick with which I drew a line on the ground has lost its power, but it can still be used to draw another line here, then we'll know who is to remain on this side and who on the other, if we cannot all be together on the same side. As far as I'm concerned, I couldn't care less, I'm leaving tomorrow, Joaquim Sassa told her. I'm the one who is going tomorrow, said Pedro Orce. Just as we came together, we can go our separate ways, said Joana Carda, but if someone has to be blamed to justify our separation, don't make Pedro Orce the scapegoat. If anyone is to blame, we are, Maria Guavaira and I, and if you think what we did calls for an explanation, then we've been wrong about each other since the day we met. I'm leaving tomorrow, Pedro Orce repeated. Don't go, said Maria Guavaira, for if you leave, it's almost certain that we'll all separate, for the men won't be able to stay with us nor we with them, not because we don't love each other, but because we don't understand each other. José Anaíço looked at Joana Carda, stretched out his hands to the fire as if they had suddenly become cold, and said, I'm staying. Maria Guavaira asked, And what about you, are you leaving or staying, Joaquim Sassa did not reply at once, he caressed the dog's head as it stood beside him, then, with his fingertips, he stroked its blue woolen collar, then the bracelet around his own arm, before saying, I'll stay, but on one condition. He didn't need to spell it out, Pedro Orce began speaking, I'm an old man, or at least getting on, I've reached that age when one isn't too sure, but let's say I'm old rather than young, Obviously not all that old. José Anaíço smiled, his smile somewhat bitter. Some times things happen in life that can never be repeated, he appeared to be about to continue, but sensed that he had said enough. Nodding his head, he withdrew to weep alone. Whether he wept a lot or a little, one cannot say, but to weep he had to be alone. That night they all slept inside the wagon, but their wounds were still bleeding, the two women slept together, as did the two betrayed men, and Pedro Orce, out of sheer exhaustion, slept soundly throughout the night. He had wanted to mortify himself with insomnia but nature proved stronger.

They awoke early, with the nestlings. As dawn broke, the first to emerge was Pedro

Orce, from the front of the wagon, then Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço from the back, and finally the women, as if they were all coming from different worlds and were about to meet here for the first time. At first they scarcely looked at one another, nothing but furtive glances, as if to confront another face would have been intolerable, too much to bear in their weak state after the crisis from which they had just emerged. Once they had drunk their morning coffee, an occasional word could be heard, bits of advice, a request, an order cautiously phrased, but now the first delicate problem had to be tackled, how were the travelers to accommodate themselves in the wagon, in the light of everything that now made the previous arrangement impossible. They were all agreed that Pedro Orce must travel in the driver's seat, but the men and women in open conflict could not continue to keep their distance. Try to imagine this distasteful and equivocal situation. If Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço were to sit up front with Pedro Orce, what conversation could they possibly hold with the driver, or more embarrassing still, were Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira to ride next to the driver, what would they say to him, what memories would they evoke, and meantime, under the awning, what biting of nails would there be, the two men asking each other, What can they be saying. These are situations that make us laugh when seen from outside, but any temptation to laugh soon disappears if we imagine ourselves in the same distress that now envelops these men. Fortunately, there's a remedy for everything, death alone has yet to follow this rule. Pedro Orce was already seated in his place, holding the reins and waiting for the others to reach a decision, when José Anaíço said, as if addressing the invisible spirits of the air, The wagon can go ahead, Joana and I will walk for a bit. And we'll do the same, Joaquim Sassa announced. Pedro Orce shook the reins, the horses gave the first sharp tug, the second one was more convincing, but even had they wanted to, they could not have gone quickly this time, the road is uphill all the way, amid mountains higher on the left than on the right. We're in the foothills of the Pyrenees, Pedro Orce thinks to himself, but it's so peaceful up here that it's hard to believe this is where those dramatic ruptures we've described took place. Trailing behind come two couples, apart, obviously, for what they have to discuss is between man and woman in the absence of witnesses.

The mountains are no good for selling, especially these wares. In addition to the sparse population typical of these mountainous regions, one must take into account the terror of the local inhabitants, who still haven't got used to the idea that this side of the Pyrenees is no longer complemented or supported on the other side. These villages are almost deserted, some completely abandoned. As the wagon passes, between doors and windows that remain firmly closed, the sound of Deux Chevaux's wheels on the stony roads is lugubrious. I'd rather be in the Sierra Nevada, thinks Pedro Orce, and these magical and entrancing words filled his heart with longing, or añoranza, as the Spanish would say. If there is any advantage to be gained from such desolation, it will be that the travelers, after so many nights of discomfort, and some promiscuity, will be able to get a good night's sleep. We are not referring to the recent and particular manifestation of promiscuity, about which opinion is divided and which the interested parties have been discussing, but simply pointing out that they will be able to sleep in the houses

abandoned by their owners. For while possessions and valuables were carried off in the general exodus, the beds were generally left behind. How remote that day now seems when Maria Guavaira vehemently rejected the suggestion of sleeping in someone else's house, let us hope this ready complacency is not an indication of a lowering in moral standards, but simply the outcome of lessons learned from hard experience.

Pedro Orce will sleep alone in a house of his choice with the dog for company. Should he decide to go for a nocturnal stroll, he's free to go out and return whenever he wishes, and this time the other men will not sleep apart from their women, Joaquim Sassa will finally be back sleeping with Maria Guavaira and José Anaíço with Joana Carda, they've probably already said all they had to say to each other and they might go on talking into the night, but human nature being what it is, out of weariness and displeasure, out of tender sympathy and sudden love, it's only natural for a man and a woman to come together, to exchange a first, uncertain kiss, and then, blessed be whoever made us so, the body awakens and desires the other body, it might be madness, it might, for the scars still throb, but the aura grows, if Pedro Orce should be walking along these slopes at this hour, he will see two houses lit up in the village, perhaps he'll feel jealous, perhaps tears will come to his eyes once more, but he will not know that at this moment the reconciled lovers are sobbing in joyful sorrow and in sudden flaring passion. Tomorrow will truly be another day, it will no longer be important to decide who should travel inside the wagon and who in the driver's seat, all combinations are now possible and none of them ambiguous.

The horses are tired, the slopes are never ending and ever upward. José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa went to have a quiet word with Pedro Orce, using the utmost tact lest their motives be misunderstood. They wanted to know if he thought they had seen enough of the Pyrenees or if he wanted to carry on until they reached the uppermost summits, and Pedro Orce replied that it was not so much the summits that attracted him as the end of the earth, although he was aware that from the end of the earth one always sees the same sea. That's why we didn't go in the direction of Donostia, what's so special about looking at a beach that has been cut in two, of standing at the edge of the sand with water on either side. But for us to see the sea from such a height, I'm not sure that the horses can make it, rejoined José Anaíço. We don't need to climb two or three thousand meters, assuming there are actually trails all the way up, but I'd rather we went on climbing until we see for ourselves. They opened the map. Running his finger between Navascués and Burgui, and then pointing in the direction of the frontier, Joaquim Sassa said, We must be about here. There don't seem to be any great elevations on this side, the road follows the river Esca, then moves away to keep on climbing, here's where things start to get difficult, on the other side there's a peak of more than one thousand seven hundred meters. There isn't any longer. There was, said José Anaíço. Yes, of course, there was, agreed Joaquim Sassa, I must ask Maria Guavaira for some scissors to cut the map along the frontier. We could try this path and if it gets too hard on the horses we can always turn back, suggested Pedro Orce.

It took them two days to reach their destination. At night they could hear the wolves howling in the hills, and they were apprehensive. People from the lowlands, they suddenly became aware of the danger they were facing. Should wild beasts invade the encampment, they would first savage the horses, then attack any human beings. If only they had a gun with which to defend themselves. Pedro Orce confessed, It's my fault that we're running these risks, let's turn back, but Maria Guavaira replied, Let's go on, the dog is here to protect us. A dog can't do much when confronted by a pack of wolves, Joaquim Sassa reminded her, This one can, and however strange this may seem to anyone who knows more about these things than the narrator, Maria Guavaira was right. One night the wolves came fairly close, the terrified horses began neighing, such anguish, and pulling at their tethers, the men and women looked around to see where they might take shelter from an attack, only Maria Guavaira insisted, though she was trembling, They won't come, and she repeated, They won't come. They kept the bonfire blazing all through that sleepless night, and the wolves drew no closer. Meanwhile, the dog appeared to grow bigger in the circle of light. The flickering shadows created the impression that heads, tongues, and teeth were multiplying, nothing but an optical illusion, human forms expanded, swelled out of all proportion, and the wolves went on howling, but only because of their fear of other wolves.

The road had been severed, truly severed in the literal sense of the word. To both left and right, the mountains and valleys were suddenly cut off in a clean line, as if sliced with a blade or cut out of the sky. The travelers, now some way from the wagon, which the dog was guarding, advanced cautiously and in dread. About a hundred meters from the scission there was a customs post. They went inside. Two typewriters still stood there, one with a sheet of paper stuck in the roller, a customs form with some words typed on it. The cold wind penetrated an open window and rustled the papers lying on the floor. There were scattered feathers. The world is coming to an end, Joana Carda exclaimed. Then let's go and see how it's ending, suggested Pedro Orce. They left. They trod cautiously, worried that cracks might suddenly appear in the ground, a clear sign that the land is unstable. José Anaíço was the one who remembered this, but the road looked smooth and even, with only an occasional bump caused by wear and tear. Ten meters from the gap, Joaquim Sassa said, Better not get too close on foot in case we get dizzy, I'm going to crawl. They got down on all fours and advanced, at first on their hands and knees, then dragging themselves along the ground, they could hear their hearts pounding in uneasiness and fear, sweating profusely despite the intense cold, asking themselves whether they would be brave enough to reach the edge of the abyss, but none of them wished to look like a coward, and almost in a trance they found themselves looking out to sea at an altitude of about one thousand eight hundred meters, the escarpment a sheer vertical cut and the sea shimmering below, the tiniest of waves in the distance and white spume where the ocean waves thrashed against the mountain as if trying to dislodge it. Pedro Orce cried out in exaltation, jubilant in his grief, The world is coming to an end, he was repeating Joana Carda's words, and they all repeated them. My God, happiness exists, said the unknown voice, and perhaps that's all it is, sea, light, and

vertigo.

The world is full of coincidences, and if one thing does not coincide with another that happens to be close to it, that is no reason for denying coincidences, all it means is that what is coinciding is not visible. At the exact moment that the travelers were leaning over the sea, the peninsula came to a halt. No one there noticed what had happened, there was no jolt as it braked, no sudden loss of balance, no impression of rigidity. It was only two days later, at the first inhabited spot they came to after descending from the magnificent heights, that they heard the astounding news. But Pedro Orce said, If they maintain that the peninsula has come to a halt, it must be true, but speaking for myself and Constant, I swear to you that the earth is still shaking. As he spoke, Pedro Orce's hand was resting on the dog's back.

Newspapers throughout the world, some putting it on the front page beneath a banner headline, published the historic photograph that showed the peninsula, which perhaps we should now definitively call an island, sitting quietly out in the middle of the ocean, maintaining its position with millimetric precision in relation to the cardinal points by which the earth is ruled and guided, with Oporto as far north of Lisbon as ever, Granada as far south of Madrid as it has been since Madrid came into being, and all the rest with the same familiar contours. The journalists concentrated their imaginative powers almost exclusively on divising bold, dramatic headlines, inasmuch as the geological displacement, or rather the tectonic enigma, continued to unfold, as indecipherable now as on the first day. Fortunately, the pressure of public opinion, for want of a better expression, had diminished, people had stopped asking questions, they were satisfied with the suggestive power of certain striking comparisons, *The Birth of a New Atlantis*, *A Piece Has Moved on the Universal Chessboard*, *A Link Between America and Europe*, *An Apple of Discord Between Europe and America*, *A Battlefield for the Future*, but the headline that made the deepest impression was the one in a Portuguese newspaper that read *The Need for a New Treaty of Tordesilla*, this is truly the simplicity of genius, the author of the idea looked at the map and verified that, give or take a kilometer or two, the peninsula would be situated on the line that in those glorious days had divided the world into two parts, one for me, one for you, one for me.

In an unsigned editorial it was proposed that the two peninsular countries adopt a joint and complementary strategy that would make them the pointer on the scales of world politics, Portugal facing west, toward the United States, Spain turned to the east, toward Europe. A Spanish newspaper, anxious to come up with something equally original, advocated an administrative plan whereby Madrid would become the political center of this entire strategy, on the pretext that the Spanish capital is situated, as it were, at the geometric center of the peninsula, which is not even true if one looks at the map, but there are people who have no qualms about the means used to achieve their objective. The chorus of protests did not come only from Portugal, the autonomous Spanish regions also rebelled against the proposal, which they saw as further proof of Castilian centralism. On the Portuguese side, as one might have expected, there was a sudden revival of interest in the occult and in esoteric sciences, this did not go very far, simply because the situation changed radically, nevertheless it lasted long enough to sell out every copy of Padre António Vieira's *History of the Future* and *The Prophecies of Bandana*, as well as Fernando Pessoa's *Mensagem*, but that goes without saying.

From the standpoint of realpolitik, discussion of the problem in European and American foreign ministries centered on spheres of influence, that is to say on whether, ignoring the question of distance, the peninsula or island should preserve its natural ties with Europe, or whether, without entirely severing them, it should orient itself rather toward the ideals and destiny of the great American nation. With no hope of exerting any clear influence in the matter, the Russians pointed out time and time again that nothing should be decided without their participation in the discussions, and meantime reinforced

the fleet that from the outset had been accompanying the errant peninsula under the watchful eye, needless to say, of the fleets of the other powers, the Americans, the British, and the French.

It was within the framework of these negotiations that the United States informed Portugal, in an audience, urgently requested by Ambassador Charles Dickens, with the President of the Republic, that the continuance of a government of national salvation made no sense whatsoever once the circumstances no longer prevailed that had been adduced. In the most dubious fashion, Mr. President, if you will allow me to express an opinion, to justify its constitution. This tactless remark became public indirectly, not because the relevant ministries of the Presidency had made any public announcement, or through any statements made by the Ambassador as he left the Palace of Belém, in fact he simply remarked that his discussions with the President had been very frank and constructive. But that was enough for the members of the governments representing the parties who would inevitably have to go, were the government to be reshuffled or a general election called, to launch an attack on the Ambassador's intolerable meddling. The internal problems of Portugal, they declared, must be solved by the Portuguese, adding with spiteful irony, Just because the Ambassador wrote David Copperfield doesn't entitle him to come and give orders in the land of Camoëns and The Lusíads. At this point, the peninsula, with no warning, started moving again.

Pedro Orce had been right when he said, there at the foot of the Pyrenees, It may have stopped, fine, but it's still trembling, and so as not to be the only one to say so, he had put his hand on Constant's back, the dog was also trembling, as the others were themselves able to confirm, repeating the unique experience of Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço beneath the Cordovan olive tree, in the arid lands between Orce and Venta Micena. But now, and the shock was general and universal, the movement was neither westward nor eastward, neither to the south nor to the north. The peninsula was turning on itself, widdershins, counterclockwise, that is, which, once made public, immediately caused the Portuguese and the Spaniards to suffer from dizziness, although the speed of rotation was anything but vertiginous. In the face of this decidedly unusual phenomenon, which threatened to jeopardize all the laws of physics, especially the mechanical ones, by which the earth had governed itself, all political negotiations, alliances made behind closed doors or in corridors, and diplomatic maneuvers, whether direct or step by step, were broken off. And we must agree that it could not have been easy to keep calm, when one knew, for example, that the table at the council of ministers, along with the building, the street, the city, the country, and the entire peninsula, was whirling like a turntable going around and around as if in a dream. Those who were more sensitive swore they could feel a circular motion, while admitting that they could not feel the earth itself going around in space. To show what they meant, they stretched out their arms seeking something to hold onto, but they did not always succeed, sometimes they even fell down, ending up on their backs on the ground, where they watched the sky slowly turning, at night the stars and the moon, during the day, with a smoked lens, the sun. Some doctors

were of the opinion that these were nothing but manifestations of hysteria.

Obviously, more radical skeptics were in good supply, go on, the peninsula turning around on itself, simply impossible, sliding would be one thing, everybody knows about landslides and what happens to an escarpment when there is a heavy rainfall could also happen to a peninsula even without rain, but all this talk about rotation would imply that the peninsula was wrenching itself from its own axis, not only is such a thing objectively impossible, but it would inevitably cause the central core to snap off, sooner or later, and then we would certainly be adrift with no moorings whatsoever, at the mercy of the whims of fate. These skeptics were forgetting that the rotation might instead resemble that of a plate revolving on top of another, note that this lamellar schist is composed, as the name implies, of thin layers of shale placed one over the other. If the adhesion between two of them should loosen, the one could revolve quite easily on top of the other, thus maintaining, theoretically speaking, a certain degree of union between them that would prevent total separation. That's precisely what's happening, asserted those who defended the theory. And for confirmation, they sent divers once more to the bottom of the sea, as far down as possible into the bowels of the ocean, and with them went the Archimedes, the Cyana, and a Japanese vessel with an unpronounceable name. As a result of all these efforts, the Italian investigator repeated those famous words, he emerged from the water, opened the hatch, and spoke into the microphones of television stations throughout the world, It cannot move and yet it moves. There was no central axis coiled like a rope, there were no layers of shale, yet the peninsula turned majestically in the middle of the Atlantic, and as it turned, it became less and less recognizable, Is this really where we've spent our lives, people asked themselves. The Portuguese coast veered to the southeast and what had formerly been the easternmost point of the Pyrenees was pointing in the direction of Ireland. Observing the peninsula had become an obligatory part of transatlantic commercial flights, although frankly to little advantage, for there the indispensable fixed point to which the movement might be related was missing. In fact, nothing could replace the image captured and transmitted by satellite, the photograph taken from a great altitude that really gave some idea of the magnitude of the phenomenon.

This movement continued for a month. Seen from the peninsula, the universe transformed itself little by little. Every day the sun emerged from a different point on the horizon, and one had to search for the moon and the stars in the sky, their own movement, proceeding around the center of the system of the Milky Way, was no longer enough, now that there was this other movement transforming space into a frenzy of flickering stars, as if the universe were being reorganized from one end to the other, perhaps following the discovery that it had not turned out right the first time around. Until one day the sun set precisely where in normal times it had risen, and then there was no point in saying that it was not true, that appearances were deceiving, that the sun was following its normal path and was incapable of any other. The man in the street simply retorted, Let me just tell you, mister, that the morning sun used to come through my

front window and now it comes in at the back, so perhaps you could explain that in simple language. The expert explained it as best he could, he brought out photographs, made drawings, opened a map of the sky, but the pupil could not be persuaded and the lesson ended with him asking the good doctor to please arrange for the rising sun to go back to coming in through his front window. Seeing that he could not convince him with scientific arguments, the expert told him, Don't worry, if the peninsula turns all the way around you will see the sun as before, but the suspicious pupil rejoined, In other words, Mr. Know it-all, you think all this is happening so that things can go back to being the same as before. And in fact they did not.

It should already have been winter, but winter, which seemed at one point to have arrived, suddenly backed away, that is the only verb to describe it. It was neither winter nor autumn, certainly not spring, not remotely like summer. It was a season in suspension, without a date, as if the world were just beginning and the seasons and their timing had still to be decided. Deux Chevaux proceeded slowly along the foothills and the travelers now stopped from time to time, astonished above all at the spectacle of the sun, which no longer appeared over the Pyrenees but rose from the sea, casting its first rays on the uppermost slopes of the mountain as far as the snow-covered peaks. Here, in one of these villages, Maria Guavaira and Joana Carda realized that they were pregnant. Both of them. There was nothing surprising about their situation, one might even say that these women had done their utmost to become pregnant during these months and weeks, giving themselves wholeheartedly to their men without the slightest precaution on either side. Nor should anyone be surprised that both women became pregnant at the same time, this was simply another of those coincidences that constitute life on this earth, the good thing being that they can sometimes be clearly identified for the enlightenment of the skeptics. But the situation is embarrassing, it leaps to the eye, and the embarrassment stems from the difficulty of ascertaining two dubious paternities. The fact is, were it not for the false step taken by Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira when, moved by pity or some other more obscure sentiment, they went into the woods and forests in search of the solitary Pedro, whom, such was his confusion and disquiet, they almost had to beg to penetrate them, to impregnate them with his last seeds, were it not for this lyrical and far from erotic episode, Maria Guavaira's child would undoubtedly be accepted as that fathered by Joaquim Sassa and Joana Carda's child as that efficiently fathered by José Ana 150. But then Pedro Orce had to cross their path, although it might be truer to say that the temptresses waylaid him, and decency overcome by shame concealed its face. I don't know who the father is, said Maria Guavaira, who had set the example, Neither do I, said Joana Carda, who later followed her example, for two reasons, first to prove that she was no less heroic, and second to correct error with error, making exception the rule.

But neither this argument nor another, however subtle, can help them to evade the main problem. José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa must be told. How will they react and what expression will come over their faces when their respective women tell them, I'm

pregnant. Were the situation more harmonious, they would be, as one is wont to say, overcome with joy, and perhaps even now, with the initial shock, their faces and expressions would betray the sudden jubilation that springs from the soul, but their faces would soon cloud over, their eyes would darken, foretelling a dreadful scene. Joana Carda suggested that they say nothing, with the passing of time and the swelling of their bellies, the evident fact of the matter would soothe ruffled susceptibilities, would appease offended honor and reawakened resentment. But Maria Guavaira did not agree, she felt that it would be sad for the courage and generosity shown on all sides to end in a feeble deception, in a cowardice worse than tacit complacency. You're right, Joana Carda conceded, we must take the bull by the horns, she answered, without realizing what she was saying, that is the danger of using certain expressions without paying enough attention to the context.

That same day the two women each called her man aside and walked out with him into the country, there where the wide open spaces reduce the most choleric and rending cries to mere whispers, that unfortunately is the reason why human voices fail to reach heaven, and there, without beating about the bush, as they had agreed, the women said, I'm pregnant and I'm not sure whether you're the father or Pedro Orce is. Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço reacted as one might have expected. There was the furious outburst, the violent gesticulations, the poignant sorrow, they were out of sight of each other, but their gestures were identical, their words equally bitter, Not satisfied with what has happened, you have the nerve to come and tell me you're pregnant and you don't know who's responsible, How can I be expected to know, and in any case when the child is born there won't be any doubt, What on earth are you talking about, There will be some resemblance, Of course, but suppose it only resembles you, If it only resembles me then it will be my child and no one else's, Are you trying to make a fool of me, I'm not making a fool of anyone, that's something I never do, So how are we supposed to solve the problem, If you could accept that I might have slept with Pedro Orce for one night, then you can put up with waiting nine months before making any decision, if the child resembles you then it's yours, and if it resembles Pedro Orce then it's his and you can disown it and me as well, if that's what you want, and as for only resembling me, don't you believe it, there's always some physical trait that comes from the other partner. And what about Pedro Orce, how do we deal with him, are you going to tell him, No, for another two months nothing will show, especially in these floppy blouses and loose jackets, I think it's best to say nothing, I must say that it would make me angry to see Pedro Orce looking smugly at you, at both of you, with the expression of a champion stud, that was the expression José Anaíço used, with his superior command of language. Joaquim Sassa was much more down to earth, I'd hate to see Senhor Pedro Orce strutting around like the cock of the walk. So in the end the two men resigned themselves to this affront, encouraged by the thought that their worst fears might be proved groundless once nature took its course and the mystery was cleared up.

It did not even dawn on Pedro Orce, who had never known what it meant to have

children, that his semen might be germinating in the wombs of the two women. How true that man never gets to know all the consequences of his deeds, here is an excellent example, the memory of the happy moments he enjoyed begins to fade, and their possible effect, modest as yet, but more important in itself than all the rest, should it come to pass and be confirmed, is invisible to his eye and concealed from his knowledge. God Himself made men, yet does not see them. Pedro Orce, however, is not entirely blind, he can see that something has upset the harmony within the couples, a certain remoteness has crept in, not exactly coldness, more a note of reserve without hostility, but causing long periods of silence, the journey had begun so well and now it is as if they had nothing more to say to each other, or as if they were too frightened to utter the only words that would have made any sense. It was over and done with, what had been alive was now dead, if that is what it is all about. It could also be that the fire of those first jealous moments had been rekindled with the passage of time. And perhaps because no one saw me passing, Pedro Orce started going for long strolls again into the surrounding neighborhood whenever they set up camp. It is almost incredible how much this man can walk.

One day, after they'd already left behind the first foothills that announce the Pyrenees from afar, Pedro Orce had gone ahead along secluded roads, feeling almost tempted never to go back to the camp, these are thoughts that come into one's head in moments of weariness, when he came across a man resting by the roadside. He looked about his own age, if not older, but worn out and tired. Beside him stood a donkey with packsaddle and load, nibbling at the sun-bleached grass with its yellow teeth, for the weather, as we mentioned earlier, is not very favorable for fresh growth and causes what new shoots there are to sprout out of place and out of season, nature has lost its way, as any lover of metaphors would say. The man was chewing a lump of stale bread and nothing else, obviously in bad shape, a tramp without food or shelter, but he seemed peaceful and harmless and, besides, Pedro Orce is not easily intimidated, since he has clearly shown on these long walks through deserted countryside. The dog hasn't left him for a moment, or rather it has left him twice, but in better company and out of sheer discretion.

Pedro Orce greeted the man, Good afternoon, and the other replied, Good afternoon, both men noted a familiar pronunciation, a southern accent, that of Andalusia, to put it in a nutshell. But the man eating the stale bread found it highly suspicious to come across a man and a dog in these parts, remote from any habitation, and looking as if they had been dropped there by a flying saucer, as a precaution, and without trying to conceal it, he reached out for his stick, which had a metal tip and was lying on the ground. Pedro Orce observed this gesture and the tramp's uneasiness, he was probably afraid of the dog as it stood there watching him, its head lowered, without moving a muscle. Don't worry about the dog, it's quite gentle, well, not exactly gentle, but it won't attack unless it thinks it's in danger of being harmed. How can the dog tell when someone is going to harm it. Now that's a good question and I wish I knew the answer, but neither I nor my

traveling companions have been able to discover the dog's breed or where it came from. I thought you were on your own and lived nearby, I'm traveling with some friends, we have a wagon and because of what's happened we set out along the road, and we've never left it. You're from Andalusia, I can tell from your accent. I'm from Orce in the province of Granada. I hail from Zufre in the province of Huelva. Pleased to meet you, The pleasure's mine. May I join you for a moment, Make yourself comfortable, but I'm afraid all I can offer you is some stale bread. Many thanks, but I've already eaten with my companions, Who are they, Two friends and their women, the two men and one of the women are Portuguese, the other woman is Galician, And how did you all meet up. Ah, that's a long story.

The other did not insist, saw that he should not, and said, You must be wondering how someone from the province of Huelva landed up here. In times like these, you rarely find people where you would expect to find them. I come from Zufre and have relatives living there unless they've gone elsewhere, but when the rumor spread that Spain was about to break away from France, I decided to go and see for myself. Not Spain, the Iberian peninsula. Yes, of course. And it wasn't from France that the peninsula broke away but from Europe, that may sound like the same thing but there's a difference. I don't understand these niceties, I only wanted to go and see for myself. And what did you see. Nothing, I reached the Pyrenees and saw only the sea. That was all we saw. There was no France and there was no Europe, now in my opinion, something that isn't there is the same as something that never was and I had wasted my time traveling league after league in search of something that didn't exist. Well, that's where you're wrong. Wrong in what way. Before the peninsula separated from Europe, Europe did exist, naturally there was a frontier, and you had to cross from one side to the other, the Spanish went, the Portuguese went, foreigners came, did you never see tourists in your region. Sometimes, but there was nothing to see there. They were tourists coming from Europe, But if I never saw Europe when I was living in Zufre, and if I've now left Zufre and I still haven't seen Europe, what's the difference. You haven't been to the moon either, yet it exists. But I can see it, at the moment it's off course, but I can still see it. What's your name. Roque Lozano at your service. I am Pedro Orce, Are you named after the place where you were born. I wasn't born in Orce, I was born in Venta Micena, which is nearby. That reminds me, when I began my journey I met two Portuguese who were traveling to Orce. Perhaps they are the same two. I'd really like to know. Come with me and you'll find out. If that's an invitation, I'll gladly accept it, I've been traveling alone for such a long time. Get up slowly in case the dog thinks you're going to attack me, I'll hand you your stick. Roque Lozano put his bundle on his back and pulled the donkey's rein, off they went, the dog at Pedro Orce's side, perhaps this is how it should always be, wherever there is a man there should be an animal with him, a parrot perched on his shoulder, a snake coiled around his wrist, a beetle on his lapel, a scorpion curled up, we might even say a louse in his hair, if this bug did not belong to that detested race of parasites, a tribe not tolerated even by insects, although they, poor creatures, are not to blame, for God willed them as they are.

Traveling at the same aimless pace, the wagon had penetrated the heart of Catalonia. Business flourished, it was a brilliant idea to have launched themselves into this branch of commerce. Fewer people are to be seen on the roads now, which means that, although the peninsula is still rotating, people are returning to their normal habits and pursuits, if that is the right word to describe their former habits and pursuits. Villages are no longer deserted, although one cannot be sure that all the houses are now lived in by their previous occupants, some men are now with other women, some women with other men, and their children are thrown together. This is the inevitable outcome of all great wars and migrations. That very morning José Anaïçounced that they must come to a decision about the group's future, since there no longer appeared to be any danger of collisions or clashes. On the most likely or at least most plausible hypothesis, in his opinion, the peninsula would go on rotating on the same spot, which would not inconvenience people's everyday existence, and although it might no longer be possible to know where the various cardinal points are, what does it matter, for there's no law that says that we cannot live without the north. But now they had seen the Pyrenees, and what a wonderful thrill they had experienced, looking down at the sea from such a height, Just like being in an airplane, Maria Guavaira had exclaimed, only to be corrected by the experienced José Anaïço, There's no comparison, no one feels dizzy looking out the window of an airplane after all, but up here, unless we hold on with all our might, we'd be tempted to throw ourselves into the sea. Sooner or later, said José Anaïço, referring to the warning he had given that morning, we shall have to decide about our future, unless we mean to spend the rest of our lives on the road. Joaquim Sassa agreed but the women were reluctant to express any opinion, they suspect there may be some ulterior motive in this sudden haste, only Pedro Orce timidly reminded them that the earth was still trembling, and if this was not a sign that the journey had not reached its end, then perhaps they could explain to him why they had made it in the first place. At another time, the wisdom of this argument, however speculative, would have made some impression, but one must bear in mind that the wounds of the soul are deep, otherwise they would not be of the soul, but now whatever Pedro Orce says, he is suspected of some ulterior motive, this is the thought one can read in the eyes of José Anaïço as he says, Immediately after dinner, each person will say what he thinks ought to be done, whether we should return home or carry on, and Joana Carda simply asked, Which home.

Now here comes Pedro Orce bringing another man with him. From this distance he looks old, just as well, we have quite enough problems of cohabitation already. The man is leading a donkey harnessed with packsaddle and load, as old-fashioned a donkey as you have ever seen, but this one is an unusual silvery color, were it called Platero, it would, like the scraggly Rocinante, be worthy of its name. Pedro Orce comes to a halt on the invisible line that marks the boundary of the encampment, he must observe the formalities of presenting and introducing the visitor, something that must always be done on the other side of the threshold, these are rules we do not have to learn, the historic man within us observes them, one day we tried to enter the castle without permission and we were taught a lesson. Pedro Orce says emphatically, I came across this fellow

countryman and I've brought him along to have a bowl of soup with us, there is obvious exaggeration in the term fellow countryman, but it is understandable at a time like this, a Portuguese from Minho and one from Alentejo feel nostalgia for the same fatherland, even though five hundred kilometers had separated the one from the other, and now they are both six hundred kilometers from home.

Joaquim Sassa and José Anaíço not recognize the man, but the same cannot be said regarding the donkey. There is something unmistakable and familiar about it, in a manner of speaking, which is not surprising, for a donkey does not change in appearance over a few months, while a man, if he is dirty and unkempt, if he has let his beard grow, has become thin or fat, or has lost his hair, would need his own wife to strip him to see if that special mark is in the same place, sometimes much too late, when everything is over and repentance will not gather the fruit of pardon. Observing the rules of hospitality, José Anaíço said, You are welcome, do join us, and if you'd like to unload the donkey and give it a rest, there's enough fodder there for all of them, the donkey and the horses. Without its packsaddle and load the donkey looked much younger, and its coat was now seen to be in two tones of silver, the one dark, the other light, and both quite striking. When the man went to tether the beast, the horses looked askance at the newcomer, doubting whether it could be of much assistance to them with its scraggly frame that would be difficult to harness. The man returned to the campfire and before pulling over the stone on which he would sit, he introduced himself, My name is Roque Lozano. As for the rest, the most elementary rules of narrative demand that it avoid repetition. José Anaíço was about to ask if the donkey had a name, if it was named by any chance Platero or Silver, but the final words uttered by Roque Lozano, which in the end always repeat themselves, I came to see Europe, caused him to fall silent. His memory was suddenly jolted and he muttered to himself, I know this man, just as well he remembered in time, it would be nothing less than offensive if it took a donkey for people to recognize each other. Similar thoughts must have been stirring in Joaquim Sassa's head when he said hesitantly, I have the impression that we've met before, Me too, replied Roque Lozano, you remind me of two Portuguese I met at the beginning of my journey, but they were traveling by car and they had no women with them, Life takes so many turns, Senhor Roque Lozano, and one gains and loses so much that one could just as easily lose a Deux Chevaux car as find a wagon with two horses, two women, and yet another man, quipped Maria Guavaira, And there's more on the way, interrupted Joana Carda. Neither Pedro Orce nor Roque Lozano had any idea what she was talking about, but José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa knew, and they did not much like this allusion to secrets of the human body, especially women's bodies.

They had recognized each other, any doubts had disappeared. Roque Lozano was the man they had encountered between the Sierras Morena and Aracena, traveling with his donkey Platero toward Europe, which in the end he had not seen, although that was still his intention and his hope of salvation. And now where are you heading, Joana Carda asked him, I'm going back home, because despite all these turns the earth has taken it's

bound to be in the same place. You mean the earth. No, my home, one's home is always where the earth is. Maria Guavaira started to ladle the soup into bowls after adding a little water to ensure that there would be enough for everyone. They ate in silence, except for the dog, which methodically gnawed a bone, and the beasts of burden, which munched and chewed the hay. Now and then you could hear a dry bean pod snap. These animals have nothing to complain about as far as their rations are concerned, if one considers the prevailing difficulties.

Some of the mote personal difficulties will be resolved by the family council scheduled for tonight. The presence of a stranger will be no impediment. On the contrary, for now that Roque Lozano has said he is returning home, what are we going to do, wander at random like gypsies, buying and selling clothes off the rack, or shall we return home, go back to work, to a normal existence, for even if the peninsula should never again come to a halt, everyone will start getting used to it, just as mankind got used to inhabiting the constantly moving earth. We're not even capable of imagining how much it must have upset everyone's balance to go whizzing around an aquarium with a sunfish inside. Forgive me for correcting you, said the unknown voice, but there's no such thing as a sunfish, there's a moonfish but no sunfish. In that case I won't argue with you, but if there isn't one there ought to be. Alas, you can't have everything, José Anaíço concluded, comfort and freedom are incompatible, this wandering existence has its charms, but four solid walls with a roof overhead give more protection than a wagon covered with canvas and bouncing along over potholes. Joaquim Sassa suggested, Let's start by taking Pedro Orce home, and then, he broke off in mid-sentence, unable to finish, and at this point Maria Guavaira intervened and said clearly what had to be said, Very well, let's drop Pedro Orce off at his pharmacy and then go on to Portugal, José Anaíço can return to his school, wherever it is, while we continue in a direction once referred to as north, Joana Carda will have to decide whether she prefers to stay behind in Ereira with her cousins or go back to her husband in Coimbra, once this matter has been settled we can head for Oporto and drop Joaquim Sassa off outside his office, his bosses must be back from Peñafiel by now, and finally I'll make my own way home where a man is waiting to marry me, he'll say he's been guarding my property while I've been away, Now marry me, and with a torch I'll set this wagon on fire, as one burns a dream, and perhaps I will finally manage to push the stone vessel out to sea and embark.

Such a long speech leaves the person speaking breathless, not to mention those who are listening. For a moment they all remained silent, then José Anaíço on a stone raft. But it's much too big for us to feel like sailors, rejoined Maria Guavaira, and Joaquim Sassa observed smiling, How true, nor has traveling through space above the world turned us into astronauts. There was further silence, then it was Pedro Orce's turn to speak. Let's do one thing at a time, Roque Lozano can join us and we'll take him to his family, who must be waiting for him in Zufre, and then we can decide about our own future. But there isn't any room for anyone else to sleep inside the wagon, José Anaíço insisted. Don't let that worry you, if that's the only reason why I shouldn't accompany you, I'm used to

sleeping out in the open, just so long as it doesn't rain, and if I can sleep under the wagon that will be as good as having a roof over my head at night, I was beginning to get tired of being on my own, believe me, Roque Lozano confided.

Next day they resumed their journey. Grizzly and Chess grumbled at the good fortune of donkeys, this one is trotting behind the wagon, comfortably attached with a rope and relieved of any burden, as naked as it came into the world, with its nice silvery sheen, its master is in the driver's seat, chatting about the past with Pedro Orce, the couples are talking under the canvas, the dog walks ahead, on patrol. From one moment to the next, almost miraculously, harmony has been restored to the expedition. Yesterday, after the final deliberation, they drew up an itinerary, nothing very precise but just so as not to go blindly. First they would descend to Tarragona, then travel along the coast as far as Valencia, move inland through Albacete as far as Cordoba, go down to Seville, and finally, less than eighty kilometers away, arrive at Zufre, where we shall say, Here comes Roque Lozano, back safe and sound from his great adventure, he left poor and poor he returns, he has discovered neither Europe nor El Dorado, not everyone who has gone in search of them has found them, nor is the traveler always to blame. Time and time again, there are no riches whatsoever where, out of malice or ignorance, we were promised we would find them. Then we will look on and see how he is received, Dear grandfather, Dearest father, Beloved husband, What a pity you've returned, I thought you might have perished in the wilderness or been devoured by wolves, not everything can be said aloud.

Then at Zufre the family council will convene once more, now where are we going and what will they say about us when we arrive, where, for what, for whom, Your questions are false if you already know the answer. Within so short a time, the unknown voice had spoken twice.

After turning from east to west until a perfect semicircle had been traced, the peninsula began to incline. At that precise moment, and in the most rigorous sense, if metaphors as a vehicle of literal sense can be rigorous, Portugal and Spain were two countries with their legs up in the air. Let us leave to the Spaniards, who have always disdained our assistance, the task and responsibility of evoking to the best of their ability, the structural changes in the physical space in which they live, and let us say here, with the modest simplicity that has always characterized primitive peoples, that the Algarve, a southern region on the map since time immemorial, became in that supernatural moment the most northerly part of Portugal. Incredible but true, as a Father of the Church preached, and has continued to preach even unto the present day, not because he's alive, for all the Fathers of the Church are dead, but because people are constantly borrowing the phrase and using it indifferently, as much for spiritual profit as for human expediency. If the fates had decreed that the peninsula should be immobilized once and for all in that position, the consequences, social and political, cultural and economic, not to mention the psychological aspect, which people tend to overlook, the various consequences, as we were saying, and their aftermath would have been drastic, radical, in a word, earth-shattering. One need only remember, for example, that the famous city of Oporto would find itself stripped, with no hope of recourse, whether logical or topographical, of its precious title of Capital of the North, and if this reference in the eyes of some cosmopolites smacks of provincialism and lack of vision, then let them imagine what would happen if Milan were suddenly to end up in Calabria in southern Italy, and the Calabrians were to prosper from the commerce and industry of the north, a transformation not entirely impossible, if we bear in mind what happened to the Iberian peninsula.

But it lasted, as we were saying, only for a minute. The peninsula was falling but went on rotating. Therefore, before proceeding any further, we must explain what we mean by the word fall in the present context. The meaning here is clearly not the immediate one, as in falling bodies, which would imply that the peninsula had literally started to sink. After all, if throughout all those days at sea, often deeply troubled and overshadowed by the threat of imminent catastrophe, no such calamity occurred, nor anything comparable, it would be the greatest misfortune for the odyssey to end now in total submersion. However much it may cost us, we are now resigned to the possibility that Ulysses may not reach the shore in time to encounter sweet Nausicaa, but may the weary sailor at least be allowed to touch the coast of the island of the Phaeacians, or failing that one, some other, so that he may rest his head on his own forearm, if no woman's breast awaits him. Let us be calm, then. The peninsula, we promise, is not about to sink into the cruel sea, where, should such havoc ensue, everything would disappear, even the highest summit of the Pyrenees, such is the depth of these chasms. Yes, the peninsula is falling, there is no other way of describing it, but southward, for that is how we divide the planisphere, into north and south, top and bottom, upper and lower, even white and black, figuratively speaking, although it may seem surprising that the countries below the Equator do not use different maps, of a kind that might present an

appropriately inverted image of the world, one complementary to our own. But things are what they are, they have that irresistible virtue, and even a schoolchild understands the lesson the first time around with no need for further explanation. Even the dictionary of synonyms, so easily dismissed, confirms as much, one descends or falls downward, fortunately for us this stone raft is not sinking to the bottom, gurgling through a hundred million lungs, blending the sweet waters of the Tagus and the Guadalquivir with the bitter swell of the infinite ocean.

There is no lack, there never has been, of those who affirm that poets are truly superfluous, but I wonder what would become of us if poetry were not there to help us understand how little clarity there is in the things we call clear. Even at this point, after so many pages have been written, the narrative material can be summed up as the description of an ocean voyage, albeit not an entirely banal one, and even at this dramatic moment when the peninsula resumes its route southward, while continuing to turn around on its imaginary axis, we would certainly have no way of surpassing and enhancing this simple statement of facts were it not for the inspiration of that Portuguese poet who compared the revolution and descent of the peninsula to the movement of a child in its mother's womb as it takes its first tumble in life. The simile is magnificent, although we must deplore this yielding to the temptations of anthropomorphism, which sees and judges everything in an essential rapport with human beings, as if nature had nothing better to do than to think about us. It would all be much easier to understand if we were simply to confess our infinite fear, the fear that leads us to people the world with images resembling what we are or believe ourselves to be, unless this obsessive effort is nothing other than feigned courage or sheer stubbornness on the part of someone who refuses to exist in a void, who decides not to find meaning where no meaning exists. We are probably incapable of filling emptiness, and what we call meaning is no more than a fleeting collection of images that once seemed harmonious, images on which the intelligence tried in panic to introduce reason, order, coherence.

Generally speaking, the poet's voice is not understood, but there are nevertheless some exceptions to this rule, as can be seen in that lyrical episode whose felicitous metaphor, stated and restated, was on everyone's lips, even if one cannot include in this popular enthusiasm the majority of the other poets, something that need not surprise us if we bear in mind that they are not exempt from all these human feelings of spite and envy. One of the most interesting consequences of that inspired comparison was the resurgence of the maternal spirit, of maternal influence, however mitigated by the changes modernity brought to family life. And if we reconsider the known facts, there are many reasons for believing that Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira were precursors of this broader renewal, through innate sensitivity rather than deliberate premeditation. The women undoubtedly triumphed. Their genital organs, if you'll pardon the crude anatomical reference, finally became the expression, at once reduced and enlarged, of the expulsive mechanism of the universe, of all that machinery that operates by extraction, that nothingness that will become everything, that uninterrupted progression

from the small to the large, from the finite to the infinite. It is satisfying to see that at this point the commentators and scholars got into deep water, but no surprise, for experience has taught us all too well how inadequate words become as we get closer to the frontiers of the inexpressible, we try to say love and the word will not come out, we try to say I want and we say I cannot, we try to utter the final word only to realize that we have gone back to the beginning.

But in the reciprocal action of cause and effect, another consequence, at once fact and factor, has come to alleviate the graveness of these discussions and to leave everyone, as it were, smiling and embracing. It so happened that from one moment to the next, allowing for the exaggeration always implicit in these simplified formulas, all, or nearly all, the fertile women of the peninsula declared themselves pregnant, although no significant change in the contraceptive practices of these women and their men had been observed, we are referring, of course, to the men with whom they slept, whether regularly or by chance. As things stand, people are no longer surprised. Several months have passed since the peninsula separated from Europe, we have traveled thousands of kilometers over this violent open sea, the leviathan just missed colliding with the terrified islands of the Azores, or perhaps, as later emerged, it was never meant to collide with them, but the men and women did not know that as they found themselves obliged to flee from one side to the other, these were only some of the many things that happened, such as waiting for the sun to rise on the left only to see it appear on the right, not to mention the moon, as if its inconstancy ever since its breaking away from the earth were not enough, and the winds that blow on all sides and the clouds that shift from all horizons and circle above our dazzled heads, yes, dazzled, for there is a living flame overhead, as if man need not, after all, emerge from the historic sloth of his animal state and might be placed once more, lucid and entire, in a newly formed world, pure and with its beauty intact. All of this having happened, and the aforementioned Portuguese poet having declared that the peninsula is a child conceived on a journey and now finds itself revolving in the sea as it waits to be born in its watery womb, why should we be astonished that the wombs of women should be swollen, perhaps the great stone falling southward fertilized them, and how do we know if these new creatures are really the daughters of men rather than the offspring of that gigantic prow that pushes the waves before it, penetrating them amid the murmuring waters, the blowing and the sighing of winds.

The travelers learned of this collective pregnancy from radio reports and newspaper stories, and television programs spoke of nothing else. Journalists had only to catch a woman on the street and they were shoving a microphone into her face and bombarding her with questions, how and when did it happen, what name was she going to give the baby, poor woman, with the camera devouring her alive, she blushed and stammered, the only thing she did not do was to invoke the constitution because she knew they would not take her seriously. Among the travelers on the wagon there was renewed tension, after all, if all the women of the peninsula are suddenly pregnant, these two women here

are not saying a word about their own mishap and one can understand their silence, if they were to confess that they are pregnant, Pedro Orce would include himself on the list of possible fathers and the harmony they restored with such difficulty last time might not survive a second blow. One evening, then, as Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira were serving dinner to the men, they said with a wry smile, Just imagine, all the women in Spain and Portugal are pregnant and here we are with no hope at all. Let us accept this momentary pretense, let us grant that José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa may disguise their annoyance, the annoyance of the male who sees his sexual potency called into question, and the worst of it is that the women's feigned sarcasm may well have struck a nerve, for if it is true that they are both pregnant, it is also true that nobody knows by whom. With so many unanswered questions, this pretense has certainly not relieved the tension, in the fullness of time it will become clear that Maria Guavaira and Joana Carda were pregnant after all, despite their denial. What explanation will they offer, for the truth always awaits us, the day arrives when it must be faced.

Visibly embarrassed, the Prime Ministers of both countries appeared on television, not that there was any reason to feel awkward when speaking of the demographic explosion that would be evident in the peninsula nine months hence, twelve or fifteen million children born almost at the same hour, crying out in chorus to the light, the peninsula transformed into maternity ward, happy mothers, smiling fathers, at least in those cases where there appears to be sufficient certainty. It is even possible to gain some political advantage from this aspect of the situation by pointing to the population figures, by appealing for austerity for the sake of our children's future, by going on about national cohesion and comparing this fertility with the sterility prevailing in the rest of the western world. One can only rejoice at the thought that the demographic explosion had been preceded by a genetic explosion, since no one can believe that this collective pregnancy is of a supernatural order. The Prime Minister now speaks of the health measures to be taken, of maternity services on a national scale, of the teams of doctors and midwives who will be hired and deployed at the appropriate time, and his face betrays conflicting emotions, the solemnity of his official statement vies with his urge to smile, he appears to be on the point of saying, any minute now, Sons and daughters of Portugal, the benefits we reap will be great and I trust that the pleasure has been just as great, for to bring forth children without indulging the flesh is the worst punishment of all. The men and women listen, exchange smiles and glances, they can read each other's thoughts, recall that night, that day, that hour, when driven by a sudden urge they came together and did what had to be done, beneath a sky that was slowly turning, a demented sun, a demented moon, the stars in turmoil. The first impression is that this might be illusion or dream, but when the women appear with swollen bellies, then it will be clear that we have not been dreaming.

The President of the United States of America also addressed the world. He declared that notwithstanding the peninsula's diversion toward some unknown place lying to the south, the United States would never abdicate its responsibility to civilization, freedom,

and peace, although the nations of the peninsula cannot count, now that they are passing through contested spheres of influence, They cannot count, I repeat, on aid equal to what awaited them when it seemed likely that their future would become inseparable from that of the American nation. This was, more or less, his utterance to the wide world. In private, however, in the secrecy of the Oval Office of the White House, ice cubes clinking in his bourbon, the President would have confided to his advisers, If they were to be stranded in the Antarctic our worries would be over, but what will become of us, countries roaming from one place to another, no strategy can cope with it, take the bases we still have on the peninsula, what good will they be except for firing missiles at the penguins. One of his advisers would have then pointed out that if one considered it carefully, the new route was really not all that bad, They are moving down between Africa and Latin America, Mr. President, Yes, this route could be advantageous, but it could also encourage further insubordination in the region. And perhaps because of this annoying thought, the President thumps the table, upsetting the smiling portrait of the First Lady. An elderly adviser jumps with fright, looks around, and says, Do be careful, Mr. President, you can never tell what a thump like that might do.

It is no longer the flayed skin of the bull but a gigantic stone in the shape of one of those flint artifacts used by men in prehistoric times, chipped away patiently, blow by blow, until it becomes a working tool, the upper part compact and rounded to fit into the palm of the hand, the lower part pointed for the tasks of scraping, digging, cutting, marking, and designing, and also, because we have not yet learned to resist the temptation, to wound and kill. The peninsula has stopped rotating and is now falling southward, passing between Africa and Central America, as the President's adviser would have explained, and its form, to the surprise of anyone who might still have in mind or on his map its former position, matches that of the two continents on either side, we see Portugal and Galicia to the north, occupying the entire width from west to east, then the great mass starts becoming narrower, Andalusia and Valencia still jutting out on the left, the Cantabrian coast on the right, and continuing the line, the great wall of the Pyrenees. The tip of the stone, the cutting edge, is the Cape of Croesus, carried from Mediterranean waters to these threatening seas, so far from the native sky of one who was the neighbor of Cerbère, that little French town so often mentioned at the beginning of this narrative.

The peninsula is descending, but descending slowly. The experts, albeit with the utmost caution, predict that the movement is about to stop, trusting in the obvious and universal truth that if the whole, as such, never stops, the constituent parts must stop at some time, this axiom being demonstrated by human life itself, which abounds as we know in potential comparisons. With this scientific statement, the game of the century got under way, with an idea that must have emerged practically at the same time everywhere in the world, and that consisted of establishing a system for placing a double wager, on the time and place in which the suspension of movement would be verified. To take a hypothetical case to clarify the point, at 5:33:49 A.M., local time of the person betting, obviously, and the day, month, and year, and the position, this being limited to

the latitude in degrees, minutes and seconds, the aforementioned Cape of Croesus serving as a point of reference. There were trillions of dollars at stake, and if someone were to guess both answers correctly, that is to say, the precise moment and the exact place, which according to the calculation of probabilities was little short of unthinkable, that person endowed with almost divine foresight would find himself in possession of greater wealth than has ever been gathered on this earth, which has seen so many riches. Nor has there ever been a more terrible game than this one, for with each passing moment, with each kilometer covered, the number of gamblers with any chance of winning is gradually reduced, although one should note that many of those eliminated come back to wager once more, thus increasing the prize money to an astronomical figure. Of course not everyone manages to raise the money for another bet, clearly many of them find no way out of their financial ruin but suicide. The peninsula is falling southward leaving behind a trail of deaths of which it is innocent, while in the wombs of its women are growing millions of children that it innocently engendered.

Pedro Orce goes around looking restless and ill at ease. Scarcely speaks, spends hours away from the encampment, comes back exhausted and refuses to eat, his companions inquire if he's feeling ill and he tells them, No, no, I'm not ill, without further explanation. Any conversation he makes is reserved for Roque Lozano, they are always reminiscing about their native parts as if there were no other topic of conversation. The dog accompanies him everywhere and one senses that the man's restlessness has affected this animal, once so placid. José Anaigo has already commented to Joana Carda, If he thinks that history is about to repeat itself, the poor man alone and abandoned who finds compassionate women ready to comfort him and bring him sexual relief, he's sorely deceived, and she answered with a wan smile, You're the one who's deceived, Pedro Orce's trouble, if that's the right word, is something quite different. What trouble. I don't know, but I can assure you he's not yearning for us this time, a woman is never in any doubt about these things. Then we should talk to him, make him speak, perhaps he really is ill. Perhaps, but even that isn't certain.

They travel along the Sierra de Alcaraz, today they will set up camp near a village that, according to the map, is called Bienservida. At least in name, it is indeed well served. Perched in the driver's seat, Pedro Orce tells Roque Lozano, From here we should soon be arriving in the Province of Granada, if that's where we're heading. But my land is still far away, You'll get there, Oh yes, I'll get there, but the question is whether there's much point, These are things we only discover afterwards, give the gray horse a prod, it's slowing down. Roque Lozano shook the reins, flicked his whip over the horses' rumps, the merest graze, whereupon Grizzly obediently adjusted its trot. The couples travel inside the wagon, they converse in whispers, and Maria Guavaira says, Perhaps he'd rather go back home but doesn't like to say so in case we take offense. You could be right, replied Joaquim Sassa, we'd better ask him straight out, tell him we understand, no hard feelings, no promise or agreement need last a lifetime, after all, friends we are and friends we remain, one day we'll come back and visit him. God forbid, Joana Carda

muttered under her breath. Have you something else in mind. No, not at all, just a premonition. What premonition, Maria Guavaira asked her. That Pedro Orce is going to die. We can all expect to die sooner or later. But he'll be the first to go.

Bienservida lies off the main road. They had gone there to sell their wares, they bought some provisions, renewed their supply of water, and returned to the road still early. But they did not get far, stopping a little farther on at a small country church known as Turruchel, a pleasant spot to spend the night. Uncharacteristically, José Anaíço and Joaquim Sassa jumped down from the wagon as it came to a halt and went to assist Pedro Orce in his descent from the driver's seat, making him say, as he held on to their outstretched hands, What's this, my friends, I'm not an invalid. He failed to notice that the word friends immediately brought tears to the eyes of these men who harbor the sorrow of mistrust in their hearts even while they receive this weary body, which falls into their arms despite the old man's proud statement, for there comes a time when pride has nothing but words, is nothing but words. Pedro Orce puts his feet on the ground, takes a few steps, and pauses with an expression of amazement on his face, in his every gesture, as if intense light were paralyzing and blinding him. What's wrong, asked Maria Guavaira, who had drawn near. Nothing, it's nothing. Do you feel unwell, Joana Carda asked him. No, it's something else. He bent down, spread out his hands on the ground, then summoned the dog Constant, placed one hand on its head, ran his fingers along its neck, its spine, back, and rump. The dog did not move, it stood stock-still as if trying to dig its paws into the earth. Now Pedro Orce had stretched out, his head resting on a tuft of grass, his white hair mingling with fresh shoots, flowering at a time when it should have been winter. Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira knelt beside him and held his hands, What's the matter, tell us what you feel, for he was clearly suffering some great pain, to judge from the expression on his face. He opened his eyes wide and stared at the sky, at the passing clouds. Maria Guavaira and Joana Carda did not need to look up to see them, they floated slowly in Pedro Orce's eyes just as the street lamps of Oporto had played in the dog's eyes so long ago, in some other existence, perhaps, and now they are together, reunited with Roque Lozano who has as much experience of life as of death. The dog appears to be hypnotized by Pedro Orce's expression, it stares at him, head lowered and hairs bristling, as if it were about to confront all the wild beasts in the world, and then Pedro Orce said distinctly, word by word, I no longer feel the earth, I can no longer feel it. His eyes darkened, a gray cloud, the color of lead, passed slowly across the sky, slowly, very slowly. With the utmost delicacy Maria Guavaira lowered his eyelids and announced, He's dead, whereupon the dog came running and let out a howl that was almost human.

A man dies, and then what. His four friends weep, even Roque Lozano, whom he had known for such a short time, rubs his eyes furiously with clenched fists, and the dog, which has howled only once, now stands beside the corpse, soon it will lie down and rest its enormous head on Pedro Orce's chest. But we must decide what to do with the body, José Anaíço remarked. Let's take it to Bienservida and inform the authorities, we can do no more for him. But Joaquim Sassa reminded him, You once told me that the poet

Machado must have been buried under a holm oak, let's do the same with Pedro Orce, but Joana Carda had the last word, Neither to Bienservida nor underneath a tree, let's take the body to Venta Micena, let's bury him in the place where he was born.

Pedro Orce lies on the bier stretched crosswise in the wagon. Beside him kneel the two women holding his cold hands, those same eager hands that scarcely became familiar with their bodies, and in the driver's seat are the two men. Roque Lozano leads the horses by the reins, they thought they were going to have a rest, and here they are on the road, after all, and in the middle of the night, such a thing has never happened to them before, perhaps the sorrel remembers another night, perhaps it was asleep and dreaming that it was shackled so that a painful sore might be cured with ointment and the morning dew, a man and a woman came looking for it accompanied by a dog, they untied it from its trappings and the horse did not know if the dream began or ended there. The dog walks underneath the wagon and below Pedro Orce as if it were carrying him, such is the weight it feels pressing down on its neck. There is a burning oil lamp hanging from the steel arch that supports the canvas in front. They still have one hundred and fifty kilometers to go.

The horses can feel death pursuing them and need no other whip. The silence of night is so deep that the wagon's wheels can scarcely be heard as they turn on the rough surface of these old roads, and the horses' trot sounds muffled as if their hooves were clad in rags. No moon will appear. They travel among shadows, there is a total blackout, an apagón or negrum, like the first night of all before those words were spoken, Let there be light, to no great wonder, for God knew that the sun would inevitably appear two hours hence. Joana Carda and Maria Guavaira have been weeping since they set out. Out of compassion they had given their bodies to this man whose corpse they all now escort, with their own hands they had drawn him to them, shown him what to do, and perhaps the unborn children forming inside their wombs and being made to tremble by their sobs are his offspring, dear God, how all things in this world are linked together, and here we are thinking that we have the power to separate or join them at will, how sadly mistaken we are, having been proved wrong time and time again, a line traced on the ground, a flock of starlings, a stone thrown into the sea, a blue woolen sock, but we are showing them to the blind, preaching to the deaf with hearts of stone.

The sky was still covered in darkness as they reached Venta Micena. Not a soul had they met along the entire route, almost thirty leagues, and slumbering Orce was a ghost, its houses like the walls of a labyrinth, their windows and doors firmly closed. Rising above the rooftops, the Castle of the Seven Towers was like a mirage. The street-lamps flickered like stars about to disappear, the trees in the square, reduced to trunks and thick boughs, might well have been the remnants of a petrified forest. The travelers passed in front of the pharmacy, this time there was no need to stop, the details of the route were still fresh in their memories, Go straight in the direction of Maria, continue for three kilometers after the last houses, you'll come to a little bridge there with an olive tree nearby, I'll catch up with you shortly. He has already arrived. After the last bend they

saw the cemetery with its whitewashed walls and enormous cross. The gate was locked, they had to force it open. José Anaíço went in search of a crowbar, pushed the claw between the gate and the post, but Maria Guavaira grabbed him by the arm, We're not going to bury him here. She pointed toward the white hills in the direction of the Cueva de los Rosales where the skull of the most ancient man in Europe had been excavated, the one who had lived more than a million years ago, and she said, The body will rest over there, that's the spot Pedro Orce himself might have chosen. They took the wagon as far as possible, the horses could scarcely walk, their hooves dragging in the loose dust. There is no one living in Venta Micena to attend the funeral, all the houses have been abandoned, nearly all of them are in ruins. On the horizon the shadowy outline of the mountains can scarcely be seen, those same mountains that Orce Man must have watched as he lay dying. It is still night, Pedro Orce is dead, in his eyes only a dark cloud remains and nothing more.

When the wagon could go no farther, the three men removed the corpse. Maria Guavaira helps them while Joana Carda carries the elm branch in one hand. They climb a flat-topped hill, and the dry soil crumbles under their feet, scattering down the slope. The corpse of Pedro Orce sways, comes close to slipping and taking its bearers with it, but they manage to hoist it to the top, where they rest it on the ground. They are bathed in sweat, covered in white dust. Roque Lozano starts digging the grave, having asked the others to leave the job to him. The soil comes away easily, the crowbar serves as a spade and their hands as shovels. Light begins to dawn to the east, the blurred form of the sierra has turned black. Roque Lozano emerges from the hole, shakes the soil from his hands, kneels and starts to lift the corpse with the help of José Anaíço, who takes it by the arms. They lower the body slowly into the ground, the grave is not deep, should anthropologists ever return to these parts they would have no difficulty in finding it. Maria Dolores will say, Here's a skull, and the leader of the expedition will take a quick look, It's of no interest, we have plenty of those. They covered the body and smoothed out the ground until it merged with the rest of the terrain, but they had to remove the dog, which was trying to scratch at the grave with its claws. Then Joana Carda stuck the elm branch into the ground where Pedro Orce's head lay buried. It is not a cross, as one can see, nor a sign of mourning, it is only a branch that has lost any value it ever had, yet it can still be put to this simple use, a sundial in a fossilized wilderness, perhaps a resuscitated tree, if a piece of dry wood stuck in the ground is capable of working miracles, of creating roots, of ridding Pedro Orce's eyes of that dark cloud. Tomorrow the rain will fall over these fields.

The peninsula has stopped. The travelers will rest here until tomorrow. It is raining as they are about to leave, they have called the dog, which has not left the grave all this time, but it will not come. It's only to be expected, observed José Anaíço, dogs cannot bear to be separated from their master, sometimes they actually pine away. He was mistaken. The dog Ardent looked at José Anaíço, then moved off slowly, head lowered. They would never see it again. The journey continues. Roque Lozano will remain in Zufre,

he will knock on the door of his house saying, I've come back, that's his story and perhaps someone will tell it one day. As for the others, they will travel on their way, who knows what future awaits them, how much time, what destiny. The elm branch is green. Perhaps it will flower again next year.

THE HISTORY OF THE SIEGE OF LISBON

Translated from the Portuguese by
Giovanni Pontiero

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R T V X Y W U S

FOR PILAR

Until you attain the truth,
you will not be able to amend it.
But if you do not amend it,
you will not attain it. Meanwhile,
do not resign yourself.

FROM The Book of Exhortations

THE PROOF-READER said, Yes, this symbol is called deleatur, we use it when we need to suppress and erase, the word speaks for itself, and serves both for separate letters and complete words, it reminds me of a snake that changes its mind just as it is about to bite its tail, Well observed, Sir, truly, for however much we may cling to life, even a snake would hesitate before eternity, Draw it for me here, but slowly, It's very easy, you only; have to get the knack, anyone looking absent-mindedly will imagine my hand is about to trace the dreaded circle, but no, observe that I did not finish the movement here where it began, I skirted it on the inside, and now I'm going to continue below until I cut across the lower part of the curve, after all, it resembles a capital Q and nothing else, Such a pity, a drawing that was so promising, Let us content ourselves with the illusion of similarity, but in truth I tell you, Sir, if I may express myself in prophetic tones, the interesting thing about life has always been in the differences, What does this have to do with proof-reading, You authors live in the clouds, you do not waste your precious wisdom on trifles and non-essentials, letters that are broken, transposed and inverted, as we used to classify these flaws when texts were composed manually, for then difference and defect were one and the same thing, I must confess that my deleaturs are less rigorous, a squiggle is good enough for everything, I have every confidence in the judgment of the printers, that famous and close-related clan of apothecaries, so skilled in the solving of riddles that they are even capable of deciphering what has never been written, And then the proof-readers set about solving the problems, You are our guardian angels, in you we put our trust, you for example, remind me of my caring mother, who would comb the parting in my hair, over and over again, until it looked as if it had been made with a ruler, Thanks for the comparison, but if your dear mother is dead, it would be worth your while seeking perfection on your own account, the day always comes when it is necessary to correct things in greater depth, As for corrections, these I make, but the more serious problems I quickly resolve by writing one word over another, I've noticed, Don't say it in that tone of voice, I am doing my best without taking too many liberties, and who does his best, Yes, Sir, no more can be expected of you, especially in your case, where there is no desire to modify, no pleasure in making changes, no inclination to amend, We authors are for ever making changes, we are perpetually dissatisfied, Nor is there any other solution, because perfection only exists in the kingdom of heaven, but the amendments of authors are something else, more problematic, and quite different from the amendments we make, Are you trying to tell me that the proof-reading fraternity actually enjoys what it does, I wouldn't go so far, it depends on one's vocation and a born proof-reader is an unknown phenomenon, meanwhile, it seems certain that in our heart of hearts, we proof-readers are voluptuaries, I've never heard that before, Each day brings its sorrows and satisfactions, and also some profitable lessons, You speak from experience, Are you referring to the lessons, I'm referring to voluptuousness, Of course, I speak from my own experience, there has to be some experience in order to judge, but I've also benefited from observing the behaviour of others, which is no less edifying as a moral science, By this criterion certain authors from the past would fit this description, wonderful proof-readers, I can think of the proofs revised by Balzac, a dazzling exponent of corrections and addenda, The same is true of our own Eça de Queiroz, lest we fail to

mention the example of a compatriot, It occurs to me that both Eça and Balzac would have felt the happiest of men in this modern age, confronted by a computer, interpolating, transposing, retracing lines, changing chapters around, And we, the readers, would never know by which paths they travelled and got lost before achieving a definitive form, if such a thing exists, Now, now, what counts is the result, there is nothing to be gained from knowing the calculations and waverings of Camoens and Dante, You, Sir, are a practical man, modern, already living in the twenty-second century, Tell me, do the other symbols also have Latin names as in the case of deleatur, If they do, or did, I'm not qualified to say, perhaps they were so difficult to pronounce that they were lost, In the dark ages, Forgive me for contradicting you, but I would not use that phrase, I suppose because it's a platitude, Not for that reason, platitudes, clichés, repetitions, affectations, maxims from some almanac, refrains and proverbs, all of these can sound new, it's merely a question of knowing how to handle properly the words that precede and follow them, Then why would you not say, in the dark ages, Because the age ceased to be dark when people began to write, or to amend, a task, I repeat, which calls for other refinements and a different form of transfiguration, I like the phrase, Me, too, mainly because it's the first time I've used it, the second time it will have less charm, It will have turned into a platitude, Or topic, which is the learned word, Do I detect a hint of sceptical bitterness in your words, I see it more as bitter scepticism, It comes to the same thing, But it does not have the same meaning, authors have always tended to have a good ear for these differences, Perhaps I'm getting hard of hearing, Forgive me, that is not what I was suggesting, I'm not touchy, carry on, tell me first why you feel so bitter, or sceptical, as you would have it, Consider, Sir, the daily life of proof-readers, think of the horror of having to read once, twice, three or four or five times books that, Probably would not even warrant a first reading, Take note that it was not I who spoke such grave words, I am all too aware of my place in literary circles, voluptuous certainly, I confess, but respectful, I fail to see what is so terrible, besides it struck me as being the obvious ending to your phrase, that eloquent suspension, even though the suspension marks are not apparent, If you want to know, consult the authors, provoke them with what I have half said and with what you have half said, and you will see how they respond with the famous anecdote of Apelles and the shoemaker, when the craftsman pointed out an error in the sandal worn by one of the figures and then, having verified that the artist had corrected the mistake, ventured to give his opinion about the anatomy of the knee, At that point Apelles, enraged at his insolence, told him, Cobbler, stick to your last, a historic phrase, Nobody likes people peering over the wall of his backyard, In this case Apelles was right, Perhaps, but only as long as some learned anatomist did not come along to examine the painting, You are definitely a sceptic, All authors are Apelles, but the shoemaker's temptation is the most common of all amongst humans, after all, only the proof-reader has learnt that the task of amending is the only one that will never end in this world, Many of the shoemaker's temptations make sense in the revision of my book, Age brings us one good thing which is bad, it calms us down, and quells our temptations, and even when they are overpowering, they become less urgent, In other words, he spots the mistake in the sandal, but remains silent, No, what I allow to pass is the mistake of

the knee, Do you like the book, I like it, You don't sound very enthusiastic, Nor did I note any enthusiasm in your question, A question of tactics, the author, however much it may cost, must show some modesty, The proof-reader must always be modest, and, should he ever get it into his head to be immodest, this would oblige him, as a human figure, to be the height of perfection, He did not revise the phrase, the verb to be three times in the same sentence, unforgivable, wouldn't you agree, Forget the sandal, in speech everything is excused, Agreed, but I cannot forgive your low opinion, I must remind you that proof-readers are serious people, much experienced in literature and life, My book, don't forget, deals with history, That is indeed how it would be defined according to the traditional classification of genres, however, since I have no intention of pointing out other contradictions, in my modest opinion, Sir, everything that is not literature is life, History as well, Especially history, without wishing to give offence, And painting and music, Music has resisted since birth, it comes and goes, tries to free itself from the word, I suppose out of envy, only to submit in the end, And painting, Well now, painting is nothing more than literature achieved with paintbrushes, I trust you haven't forgotten that mankind began to paint long before it knew how to write, Are you familiar with the proverb, If you don't have a dog, go hunting with a cat, in other words, the man who cannot write, paints or draws, as if he were a child, What you are trying to say, in other words, is that literature already existed before it was born, Yes, Sir, just like man who, in a manner of speaking, existed before he came into being, What a novel idea, Don't you believe it, Sir, King Solomon, who lived such a long time ago, affirmed even then, that there is nothing new under the sun, so if they acknowledged as much in that remote age, what are we to say today, thirty centuries later, if I correctly recall what I read in the encyclopaedia, It's curious that even as a historian, I would never have remembered, if suddenly asked, that so many years have passed, That's time for you, it races past without our noticing, a person is taken up with his daily life when he suddenly comes to his senses and exclaims, dear God, how time flies, only a moment ago King Solomon was still alive and now three thousand years have passed, It strikes me that you've missed your vocation, you should have become a philosopher, or historian, you have the flair and temperament needed for these disciplines, I lack the necessary training, Sir, and what can a simple man achieve without training, I was more than fortunate to come into the world with my genes in order, but in a raw state as it were, and then no education beyond primary school, You could have presented yourself as being self-taught, the product of your own worthy efforts, there's nothing to be ashamed of, society in the past took pride in its autodidacts, No longer, progress has come along and put an end to all of that, now the self-taught are frowned upon, only those who write entertaining verses and stories are entitled to be and go on being autodidacts, lucky for them, but as for me, I must confess that I never had any talent for literary creation, Become a philosopher, man, You have a keen sense of humour, Sir, with a distinct flair for irony, and I ask myself how you ever came to devote yourself to history, serious and profound science as it is, I'm only ironic in real life, It has always struck me that history is not real life, literature, yes, and nothing else, But history was real life at the time when it could not yet be called history, Sir, are you sure, Truly, you are a walking interrogation and disbelief endowed with arms, That only leaves my

head, Everything in its own good time, the brain was the last thing to be invented, Sir, you are a sage, Don't exaggerate, my friend, Would you like to see the final proofs, There's little point, the author has already made his corrections, all that remains now is the routine task of one final revision, and that is your responsibility, I appreciate your trust, Well deserved, So you believe, Sir, that history is real life, Of course, I do, I meant to say that history was real life, No doubt at all, What would become of us if the deleatur did not exist, sighed the proof-reader.

ONLY WHEN A VISION a thousand times sharper than nature can provide might be capable of perceiving in the eastern sky the initial difference that separates night from day, did the muezzin awake. He always woke at this hour, according to the sun, no matter whether summer or winter, and he needed no instrument to measure time, nothing other than the infinitesimal change in the darkness of the room, the first hint of light barely glimpsed on his forehead, like a gentle breath passing over his eyebrows, or that first and almost imponderable caress which, as far as is known or believed, is the exclusive and secret art never revealed to this day of those beautiful houris who attend the believers in Mohammed's paradise. Secret, and also prodigious, if not an impenetrable mystery, is their ability to regain their virginity the moment they lose it, this by all accounts supreme bliss in eternal life, thus proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that death does not bring an end to our labours or those of others, any more than to our undeserved sufferings. The muezzin did not open his eyes. He could go on resting there a little longer, while the sun, very slowly, began approaching from the earth's horizon, but still so far away that no cockerel in the city had raised its head to probe dawn's movements. It is true that a dog did bark, to no avail, for everyone else was asleep, perhaps dreaming that they were barking in their dreams. It is a dream, they thought, and went on sleeping, surrounded by a world filled with odours that were certainly stimulating, but none so potent as to rouse them with a start, the unmistakable smell of danger or fear, to give only these basic examples. The muezzin got up and fumbled in the dark until he found his clothes, and dressed before leaving the room. The mosque was silent, nothing but hesitant footsteps that echoed under the arches, a shuffling of cautious feet, as if he were afraid of being swallowed up by the ground. At no other time of day or night had he ever experienced this torment of the invisible, only at this early hour when he was about to climb the stairs of the minaret in order to summon the faithful to morning prayers. A superstitious scruple made him feel quite guilty that the inhabitants should still be sleeping when the sun was already over the river, and awakening with a start, dazzled by the light of day, would ask aloud, where was the muezzin who failed to summon them at the appropriate hour, someone more charitable might say, Perhaps the poor man is ill, and it was not true, he had disappeared, yes, carried off into the bowels of the earth by some evil genie from the darkest depths. The winding staircase was difficult to climb, especially since this muezzin was already quite old, fortunately he did not need to have his eyes blindfolded like the mules who drive the water wheels blindfolded to prevent them from becoming dizzy. When he got to the top he could feel the cool morning breeze on his face and the vibrations of the dawning light, as yet without any colour, for there is no colour to that pure clarity which precedes the day and comes to graze one's skin with the merest suggestion of a shiver, as if touched by invisible fingers, a simple impression which makes you wonder whether the discredited divine creation might not, after all, in order to chasten the sceptics and atheists, be an ironic fact of history. The muezzin slowly ran his hand along the circular parapet until he found engraved in the stone the sign pointing in the direction of Mecca, the holy city. He was ready. A few more seconds to give time for the sun to cast its first rays on the earth's balconies and for him to clear his throat, because a muezzin's declamatory powers must be loud and clear from the very first cry,

and that is when he must show his mettle, not when his throat has softened with the effort of speech and the consolation of food. At the muezzin's feet lies a city, further down, a river, everything is still asleep, but restless. Dawn begins to spread over the houses, the surface of the water mirrors the sky, and then the muezzin takes a deep breath and calls out in piercing tones, Allahu akbar, proclaiming the greatness of Almighty God to the heavens, and he repeats these words, just as he will utter and repeat the following phrases, in an ecstatic outburst, calling upon the world to witness that there is no other God than Allah, and that Mohammed is the messenger of Allah, and having affirmed these essential truths he summons the faithful to prayer, Come to recite the azalá, but man being indolent by nature, although a believer in Him who never sleeps, the muezzin charitably reproaches those whose eyes are still closed, Prayer is better than sleep, As-salatu jayrun mitt an-nawn, for those who understand this language, and he ended by declaring that Allah is the only God, La ilaha ilia llah, but once only this time, for that is enough when pronouncing definitive truths. The city murmurs its prayers, the sun has come out, lighting up the roof-terraces, and soon the inhabitants will start to appear in their patios. The minaret is bathed in full light. The muezzin is blind.

In his book the historian gave no such description. Simply that the muezzin climbed the minaret and from there summoned the faithful to prayer in the mosque, without specifying whether it was morning or noon, or sunset, for certainly in his opinion, such minute details would be of no historical interest and all the reader needed to know was that the author knew enough about the life of that time to be able to give them due mention. And for this we are indebted to him, for since his theme is that of battle and siege, and he is writing about the most virile of deeds, he could happily dispense with the raptures of prayer, which is the most submissive of situations, for he who prays, surrenders without a struggle and is for ever vanquished. Although, rather than ignore and fail to consider anything that might challenge these contradictions between prayer and warfare, we might here record, being so recent in time, and because of all the famous witnesses who are still alive, we might here record, we repeat, that much celebrated miracle at Ourique, when Christ appeared to the Portuguese king, and the latter called out to Him, while the army, prostrate on the ground, began to pray, Appear before the infidels, Oh Lord, before the infidels, and not before me who believes in your powers, But Christ had no desire to appear before the Moors, and the more the pity, otherwise instead of that most vicious battle, we might today be able to record in these annals the glorious conversion of the hundred and fifty thousand barbarians who finally perished, a waste of souls who might have raised their voices to heaven. That's life, certain things cannot be avoided, we never cease to importune God with our wise exhortations, but destiny has its own intransigent laws, and so often with the most surprising and dramatic effects, as in the case of Camoens who was able to exploit that inflammatory battle cry, by casting it into two immortal verses. How true that in nature nothing is created and nothing lost, everything used to advantage.

Those were good times, when, in order to receive satisfaction, all we had to do was

to ask with the appropriate words, even in difficult cases, already disillusioned, as it were, like a patient without hope of being cured. For example, this very same king, who, having been born with shrivelled, or atrophied, legs, as people say nowadays, was miraculously healed, without any doctor having laid a finger on him, and even if he had done so, it would have been to no avail. Nor are there any signs, no doubt because he was a person destined to rule, that he had to importune the heavenly powers, we refer to the Virgin and the Lord, not to the angels of the sixth hierarchy, in order to produce this edifying outcome, thanks to which, who knows, Portugal may owe her independence. It so happened that Dom Egas Moniz, the tutor of young Afonso, was asleep in his bed when Holy Mary appeared to him in a vision and said, Dom Egas Moniz, are you asleep, and he, not knowing whether he was awake or dreaming, asked, in order to be certain, My Lady, who are you, and she politely replied, I am the Virgin, and I command you to go to Carquere in the municipality of Resende, and if you dig there you will find a church which was once built in my name, and you will also find my statue, repair it for it is in a lamentable state after being so sadly neglected, and then you must keep vigil there, and you will lay the boy on the altar, whereupon I assure you he will be instantly cured and restored to health, and take good care of him thereafter, because I happen to know that my Son is thinking of entrusting him with the destruction of the enemies of the Faith, and obviously that is something he cannot do with stunted legs. Dom Egas Moniz awoke as happy as could be, convened his aides and, mounting his donkey, made his way to Carquere and ordered his men to dig at the spot pointed out by the Virgin, and lo and behold there was the church, but the surprise is ours rather than theirs, for in those blessed times warnings from on high were never gratuitous or misleading. It is true that Dom Egas did not carry out the Virgin's instructions to the letter, for when she told him to dig, it is our understanding that she meant with his own hands, and what did he do, he ordered others to dig, the serfs working the land most likely, for even at that time these social inequalities existed. Let us be grateful that the Virgin is not easily offended, otherwise she might have shrivelled up little Afonso's legs once more, because just as there are miracles that do good, some miracles have proved to be harmful, as those wretched pigs in Holy Scripture can testify, for they threw themselves over the precipice when Sweet Jesus put the demons that had been plaguing the possessed man into their bodies, whereby these innocent animals suffered martyrdom, and they alone, for much greater was the downfall of the rebellious angels who were immediately turned into devils when they rebelled, and as far as we know, not one of them died, which makes it difficult to pardon the improvidence of Our Lord God, who carelessly missed the opportunity of putting an end to this unfortunate race once and for all, wise is the proverb that cautions, he who spares his enemy, will perish at his hands, let us hope that God will not have cause to repent one day when it is much too late. Nevertheless, if at that fatal moment he should have time to remember his past life, let us hope His spirit will be enlightened and He will understand that He should have spared all of us, vulnerable pigs and humans, those vices, sins and feelings of discontent which are, as the saying goes, the work and mark of Satan. Between the hammer and the anvil we are a red-hot iron, which has been beaten so much that the heat is extinguished.

For the present, we have had enough of sacred history. We do want to know, however, who wrote the tale about the beautiful awakening of the muezzin at dawn in Lisbon, with so many factual details that it sounds like the testimony of some eyewitness here in our presence, or, at least, the ingenious use of some contemporary document, not necessarily relevant to Lisbon, because, for the purpose, one would only need a city, a river and a clear morning, the most banal of compositions, as we know. The reply, surprisingly enough, is that no one wrote it, and despite appearances, it is not written, the whole thing was nothing more than vague thoughts in the proof-reader's mind as he was reading and correcting what he had surreptitiously missed in the first and second proofs. The proof-reader has this remarkable flair for splitting his personality, he inserts a *deleatur* or introduces a comma where required, and at the same time, if you'll pardon the neologism, heteronomises himself, he is capable of pursuing the path suggested by an image, a simile, or metaphor, often the simple sound of a word repeated in a low voice leads him, by association, to organise polyphonic verbal edifices capable of transforming his tiny study into a space multiplied by itself, although it is difficult to explain in plain language what that means. Here it struck him that the historian had provided little information by mentioning the muezzin and the minaret, simply to introduce, if such rash judgments are permissible, a little local colour and historical atmosphere into the enemy camp, a semantic blunder we might as well correct at once, since this is the camp of the assailants, not of the besieged, for the latter, in the meantime, are installed with reasonable comfort in the city which except for the odd interval, has been theirs, since the year seven hundred and fourteen, as counted on the beads of the Christians, for those on the rosary of the Moors are different, as everyone knows. This correction was made by the proof-reader himself, who has a more than adequate knowledge about calendars, and who knows that the Hegira began, according to the rules given in that indispensable reference book, *The Art of Verifying Dates*, on the sixteenth of July in the year six hundred and twenty-two after Christ, AD in abbreviated form, without forgetting, meanwhile, that since the Moslem year is governed by the moon and is, therefore, shorter than that of Christianity which is oriented by the sun, we must always discount three years for each century gone by. This meticulous fellow would make an excellent proof-reader, if he were to consider trimming the wings of a discourse given to inventions that are sometimes irresponsible, a case of someone who has sinned because it came so naturally, incurring obvious errors and dubious assertions, we suspect at least three, which if proved, would show conclusively that the historian had no reason whatsoever for flippantly suggesting that he should devote himself to history, As for philosophy, God help us.

The first dubious point, according to the inverse order of the narrative, is that fanciful idea that there existed on the parapets of the verandahs of minarets, marks in the stone which, probably in the form of arrows, pointed in the direction of Mecca. However advanced at that time the geographical and surveying skills of the Arabs and other Moors, it is most unlikely that they knew how to determine with the accuracy insinuated, the position of a Kaaba on the surface of the planet, where there is certainly no lack of

stones, some more sacred than others. All these things, whether they be reverences, genuflections or upward and downward glances, are performed by way of approximation, upon sensing, if we may be allowed this expression, that what really matters is that God and Allah can read into hearts and do not take offence when, out of ignorance, we turn away, and when we speak of ignorance it can be as much ours as theirs, for they are not always to be found where they promised to be. The proof-reader belongs to that age when a man was taught to trust and firmly believe in road-signs, therefore, do not be surprised that he should have fallen into this anachronistic temptation, perhaps driven by sudden compassion, bearing in mind the muezzin's blindness. It is well known that, no matter the quality of the cloth, knots are inevitable, some even claim that the better the cloth the more knots there are likely to be, and that where there is one knot there are bound to be two, and there we have the second error, and this time much more serious, because it would lead the unsuspecting reader, had it been written, but fortunately it never was, to accept the description of the muezzin's actions after waking up, as being correct and in accordance with the Moslem way of life. This is wrong, we insist, inasmuch as the muezzin, the term preferred by the historian, did not carry out the ritual ablutions before summoning the faithful to prayer, consequently finding himself in a state of impurity, a most improbable situation if we consider how close we still are in time to the early origins of Islam, a little over four centuries, in the cradle, as it were. Later on there will be much laxness, no strict observation of fasting, spurious interpretations of the rules that seem reasonably clear, the problem being that there is nothing that tires people more than the strict observance of precepts, before the flesh submits the spirit has already weakened, but no one takes the spirit to task, it is the poor flesh they revile, insult and censure. Even in these days of total faith, the muezzin would be the lowest of men if he were to dare climb the minaret without having purified his soul and having first washed his hands, and so he is declared innocent of the crime attributed to him by the unpardonable flippancy of the proof-reader. Despite the professional competence with which we hear him express himself during the conversation with the historian, it is time to introduce the first hint of doubt about the consequences of the trust invested in him by the author of *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, perhaps in a moment of despondent weariness, or worried about a forthcoming journey, when he permitted that the final reading of the proofs should be the exclusive task of the expert in deletures, without any control. We shudder to think that the muezzin's description of dawn might abusively find a place in the author's scientific text, both the one and the other, the fruit of assiduous study, extensive research, detailed comparisons. It is doubtful, for example, although it is always wise to question one's own doubt, that the historian would mention dogs and the barking of dogs in his narrative, because he knows that the dog, for the Arabs, is an unclean animal, just like the pig, and therefore, it would be a display of crass ignorance to assume that the Moors of Lisbon, zealous as they are, would be living cheek by jowl with a pack of dogs. A pigsty by the door of the house and a dog-kennel or wicker basket for one's lap-dog are Christian inventions, it is not by accident that the Moslems refer to the warriors of the cross as dogs, and they might well have called them pigs, although there is no evidence to prove it. Clearly, if this is true, then it is a pity not to be able to

count any more on a dog barking at the moon or scratching its ear infested by fleas, but the truth should we ever discover it, must be put above all other considerations, whether it be for or against, wherefore we should here and now take as unwritten the words that described the last tranquil dawn of Lisbon, were we not already aware that that spurious discourse, although coherent, and that is the greatest danger of all, never emerged from the proof-reader's mind and was nothing more than absurd and fanciful daydreaming.

It is proven, therefore, that the proof-reader was mistaken, that if he was not mistaken then he was confused, that if he was not confused then he was imagining things, but let him who has never erred, been confused or imagined things, throw the first stone. To err, as the wise man said, is only human, which means that, unless we are wrong to take things literally, anyone who never errs cannot be a real man. Nevertheless, this supreme maxim cannot be used as a universal pretext to absolve all of us from lame judgments and warped opinions. He who does not know should have the humility to ask, and the proof-reader should always be mindful of this simple precaution, especially since he does not even need to leave the house or abandon his study where he is now working, for here he has all the reference books he needs to clarify matters, assuming he has been wise and prudent enough not to believe blindly in what he thinks he knows, because this rather than ignorance is the cause of the greatest blunders. On these crammed bookshelves, thousands and thousands of pages await a spark of awakening curiosity or that direct light which is nothing other than doubt in search of its own clarification. Let us then give credit to the proof-reader for having collected throughout his life so many different sources of information, although a mere glance reveals that the inventory does not include a computer, but his finances, alas, do not cover everything, and this profession, it should be said, is one of the worst paid in the world. One day, but Allah is greater, every proof-reader of books will have a computer at his disposal which he will connect umbilically, night and day, to the central databank, so that all he, or we, need worry about is that amongst these comprehensive data, no tempting error has crept in, like the devil invading a convent.

In any case, until that day comes, the books are here, like a pulsating galaxy, and the words, inside them, form another cosmic dust hovering in anticipation of that glance which will impose some meaning or will search therein for some new meaning, for just as the explanations of the universe tend to vary, so does the statement that once seemed for ever immutable, suddenly offer another interpretation, the possibility of some latent contradiction, the evidence of his own error. Here, in this study, where the truth can be no more than a face superimposed on endless different masks, stand the usual dictionaries and vocabularies of the Portuguese language, Morais, Aurélio, Moreno and Torrinha, several grammars, the Handbook of the Model Proof-reader, the vade-mecum of the profession, but there are also histories of Art, of the World in general, of the Romans, Persians, Greeks, Chinese, Arabs, Slavs and Portuguese, in short, of almost everything that constitutes an individual race and nation, and the histories of Science, Literature, Music, Religions, Philosophy, Civilization, the pocket Larousse, the abridged Quillet, the

concise Robert, the Encyclopaedia of Politics, the Luso-Brazilian Encyclopaedia, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, incomplete, the Dictionary of History and Geography, a World Adas on these subjects, that of Joao Soares, ancient, the Historical Yearbooks, the Dictionary of Contemporaries, the Universal Biography, the Manual for Booksellers, the Dictionary of Fable, the Dictionary of Mythology, the Biblioteca Lusitana, the Dictionary of Comparative Geography, Ancient, Medieval and Modern, the Historical Atlas of Contemporary Studies, the General Dictionary of Literature, Fine Arts and Moral and Political Sciences, and, to conclude, not the general inventory, but what is most in evidence, the General Dictionary of Biography and History, Mythology, Ancient and Modern Geography, Antiquities and Greek, Roman, French and other Foreign Institutions, without forgetting the Dictionary of Rarities, Inverisimilitudes and Curiosities, which, a surprising coincidence, fits in perfectly with this adventurous account and contains as an example of error the affirmation by the wise Aristotle that the common domestic fly has four legs, an arithmetical reduction that subsequent authors continued to repeat for centuries thereafter, when even children knew from their cruel experiments that the fly has six legs, for since the time of Aristotle, they have been pulling them off and voluptuously counting one, two, three, four, five, six, but these very same children, when they grew up and came to read the Greek sage, said amongst themselves, The fly has four legs, such is the influence of learned authority, to such an extent is truth undermined by certain lessons we are always being taught.

This unexpected incursion across the frontiers of entomology shows us, conclusively, that the errors ascribed to the proof-reader are not his after all, but of those books which have gone on repeating, unchallenged, much earlier works, and, this being so, we regret that he came to be the victim of his own good faith and of another's error. It is true that, by being so condescending, we might fall for that universal excuse we have already censured, but we shall not do so without one prior condition, namely, that for his own good, the proof-reader reflect on the extraordinary lesson about errors given by Bacon, another sage, in his book entitled *Novum organum*. He divides errors into four categories, as follows, *idola tribus*, or the errors of human nature, *idola specus*, or the errors of individuals, *idola fori*, or linguistic errors, and finally, *idola theatri*, or errors of systems. In the first instance, these result from the imperfection of the senses, from the influence of preconceptions and passions, from our habit of judging everything according to inherited wisdom, from our insatiable curiosity notwithstanding the limitations imposed on our mind because of our tendency to find more analogies amongst things than actually exist. In the second instance, the source of errors comes from the difference between minds, some that lose themselves in details, others in vast generalisations, as well as from our preference for certain sciences to which we are inclined to reduce everything. As for the third category, that of linguistic errors, the problem is that words often no longer have any meaning, or that meaning is indeterminate, and, finally, in the fourth category, there are so many errors of systems that we should never finish if we were to start listing them here. So let the proof-reader avail himself of this catalogue and he will prosper, and let him also take advantage of that statement by Seneca, reticent as befits this day and age,

Onerat discentem turba, non instruit, the perfect maxim which the proof-reader's mother, many years ago, without knowing any Latin and very little about her native language, translated with blatant scepticism, The more you read, the less you learn.

But if there is anything to be saved from this inquiry and debate, it is the confirmation that it was not wrong to write, for, after all, it is written, that the muezzin was blind. The historian, who only speaks of minaret and muezzin, is probably unaware that nearly all muezzins, at that time and for some time to come, were blind. And if he is aware of this fact, perhaps he imagines that the chanting of prayers is the special vocation of the disabled, or that the Moorish communities so decided, partly, as has always been and always will be the practice, to solve the problem of giving work to people without the precious organ of sight. An error on his part, this time, which invariably affects everyone. The historical truth, take note, is that the muezzins were chosen from amongst the blind, not because of any humanitarian policy of providing work or professional training they could cope with physically, but to prevent them from infringing upon the privacy of the courtyards and roof terraces from the dominant position at the top of the minaret. The proof-reader no longer remembers how he came by this information, he almost certainly must have read it in some book he trusted, and since nothing has changed, he can now insist that, yes, Sir, muezzins were blind. Almost all of them. Yet when he happens to think about this, he cannot help wondering whether they did not pierce the bright eyes of these men, as they once did and perhaps still do to nightingales, so that they might experience no other manifestation of light than the voice heard in the darkness, theirs, or perhaps the darkness of that Other who does nothing except repeat the words we are inventing, those words with which we try to say everything, blessing and malediction, even that which shall forever be nameless.

THE PROOF-READER has a name, he is called Raimundo. It is time that we should know the person about whom we have been talking indiscreetly, if name and surnames could ever add anything useful to the normal identifying features and other statistics, age, height, weight, morphological type, skin tone, colour of eyes, whether the hair is smooth, curly or wavy, or has simply disappeared, timbre of voice, clear or harsh, characteristic gestures, manner of walking, since experience of human relationships has shown that, once apprised of these details and sometimes many more, not even this information serves any purpose, nor are we capable of imagining what might be missing. Perhaps only a wrinkle, or the shape of the nails, or the thickness of the wrist, or the line of an eyebrow, or an old invisible scar, or simply the surname that has never been mentioned, the one that is most esteemed, in this case Silva, his complete name being Raimundo Silva, for that is how he introduces himself when necessary, omitting the Benvindo which he does not like. No one is satisfied with his lot in life, this is generally true, and Raimundo Silva, who above all else should appreciate being called Benvindo, which says precisely what it means, bem-vindo or welcome to life, my son, but no Sir, he does not like the name, and fortunately, says he, the tradition has been lost whereby one's godparents settled the delicate question of proper names, although he recognises that he is very pleased with Raimundo, a name which somehow conveys the solemnity of another age. Raimundo's parents expected that an inheritance from the woman who had accepted to be his godmother would provide for their son's future, and for this reason, since it was the custom only to give the godfather's name, they added that of the godmother in the masculine form. Destiny, as we well know, does not look after everything in quite the same manner, but in this case some concurrence has to be acknowledged between the possessions from which he was never to benefit and a name so resolutely disclaimed, although no one should suspect the existence of a relationship of cause and effect between his disappointment and disavowal. Raimundo Benvindo Silva's motives, which at no time in his life had been provoked by resentful frustration, nowadays are either merely aesthetic, for he does not like the sound of those two gerunds stuck together, or, in a manner of speaking, ethical and ontological, because according to his disillusioned way of thinking, only the darkest irony would expect anyone to believe that we are truly welcome in this world, without contradicting the evidence of those who find themselves nicely settled.

The river can be seen from the verandah, a narrow projection from another age beneath a porch which still has its coffered ceiling, and it is an immense sea which the eye can capture between one ray and the next, from the red line of the bridge to the flat marshlands of Pancas and Alcochete. A dank mist covers the horizon, brings it almost within reach, what can be seen of the city is reduced to this side, with the cathedral below, halfway down the slope, and staggered roof-tops, descending to the dark, murky water, where a fleeting backwash of white spume opens up as a boat quickly passes, others navigate with difficulty, sluggish, as if they were struggling against a current of mercury, this last comparison being more appropriate at night, rather than at this hour. Raimundo got up later than usual, he had worked into the early hours, a long, drawn-out

stint, and when he opened the window in the morning, he was confronted by mist, thicker than the one we are seeing at this hour, noon, when the weather must decide whether it is going to get worse or clear up, as the saying goes. Just then the cathedral towers were nothing other than a faint blur, of Lisbon there was nothing more than the sound of voices and indeterminate sounds, the window-frame, the first roof, a car travelling along the street. The blind muezzin had raised his cry to the heavens, the morning luminous, crimson, and then blue, the colour of the atmosphere between here on earth and the sky overhead, should we choose to believe in the blinkered eyes with which we see the world, but the proof-reader, on this day which is almost as blurred as his blindness, simply muttered, with the ill humour of someone who, after a restless night with troubled dreams about siege, broadswords, cutlasses and deadly slings, is annoyed upon awakening, to find that he cannot recall how these weapons of war were made, we are talking about the slings, and more could be said about the deep conversations of the person who was dreaming, but let us not fall into the temptation of anticipating the facts, for the moment we need only regret the lost opportunity of finally discovering what kind of weapon those so-called slings were, how they were loaded and fired, for it is not all that rare for great mysteries to be revealed in dreams, and amongst them we do not include the winning number in the lottery, the utmost banality and unworthy of any self-respecting dreamer. Still in bed, a puzzled Raimundo Silva was asking himself why he should be so concerned about deadly slings, or catapults as they were sometimes called, and just as effective. Known in Portuguese as *baleares*, the name has nothing to do with the Balearic Islands but comes from the Portuguese word *bala* meaning a pellet or shot, and these as we know are missiles, stones which were fired at walls or over the top of fortifications and aimed at houses and their terrified occupants, but the word *bala* was not in use at the time, words cannot be transported lightly here and there, back and forth, so watch out, otherwise someone will come along and say, I don't understand. He dozed off, remained like that for ten minutes, and on reawakening, now lucid, he dismissed any further thought of those weapons and rashly allowed the images of swords and scimitars to occupy his mind, he smiled in the shadows of the room, for he was well aware that these are obvious phallic symbols, almost certainly drawn into his dream by *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, yet undoubtedly rooted in himself, for if sharp pointed weapons can be said to have roots, embedded as they are, you only had to look at the empty bed beside him in order to understand everything. Lying on his back, he crossed his arms over his eyes, and murmured prosaically, One more day, he had not heard the muezzin, how would a deaf Moor of that religious persuasion make sure that he did not miss prayers, especially morning prayers, he would surely ask a neighbour, In the name of Allah, knock loudly on my door and go on knocking until I come to open it. Virtue is not as easy as vice, but it can be aided.

No woman lives in this house. Twice weekly a woman comes from outside, but do not imagine that the empty side of the bed has anything to do with these visits, they meet other needs, and let it be said here and now, that in order to satisfy more pressing urges, the proof-reader goes down to the city, hires a woman, relieves himself and pays,

he has always had to pay, no other solution, even when he did not get any satisfaction, for that word has more than one meaning contrary to popular belief. The woman who does not live in is what we might call a daily help, she does his washing, tidies up and does the essential chores, prepares a large pot of soup, always the same, white beans with greens, which will last for several days, not because the proof-reader does not like other food, but this was catered for by going to restaurants, which he frequents from time to time, without making a habit of it. So there is no woman in this house, nor has there ever been. The proof-reader Raimundo Benvindo Silva is a bachelor and has no intention of getting married, I'm in my fifties, he says, who is going to love me at my age, or who am I going to love, although, as everyone knows, it is easier to love than be loved, and this last comment, which sounds like the echo of some past sorrow, now transformed into a precept for the benefit of the presumptuous, this comment, as well as the preceding question, he addresses to himself, for he is much too reserved a man to go around pouring out his heart to those friends and acquaintances he is bound to have, although there will probably be no need to bring them into the story, judging from the way it is going. He has no brothers or sisters, his parents had died in due course, his relatives, if there are any left, have dispersed, and whenever he receives any news of them, it scarcely brings any reassurance, happiness has gone, there is little point in mourning, and the only thing really close to him are the proofs he is reading, for so long as they might last, the error he must ferret out, and also the odd problem that might arise, although best to let the authors cope since they are the ones who take all the credit, such as this nagging doubt about deadly slings which has come back to haunt him and refuses to go away. Raimundo Silva finally got up, searched for his babouches with his feet, Slippers, slippers, which is the proper term, and he moved into his study while pulling his dressing-gown over his pyjamas. From time to time, the charlady makes some solemn declaration about the need to remove the dust from his books, especially on the upper shelves, where he has placed the ones he rarely consults, the dust is more like an alluvial deposit that has accumulated throughout the centuries, a dust as black as ashes that has come from who knows where, it cannot have been caused by tobacco smoke, because the proof-reader gave up smoking ages ago, it is the dust of time, and there is nothing more to be said. Yet for some reason which remains unclear, the task is always being postponed, one suspects to the satisfaction of his charlady who, absolved ill her own eyes by good intentions, never fails to remind him, You can't blame me.

Raimundo searches in the dictionaries and encyclopaedias, he consults Weapons, The Middle Ages, he consults War Machines, and finds the common terms for the primitive arms of the time, suffice it to say that in those days you could not kill the man you were aiming at if he were two hundred paces away, a serious loss, beyond comparison, and when it came to hunting, unless he possessed a bow or crossbow, the hunter had to grapple bare-handed with a bear or the antlers of a stag or the tusks of a wild boar, the only sport involving such dangerous risks nowadays is bullfighting and the toreadors are the last of those ancient warriors. No explanation is to be found anywhere in these weighty volumes, no drawing provides even the vaguest idea of what this deadly

weapon looked like that so terrified the Moors, but this lack of information is nothing new for Raimundo Silva, what he now wants to know is why the sling was called *balear à funda*, and he goes from book to book, searches over and over again, loses his patience, until finally, the precious and inestimable Bouillet informs him that the inhabitants of the Balearic Islands were considered in ancient times to be the best archers in the world, that was the obvious explanation, and this is how these islands came to get their name, for the Greek word meaning to shoot is *ballô*, nothing could be clearer, any run-of-the-mill proof-reader is capable of spotting the direct etymological link between *ballô* and Balearic, the mistake in the Portuguese, *Sir*, having been to describe the sling as *balear* when *balearica* would have been more correct. But Raimundo Silva will not amend it, old habits die hard, usage sometimes becomes law, if not always, and the first of the ten commandments observed by a proof-reader aspiring to sanctity is that you must always try to avoid upsetting the author. He put the book back in its place, opened the window, and at that moment felt the mist on his face, thick, really dense, and if instead of the towers of the cathedral the minaret of the great mosque was still standing, he certainly would not be able to see it, the minaret was so slender, ethereal, almost immaterial, and then, if this were the hour, the muezzin's voice would come down from the white sky, directly from Allah, for once singing his own praises, something we cannot entirely censure him for, being who He is, He must surely know Himself.

It was mid-morning when the telephone rang. A call from the publisher who wanted to know how the proofs were coming along, the first to speak was Monica from the Production department, who, like everyone else working in this section, has a tendency to speak in the following high-faluting terms, *Senhor Silva*, she said, Production wishes to inquire, it is almost as if we were hearing, Your Royal Highness should know, and she repeats as court heralds used to repeat, Production wishes to inquire about the proofs, how soon do you expect to deliver them, but despite all the years they have known each other, Monica has not yet realised that Raimundo Silva hates being addressed simply as *Silva*, not because he finds the name as common as that of *Santo* or *Sousa*, but because he feels the absence of that Raimundo, therefore he replied curtly, unfairly offending Monica, sensitive creature that she is, Tell them the work will be ready tomorrow, I shall tell them, *Senhor Silva*, I shall tell them, and before she could say another word the telephone was snatched from her hand by someone else, *Costa* speaking, Raimundo Silva here, the proof-reader managed to reply, Yes, I know, the point is that I need the proofs today, my schedule is getting out of hand, and unless I get the book to the printers by tomorrow morning all hell will be let loose, and just because you're late with the proofs, Given the type of book, content, and number of pages, the proof-reading has taken no longer than you might expect, Don't you tell me what I should expect, I want the work finished, *Costa* had raised his voice, a sign that one of the bosses must be within hearing, a director, perhaps even the owner himself. Raimundo Silva took a deep breath and pointed out, Proofs corrected in a hurry invariably leads to mistakes, And books that come out late prejudice sales, clearly, the owner must be listening in on the conversation, but *Costa* goes on to say, Let me tell you that it's preferable to let a couple of misprints pass

than to lose a day's business, no, the owner is not present, nor the director, nor the boss, otherwise Costa would not so readily have approved of misprints for the sake of getting the book out quickly. It's a question of criteria, replied Raimundo Silva, but the implacable Costa warned him, Don't talk to me about criteria, I know all too well what your criteria are, and as for mine, they are quite simple, I need those proofs without fail by tomorrow, so it's up to you, the ball is in your court, I've already explained to Monica that the work will be ready by tomorrow, It must be at the press by tomorrow, It'll be there, you can send someone to collect it at eight o'clock, That's much too early, at that hour the press is still closed, Then send for them whenever you like, I have no more time to waste, and he rang off. Raimundo is accustomed to Costa's insolence which he does not take to heart, rudeness without malice in the case of poor Costa, who never stops talking about the Production, one has to keep to a strict schedule in Production, yes, Sir, says he, there may be authors, translators and proof-readers and jacket designers involved, but if it weren't for our little Production team, I'd like to see what all their skills would achieve, a publishing house is like a football team, some showy moves on the forward line up front, lots of passes, much dribbling, lots of headers, but if the goalkeeper turns out to be paralysed or rheumatically, all is lost, farewell championship, and Costa sums it up, this time with algebraic precision, In publishing, the Production department is like the goalkeeper of a football team. Costa is right.

When it is time for lunch, Raimundo Silva will make an omelette with three eggs and chorizo, an indulgence his liver can still tolerate. With a plate of soup, an orange, a glass of wine, and a coffee to finish off, no one with his sedentary lifestyle could wish for more. He carefully washed up, using more water and detergent than necessary, he dried the dishes and put them back in the kitchen cupboard, he is a methodical man, a proof-reader in the absolute sense of the word, if any word can be said to exist and go on existing for ever with the same absolute meaning, since the absolute demands nothing less. Before getting back to his work, he went to look at the weather, the sky had cleared a little, the other side of the river is becoming visible, nothing but a dark line, an elongated blur, but it is still cold. On his desk there are four hundred and thirty-seven pages of proofs, two hundred and ninety-three of them have already been corrected and checked, the rest should not take too long, the proof-reader has the entire afternoon, and the evening, yes, the evening as well, because this meticulous professional always gives the proofs one last reading from start to finish as if he were an ordinary reader, finally there is the pleasure and satisfaction of understanding in a relaxed manner without looking out for mistakes, how right that author was who asked one day, What would Juliet's complexion have looked like if examined with the eyes of a hawk, now then, the proof-reader in his vigilant task, is just like the hawk, even when his eyes have started to tire, but when he comes to the final reading, he is that self-same Romeo gazing upon Juliet for the first time, innocent, and transfixed by love.

In the case of The History of the Siege of Lisbon, Romeo is fully aware that he will not find much cause for rapture, although Raimundo Silva, in the preliminary and

somewhat labyrinthine conversation about the correction of errors and errors of correction, had told the author that he liked the book, and, in fact, he was not lying. But what does liking mean, we ask ourselves, between liking something a lot and not liking it at all, there is less and little, and it is not enough to write it in order to know how much yes, or no, or maybe, means in all of this, you would have to utter it aloud, hearing invariably captures the ultimate vibration, and when we are deceived or allow ourselves to be deceived it is only because we did not listen sufficiently to our hearing. It must be recognised, however, that there was no such deception in that dialogue, and it soon became clear that this was a vague or distracted kind of liking, as lukewarmly expressed by Raimundo Silva, I like it, and no, sooner had he uttered these words than they turned cold. In those four hundred and thirty-seven pages he did not find a single new fact, controversial interpretation, unpublished document, even as much as a fresh reading. Nothing more than yet another regurgitation of those interminable, played-out accounts of the siege, the description of places, the speeches and deeds of the royal personage, the arrival of the crusaders at Oporto and their navigation until they entered the Tagus, the events that occurred on the feast of St Peter, the ultimatum given to the city, the efforts that went into the siege, the battles and assaults, the surrender, and finally the sacking of the city, *die vero quo omnium sanctorum celebratur ad laudem et honorem nominis Christi et sanctissimae ejus genitricis purificatum est templum*, words attributed to Osbern, who entered the pantheon of literature thanks to the siege and capture of Lisbon and what has been written about them, these Latin words, translated roughly by someone who knows the language, mean that on All Saints Day the corrupt mosque became the most holy Catholic church, and now the muezzin will definitely no longer be able to summon the faithful for prayers to Allah, he will be replaced by a bell or carillon after one god has been substituted for another, and what a pity they did not let him go. He is blind, poor man, but then just as blind with sanguinary wrath was the crusader Osbern, the same only in name, when, with sword in hand, he saw an elderly Moor who did not even have the strength to escape, floundering there on the ground, waving his arms and legs as if trying to bury himself under the earth, this fear being real while that other was imaginary, and he will have his wish, as sure as he is still alive, but not for much longer, say we, nor will he be able to bury himself because by then he will be dead, the proof-reader thought to himself, meanwhile the common graves are being dug. From time to time, the low bleating of a foghorn can be heard coming from the river, it has been doing this since morning, to warn ships, but only now has Raimundo Silva noticed, perhaps because of the great silence that has suddenly descended upon him.

It is January and darkness falls early. The atmosphere in the study is heavy and airless. The doors are closed. To protect himself from the cold, the proof-reader has a shawl over his knees, the heater right up against the desk almost scalding his ankles. Easy to see that the house is old and lacking in comfort, dating from more spartan and primitive times, when to go outdoors with the weather at its coldest was still the best solution for anyone who had nothing better than a freezing corridor where he could march up and down in an effort to keep warm. But on the very last page of *The History of the*

Siege of Lisbon Raimundo Silva will discover the impassioned expression of a fervent patriotism, which he will have no difficulty in recognising unless a monotonous and humdrum existence has dampened his own patriotism, now he will shiver, that is true, but from that unmistakable breath that comes from the souls of heroes, note what the historian wrote, On the summit of the fortification, the Moslem moon made its final descent, and definitively and for evermore, alongside the cross which announced to the world the holy baptism of a new Christian city, slowly rising into the blue sky above, kissed by light, tossed by the breeze, the standard of Dom Afonso Henriques which bears the five shields of the Portuguese coat of arms is proudly unfurled in jubilant triumph, shit, and do not imagine that the proof-reader is insulting the national emblem, on the contrary this is the legitimate outburst of someone who, having been ironically reprimanded for inventing ingenuous errors, will have to allow the errors of others to pass, when what he is tempted to do, and rightly so, is to fill the margins of the page with a flurry of indignant deletions, however, we know he will do no such thing, because any such corrections would offend the author, Let the cobbler stick to his last, for that is all he is paid to do, said the impatient Apelles categorically. Now these errors are not as serious as those we found regarding the word sling or catapult, these are mere trifles hovering uncertainly between a possible yes or no, for in all truth, we do not give a damn nowadays whether these weapons are described as balearicas or as something else, but what' is wholly unacceptable is this nonsense of referring to coats of arms in the time of Dom Afonso, the First, when it was only during the reign of his son Sancho that they appeared on the Portuguese flag, nor do we know how they were depicted, whether forming a cross in the centre, or each emblem in a separate corner, or filling up the entire space, this final hypothesis being the most likely according to the most reliable sources. A serious blot, but not the only one, which will forever stain the closing page of The History of the Siege of Lisbon, otherwise so richly orchestrated with resounding trumpets, with drums and rapturous outbursts, with the troops lined up on parade, and let us try to picture the scene, foot-soldiers and cavalymen watching that abominable standard being lowered and the insignia of Christian Portugal being raised in its place, and calling out in one voice, Long live Portugal, and striking their shields vigorously with their swords in an outburst of military zeal, followed by a march past in the presence of the king, who is vindictively trampling underfoot, not only Moorish blood, but that Moslem crescent of the moon, a second error and totally absurd, for no such flag was ever raised above the walls of Lisbon and, as the historian ought to know, the crescent of the moon on a flag was an invention of the Ottoman empire, two or three centuries later. The tip of Raimundo Silva's biro was still poised over the shields in the coat of arms, but then he thought that if he were to remove them and the crescent, it would provoke an earthquake on the page, everything would come crashing down, an inconclusive history in keeping with the greatness of the moment, and this is an excellent way of teaching people the importance of something which, at first sight, appears to be nothing other than a piece of cloth in one or more colours, with designs also in different colours, such as castles or stars, lions, unicorns, eagles, suns, scythes or hammers, wounds, roses, sabres or machetes, compasses, wheels, cedars, elephants or oxen, birettas, hands, palm-trees, bones or

candelabra, as I know all too well and, without a guide or catalogue, you could get lost in this museum, even more so if someone has remembered to embellish the flags with coats of arms, all belonging to the same family, for then it becomes an endless list of fleurs-de-lis, shells, buckles, leopards, bees, bells, trees, croziers, mitres, spikes, bears, salamanders, herons, rings, drakes, doves, wild boars, virgins, bridges, ravens, caravels, lances, books, yes, even books, the Bible, the Koran, Das Kapital, written by whom do you think, and so forth and so on, from which we may conclude that men are incapable of saying who they are unless they can claim to be something else, and this would be reason enough for leaving aside the episode of the flags, the one reviled, the other exalted, but bearing in mind that the whole thing is a lie, useful to some extent, the ultimate disgrace, simply because we did not have the courage to correct it or know how to replace it with the honest truth, the most ambitious but constant aspiration of all, and may Allah have mercy, on us.

For the first time in all these years of painstaking labour, Raimundo Silva will not give the book one final reading from beginning to end. There are, as we explained, four hundred and thirty-seven heavily annotated pages, to read all of them would mean staying up all night or at least most of it, a torment he does not relish for he has positively come to dislike the book and its author, tomorrow the ingenuous readers will say and schoolchildren repeat that the fly has four legs, as affirmed by Aristotle, and on the next centenary of the conquest of Lisbon from the Moors, in the year two thousand and forty-seven, if Lisbon still exists and continues to be inhabited by the Portuguese, some president or other will evoke that sublime moment when the insignia of the proud victors triumphantly replaced the unholy crescent of the moon in the blue skies of our lovely city.

Nevertheless, his professional scruples demand that he should, at least, slowly go over the pages, his expert eyes scanning the words, in the hope that by thus varying the degree of concentration, he might discover some minor error of his own, like that shadow suddenly displaced by strong light, or that familiar sideways glance which at the last minute captures an image in flight. We do not need to know whether Raimundo Silva managed to tidy up those tiresome proofs, but what is interesting is to observe him as he re-reads the speech Dom Afonso Henriques made to the crusaders, according to the version attributed to Osbern, here translated from the Latin by the author of the History himself, who does not trust the lessons of others, especially when dealing with such an important subject, no less than the first speech of our founding king to be recorded, for there is no reliable evidence of any other. Raimundo Silva finds the entire speech absurd from start to finish, not because he is competent to question the accuracy of the translation, a command of Latin not being amongst the talents of this average proof-reader, but because no one in their right mind could possibly believe that this King Afonso, who had no gift for rhetoric, made such a convoluted speech, more like one of those pretentious sermons the friars would be giving six or seven centuries later than the limited phrases of a language which at that time was little more than childish prattle.

There was the proof-reader smiling scornfully, when suddenly he felt his heart leap, if Egas Moniz really had been the excellent tutor described in the annals, if he was born not simply to accompany the little cripple to Carquere or subsequently to go to Toledo with a noose round his neck, then surely he would have instilled a fair number of Christian precepts and political maxims into his pupil, and Latin being the perfect language in which to impart this knowledge, one might assume that the royal prince, in addition to a natural command of Galician, would have known quantum satis Latin in order to be able to make the aforementioned harangue at the right moment, to all those foreign and highly civilised crusaders, since at that time the only language they understood was the one they had learned in the cradle and a few words of the foreign language with the help of the friars who acted as interpreters. Dom Afonso Henriques, therefore, would have known Latin and not needed to send an emissary in his place to that famous assembly, perhaps he himself might even have been the author of those celebrated words, a wholly plausible hypothesis in the case of someone who in his own hand, and in Latin no less, had written *The History of the Conquest of Santarém*, as we are solemnly informed by Barbosa Machado in his *Biblioteca Lusitana* and who also states that the manuscript was preserved at the time in the Royal Convent of Alcobaça at the end of a book of about St Fulgentius. It has to be said that the proof-reader does not believe a single word of what he is reading, he is more than sceptical, he himself has already said so, but in order to be fair-minded, as well as to break the monotony of this obligatory reading, he consulted the primary source on which the modern histories are based, he searched and found, just as I suspected, the credulous Machado copied, without checking, what Fray Bernardo de Brito and Fray Antonio Brandão had written, this is how historical misconceptions come about, So-and-So says that Beltrano said that Cicrano heard, and three such statements are enough to make a story, but what is beyond question is that *The Conquest of Santarém* was written by a member of the community of Santa Cruz in Coimbra, whose very name has not survived to take its rightful place in the library and remove that of the usurping king.

Raimundo Silva is on his feet, he has the shawl drawn over his shoulders but one corner trails on the ground whenever he moves, and he is reading aloud like a herald making a proclamation, that is to say, the speech our noble king made to the crusaders in the following words, We know, and can witness with our own eyes, that you are men of valour, fearless and well prepared, and, truly, your presence has not diminished in our eyes what we already knew of your prowess. We are not gathered here in order to know how much, men of such wealth, we need promise you, so that enriched with our gifts, you might join us in besieging this city. From the Moors, ever restless, we were never able to accumulate treasures, with which as sometimes happens one cannot live in safety. But since we want you to know what resources we have and what our intentions towards you are, we feel that this should not lead you to despise our promise, for we consider at your disposal everything that our land possesses. Of one thing, however, we are certain, and that is that your piety will incline you more to this enterprise and the desire to carry out such a mighty deed, than any promise of financial rewards. Now then, so that the

clamour of your men does not disturb what I have to say to you, choose whomsoever you wish, so that once both sides have withdrawn, we may sit down quietly and discuss the reasons for this assurance and reach some mutual understanding about our proposals before making any statement in public, and so, with both sides in agreement and with the appropriate oaths and guarantees, may this be ratified for the greater glory of God.

No, this speech is not the work of some fledgling monarch without much experience in matters of diplomacy, here one detects the finger, hand and head of some senior ecclesiastic, perhaps the Bishop of Oporto himself, Dom Pedro Pitões, and almost certainly the Archbishop of Braga, Dom João Peculiar, who jointly and in connivance had managed to persuade the crusaders who were passing along the Douro to come to the Tagus and help with the conquest, saying to them amongst other things, At least, listen to the reasons why we think you should come to our assistance and see the evidence for yourselves. And the journey from Oporto to Lisbon having lasted three days, one does not need much imagination to assume that the two prelates, on the way, drew up their plans with the aim of advancing the enterprise, pondering the arguments, giving much advice, cautioning each other about possible dangers, with the most liberal assurances entangled in prudent mental reservations, not forgetting a little flattery, a beguiling strategy which rarely fails to bear fruit even if the ground is sterile and the sower somewhat inexperienced. Blushing, Raimundo Silva drops his shawl with a theatrical gesture, he smiles without happiness, This is not a speech one could ever believe in, more like some Shakespearian climax than the speech of provincial bishops, and he returns to his desk, sits down, shakes his head despondently, We're convinced we shall never know what Dom Afonso Henriques actually said to the crusaders, at least, good-day, and what else, what else, and the blinding clarity of this evidence, not to be able to know, suddenly strikes him as being most unfortunate, he would be capable of renouncing something, he does not ask himself what or how much, his soul, if he has one, his possessions, if he had any, in order to discover, preferably in this part of Lisbon where he lives and where the entire city was once located, some parchment, papyrus, sheet of paper, newspaper cutting, some entry, if possible, or stone engraving, as a record of what was really said, the original, as it were, perhaps less subtle in the art of discourse than this mannered version, which has none of the vigorous language worthy of such an occasion.

His dinner was a quick and simple affair, somewhat lighter than lunch, but Raimundo Silva drank two cups of coffee instead of one, in order to resist the drowsiness that would soon assail him, especially since he had slept so badly the night before. At a steady rhythm, the pages are turned over, scenes and episodes follow upon each other, the historian has now embellished his prose in order to deal with the serious disagreements which arose between the crusaders after the royal harangue, as they debated whether they should or should not help the Portuguese to capture Lisbon, whether they should remain here or travel on, as planned, to the Holy Land, where Our Lord Jesus Christ awaited them, fettered by the Turks. Those who liked the idea of staying on, argued that to expel these Moors from the city and convert them to Christianity would also render

service to God, while those who opposed the suggestion replied that any such service would be inferior in the eyes of God and that knights as illustrious as those present prided themselves on being, had an obligation to assist where the struggle was most hazardous, rather than in this hell-hole, amongst peasants and the dregs of humanity, the former, no doubt, being the Moors and the latter the Portuguese, but the historian never found out for certain, perhaps because there was not much to choose between the two insults. The warriors yelled as if possessed, may God forgive me, violent in word and gesture, and those who supported the idea of continuing on their journey to the Holy Places declared that they would derive much greater profit and advantage from the extortion of money and merchandise from the ships at sea, whether from Spain or Africa, merchant ships in the twelfth century being an anachronism which only the historian could explain, than the capture of the city of Lisbon, with less danger of risking lives, because the walls are high and the Moors many. Dom Afonso Henriques could not have been more right when he predicted that any perusal of his proposals would end in turmoil, or, as the Portuguese would say, in *algazarra*, an Arabic word which serves equally well to describe the shouting and uproar of this mixed gathering of men from Cologne and Boulogne, of Flemings, Bretons, Scots and Normans. The opposing factions finally calmed down after a verbal dispute which lasted throughout the feast of St Peter, and tomorrow, which is the thirtieth of June, the representatives of the crusaders, now in agreement, will inform the king that they are prepared to help with the conquest of Lisbon, in exchange for the possessions of their enemies, who even now are watching them from the ramparts beyond, along with other concessions, whether direct or indirect.

For two minutes, Raimundo has been staring so hard that he looks distracted, at the page where these immutable facts of history are recorded, not because he suspects that some final error may be lurking there, some perfidious misprint skilfully concealed between the folds of this tortuous rhetoric, and now wilfully provoking him, safe from his tired eyesight and the drowsiness that is fast creeping in and making him feel numb. Although it would be more accurate to say, the drowsiness that was making him feel numb. Because for the last three minutes, Raimundo Silva is as wide awake as if he had taken one of the benzedrine pills left over from a prescription given by an idiot of a doctor and which he stores behind some books. As if fascinated, he reads over and over again, keeps going back to the same line, the one that emphatically asserts that the crusaders will help the Portuguese to capture Lisbon. As chance would have it, or perhaps it was fate, these unequivocal words occupied a single line and have all the impact of an inscription, a distich or some irrevocable maxim, but they are also provocative, as if saying ironically, Make me say something else, if you can. The tension became so great that Raimundo Silva suddenly could not bear it any longer, he got to his feet, pushed back his chair, and is now nervously pacing up and down within the confined space that the bookcases, sofa and desk leave free, saying over and over again, Such rubbish, such utter rubbish and, as if needing to confirm this radical opinion, he picked up the sheet of paper once more, thanks to which, we can now dismiss any earlier doubts and confirm that there is no such nonsense, for it is clearly stated there that the crusaders will help to

capture Lisbon, and the proof that this actually happened, we shall find on subsequent pages, where there is a description of the siege, the assault on the ramparts, the fighting in the streets and inside the houses, the indiscriminate slaughter and the sacking of the city. So, Mr Proof-reader, show us where you found this blunder, this error that escapes us, true, we don't have your vast experience, we sometimes look without seeing, but we can read, we assure you, yes, you're absolutely right, we do not always understand everything, easy to see why, we lack the necessary training, Mr Proof-reader, the necessary training, and besides, we have to admit that we are often too lazy to verify the meaning of a word in the dictionary, with inevitable consequences. It is preposterous, insists Raimundo Silva as if he were giving us his answer, Never would I do such a thing, and why should I, a proof-reader takes his work seriously, he does not play games or tricks, he respects what has been established in grammars and reference books, he is guided by the rules and makes no attempt to modify them, he obeys an ethical code which is unwritten but sacrosanct, he must respect tradition, observe the conventions, and suppress his private inclinations, any doubts he may have, he keeps to himself and, as for putting a not where the author wrote yes, this proof-reader simply would not do it. The words just spoken by Mr Jekyll try to contradict others we could not hear, words spoken by Mr Hyde, nor do we need to mention these two names in order to see that in this antiquated building in the district of Castelo we are watching yet another titanic struggle between an angel and a demon, the two conflicting sides of human beings, without excepting proof-readers. But unfortunately it is Mr Hyde who will win this battle, as is clear from the smile on Raimundo Silva's face and a look of utter malevolence we would not have expected of him, all traces of Jekyll have gone from his face, he has obviously taken a decision, and such a bad one, he holds his biro with a steady hand and adds a word to the page, a word the historian never wrote, that for the sake of historical truth he could never have brought himself to write, the word Not, and what the book now says is that the crusaders will Not help the Portuguese to conquer Lisbon, thus it is written and has come to be accepted as true, although different, what we would call false has come to prevail over what we would call true, falsehood has replaced the truth, and someone would have to narrate the history anew, and how.

In all these years of dedication to his profession. Raimundo Silva would never have knowingly dared to infringe the aforementioned ethical code, unwritten but regulating the actions of proof-readers in relation to the ideas and opinions of authors. For the proof-reader who knows his place, the author, as such, is infallible. It is well known, for example, that Nietzsche's proof-reader, although a fervent believer, resisted the same temptation to insert the word Not on a certain page, thus amending the philosopher's phrase, God is dead, God is not dead. If proof-readers were given their freedom and did not have their hands and feet tied by a mass of prohibitions more binding than the penal code, they would soon transform the face of the world, establish the kingdom of universal happiness, giving drink to the thirsty, food to the famished, peace to those who live in turmoil, joy to the sorrowful, companionship to the solitary, hope to those who have lost it, not to mention the rapid disappearance of poverty and crime, for they would be able to

do all these things simply by changing the words, and should anyone doubt these new demiurges, they need only remember that this is precisely how the world and man came to be made, with words, some rather than others, so that things might turn out just so, and in no other fashion, Let it be done, said God, and it was done immediately.

Raimundo Silva will read no more. He is exhausted, all his strength has gone into that Not with which he has just put at risk, not only his professional integrity, but also his peace of mind. As from today, he will live for that moment, sooner or later, but inevitable, when someone will ask him to account for his mistake, it might well be the outraged author, some witty and implacable critic, or an attentive reader who writes to the publisher, or even Costa himself when he turns up tomorrow morning to collect the proofs, for he is perfectly capable of appearing in person with that heroic and martyred expression on his face, I preferred to come myself, always better to take on more work, even if it is beyond the call of duty. And if Costa should decide to leaf through the proofs before putting them into his briefcase and he should happen to spot that page sullied by falsehood, if he should be surprised to find a new word in the proofs which are already in quarto, if he were to take the trouble to read the word and understand what has come to be written, the world, at that moment amended once more, he will have lived differently for one brief instant, Costa will say, still hesitating, Senhor Silva, there appears to be a mistake here, and he will pretend to look and be forced to concede, How foolish of me, I cannot imagine how it could have happened, probably because I was getting tired, It will not be necessary to put in a deleatur in order to eliminate that ominous word, he need simply delete it as any child would do, and the world will return to its former tranquil orbit, it will go on being what it was, and, from now on, Costa, although he may never refer again to this curious lapse, will have one more reason for proclaiming that everything depends on the Production team.

Raimundo Silva lay down. He is lying on his back with his hands clasped behind the nape of his neck, and he does not yet feel the cold. He has some difficulty in reflecting on what he has done and, worst of all, cannot acknowledge the seriousness of his action, he even feels surprised that the idea never occurred to him earlier to alter the sense of other texts he has revised. And just as he thinks he is about to examine his conscience, to become detached, he observes himself thinking, and feels somewhat alarmed. Then he shrugs his shoulders, postpones the anxiety that was beginning to invade his spirit, We shall see, tomorrow I shall decide whether the word stays there or whether I remove it. He was just about to turn on to his right side, turning his back on the empty side of the bed, when he noticed that the foghorn could no longer be heard and he wondered how long it had been silent. No, I heard it when I was reading the king's speech aloud, I can clearly remember, between one phrase and the next, that low bellow as if a bull were lost in the mist and lowing at the white sky, far from the herd, how strange that there are no marine creatures with voices capable of filling the vastness of the sea, or this wide river, I must take a look at the weather. He rose to his feet, wrapped himself in his thick dressing-gown which, in winter time, he always spreads over the bedcover, and went to

open the window. The mist had disappeared, incredible that it should have concealed all those scintillations, lights all the way down the slope, more on the other side, yellow and white, projected on to the water like flickering flames. It is colder. Raimundo Silva thought to himself, in the manner of Fernando Pessoa, If I smoked, I should now light a cigarette, watching the river, thinking how vague and uncertain everything is, but, not smoking, I should simply think that everything is truly uncertain and vague, without a cigarette, even though the cigarette, were I to smoke it, would in itself express the uncertainty and vagueness of things, like smoke itself, were I to smoke. The proof-reader lingers at the window, no one will call out, Come inside or you'll catch cold, and he tries to imagine someone gently calling, but pauses for another minute in order to think, vague and uncertain, and finally, as if someone had called out once more, Come inside, I beg of you, he obeys, closes the window and goes back to bed, lying on his right side and waiting. For sleep.

IT WAS NOT YET EIGHT O'CLOCK when Costa rang the doorbell. The proof-reader, who had slept badly as one disturbing dream followed another, was at last sleeping heavily, at least this was what that part of him which had reached a level of consciousness that allowed him to think concluded, namely that this deep sleep finally prevailed, given the difficulty of awakening the other part, despite the insistent ringing of the doorbell, four times, five, now a prolonged ringing which went on and on, as if the mechanism of the button had jammed. Raimundo Silva realised, naturally, that he would have to get up, but he could not leave one half of himself in the bed, perhaps even more, what would Costa say, in all certainty it is Costa, now that the police no longer drag us out of bed in the middle of the night, yes, what will Costa have to say if he sees only half of Raimundo Silva appear, perhaps the Benvindo half, a man should always go in his entirety wherever he is called, he cannot allege, I've come with part of myself, the rest got delayed on the way. The bell went on ringing, Costa starts to get worried. Such silence in the house, finally the awakened part of the proof-reader manages to call out in a hoarse voice, I'm just coming, and only then does the part which is asleep begin to stir, but with reluctance. Now, precariously reunited, unsteady on legs which could belong to anyone, they cross the room, the door on the landing is at a right angle to this one, and both could almost be opened with a single gesture, it is Costa, clearly sorry to have disturbed him at this hour, Forgive me, then it dawns on him that he has not said good morning, Good morning, Senhor Silva, I do apologise for calling so early, but I've come to collect those little proofs, Costa genuinely wishes to be forgiven, the deprecating tone can imply nothing else, Yes, of course, says the proof-reader, go through to the study.

When Raimundo Silva reappears, tightening his belt and pulling up the collar of his dressing-gown, which is in shades of blue with a tartan design, Costa already has the bundle of proofs in his hand, he holds them as if he were weighing them, and even comments sympathetically, This really is enormous, but he does not actually leaf through the pages, simply asks somewhat nervously, Did you make many more corrections, and Raimundo Silva replies, No, while smiling to himself, fortunately no one can ask him why, Costa does not know that he is being deceived by that tiny word, No, which in a single utterance both masks and reveals, Costa had asked, Did you make many more corrections, and the proof-reader replied, No, with a smile, now on edge as he says, If you wish, take a look for yourself, Costa is surprised at such benevolence, a vague sentiment which soon dispersed, It isn't worth the bother, I'm going straight to the press from here, they promised me the book would go to press the moment the proofs arrived. If Costa were to leaf through the pages and spot the error, the proof-reader is convinced he would still be able to persuade him with two or three concocted phrases about context and denial, contradiction and appearance, nexus and indétermination, but Costa is now anxious to be off, they are waiting for him at the press, he is delighted because the Production team has achieved one more victory in the battle against time, Today is the first day of the rest of your life, he should, of course, be more severe, it is not acceptable that problems should always be solved at the last moment, we must work within wider and safer margins, but the proof-reader has such a helpless expression as he stands there

in that pseudo-tartan dressing-gown unshaven, his hair grotesquely dyed and in sad contrast with his pale complexion, that Costa, who is in his prime, despite belonging to a generation that has made a mockery of kindness, suppresses his justified complaints and almost with affection, removes from his briefcase the manuscript of a new book for revision. This one is short, little more than two hundred pages, and there is no real urgency. What he means by this gesture and these words is not lost on Raimundo Silva, he can decipher that semitone added or removed from a vowel, his hearing attuned to reading as clearly as his eyes, and this makes him almost remorseful that he should be deceiving the ingenuous Costa, envoy and messenger of an error for which he is not responsible, as happens to the majority of men, who live and die in all innocence, affirming and denying on account of others, yet settling accounts as if they were their own, but Allah is wise and the rest a figment of the imagination.

Costa departed, happy to have made such a good start to the day, and Raimundo Silva goes into the kitchen to prepare some coffee with milk and buttered toast. Toasted bread for this man of norms and principles is almost a vice and truly a manifestation of uncontrollable greed, wherein enter multiple sensations, both of vision and touch, as well as of smell and taste, beginning with that gleaming chrome-plated toaster, then the knife cutting slices of bread, the aroma of toasted bread, the butter melting, and finally that mouth-watering taste, so, difficult to describe, in one's mouth, on one's palate, tongue and teeth, to which that ineffable dark pellicle sticks, browned yet soft, and once more that aroma, now deep down, the person who invented such a delicacy deserves to be in heaven. One day, Raimundo Silva spoke these very words aloud, at a fleeting moment when he had the impression that this perfect creation made from bread and fire was being transfused into his blood, because, frankly, even the butter was superfluous and he would happily have done without, although only a fool would refuse this final addition to the essential which only serves to increase one's appetite and enjoyment, as in the case of this buttered toast we were discussing, the same could be said of love, for example, if only the proof-reader were more experienced. Raimundo Silva finished eating, went into the bathroom to shave and do something about his appearance. Until his face is well covered in foam, he avoids looking at himself directly in the mirror, he now regrets having decided to dye his hair, he has become the prisoner of his own artifice, because, more than the displeasure caused by his own image, what he cannot bear is the idea that, by no longer dyeing his hair, the white hairs he knows to be there will suddenly come to light, all at once, a cruel incursion, instead of that naturally slow progression which out of foolish vanity he decided one day to interrupt. These are the petty misfortunes of the spirit which the body, although blameless, has to pay for.

Back in his study and curious about this new assignment, Raimundo Silva examines the manuscript Costa has left him, heaven forbid that it should turn out to be A Comprehensive History of Portugal, bringing further temptations as to whether it should be Yes or No, or that even more seductive temptation to add a speculative note with an infinite Perhaps which would leave no stone unturned or fact unchallenged. After all, this

is simply another novel amongst so many, he need not concern himself with introducing what is already there, for such books, the fictions they narrate, are created, both books and fictions, with a constant element of doubt, with a reticent affirmation, above all the disquiet of knowing that nothing is true, and that it is necessary to pretend that it is, at least for a time, until we can no longer resist the indelible evidence of change, then we turn to the time that has passed, for it alone is truly time, and we try to reconstitute the moment we failed to recognise, the moment that passed while we were reconstituting some other time, and so on and so forth, from one moment to the next, every novel is like this, desperation, a frustrated attempt to save something of the past. Except that it still has not been established whether it is the novel that prevents man from forgetting himself or the impossibility of forgetfulness that makes him write novels.

Raimundo Silva has the salutary habit of allowing himself a free day whenever he finishes the revision of a manuscript. It gives him respite, or as he would say, relief, and so he goes out into the world, strolls through the streets, lingers before shop-windows, sits on a park bench, amuses himself for a couple of hours in a cinema, enters some museum on a sudden impulse to take another look at a favourite painting, in a word leads the life of someone who is paying a visit and will not be back all that soon. Sometimes, however, he does not fit all these things in. He often returns home in mid-afternoon, neither tired nor bored, simply because summoned by an inner voice with whom there is no point arguing, he has the manuscript of a book waiting for him, another one, because the publisher who values and esteems his work has never so far left him without work. Despite so many years of this monotonous existence, he is still curious to know what words might be waiting for him, what conflict, thesis, opinion, what simple plot, the same thing happened with *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, nor is it surprising, for since his time at school neither chance nor inclination had aroused any further interest in such remote events.

This time, however, Raimundo Silva foresees that he will return home late, most likely he will even go to a midnight session at the cinema, and we do not need to be very perceptive in order to realise that he is anxious to keep out of the immediate reach of Costa, should the latter discover the deception, of which he is both author and accomplice, for as the author he erred and as the proof-reader he failed to correct the mistake. Besides, it is almost ten o'clock, at the press they must already be setting up the first frames, the printer, with slow and cautious movements which distinguish the specialist, will make any necessary adjustments after assembling the pages and locking them into the chase, any minute now the sheets of paper narrating the spurious *History of the Siege of Lisbon* will rapidly begin to appear, just as at any minute now the telephone might ring, strange that it should not have rung already, with Costa bellowing at the other end, An inexplicable error, Senhor Silva, fortunately I noticed it just in time, grab a taxi and get yourself here at once, this matter is your responsibility, I'm sorry but this is not something we can deal with over the telephone, I want you here in the presence of witnesses, Costa is so agitated that his voice sounds shrill, and Raimundo

Silva, who is feeling just as nervous, or even more so, driven by these imaginings, gets dressed in haste, goes to the window to check the weather, it is cold but the sky is clear. On the other side, tall chimneys send up spirals of smoke which rise vertically at first, until broken by the wind and reduced to a slow cloud that heads southwards. Raimundo looks down at the roof-tops covering the ancient foundations of Lisbon. His hands are resting on the parapet of the verandah, he can feel the cold, rough ironwork, he is now tranquil, simply gazing, no longer thinking, feeling somewhat empty, when it suddenly occurs to him how he can spend his free day, something he has never done before, and those who complain of life's brevity only have themselves to blame if they have failed to take advantage of whatever life they have been given.

He left the verandah, looked amongst his papers for the first proofs of *The Siege*, still in his possession along with the second and third proofs, but not the original manuscript, that remains with the publishers once the first revision has been completed, he put them into a paper bag, and now the telephone starts ringing. Raimundo Silva shuddered, his left hand, raised out of habit, reached out, but stopped halfway and drew back, this black object is a time-bomb about to explode, a quivering rattlesnake ready to attack. Slowly, as if afraid that his footsteps might be heard where the call is coming from, the proof-reader moves away, muttering to himself, It's Costa, but he is wrong, and he will never find out who wanted to speak to him at this hour of the morning, who or for what reason, Costa will not say to him, within the next few days, I telephoned your home, but no one answered, not even some other person, but who, will repeat the statement, Such a pity, I had some good news to give you, the telephone rang and rang, and no one answered. It is true, the telephone is ringing and ringing, but Raimundo Silva will not reply, he is already in the passageway, ready to go out most likely, after so many doubts and worries, it must have been someone who dialled the wrong number, such things can happen, but this is something we shall never know, it is simply an assumption, although he would like to take advantage of this hypothesis, it would give the proof-reader greater peace of mind, which, all things considered, is a somewhat flippant way of putting it, given that any such peace of mind in the present circumstances, would be no better than the uncertain relief of a mere postponement, Let this cup pass from me, Jesus said, but to no avail, because the command would be repeated.

As he descends the steep, narrow stairway, Raimundo Silva is thinking that he might still be in time to avoid the evil hour awaiting him when his reckless behaviour is discovered, he need only take a taxi and rush to the press, where Costa is certain to be on hand, delighted at having proved once more that efficiency is his hallmark, Costa, who represents Production, loves coming to the press in order to give, as it were, the word to start printing, and he is just on the point of doing so when Raimundo Silva bursts through the door, shouting, Stop, hold on, as in that fictional episode about the breathless messenger who brings a royal pardon to a condemned man at the eleventh hour, such relief, but short-lived, for there is a vast difference between knowing that we shall die one day and having to confront the end of everything, the firing squad about to aim, and

who knows it better than he who, having earlier made a miraculous escape, now finds himself in a hopeless predicament, Dostoevsky got away the first time, but not the second time. In the bright, cold light on the street, Raimundo appears to be still pondering what he will finally do, but this pondering is misleading, mere appearances, the proof-reader inwardly imagines a debate with a foregone conclusion, here prevailed that familiar saying of intransigent chess-players, once handled, a pawn has been played, my dear Alekhine, what I have written, I have written. Raimundo Silva gives a deep sigh, he looks at the two rows of buildings to the left and right, with a strange feeling of possession that embraces the very ground he treads, he who has no worldly goods under the sun nor any hope of ever acquiring them, having lost ages ago the illusory inheritance expected from his godmother Benvinda, God rest her soul, if she is being comforted by the prayers of her legitimate and rewarded heirs, no less or more grasping than nature generally ordains, and much the same everywhere. But it is true that the proof-reader, who has been living in this district close to the castle for more yeats than he cares to remember, and has all the reference he needs to find his way home, now experiences, along with the aforementioned pleasure of being the new owner, an open and liberating sense of pleasure which might even last beyond the next corner, when he turns into the Rua Bartolomeu de Gusmão, in the zone of shadows. As he walks along, he asks himself where this reassurance is coming from, when he knows full well that he is being pursued by the sword of Damocles, in the form of a letter of formal dismissal, for reasons more than justified, incompetence, deliberate fraud, premeditated malice, incitement to perversion. He asks, and imagines receiving a reply from the very offence that he committed, not from the offence in itself, but from the inevitable consequences, that is to say, Raimundo Silva, who finds himself at the precise location of the ancient Moorish city, has a multiple and kaleidoscopic awareness of this historical and topographical coincidence, no doubt thanks to his formal decision to have the crusaders refusing to help the Portuguese, thus leaving the latter to get along as best they could with their own meagre national forces, if they could already be described as national, since it is certain that seven years earlier, despite the assistance of other crusaders, they came face to face with the ramparts and did not even attempt to get any closer, simply carrying out forays, destroying orchards and kitchen-gardens, and doing other damage to private property. Well now, the only purpose of these minute considerations is to make it clear, however much it may cost to admit it in the light of crude reality, that for Raimundo Silva, until there is proof to the contrary or God Our Lord disposes otherwise, Lisbon continues to belong to the Moors, because, if you'll bear with the repetition, twenty-four hours have not elapsed since that fatal moment when the crusaders uttered that damaging refusal, and in such a short time it would have been impossible for the Portuguese to plan on their own the complicated tactics and strategies of siege, blockade, battle and assault, let us hope in diminishing order of duration when the time comes.

Obviously, the Café Graciosa, where the proof-reader is heading for at this moment, did not exist here in the year one thousand one hundred and forty-seven in which we find ourselves, under this June sky, magnificent and warm notwithstanding the fresh breeze

coming in from the sea through the mouth of the straits. A café has always been the ideal place to catch up on the news, the customers sit there at their leisure, and this being a working-class district, where everybody knows each other and daily contact has reduced any formalities to the minimum, apart from a few simple pleasantries, Good morning, How are you, All well at home, said without paying much attention to the real meaning of these questions and answers, and soon moving on to the concerns of the day, which are wide-ranging and all of them serious. The city has become one great chorus of lamentations with the arrival of so many fugitives, ousted by the troops of Ibn Arrinque, the Galician, may Allah punish him and condemn him to darkest hell, and the wretched fugitives arrive in a pitiful state, the blood gushing from their wounds, crying out and weeping, many of them with stumps instead of hands, their ears or noses cut off with the most wanton cruelty, an advance warning from the Portuguese king. And it would appear, says the café-owner, that the crusaders are on their way by sea, damn them, rumour has it that two hundred ships are about to arrive, this time the situation is really serious, mark my words, Oh, the poor creatures, says a fat woman, wiping away a tear, for I've just come this minute from the Porta de Ferro, a wilderness of misery and misfortune, the doctors don't know where to turn, I saw people with their faces battered into blood and pulp, one poor fellow had his eyes gouged out, horrible, horrible, may the Prophet's sword fall on the assassins, It will, interrupted a youth who was leaning against the counter with a glass of milk in one hand, if left to us, We shall never surrender, said the café-owner, the Portuguese and the crusaders were here seven years ago and were sent packing with their tails between their legs, Too true, the youth continued, after wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, but then Allah is not in the habit of helping those who do not help themselves, and as for those five ships carrying crusaders anchored in the river for the last six days, I ask myself what we're waiting for before we attack and sink them, That would be just punishment, said the fat woman, in payment for all the misery they have caused our people, Scarcely in payment, rejoined the café-owner, since for every outrage committed against us, we have paid back in kind at least a hundredfold, But my eyes are like the dead doves that will never more return to their nests, said the muezzin.

Raimundo Silva entered, said good morning to no one in particular, and sat at a table behind the showcase where the usual tempting delicacies were on display, sponges, mille feuilles, cream cornets, tartlets, rice cakes, mokatines and, those inevitable croissants, in the shape dictated by the French word, a pastry that has risen only to collapse at the first bite and disintegrate until there are nothing but crumbs left on the plate, tiny celestial bodies which the huge wet finger of Allah is lifting to his mouth, then all that remains will be a terrible cosmic void, if being and nothingness are compatible. The fellow behind the counter, who is not the owner, puts aside the glasses he is washing and brings the coffee the proof-reader ordered, he knows him even though he does not patronise the café every day, only now and then, and he always gives the impression of whiling away the time, today he seems more relaxed, he opens a paper bag and takes out a thick bundle of loose pages, the waiter tries to find some space to deposit the cup of coffee and glass

of water, he places the wrapped lump of sugar on the saucer, and before withdrawing, repeats the observation he has been making all morning that it has turned very cold, Fortunately, there isn't any fog today, the proof-reader smiles as if he had just received some good news. It is true, fortunately there is no fog, but a fat woman at the next table who is eating a mille feuille with her white coffee informs him that according to the weather report given by the Meteorological or Metrological Office, as the woman insists on pronouncing it, the mist will probably reappear by evening, who would have thought it, the sky now being so clear, this bright sunshine, a poetic observation not made by him, but inserted here because irresistible. Time, like fortune, is inconstant, said the proof-reader, conscious of the banality of those words. Neither the waiter nor the woman made any reply, this being the most prudent attitude to adopt when confronted with definitive statements, to listen and say nothing, waiting for time itself to tear them to shreds, although they often become even more definitive, like those of the Greeks and Romans, until finally consigned to oblivion when time finally comes to an end. The waiter turned back to washing glasses, the woman to what remained of her mille feuille, any minute now, furtively, because it is impolite, although irresistible, she will pick up the crumbs on her plate with her wet forefinger, but she will not lift all of them, one by one, because the crumbs of mille feuilles, as we know from experience, are just like particles of cosmic dust, endless, droplets of perpetual mist without remission. In this same café, we would find another youth, had he not died in the war, and as for the muezzin, we need only recall that we were just about to find out how he died of merciful fright, when the crusader Osbern, but not the same Osbern, came down on him, with raised sword, spilling fresh blood, may Allah take pity on his own creatures, wretched as they are notwithstanding.

While drinking his coffee, Raimundo Silva began searching for the pages of The History of the Siege of Lisbon that interested him, not the king's speech, nor the battle scenes, he has lost all interest whether balear or balearic is the correct adjective for those slings, and wants to know nothing more about capitulation and sacking. He has found what he was looking for, four sheets of paper which he separates from the pile and re-reads attentively, running a line over the more important references with a fluorescent yellow marker. The fat woman watches this strange operation with wary respect, and then quite unpredictably, with no direct relationship of cause and effect between another's action and one's own thoughts, she suddenly gathers the crumbs together into a little pile and with five chubby fingertips she scoops them up, squeezes them together and bringing them to her mouth, avidly devours them, smacking her lips. Disturbed by the noise, Raimundo Silva looked away, no doubt, disapprovingly, thinking to himself that the temptation to regress to certain childish habits is a constant trait in the human species, if Dom Afonso Henriques eats voraciously with his fingers, so what, it is the custom of the time, although certain innovations can now be seen, such as sticking a knife into a chunk of beef and bringing it to one's mouth, all that remains now is for someone to have the bright idea to add prongs to the tip of the knife, the invention is long overdue, after all, those absent-minded inventors need only take note of those pitchforks in rough wood

with which farmers harvest and gather in their wheat and barley and load them on to carts, besides as experience has all too clearly shown, no one will progress in art or life if they succumb to the comforts of the court. But the woman in the café has no such excuse since her parents took great pains to teach her how to behave at table, yet here she is relapsing into her old habits which probably go back to those primitive times when Moors and Christians had similar habits, a somewhat controversial opinion, for some would argue that the followers of Mohammed were much more civilised, and that the others, out-and-out rustics who rejoiced in their stubbornness, knew little or nothing about good manners, but everything will change one day when they start to worship the Virgin Mary with such fervour that they soon forget Her Divine Son, not to mention their insulting disregard for the Eternal Father. And so we can see how, quite naturally, and without any effort, by passing quietly from one episode to another, we soar from that mille feuille eaten by a woman in the Café Graciosa, to Him who feels no hunger, yet who has endowed us with a thousand desires and needs.

Raimundo Silva puts the proofs of The History of the Siege of Lisbon back into the paper bag, with the exception of the four pages of interest which he folds and carefully tucks into the inside pocket of his jacket, he then goes up to the counter where the waiter is serving a glass of milk and a pastry to a young man who looks as if he is in search of work and whose earnest expression is that of someone who anticipates that this is the most substantial meal he is likely to have all day. The proof-reader is a sufficiently astute and sensitive observer to be able to take in all these details at a single glance, we might even speculate that one day he saw a similar expression in his own eyes when looking into the mirror at home, but no point in asking him, because we are much more interested in the present, and, from the past only some memory, not so much his as of the past in general, the part modified by that reckless word. Now it only remains to be seen where it will lead us, undoubtedly, in the first place, to Raimundo Silva, for the word, any word, has this facility or virtue to lead to the person who used it, and then, perhaps, who knows, to us who pursue it like hounds on the trail, considerations which are obviously premature, since the siege has not yet started, the Moors who come into the café sing in chorus, We shall conquer, we shall conquer, with the weapons we carry it is possible, but to achieve so much Mohammed will have to help as he best knows how, because we can see no weapons, and the arsenal, if the voice of the people is truly the voice of Allah, is not sufficiently stocked in proportion to their needs. Raimundo Silva says to the waiter, Look after this parcel for me, I'll collect it before you close, meaning the Café, of course, and the waiter sticks the parcel between two covered jars on the shelf behind him, It'll be quite safe here, he says, and it never occurred to him to ask why Raimundo Silva does not leave the parcel at home, since he lives so near, in the Rua do Milagre de Santo Antonio which is only round the corner, but waiters, contrary to general opinion, are discreet fellows, they listen with saintly patience to the rumours going round, day in, day out, every day of their life, and it becomes tedious, while out of professional courtesy and rather than offend the clients who are their *raison d'être*, they show the greatest interest and listen attentively, but at heart, they are always thinking of

something else, such as, for example, of what interest the proof-reader's reply might be if he were to give one, I'm afraid someone might ring. The young man has finished eating his cake and is now unselfconsciously using what remains of the milk to rinse out any crumbs still sticking to his teeth and gums, waste not want not, as our dear parents would say, but these words of sublime wisdom brought them no riches and, as far as we know, this was not the source of the lamented possessions of Godmother Benvinda, God forgive her if He can.

The waiter in the café is wise not to pay any attention to gossip. It is well known that when there are serious tensions on the international front, the first signs of instability and financial ruin are to be seen in the tourist industry. Now if the situation here in this city of Lisbon were one of imminent siege and attack, these tourists would not be arriving, the first this morning, transported in two buses, one full of Japanese with their binoculars and cameras, the other with Americans wearing anoraks and shorts in garish colours. They assemble behind the interpreters, and side by side, in two separate columns, they start climbing the slope, they are about to enter the Rúa do Chão da Feira by the gate with the niche of St George, they will marvel at the saint and the terrifying dragon, ridiculously small in the eyes of the Japanese who are accustomed to somewhat more prodigious monsters of the species. As for the Americans, they will be deeply ashamed when forced to acknowledge that a cowboy from the Far West lassoing a wild heifer cuts a poor figure when compared with this knight in shining armour, invincible in every battle, although there is some suspicion that he abandoned these latest conflicts and is now living on past laurels. The tourists had already moved on and the street suddenly went quiet, we are even tempted to say into a state of torpor, if the word, which irresistibly insinuates into one's spirit and body the lassitude of a torrid summer, were not to sound incongruous on such a cold morning, however tranquil the place and quiet the people. From here the river can be seen over the merlons of the cathedral which resemble a game of ninepins above the bell-towers which the unevenness of the terrain has made invisible, and despite the great distance, you can sense the serenity out there and imagine the throbbing flight of seagulls over the gleaming highway of the waters. If it were true that there are five ships carrying crusaders out there, they would almost certainly have started to bombard the defenceless city, but no such thing will happen, because we know very well that from this side no harm will come to the Moors, once it has been said and subsequently written for posterity, that the Portuguese on this occasion cannot rely on help from those who have entered port simply to replenish their supply of drinking water and rest from the hardships of navigation and the agonies of tempests, before continuing their journey to oust the infidels, not in any old city such as Lisbon, but on that hallowed ground where God once walked, leaving the divine traces of his bare feet where no other has passed, and which the rain and wind have left undisturbed.

Raimundo Silva turned the corner leading into the Rua do Milagre de Santo Antonio and passing in front of his house, perhaps because he was only semi-consciously listening

to the sounds around him, had the fleeting impression that he could hear a telephone ringing, Could it be mine, he wondered, but the sound was coming from nearby, it might have been in the barber's shop on the other side of the street, and just then another possibility comes to mind, how careless of him, how utterly stupid to imagine that Costa would necessarily use the telephone, Who knows, he might be about to arrive at any minute, and his imagination, ever obliging, conjured up the scene, Costa at the wheel of his car, driving at full speed up the Rua do Limoeiro, the screeching of his tyres still hovering in the air as he takes the bend round the cathedral, unless Raimundo Silva gets out of the way, Costa will loom into sight with his engine roaring, braking abruptly at the entrance to his apartment and say breathlessly, Get in, get in, we must have a chat, no, I can't discuss these matters here, for despite everything Costa is well-mannered, incapable of creating a scene in public. The proof-reader waits no longer, he rapidly descends the Escadinhas de'São Crispim and only pauses for breath after turning the bend where he is concealed from Costa's searching eyes. He sits on a step to recover from his fright, shoos away a dog that has come up to him, its nose outstretched to catch his scent, and removes from his inside pocket the four pages he has extracted from the bundle of proofs, he unfolds them and smooths them out on his lap.

The idea, which came to him as he watched the roof-tops descending like steps as far as the river, is to follow the lay-out of the Moorish fortifications according to the scant and rather dubious information provided by the historian, as he himself had the good grace to acknowledge. But here, right before Raimundo Silva's eyes is a fragment, if not of the indestructible rampart itself, at least of a wall occupying the same space where the other stood, and descending all the way down the steps beneath a row of broad windows surmounted by tall gables. Raimundo Silva, therefore, is on the outer side of the city, he belongs to the besieging army, and it would only take one of those windows to open for a Moorish girl to appear and start singing, This is proud Lisbon, Impregnable, Here the Christian will meet his perdition, and on finishing her song, she taps disdainfully on the window, but unless the proof-reader's eyes are deceiving him, the muslin curtain has been drawn back ever so discreetly, and this simple gesture was enough to mitigate any threat in those words, if we take them literally, for it might well be that Lisbon, contrary to all appearances, was not a city but a woman, and the perdition simply amorous, assuming that the restrictive adverb has some meaning here, and that this is not the only blissful perdition. The dog drew near once more, now Raimundo Silva looks at it nervously, who knows it might have rabies, for he once read, he no longer remembers where, that one of the signs of the dreaded disease is a drooping tail, and this one looks rather limp, probably because it has been ill-treated, for the animal's ribs are sticking out, another sign, but this one decisive, is that unsightly saliva trickling down the fauces and fangs, but this mongrel, is only drooling because of the smell of food being cooked here on the Escadinhas de'São Crispim. The dog, let us rest assured, does not have rabies, perhaps if we were living in the time of the Moors, but nowadays, in a city like this, modern, hygienic, organised, even the sight of a stray dog comes as a surprise, it has probably escaped the net because of its preference for this remote, uphill route, which

calls for nimble feet and the vigour of youth, blessings which do not necessarily coincide in dog-catchers.

Raimundo Silva goes on consulting the pages, mentally following the itinerary, and a stealthy glance at the dog suddenly reminds him of the historian's description of the horrors of famine endured by the beleaguered for months on end, neither dog nor cat survived, even the rats disappeared, but if this was so, then surely the man was right who said that a dog barked that serene dawn when the muezzin climbed the minaret to summon the faithful to morning prayers, and the man was mistaken who argued that because the dog was unclean, the Moors could not bear to have the animal in their sight, now let us concede that they banned dogs from their houses and deprived them of caresses and feeding-bowls, but never from vast Islam, for truly, if we are capable of living in harmony with our own impurities, why should we so vehemently reject the impurities of others, in this case, of the canine species, therefore, much more innocent than those of humans, who so thoroughly abuse the term dog, an insult hurled right and left at enemies, by Christians abusing Moslems, by Moslems abusing Christians, and by both parties abusing the Jews. Not to mention those whom we know best, those Portuguese noblemen coming yonder, so preoccupied and besotted with their hounds and mastiffs that they are given to sleeping with them, with as much or even greater pleasure than with their concubines, and yet, as you will see, the worst name they can call their most implacable enemy is Dog, there would appear to be no greater insult, except for Son of a Bitch. And all this has come about through the arbitrary criteria of men, they are the ones who create words, the animals, poor things, are unaware of these semantic subtleties as they listen to the quarrelling, Dog, says the Moor, You're the dog, retorts the Christian, and next minute they are fighting with lance, sword and dagger, while the hounds and mastiffs say to each other, We are the dogs, nor does it bother them in the least.

Having decided the route he must take, Raimundo Silva gets to his feet, shakes the dust from his breeches and begins to descend the steps. The dog has followed him, but keeps his distance, like someone accustomed to being stoned, and the man only has to bend down and pretend he is picking up a stone and the dog takes fright. At the bottom of the steps, the dog hesitated, and appeared to be asking himself, Should I or should I not go any further, but decided to carry on following the proof-reader who is making his way down the Calçada do Correio Velho. Somewhere around here, or a little further on, corresponding to the borders of the district of São Crispim, the rampart descended on the right, presumably as far as the famous Porta de Ferro, attributed by some to a certain Ferro, but of which no trace remains, perhaps if we were to remove this modern paving in the Largo de Santo Antonio in front of the Cathedral, and dig deep down, we should discover the foundations of the period, the rusted remains of ancient weapons, the stench of a tomb, the entangled skeletons of warriors, not lovers, who shouted in unison, Dog, and then proceeded to kill each other. Cars pass up and down, the trams creak round the bend of the Madalena, they are on the 28 route, particularly esteemed by film directors,

and yonder, turning in front of the Cathedral, goes another bus full of tourists, they must be French and imagine they are in Spain. The dog is wary about crossing, the world best known to him are those streets further up the hill, and although he can see the man looking back as he descends the Rua da Padaria, along which the walls of the rampart would have extended, centuries ago, as far as the Rua dos Bacalhoeiros, he does not dare to go on, perhaps the fear he now experiences is too unbearable as he recalls some terrifying event in the past, cats doused with cold water take fright, and dogs as well. The dog returns by the same route, returns to the Escadinhas de'São Crispim, waiting for someone else to turn up.

The proof-reader is taking another look, he enters by the Arco Escuro in order to examine the stairway which the historian claims was one of the points of access to the battlements of the stockade, or rather, this stairway, the steps of which have only been in existence for three generations, is located where the original one stood. Raimundo Silva carefully examines the dark windows, the grimy façades eroded by saltpetre, the tiled insets, this one dated one thousand seven hundred and sixty-four, with St Anne teaching her daughter Mary how to write, and medallions on either side depicting St Martial, who wards off fire, and St Antony who restores earthenware jugs and is something of a wizard when it comes to finding lost objects. The inscription, in the absence of any authentic certificate, is the next best thing, if the date it carries, which we have no reason to doubt, is that of the year when the edifice was built, nine years after the earthquake. The proof-reader studies the information he has gathered and finds it has been much enriched, so when he returns to the Rua dos Bacalhoeiros, he will look with disdain upon those ignorant passers-by, who show no interest in the curiosities of the city and life, and who are quite incapable of making any connection between these two explicit dates. But shortly, when he arrives before the Arco das Portas do Mar, thinking to himself that the ñame deserved some other architectural commemoration, and not the prosaic name-plate of customs officials, reflecting at that moment on the discrepancy between the word and its meaning, he observed himself and disapproved of what he saw, After all, what right do I have to pass judgment on others, I have lived in Lisbon all my life and it has never occurred to me to come and see with my own eyes things described in books, things that I have often looked at time and time again, without actually seeing them, as blind as the muezzin, and were it not for this threat from Costa, I should probably never have thought of checking the lay-out of the wall, the gates, which I now recognise as belonging to the fortress of Dom Fernando, obviously by the time I have finished my stroll I shall know more, but it is also true that I'll know less, in other words, let's see if I can explain myself, this awareness of knowing more, brings me to an awareness of knowing little, besides, one is tempted to ask what it means to know, the historian was right, I ought to have been a philosopher, one of those admirable philosophers who can pick up a skull and spend the rest of their lives probing its importance in this world and wondering if there is any good reason why the world should concern itself with a skull, and now we come, ladies and gentlemen, tourists, travellers, or those of you who are merely curious, says the indispensable guide, to the Arco da Conceição, where once stood the celebrated

fountain known as the Preguiça, whose refreshing waters have abated the thirst and any desire to work of so many people right up to the present day.

Raimundo Silva is not in a hurry. He studies the itinerary seriously, for his own satisfaction he makes detailed mental notes, complementary as it were, which attest to his own contemporaneity, there in the Calçada do Correio Velho a gloomy undertaker's office, white spume in the blue sky coming from a jet plane, like the extended backwash of a speed-boat on the blue sea, the Pensão Casa Oliveira Bons Quartos in the Rua da Padaria, the Restaurante Come Petisca Paga Vai Dar Meia Volta, right beside the Portas do Mar, the Cervejaria Arco da Conceição, nearby, the coat of arms of the Mascarenhas engraved on a cornerstone of one of the buildings of the Arco de Jesus, where there must have been a gate in the Moorish ramparts, as attested by the inscription on the wall, the Neoclassical entrance to the Palace of the Condes de Coculim, who were Mascarenhas, arsenals of weaponry, so much for all their achievements, a world of fleeting, transitory things, as all things without exception inevitably prove to be, for the white trail of the plane has evaporated and time will take care of the rest in due course, we need only have the patience to wait. The proof-reader entered the Alfama by the Arco do Chafariz d'El-Rei, he will lunch somewhere nearby, in an eating-house in the Rua de'São João da Praça, over by the tower of St Peter, a traditional Portuguese meal of fried fish and rice with tomato sauce and salad, and with any luck, the tender leaves of a lettuce heart, where, something not many people know, nestles the incomparable freshness of the morning, the dew and mist, which are one and the same, but warrant repetition for the simple pleasure of writing both words and savouring the sound. At the entrance to the restaurant stood a gypsy girl, probably about twelve, with outstretched hand and saying never a word, simply staring at the proof-reader, who, lost in thought, did not recognise a gypsy but only a Moorish girl, when hunger was first making itself felt and when there was still someone to ask for alms, and cats and vermin felt their existence was assured until they died a natural death from disease or warfare amongst the species, after all, progress is a reality, nowadays no one in Lisbon hunts such animals for food, But the expression in the gypsy girl's eyes warns him that the siege is not yet over.

Raimundo Silva will peruse more slowly whatever remains to be inspected, another section of the wall in the Patio do Senhor da Murça, the Rua da Adiça, where the wall rose up, and that of Norberto de Araújo, as the street was recently baptised, at the summit an imposing stretch of wall, eroded at the base, these are truly living stones, they have been here for nine or ten centuries, if not longer, from the time of the barbarians, and they survive, they intrepidly support the bell-tower of the church of St Lucy or St Bras, it makes no difference, at this spot, ladies and gentlemen, opened the ancient Portas do Sol, facing eastward, the first to receive the rosy breath of dawn, now all that remains is the square which took its name from this landmark, but the special effects of the aurora have not changed, for the sun, a millennium is like a tiny human sigh, sic transit, needless to say. The wall continued along these parts, at an obtuse angle, wide open, and continued right up to the walls of the fortress, thus enclosing the entire city,

from the edge of the waters below to the point where it joins the fortress, head erect and strong joints, arms bent and fingers firmly clasped, like a woman supporting her pregnant womb. Feeling weary, the proof-reader goes up the Rua dos Cegos, enters the Patio de Dom Fradique, time divides into two strands rather than disturb this village made of rock, it has been like this, in a manner of speaking, since the time of the Goths, Romans, or Phoenicians, then came the Moors, the first Portuguese, their children and their grandchildren, from whom we are descended, the power and the glory, the subsequent phases of decline, first, second and third, each of them divided into genera and subgenera. At night, in this space between the low-lying houses, the three ghosts gather, the ghost of the past, the ghost of the future and the ghost of things that might happen, they do not speak, they look at each other as if they were blind, and remain silent.

Raimundo Silva sits on a stone bench in the cool evening shade, he examines the pages for the last time and confirms that there is nothing more to see, he knows enough about the castle not to have to return there today, even if he is making a full inventory. The sky is beginning to turn white, perhaps a warning of that mist promised by the meteorological office, and the temperature drops rapidly. The proof-reader leaves the patio and heads for the Rua do Chão da Feira, in front of the Porta de'São Jorge, even from here people can still be seen taking photographs of the saint. Less than fifty metres away, although invisible from here, is his house, and as this thought crosses his mind, he realises for the first time that he lives at the very spot where the Porta de Alfafa stood, whether on the inside or outside it is no longer possible to tell, so we cannot be sure whether Raimundo Silva is one of the besieged or an assailant, a future conqueror or hopeless loser.

There was no irate message from Costa awaiting him under the door. Darkness fell and the telephone did not ring. Raimundo Silva spent a peaceful evening searching his shelves for books that might tell him more about the city the Moors named Lissibona. It was late when he went out on to the verandah to check the weather. Mist, but not as dense as that of yesterday. He could hear two dogs barking, and for some reason, this made him feel even more tranquil. Dogs had been barking for centuries, therefore, the world was unchanged. He went to bed. Tired out from his exertions that day, he slept soundly, but he woke up several times, whenever he dreamt and went back to dreaming about a rampart with nothing inside, like a sack with a tight opening spreading its belly to the edge of the river, and all around, forested slopes, woods and valleys, streams, a scattering of houses, orchards, olive-groves, a broad estuary advancing inland. In the distance, the clear outline of the towers of Amoreiras.

IT TOOK THIRTEEN long and seemingly endless days before the publishers or someone acting on their behalf discovered the crime, and Raimundo Silva lived this eternity as if he had some slow-acting poison in his body, but ultimately as decisive as the most lethal toxicant, the perfect simile of death that each one of us goes through life preparing for and for which life itself serves as a protective cocoon, a propitious womb and ferment for cultivation. He made four visits to the publishers for no good reason, since his work, as we know, is freelance and can be done from home, exempt from the drudgeries that saddle ordinary employees, subjected to the chores of administration, editing, production, distribution and storage, a world under constant scrutiny and, by comparison, the task of proof-reader belongs to the realms of liberty. They asked him what he wanted, and he replied, Nothing, I just happened to be passing nearby and thought I'd call in. He lingered awhile, listening to conversations and studying the expression on people's faces, trying to pick up any thread of suspicion, a sly, provocative smile, a phrase wherein he could detect some hidden meaning. He avoided Costa, not because he had anything to fear, but simply because he had deceived him, Costa thus becoming that personification of outraged innocence we are incapable of confronting, because we have wronged someone and they still have not found out. We are tempted to say that Raimundo Silva goes to the publishers like the criminal returning to the scene of the crime, but that would not be entirely true, Raimundo Silva is certainly attracted to the place where his crime will be discovered and where the judges will convene to pass the sentence that will condemn him, prevaricator, exposed, false and defenceless.

The proof-reader is in no doubt that he is about to make a foolish mistake, that these visits will be remembered, when the time comes, as particularly odious expressions of a perverse malevolence, You knew the damage you had done, yet notwithstanding, you didn't have the guts, they would actually use the word guts, the frankness, the honesty, to own up of your own free will, they would use the words free will, you waited for events to take their course, perversely amusing yourself, yes perversely amusing yourself at our expense, and the banality of these final words will clash with the high moral tone of his severe reproof. It would be useless trying to tell them that they are mistaken, that Raimundo Silva was only looking for some peace of mind and reassurance. They still have not found him out, he sighs with relief each time he goes there, but any reassurance and peace of mind were of short duration, no sooner did he enter his apartment than he felt more beleaguered than Lisbon had ever been.

Not being superstitious, he was not expecting anything disagreeable to happen to him on the thirteenth. Only those obsessed with oracles are plagued by mishap and misfortune on the thirteenth day of the month, I have never allowed myself to be influenced by these absurd superstitions, and this would probably have been his answer if anyone had raised this hypothesis. This radical scepticism explains why his initial reaction was one of vexed surprise when he heard the voice of the director's secretary on the line, Senhor Silva, you are requested to attend a meeting at four o'clock this afternoon, she spoke the words in this curt manner as if she were reading from a written memo,

carefully drafted to make sure that all the essential words were in place and any word eliminated that might diminish the effect of mental torment and confusion, now that surprise and annoyance no longer have any meaning when confronted with the evidence that the thirteenth of the month does not spare the strong-minded, while dominating the feeble. He slowly replaced the receiver and looked around him, with the distinct impression that he could see the apartment sway, Steady on, he said. At such moments, the stoic would smile, had this classical species not died out completely to give way to the evolution of the modern cynic, who, in his turn, bears scarcely any resemblance to his philosophical and pedestrian ancestor. Be that as it may, there is a wan smile on Raimundo Silva's face, his look of resigned martyrdom is tempered by a manly sorrow, this is what you mainly find in novels dominated by characters, by taking another look you learn so much.

The proof-reader asks himself whether he is troubled or not, and cannot come up with an answer. What he does find intolerable is to be obliged to wait until four o'clock in order to know what the editors have in mind for this irresponsible proof-reader, how they will punish his insolent disregard for sound historical facts which ought to be permanently reinforced and defended from any meddling, otherwise we shall lose any sense of our actuality and seriously undermine the concepts and beliefs derived therefrom, on which we rely for guidance. Now that the error has been discovered, it is pointless to speculate on the future consequences of the presence of that Not in The History of the Siege of Lisbon, whether fate had permitted a slower incubation, page against page, unobserved by the readers but invisibly burrowing a path like woodworms who leave a hollow shell where we expected to find a solid piece of furniture. He pushed the proofs he was revising to one side, not those of the novel Costa had left him on that famous day, this is a slim little volume of poems, and, resting his weary head in his hands, he remembered a story whose tide and author escaped him, although he had an idea it was something like Tarzan and the Lost Kingdom, and where there was a city with ancient Romans and the first Christians, all hidden away in the African jungle, truly, the imagination of novelists has no limits, and this one, if all the rest tallies, can only be Edgar Rice Burroughs. There was an amphitheatre and the Christians were thrown to wild beasts, that is to say, to the lions, all the more feasible since Africa is where lions belong, and the novelist wrote, although without providing any proof or citing his sources, that the more nervous of those unfortunate creatures did not wait for the lions to attack, but actually ran, in a manner of speaking, into the arms of death, not in order to be the first to enter paradise, but simply because they did not have the strength of mind to bear this waiting for the inevitable. These reminiscences of books he had read in his youth made Raimundo Silva think, along the familiar paths pursued by one's thoughts, that it was within his power to precipitate the course of history, to accelerate time, to go immediately to the publisher, on some pretext or other, such as, At four o'clock I have a medical appointment, so don't beat about the bush and tell me what you want, this is the tone he would adopt in speaking to Costa, but needless to say, he did not go to any meeting with Production as the director's secretary called it, his case would be dealt with at the highest level and, ironically, this

certainly pandered to his vanity, I must be mad, he muttered, repeating the same words he had spoken three days ago. If only I could find, amidst this confusion, some feeling that might prevail over all others, so that if he were subsequently asked, How did you feel in that terrible situation, he would reply, I felt worried, or indifferent, or amused, or troubled, or fearful, or ashamed, frankly, he does not know what he feels, he only wishes it were already four o'clock and time for that fatal encounter with the lion awaiting him with gaping jaws while the Romans applaud, the minutes are like this, although they usually step back in order to let us pass after brushing against our skin, but there will always be one ready to devour us. All metaphors about time and fate are tragic and at the same time futile, mused Raimundo Silva, perhaps not in these precise words, but since what really counts is the meaning, this is how he jotted it down, pleased to have thought of it. Yet he scarcely felt like eating any lunch, he had a lump in his throat, a familiar sensation, and a knot in his stomach, which is most uncommon, but conveys the seriousness of the situation. The charlady, this being her day, thought he looked odd and asked him straight out, Are you unwell, words which unexpectedly had a stimulating effect, for if his behaviour were giving strangers the impression that he was sick, then it was time to get a grip on himself, to overcome this malaise that was destroying him, so he replied, I feel fine, and at that moment it was true.

It was five to four when he walked into the publishers. This time he found all the things he had been looking for last time, whispering, furtive glances, sniggering, and also, on several faces, simply the puzzled expression of someone who is not entirely satisfied with the evidence, although forced to accept it. They showed him into the waiting-room outside the director's office and left him sitting there for more than a quarter of an hour, which goes to show the futility of fears which are in no sense punctual. He looked at his watch, the lion had obviously been delayed, nowadays it is extremely difficult to drive in the jungle even with Roman roads, but in this case, it is much more likely that someone may have thought it a good idea to have recourse to proven psychological tactics, to make him wait until his nerves became frayed, to push him to the edge of crisis, and leave him defenceless against the very first attack. Raimundo Silva considers that even so, taking into account the circumstances, he is reasonably calm, as if he had spent his entire life doing nothing except replacing true facts with lies, without really noticing the difference and learning to choose between the arguments for and against, accumulated throughout the ages by the endless discourse and sophistry that have flourished in the mind of homo sapiens. All of a sudden, the door was flung open and there stood, not the director's secretary as one might have expected, but the secretary of the Editorial Director. Please to accompany me, she said, and Raimundo Silva, despite having noticed the faulty syntax, perceived that his imagined calm was merely superficial, and tenuous, his knees were shaking as he rose from the sofa, the adrenalin stirring in his blood, the sweat oozing from the palms of his hands and from his armpits, and he could even feel a diffused colic, a sign that his entire digestive system was trying to expand, I am like a calf being led to the slaughterhouse, he thought to himself, and fortunately he was capable of self-disparagement.

The secretary allowed him to pass, Do go in, and closed the door. Raimundo Silva said, Good afternoon, two of those present replied, Good afternoon, the third, the Editorial Director, simply said, Take a seat, Senhor Silva. The lion is also seated and watching, we may assume the beast is licking its chops with bared fangs as it weighs up the texture and flavour of the pale Christian's flesh. Raimundo Silva crosses his leg, then uncrosses it at once, and at that moment realises he does not know one person who is there, a woman seated on the left of the Editorial Director. He recognises the Production Manager on his right, but he cannot recall ever having seen this woman before, Who can she be. He tries to get a better look, but the Editorial Director has started to speak, I imagine you know why we have sent for you, I have a fair idea, The Managing Director was anxious to deal with this matter personally but a matter of some urgency turned up at the last minute, obliging him to absent himself. The Editorial Director fell silent, as if wanting to give Raimundo Silva time to lament his misfortune, to have lost the opportunity of being interrogated by the Managing Director in person, but, confronted by the proof-reader's silence, he allowed a note of repressed annoyance to creep into his voice for the first time, although softened by a tone of voice that almost sounded conciliatory, I'm grateful to you, he went on, for having implicitly admitted that you were responsible, sparing us a disagreeable situation, should you have denied or tried to justify your action. Raimundo Silva thought they must now be waiting for him to say something more than simply, I have a fair idea, but before he could speak the Production Manager intervened, I still can't believe it, Senhor Silva, you have worked for so many years for this publishing house, and for an experienced professional like you to make such an error. It wasn't an error, interrupted the Editorial Director, it is useless extending a merciful hand to Senhor Silva, for we know as well as he does that the error was quite intentional, is that not so, Senhor Silva, What makes you think, Sir, that it was quite intentional, I trust you are not about to go back on what you intended to say when you came into this room, I'm not going back on anything, simply asking a question. The Editorial Director's annoyance became obvious, all the more so because of the irony in those words, I presume you are aware that the right to ask for an explanation and demand an apology, not to mention other measures we mean to take, is ours rather than yours, especially mine, as the Managing Director's representative, Quite right, Sir, I withdraw my question, No need to withdraw your question, we're convinced that the error was intentional because of the manner in which you wrote Not on the proof, in bold, neat lettering, unlike your usual handwriting which is brisk and fluent although perfectly legible. At this point, the Editorial Director suddenly fell silent, as if conscious that he was talking too much and, therefore, weakening his position as arbiter. There was silence and Raimundo Silva had the impression that the woman had not taken her eyes off him during all this time, Who can she be, but she said nothing as if this matter had nothing to do with her. For his part, the Production Manager, piqued at having been interrupted, appeared to have lost all interest in a discussion which, to all appearances, was getting nowhere. This idiot cannot see that this is no way to deal with such a case, he never stops talking, likes the sound of his own voice, and gives all the trump cards to Silva, who must be laughing up his sleeve, you only have to see how he handles the sudden silence, he should have been

terrified and there he sits, calm personified. The Production Manager was wrong about Raimundo Silva being calm, if not about the rest, for the fact is that we do not know enough about the Editorial Director to form our own considered opinion. Raimundo Silva is not the least bit calm, he only looks calm, thanks to the disorientation provoked by the unexpected course of this dialogue which he had imagined would be literally catastrophic, the solemn formal accusation, his stuttering attempts to defend the indefensible, the vexation, heavy irony, the diatribe, threats, perhaps dismissal to cap all this or render it unnecessary, You're fired, and don't expect any references from us. Now Raimundo Silva perceives that he must say something, especially since the lion is not directly confronting him, he has moved up on one side and is absorbed in scratching his mane with a broken nail, perhaps no Christian will perish after all in this amphitheatre, even if there is no sign of Tarzan. He says, first addressing the Production Manager, then furtively eyeing the woman who remains silent, I've made no attempt to deny that the word was written by me nor did I ever mean to deny it once it came to light, but the important thing is not to have written it, the important thing, in my opinion, is to discover why I wrote it, I hope you're not going to tell me that you don't know, the Editorial Director said sarcastically, regaining control of the situation, It's true, Sir, I don't, That's a good one, this fellow commits a deliberate fraud, causes grave moral and material damage to the publishing house and the author, has not yet uttered a word of apology, and with the most innocent air imaginable, wants us to believe that some mysterious force, a spirit from beyond guided his hand while he was in a hypnotic trance. The Editorial Director smiled, rejoicing in his own eloquence, but trying to transform his smile into an expression of irrefutable irony. I don't believe I was in a trance, replied Raimundo Silva, I can clearly recall the circumstances in which everything happened, but this doesn't mean that I can explain how I came to make this deliberate mistake, Ah, so you confess it was deliberate, Naturally, Now you only have to admit that it was not a mistake, but blatant deception, and that you consciously hoped to prejudice the publishing house and ridicule the author of the book, I admit to deception, as for the rest, nothing could have been further from my mind, Perhaps a moment of agitation, suggested the Production Manager, as if trying to be helpful. Raimundo Silva expected a predictably brusque reaction from the Editorial Director, but it did not come, and then he realised the phrase had been foreseen, there would be no dismissal, everything would end up in words, yes, no, perhaps, and the sense of relief was so overwhelming, that he could feel his body weaken, his spirit unburden, now it was up to him to say the right words, such as, Yes, a moment of agitation, but we cannot forget that several hours elapsed before the proofs were delivered to Costa, and Raimundo Silva congratulated himself on the subtle manner in which he had slipped in that cannot, putting himself on the side of the judges, as if he were saying to them, Don't let us deceive ourselves. The Editorial Director said, Good, the book will be distributed bearing an errata, a somewhat absurd errata cautioning, Where there is a Not in the text it should be negated, where the text says the crusaders did not help, it should read, the crusaders did help, readers will be amused at our expense, but fortunately for us, we spotted the error in time, and the author has been most understanding, I even got the impression that he genuinely respects you, he spoke

of a conversation you both had some time ago, Yes, we did have a conversation, it was about deleatur, About what, the woman asked, About deleatur, don't you know what it means, asked Raimundo Silva aggressively, Of course, but I didn't hear you the first time. The woman's intervention, which appeared to take everyone by surprise, seemed to warrant some deviation in their discussion, This lady, the Editorial Director informed him, from now onwards will be in charge of all the proof-readers employed by our publishing house, whether it is a question of deadlines and the rhythm of the work or the final checking of proofs to ensure accuracy, she will have full responsibility, but let us return to the matter in hand, the publishers have decided to treat this disagreeable episode as closed, and taking into account the good work and loyal service Senhor Silva has rendered during all these years, we are prepared to treat this lapse as the result of overwork, of mental fatigue, in a word, we shall treat the matter as settled, in the hope that it never happens again, however Senhor Silva must write a letter of apology to the publishers and another to the author, the latter has said it is not necessary, that one day, he himself will have a word with you about this matter, but we feel it is your duty, Senhor Silva, to write this letter, Of course, I shall write to him, Very well, the Editorial Director was obviously relieved, needless to say, for some time to come, your work will receive our special attention, not because we think you will deliberately set about altering texts, but to guard against the eventuality of any such sudden impulses ever recurring, and I don't have to tell you that we shall be less tolerant next time. The Editorial Director said no more, waiting for the proof-reader to make some declaration about his future intentions, at least those of which he was conscious, since any others, if they existed, were unconscious and, therefore, impenetrable. Raimundo Silva perceived what was expected of him, there is no denying that words demand words, which is why people say, One word leads to another, but it is no less true that, It takes two to pick a quarrel, let us imagine that the Pilgrim refused to satisfy the fatal curiosity of Esquire Telmo, most likely the matter would have been resolved and there would have been no conflict, drama, death, and widespread calamity, or let us suppose that a man has asked a woman, Do you love me, and she remains silent, simply looking at him, sphinx-like and distant, refusing to utter that No that will destroy him, or that Yes which will destroy both of them, then we must conclude that the world would be a better place if everyone were content with what they say, without expecting any reply and, moreover, neither demanding or desiring one. But Raimundo Silva feels obliged to say, I can understand that the publishing house should want to take precautions, who am I to criticise their decisions, in short, I wish to apologise and hereby promise that so long as I am in my right mind, it will never happen again, at this point he paused as if asking himself whether he should continue, but then he thought everything had been said, and shut up. The Editorial Director said, Good, and prepared himself to add the expected words, The matter is closed, now back to work, getting to his feet as he spoke and smiling as he offered his open hand to Raimundo Silva as a token of peace, but the woman seated on his left interrupted this magnanimous gesture, If you'll allow me, what surprises me is that Senhor Silva, that is hisname, I believe, has not made the slightest attempt to explain why he behaved so irresponsibly, changing the meaning of a sentence, when as

proof-reader it was his solemn duty to respect and safeguard the original text, which is why proof-readers exist. The lion suddenly reappeared, roaring, baring its terrifying fangs, its sharpened claws, now our only hope, abandoned in this arena, is that Tarzan will turn up at last, swinging from a liana and shouting, Ah-ah-ah-oe-oe, if my memory serves me well, and he might even bring elephants to assist him, since they have such a wonderful memory. Confronted with this unexpected attack, both the Editorial Director and Production Manager started frowning again, perhaps to avoid being accused of weakness by a fragile woman conscious of the professional obligations with which she had only recently been invested, and they stared at the proof-reader with fitting severity. They had failed to notice that there was nothing severe about the woman's expression, nothing but a playful smile, as if, at heart, she were enjoying the situation. Disconcerted, Raimundo Silva looked at her, she is still young, not quite forty, obviously tall, she has a pale complexion, brown hair, if the proof-reader were closer he might detect a few white hairs, and her mouth is nicely shaped and fleshy, but the lips are not thick, a strange encounter, and a hint of disquiet stirs inside Raimundo Silva, perturbation would be a better word, now we must choose the right adjective to accompany it, such as sexual, but we shall resist the temptation. Raimundo Silva cannot dally much longer before replying, although it is common in situations of this kind to say that time is at a standstill, something time has never been since the world began. The smile is still on the woman's face, but the brusqueness and hostility of her words cannot be ignored, not even the directors were so blunt, Raimundo Silva hesitates between responding with the same aggression or using the conciliatory tone his dependence on this woman would appear to warrant, it goes without saying that she has the means to give him a hard time in future on the merest pretext, so, having pondered as carefully as the little time at his disposal allowed, as well as taking into account the time lost in physiognomic observations, he finally replied, No one would be happier than I to find a satisfactory explanation, but, if I haven't found one after all this time, I doubt if I ever will, what I believe is that there must have been some inner struggle between my good side, if I really have one, and my bad side, which is common to all of us, a tussle between a Dr Jekyll and a Mr Hyde, if you will pardon this literary reference, or, to put it in my own words, between the inconstant temptation of evil and the spirit that upholds good, sometimes I ask myself what mistakes Fernando Pessoa must have made, whether of revision or otherwise, with that confusion of heteronyms, a hellish battle, I should imagine. The woman never stopped smiling as he delivered this speech, and she was still smiling when she asked him, Apart from Jekyll and Hyde, are you someone else, So far I have managed to be Raimundo Silva, Splendid, now let's see if you can stay that way, for the sake of the publishing house and harmony in our future relationship. Professional, I trust you're not suggesting it could be otherwise, I was simply finishing off your phrase, the proof-reader's job is to propose solutions that will eliminate any ambiguity, either in matters of style or meaning, I presume you know that ambiguity is in the mind of the person listening or reading, Especially if the stimulus came to them from the person writing or speaking, Or he or she is one of those people who go in for auto-stimulation, I don't think so in my case, You don't think so, I rarely make peremptory statements, It was peremptory to write that Not of yours in The History

of the Siege of Lisbon, and if you cannot justify the deception, at least explain it, because there can be no justification, Excuse me, we've been through all this before, Thanks for telling me, you've spared me the trouble of having to repeat what I think of your behaviour. Raimundo Silva opened his mouth to reply, but suddenly noticed the look of amazement on the faces of the directors and decided to hold his peace. Silence fell, the woman continued to smile, but perhaps because she had been smiling all this time, her facial muscles appeared to be twitching, and Raimundo Silva felt as if he were suffocating, the atmosphere in the office seemed to weigh on his shoulders, I detest this female, he thought, and deliberately eyed the directors as if making it clear that from now on he will only accept and consent to answer their questions. He knew that on this side the game had been won, the directors, both of them, were now getting to their feet and one of them repeated, We consider the matter closed, now back to work, but he did not extend his hand to Raimundo Silva, this dubious peace called for no celebration, when the proof-reader left the room, the Editorial Director commented to the Production Manager, Perhaps we should have dismissed him, it would have been simpler, and it was the woman who pointed out, We should have lost a good proof-reader, He's going to give us further trouble, judging from what we've just heard, Perhaps not.

On the way out, Raimundo Silva bumped into Costa who was coming from the printers. He curdy wished him good afternoon and was about to walk on, but Costa took him by the arm, gently, barely touching the sleeve of his raincoat, the expression in Costa's eyes was serious, almost pitiful, and his words accusing, Why have you done this to me, Senhor Silva, he asked, and Raimundo Silva, at a loss for an answer, simply shook his head childishly, But I haven't done anything to you. Costa shook his head, removed his hand, and set off down the corridor, he could not believe that this fellow did not realise he had offended him personally, and that this matter was really between the two of them, Costa and Raimundo Silva, the deceiver and the deceived, for them there could be no saving errata in extremis. On reaching the end of the corridor, Costa turned back and asked, Have they dismissed you, No, they have not dismissed me, Just as well, if they had given you the sack I should be even more put out, when all is said and done, Costa is a decent fellow, restrained in his use of language, he did not say sad or embittered, so as not to sound solemn, he said put out which is a common expression according to the dictionaries, yet incomparable, however much the purists may deny it. Costa is definitely put out, no other phrase could better express his state of mind, nor that of Raimundo Silva who, having asked himself for the umpteenth time, How do I feel, was able to give the same definite answer, I'm put out.

When he arrived home the charlady had already gone, leaving him a message, always the same message if he happened to be out, Everything is back in order, I've taken the washing with me to finish off the ironing, this show of zeal meant that she had taken advantage of his absence in order to leave earlier, but she would never admit to it, and Raimundo Silva, who was in no doubt about the hours she worked, accepted her explanation and said nothing. Certain harmonious relationships are created and endure,

thanks to a complex system of little fibs and denials, a duet, as it were, danced with knowing gestures and posturings, which can be summed up in that proverb or maxim, to be more precise, that we can never hear too often, You know what I know, but let's keep it to ourselves. Not that there are any secrets, mysteries, skeletons in locked cupboards that need to be revealed when one speaks of the relationship between servant and master in this house where Raimundo Silva lives and where a woman is occasionally present, but only to do the chores, a woman whose full name he is never likely to need to know. But it is extremely interesting to see how the life of these two human beings is at once opaque and transparent, for Raimundo Silva there is no one closer, yet he has never-shown any interest in knowing what existence this woman leads when she is not working, and as for her name, he only has to say, Senhora Maria, and she appears in the doorway to inquire, Senhor Raimundo, did you want something, Senhora Maria is short, thin, dark enough to be taken for a half-caste, and she has naturally curly hair of which she is immensely proud, just as well, for she is no beauty. When she says or writes, Everything is back in order, she is obviously abusing these words, for her idea of putting things in order consists of applying the golden rule whereby things only have to look neat and tidy, or, to put it in other words, no one should notice what has been overlooked or not been cleaned. The obvious exception is Raimundo Silva's study where untidiness seems to be in keeping with his work, that is how he sees it, unlike those proof-readers who are obsessed with tidiness, precision, geometrical harmony, and would give Senhora Maria a hard time, by pointing out, This paper is not where I left it, the papers in Raimundo Silva's office are always where he left them, for the simple reason that Senhora Maria is not allowed to touch them, and therefore can always protest, It's not my fault, whenever Raimundo Silva mislays books or proofs.

He crumpled the paper, disregarding the message, and threw it into the wastepaper basket. Only then did he remove his coat and change into a flannel shirt, trousers he wore indoors, a knitted waistcoat, not only because of the chilly weather, but because he feels the cold and is rarely warm enough, so much so that he has slipped a tartan dressing-gown over his clothes, bulky, but it could not be more comfortable, besides he is not expecting any visitors. Throughout the journey from the publishing house back to his apartment he had managed not to think, some find this impossible, but Raimundo Silva has mastered the art of floating vague ideas, like clouds that stay apart, and he even knows how to blow away any idea that gets too close, the important thing is that they should not come into contact thus creating a continuum or, something worse, if there is electricity in the mental atmosphere, with the inevitable storm bringing thunder and lightning. For a few moments he had allowed his thoughts to dwell on Senhora Maria, but now his brain was vacant once more. To make sure it stayed that way, he went through to the sitting-room where he kept the television and switched on the set. In there it was even colder. Thanks to a clear sky, the sun was still shining over the city, already from the direction of the sea, as it went down, casting a gentle light, bestowing a luminous caress to which the window-panes on the hillside would soon respond, first with flaring torches, then turning pale, dwindling to a tiny fragment of flickering glass, until finally

extinguished as twilight gradually begins to sift its ashes between the buildings, concealing the gables, as the noise of the city down below dies away and withdraws beneath the silence spreading from these streets to on high where Raimundo Silva lives. The television has no sound, that is to say, Raimundo Silva has turned it off, there are only luminous images that move, not only on the screen, but also over the furniture, the walls, and over Raimundo Silva's face which looks without seeing or thinking. For almost an hour he has been watching video-clips of Totally Live, singers, for want of a better word, and the dancers wriggle their bodies, the former express every conceivable human feeling and sensation, some of them dubious, their faces speak for themselves, their words cannot be heard but that does not matter, it is incredible how a face can have so much mobility, twitching, leering, grimacing, scowling menacingly, an androgynous creature, false and obscene, mature women with a lion's mane, alluring girls with shapely hips, thighs and bosoms, others as slender as a reed and fiendishly erotic, mature gentlemen showing interesting wrinkles to add an air of distinction, all of this created by flickering light, all smothered in silence, as if Raimundo Silva had grabbed those throats, asphyxiating them behind a curtain of water, no less silent, the universal triumph of deafness. Now a man appears on his own, he must be singing although his lips scarcely move, the caption gave the name Leonard Cohen, and the image looks fixedly at Raimundo Silva, the movements of his mouth articulate a question, Why won't you listen to me, lonely man, no doubt adding, Listen to me while you can, before it's too late, one video-clip follows another, and they are never repeated, this isn't a disk you can play over and over again, I might be back but I can't say when, and you might miss me, so take your chance, take your chance, take your chance. Raimundo Silva bent over, turned on the sound, Leonard Cohen made a gesture as if to thank him, now he could sing, and sing he did, he sang of things only someone who has lived can sing of, and asks himself how much and for what, someone who has loved and asks himself who and why, and, having asked all these questions, he can find no answer, not one, contrary to the belief that all the answers are there and that all we have to do is to learn how to phrase our questions. When Cohen finished singing, Raimundo Silva turned the sound off again and then switched off the set. The sitting-room, located in the middle of the apartment, was suddenly plunged into darkest night, and the proof-reader can raise his hands to his eyes without anyone seeing him.

Anyone concerned with logic must now be asking himself how it is conceivable that during all this time Raimundo Silva has not given another thought to the humiliating scene in the director's office, or, if he did, why has it never been mentioned for the sake of giving some coherence to a character and verisimilitude to events. Now then, the fact is that Raimundo Silva did think, several times, about the disagreeable episode, but thinking can mean different things according to the circumstances, and the most he permitted himself was to remember, as we earlier explained using other words, when we referred to clouds in the sky and electricity in the atmosphere, the former unattached and the latter of minimum voltage. The difference is between an active thinking which goes burrowing around some fact, and this other form of thinking, if worthy of the name, which

is inert and detached, when it looks it does not linger but passes on, convinced that what has not been mentioned does not exist, like the sick man who considers himself healthy because the nature of his illness has not yet been diagnosed. But anyone who imagines that these defensive systems last forever is much mistaken, there comes a moment in which the vagueness of one's thinking becomes an obsession, as a rule it only has to go on hurting a little more. This is what happened to Raimundo Silva as he was washing up the few dishes he had used during supper, it suddenly dawned on him that the publishers had not taken thirteen days to spot the deception, which not only absolved that old superstition but imposed the need for some new superstition, charging yet another day, hitherto innocent, with negative energy. When he was summoned to appear before the directors everything had already been exposed and discussed, What are we going to do with this rascal, asked the Managing Director and the Editorial Director telephoned the author to tell him about this ridiculous incident with profuse apologies, The fact is that you cannot trust anyone, whereupon the author replied, incredible as it may seem, It's not the end of the world, an erratum will solve the problem, and he laughed, What could this man be remembering, and Costa had an idea, There ought to be someone in charge of the proof-readers, Costa knows what is wrong, and the suggestion seemed such a good one that the Production Manager, as if he himself had thought of it, raised the matter with senior management who were so enthusiastic that before the thirteenth, the right person had been interviewed, appointed and installed, to the extent of being allowed to participate ex officio in the summary hearing that would consider this blatant misdemeanour, proven and finally confessed, although as confessions go there were far too many silences and mental reservations on the part of the culprit, an attitude which ended up irritating the new employee, the only possible explanation for her angry outburst as she launched one final attack, But I answered her question, muttered Raimundo Silva as he dried his hands and unrolled his sleeves once he had finished the washing up.

Now seated at his desk with the proofs of the volume of poems in front of him, he pursues the thought, although it might be more precise to say that he anticipates it, because, knowing as we do that thoughts are fleeting, if we content ourselves with pursuing some thought, we shall soon lose the trail, we shall still be inventing the flying machine only to find it has already reached the stars. Turning the thought over in his mind, Raimundo Silva tries to understand why from her very first words he could not repress his hostility, Don't you know the meaning of deleatur, and he is irked most of all by the memory of that tone of voice with which he threw the question, provocative, even rude, and then the final duel between sworn enemies as if there were some personal matter to settle, a long-standing grudge, when we know that these two have never met before, and if they did, they never noticed each other, Who can she be, Raimundo Silva wondered, and as the thought crossed his mind, he inadvertently slackened the rein with which he had been guiding the thought, enough for him to be able to pass in front and start thinking for himself, she is still a young woman, not quite forty, not as tall as he first imagined, pale complexion, brown hair worn loose, eyes the same colour, almost as dark,

and a tiny, round mouth, tiny and round, tiny, round, round. Raimundo Silva stares at the bookcase in front of him, gathered there are all the books he has proof-read throughout his working life, he has not counted them but they constitute a library, tides, names, this one a novel, this a book of poems, this one a play, this one about the opportunism of politics, biographies, memoirs, tides, names, names, tides, some of them famous even today, others who enjoyed their hour of glory and then the clock came to a standstill, some still held in suspense by destiny, But the destiny we have is the destiny we are, murmured the proof-reader, replying to his previous thought, We are the destiny we have. Suddenly he felt hot even though the electric heater was off, he untied the cord of his dressing-gown, got up from his chair, these movements appeared to have some objective and yet, there can be no other explanation, they were merely the expression of an unexpected sense of wellbeing, an almost farcical vigour, a divine tranquillity without remorse. The apartment suddenly became small, even the window open to those three vast entities, the city, the river, and the sky, now looked like a blind peep-hole, and it is true that there was no mist and the night chill brought a reinvigorating freshness. It was not at that moment, but before then, that Raimundo Silva thought to himself, I wonder what she's called, it sometimes happens, we have a thought but do not wish to acknowledge or trust it, we isolate it along with lateral thoughts such as this latest one of having finally remembered that the woman's name was not mentioned even once, This colleague, the Editorial Director declared, will be in charge from now on, and, either because of an improbable lack of manners, or because of his own and everyone else's nervous state, never got round to introducing her, Senhor Raimundo Silva, Senhora So-and-So. These reflections had prevented Raimundo Silva from asking outright, What is her name, and now that he has asked he is unable to think of anything else, as if, after all these hours, he had finally arrived at his destiny, a word used here with its common meaning, in terms of a journey, without any ontological or existential derivations, simply that well-known expression of travellers, I've arrived, thinking they know what awaits them.

An explanation for Raimundo Silva's action is no longer expected or required. He went back into his study, opened José Pedro Machado's Vocabulario, sat down and slowly began perusing the columns of the section dealing with proper names beginning with the letter A, the first name is the personal name Aala, but the gender has been omitted, masculine, feminine, who can tell, a case of careless revision, or could it be a name common to both genders, be that as it may, no woman in charge of proof-readers could possibly be called Aala. Raimundo Silva dozed off over the letter M, his finger placed on the name Maria, undoubtedly the name of a woman, but a charlady, as we know, which does not rule out the hypothesis of a coincidence in a world where they are so easy to find.

THE LETTER WHICH Raimundo Silva wrote to the author of The History of the Siege of Lisbon contained the necessary quantum satis of excuses and a subtle touch of discreet humour which the cordial relations between the sender and the addressee permitted without any abuse of confidence, although in the end there must have been a lasting impression of genuine bewilderment, a serious questioning of the irresistible nature of certain absurd actions. The letter, like some meditation about human frailty, would break down any remaining resistance on the part of the author, who, on being informed of this damaging assault on his intellectual integrity, had replied to the Editorial Director's astonishment, It isn't the end of the world, of course, in real life you do not encounter such abnegation, but this reflection, needless to say, does not come from the historian, it is therefore merely introduced to augment the double meaning, and as relevant here as anywhere else or on any other page of this narrative. The wastepaper basket was soon filled with crumpled paper, discarded pages, drafts amended in all directions, the useless remains after having struggled all day with style and grammar, with those minute harmonies intended to balance the constituent parts of a letter, and an exasperated Raimundo Silva gave vent to his feelings, saying aloud, Is this what writers have to put up with, poor things, and he felt glad to be nothing more than a proof-reader.

Raimundo Silva was walking up the stairs to his apartment after taking his letter to the post office, when he heard the telephone ring. He made no attempt to hurry, partly because he was tired, partly because he felt indifferent and detached, most likely it was Costa wanting to know how he was getting on with the proofs of the volume of poetry or with the preliminary reading of the novel he had left him on that black day, Do you remember. He allowed enough time for Costa to give up, but the telephone went on ringing, it rang with gentle insistence, as if someone was determined to persist simply because it was his or her duty and not because they were counting on getting an answer. He was tranquilly inserting the key in the lock when he remembered it could not possibly be Costa who was calling, Costa had ceased to be his direct contact, poor Costa, an innocent victim, demoted in the hierarchy to the almost mechanical task of fetching and carrying, he who, whenever necessary, was capable of treating the proof-reading mob as equals. Raimundo Silva paused on the threshold of the study, and the telephone, as if sensing his presence, became twice as strident, like a pet dog delirious with excitement on hearing its master return, all it had to do was to jump down from the table and start leaping about, anxious to be patted and cuddled, its tongue out, panting, drooling with sheer pleasure. Raimundo has the odd acquaintance who rings from time to time, and there have been occasions when some woman or other has rung him because she wanted or pretended to want to speak to him and hear how he was getting along, but that was ages ago, calls from women were a thing of the past and there they remained, voices which, if they were to come to him now, would sound supernatural as if coming from another world.

He placed his hand on the receiver, waited a moment longer, as if giving the telephone one last chance to stop ringing, but finally picked up the receiver thinking he

knew exactly what to expect, Is that Senhor Silva, asked the telephonist, and he laconically replied, Speaking, Since no one was answering I was just about to ring off, What can I do for you, I'm calling on behalf of Dr Maria Sara who wishes to have a word with you, just one moment. There was a pause, noises as the connection was being made, sufficient time to allow Raimundo Silva to gather his thoughts, She's called Maria Sara, so to some extent he had guessed correctly without knowing, for if it is true that he had fallen asleep with a revealing finger on the name Maria, it is also true that he had already forgotten and, on awakening, on raising his head from his hand spread out on the book, and then rubbing his eyes with both hands, he had culled from the page that precarious sign of orientation, he would only have those two limiting references at his disposal, and would know, at most, that what he was looking for had to be between Manuela and Marula, both names that could be ruled out immediately, because totally unsuited to the personality of this person or character. The telephonist said, I'm just connecting you, a phrase common to all telephonists, the jargon of their profession, yet they are words that promise results, as much for good as for evil. I'm just connecting you, she said, indifferent to the destiny that makes use of her services and pays no attention to what she is saying, I'm going to connect, dial, transfer, switch through, link, contact, plug in, put you in touch, in her mind it is simply a matter of making it possible for two people to communicate, but even this straightforward operation is not without its dangers and should be handled with care. But these warnings go unheeded, even though we are reminded daily that every word is a dangerous sorcerer's apprentice.

Raimundo Silva had slumped into a chair, suddenly feeling twice as tired, Trembling knees are a sign of old age, the obligatory quotation mocked him unjustly, a man who has just turned fifty is not old, perhaps in the past, but nowadays men take better care of themselves, there are lotions, dyes, creams, various skin conditioners, where, for example, would you find a man in the civilised world today, who after shaving would use alum, so severe on the skin, in this modern age cosmetics are queen, king and president, and if, as we have seen, he was unable to disguise the shaking in his legs, at least he has ways and means of contriving a look of composure in the presence of any witnesses. In their absence, Raimundo Silva's face starts twitching, while at the other end of the line, the composed Dr Maria Sara, no doubt with a graceful gesture, tosses her head to throw her hair back on the left side before putting the receiver to her ear, and at last she is ready to speak, We weren't introduced the other day, so let me introduce myself, my name is Maria Sara, yours, she was about to say, I already know, but Raimundo Silva, from force of habit, gave his name, but gave it in full, adding the Benvindo, and almost died of embarrassment there and then. Dr Maria Sara, however, despite having revealed nothing more about herself, ignored this confidence and addressed him as Senhor Silva, without ever suspecting how much balm she was pouring on to the proof-reader's wounded susceptibility, I'd like to discuss how we might organise our work, I'm having meetings with all the proof-readers in order to hear what they think, yes private meetings, I can think of no other way, tomorrow at midday, if that suits you, agreed, I'll expect you then, see you tomorrow. She then rang off but it took Raimundo Silva some

time to regain his composure, now the apartment is filled with silence, only the faintest pulsation can be heard, which could be that of the palpitating city, the flowing river, or simply the proof-reader's heartbeat.

He awoke several times in the night with a start, as if someone had shaken him. He kept his eyes closed, trying to ward off insomnia, and soon he passed from uneasy torpor to another restless sleep, but without any dreams. As midnight approached it began to rain, the noise on the verandah roof was always the first sign, however light the rain, and Raimundo Silva's sleep was disturbed by the continuous patter of raindrops falling and reverberating, he slowly opened his eyes to greet the wan light that was just beginning to filter through the chinks of the shutters. As nearly always happens to anyone awakening at this hour, he went back to sleep, this time troubled by dreams, worrying if there would be enough time to dye his hair which badly needed doing, and whether he would be able to do it effectively enough to disguise the fact that it was dyed. It was after nine when he awoke, and immediately thought, I haven't time, then changed his mind. He went into the bathroom and, blinking his eyes, hair uncombed, his face wrinkled, he examined himself under the strong light of the two lamps, one on each side of the mirror. White roots were sadly visible, it would not be enough to ruffle his hair in order to hide them, the solution was really to dye them. He got through his breakfast in a matter of minutes, sacrificing his confirmed appetite for buttered toast, and went back into the bathroom, where he locked himself in to get on with the minting of false coin, in a word, to applying the product, as the instructions on the label described it. He always locked himself in, even though he might be all alone in the apartment when he dyed his hair, he did it in secret, which, as he ought to know, was no secret to anyone, and he would certainly have died of shame were he ever to be discovered carrying out what he himself considered a depressing operation. Like that of Dr Maria Sara, his hair, in more truthful times, was brown, but now it would be impossible to compare their respective hair tones, nature with nature, because that of Raimundo Silva has a uniform colour which bears a striking resemblance to a dowdy, moth-eaten wig, long forgotten then rediscovered in some attic, entangled amongst old pictures, items of furniture, ornaments, knick-knacks, the masks of another age. It was getting on for eleven-thirty before he was ready to leave, already very late, and unless he was fortunate enough to find a taxi right away, the situation would warrant another quotation, this time from an old saying, 111 often comes on the back of worse, a succinct and telling expression which could be transposed as, Out of one ill come many. He was truly fortunate to be living in the Rua do Milagre de Santo Antonio, for only a miracle could have brought an empty taxi into such a deserted street on such a rainy day and it actually stopped when he hailed it without signalling back that it was heading elsewhere. Feeling cheerful, Raimundo Silva arrived at the publishers and made for the editorial department, but later, as he was depositing his umbrella, he realised he was being idiotic, his anxiety was showing in two quite different ways, the fear of going, the desire to arrive, the publishing house for him had become a loathsome place, and, on the other hand, it was not simply to arrive at midday on the dot that he had urged the taxi-driver to go faster, I'm in a hurry, running

the risk of making an enemy of someone who had just shown himself to be instrumental in the working of a miracle. Descending into the lower part of the city took some time, to make headway amidst traffic held up by the rain was like thrashing about in treacle, Raimundo Silva perspired with impatience, it was already ten minutes past midday when he walked into the office, panting for breath, and in the worst possible frame of mind for a meeting to discuss new responsibilities and, almost certainly, to reopen the question of his recent fall from grace.

Dr Maria Sara rose from her chair and cordially came to greet him, How are you, Senhor Raimundo Silva, Sorry I'm late, in this rain the taxi took some time, It doesn't matter, make yourself comfortable. The proof-reader sat down, but made to get up again as Dr Maria Sara returned to her desk, Please, don't get up, and when she came back she was carrying a book which she placed on the low table, between the two sofas upholstered in soft black leather. Then she sat down, crossed her legs, she was wearing a skirt in a heavy material, pulled in at the waist, and she lit a cigarette. The proof-reader's eyes accompanied the movement which animated her upper regions, he recognised the face, the hair hanging loosely at shoulder-length, and was shocked to discover white hairs gleaming under the ceiling lamp, She doesn't dye them, he thought to himself, anxious to get out of the place as soon as possible. Dr Maria Sara had asked him if he wished to smoke, but he only heard her when she repeated the question, No thanks, I don't smoke, he replied, lowering his eyes and carrying away the image of a blouse with a plunging neckline, in a colour he was too perturbed to identify. Now he could not take his eyes from the table, he was fascinated, there lay *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, turned towards him, no doubt deliberately, clearly showing the author's name, the title in bold lettering, an illustration in the centre of the cover with medieval knights with the emblem of the crusaders and on the ramparts of the fortification, disproportionately large drawings of Moors, it was difficult to tell at this distance if it was a reproduction from some old manuscript or a modern design in medieval style, therefore, pseudo-naïf. He had no desire to go on looking at that provocative cover, yet he was so reluctant to confront Dr Maria Sara who at this moment must be staring relentlessly at him, like a cobra about to lunge and inflict one last fatal bite. But all she said, in a natural voice, with no particular intonation, deliberately neutral, as straightforward as the four words she uttered, This book belongs to you, she took a long pause and added, this time putting greater emphasis on certain syllables, Let me rephrase that, This is your book. Confused, Raimundo Silva raised his head, Mine, he asked, Yes, it's the only remaining copy of *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* that does not carry an erratum, the only copy which still claims that the crusaders refused to help the Portuguese, I don't understand, Don't you mean you're stalling until you decide how you should speak to me, Forgive me, that was not my intention, No need to justify yourself, you can't spend your entire life offering excuses, I was only hoping that you might ask me why I'm giving you this copy without any erratum, a book which preserves the deception, that makes no attempt to remove this error or falsehood, the choice of word is up to you, Then tell me, why are you giving me this book, Too late, I no longer feel like telling you, but she was smiling as she

spoke, notwithstanding a certain tension in the way she moved her lips, I beseech you, he insisted, returning her smile, and he was surprised to find himself smiling in such a situation. To be smiling at a woman about whom I know almost nothing and who is almost certainly amusing herself at my expense. Looking somewhat nervous, Dr Maria Sara put out her cigarette and lit another, Raimundo Silva observed her closely, the scales were beginning to tip in his favour, but he could not understand why, much less the meaning of all this, he had not, after all, been summoned to discuss or simply receive instructions about new procedures for proof-readers, what was happening here made it obvious that the matter of the Siege had not been finally settled at that black hour on the thirteenth day when he had come here to be sentenced, But don't imagine you're going to subject me to any more vexation, he thought to himself, unwilling to recognise that he was misrepresenting the facts, the truth being that he had been spared the vexation of being dismissed under a cloud, and he certainly did not expect to be given a medal for good conduct or be promoted to head proof-reader, a rank that previously did not exist but had now apparently been created.

Dr Maria Sara quickly rose to her feet, it was interesting to see how she could move so quickly without losing a natural grace which eliminated any impression of brusqueness, and she went to her desk to find a sheet of paper which she handed to Raimundo Silva, From now on all the proof-reading will conform to these instructions, there is no radical departure from the way things have been done in the past and, as you will see, the most important thing is that where a proof-reader is working on his own, as in your case, the proofs will be given a final checking, which might be done by me or some other proof-reader, on the clear understanding that the criteria adopted by the first proof-reader must always be respected, all we are trying to do here is to carry out one final revision to avoid any errors and correct any inadvertent slips, Or intentional deviations, added Raimundo Silva, forcing a bitter smile, You're mistaken, that was an episode you couldn't even describe as locking the stable door after the horse has bolted, because I'm convinced that the thieves won't be back and that the door can stay unlocked, the rules you have there are based on common sense, they are not some penal code to dissuade and punish the offence of hardened criminals, Such as me, An isolated incident, which, as I've already told you, won't happen again, does not make someone into a criminal, Thanks for being so trusting, You don't need my trust, it's a question of basic logic and elementary psychology, something even a child would understand, But I do have my limitations, So does everyone else. Raimundo Silva made no reply, went on staring at the sheet of paper he was holding in his hands, but without reading it, because for an experienced proof-reader like him, it would be difficult to invent any surprise likely to make an impact beyond the time it would take to enunciate. Dr Maria Sara remained seated, but she had straightened up and was leaning ever so slightly forward, making it clear that for her part, the conversation was over, and that any second now, unless there was some good reason to act otherwise, she would be on her feet to say those final words, the ones we usually disregard, those phrases on parting which repetition and habit have robbed of any meaning, a comment which is no less repetitive, introduced here to echo a comment

made elsewhere at some other time and not worth any further elaboration, see Portrait of the Poet in the Year of his Death.

Raimundo Silva carefully folded the sheet of paper twice, and tucked it into the inside pocket of his jacket. He then moved in such a way that he misled Dr Maria Sara, he appeared to be getting up, but no, he was simply preparing himself, so as not to half-finish the phrase he was about to utter, which, in a nutshell, more or less means that these moments, and moments are always many, even though the seconds of which they consist may be few, they have both lived with unstable equilibrium, the proof-reader compelled against his will to follow Dr Maria Sara's movement, as she herself changed her mind on realising that she had misunderstood his intention. Even more effectively than the theatre, the cinema would know how to show this subtle choreography of gestures, able even to decompose and recompose them successively, but our experience of communication has shown that this seeming wealth of visual images has not lessened the need for words, any words, even in the knowledge that they tell us so little about the actions and interactions of the human body, about the volition implied or actually there, about what we call instinct for want of a better name, about the chemistry of emotions, and all those other things, which precisely for lack of words, we shall refrain from mentioning. But since we are not dealing here with cinema or theatre, or even with life, we are forced to waste more time saying what we have to, especially since we are aware that after a first, second, and sometimes third attempt, only a minimum of the essentials will have been spoken, and even then subject to interpretations, inasmuch as, in a laudable attempt to communicate, we go back to the beginning in dismay, to the point of becoming incapable of getting near or distancing ourselves from the plane of focus, at the risk of blurring the outlines of the central motive, thus making it, let us say, unidentifiable. Fortunately in this case, however, we had not lost sight of Raimundo Silva, we left him in that vacillating movement that was to carry the phrase, not even Dr Maria Sara, rather subdued, if you will forgive the exaggeration, not through any loss of willpower, but because of one last and perhaps benevolent hope, the question is knowing whether the proof-reader is about to speak the right words, avoiding, above all, any cacophony, which arises when the word does not harmonise with the sound nor both word and sound with the intention, let us see how Raimundo Silva will solve the problem, Please, he said, and he had certainly made a good start, my reaction on receiving this book, my surprise on hearing that it carries no erratum, all of this is like having a sore, the whole body instinctively flinches if anyone touches the spot where it hurts, all I can say is that I want to erase this entire episode from my mind, You seem much less edgy than when you were here last time, Fires die out, victories lose their meaning, one gets tired of confrontation, and as I said, I'd like to forget what has happened, I'm afraid that may not be possible if you accept the suggestion I am about to make, A suggestion, Or a proposal, if you prefer. Dr Maria Sara took from a low bookshelf by her side a dossier which she placed on her lap, and told him, Here are all the filed reports about books which the firm has published or rejected in the past, This is ancient history, Tell me about it, Do you think there is any point, Yes, I have my own good reasons for believing so,

Well, in those days the publishing house was only beginning to get established, any help they could get was welcome, and someone at that time thought that I could do more than only proof-read, for example being asked to write reviews and reports about manuscripts, I must confess it never occurred to me that these papers would still be here today. I came across them when I was inspecting the section of the archives related to my duties, After all this time, I can scarcely remember them, I've read all of them, You must have been amused by some of the rubbish I used to write, Not at all, on the contrary, your reports are excellent, carefully considered and nicely written, I hope you didn't find not constantly being substituted for yes, and Raimundo Silva was brave enough to smile, he could not resist it, but out of the side of his mouth so as not to appear over-confident. Dr Maria Sara also smiled, No, there were no such changes, everything was as it should be. She paused, casually leafed through the dossier, appeared to be still hesitating, and then went on to say, These were reports, and the fact that they are so well written and reveal, in addition to your flair for perceptive criticism, a kind of, how can I put it, lateral thinking is altogether rare, Lateral thinking, Don't ask me to explain, it's something I can sense rather than explain, and this is what made me decide to make a proposal, And what is it, That you yourself should write a history of the siege of Lisbon in which the crusaders do not help the Portuguese, therefore taking your deviation literally, the word I heard you use a moment ago, Forgive me, but I don't quite see what you're proposing, It couldn't be clearer, Perhaps that is why I can't see it, You still haven't got used to the idea, so naturally, your first reaction is to refuse, It's not a question of refusal, rather that the idea strikes me as being absurd, Tell me, do you know of any greater absurdity than this deviation of yours, Let's say no more about my deviation, Even if we were never to mention it again, even if this copy I've just given you were to carry the same erratum as all the others, even if this edition were to be completely destroyed, even so, the Not you slipped in that day will prove to be the most important act in your life, What do you know about my life, Nothing, apart from this, Then how can you have any opinion about the importance of the rest, True, but what I said wasn't meant to be taken literally, these are emphatic expressions which rely on the intelligence being addressed, I'm not very intelligent, There's another emphatic expression, which I accept for what it is worth, that is, nothing, Can I ask you a question, Go ahead, Tell me frankly, are you or are you not amusing yourself at my expense, Frankly, I am doing no such thing, Then why this interest, this proposal, this conversation, Because it isn't every day that you come across someone who has done what you did, I was in a state of agitation, Come on, Without wishing to be rude, I'm convinced your idea doesn't make sense, Then forget I ever mentioned it, Raimundo Silva got to his feet, adjusted his coat which he had never removed, Unless there is something else you wish to discuss, I'll be going, Take your book, it's the only copy of its kind. Dr Maria Sara wears no ring to suggest that she is married. As for her blouse, chemise, or whatever it is called, it looks like being made of silk, in a pale shade difficult to describe, beige, old ivory, off-white, whether it is possible that fingertips tremble differently according to the colours they touch or caress, we cannot say.

The rain had not subsided. At the front entrance of the publishing house, a bad-tempered Raimundo Silva glanced at the sky through the naked branches of the trees, but the sky was one great mass of cloud without any intervals of blue sky, and the rain was coming down in a steady drizzle, nothing more, nothing less. There will be no tomorrow, he murmured, repeating an old adage used by people acquainted with practical meteorology, but in which we must not put too much faith, because that day was followed by others, and for Raimundo Silva this is certainly not his last. As he awaited the unlikely respite promised by the meteorologists, employees were leaving the building on their way to lunch, it was already after one, the meeting had taken longer than expected. He was hoping Costa would not suddenly appear, forcing him to speak to him, listen to him, watch those accusing eyes, and at that moment it struck him that there was someone else whom he wanted to see even less, Dr Maria Sara, who, as it happens, is already descending in the elevator, and who on seeing him standing in the doorway, might think he is hovering there on purpose, using the rain as an excuse, in order to be able to carry on with their conversation elsewhere, in a restaurant, for example, where he would invite her, or the much more terrifying hypothesis, should she offer him a lift and take him home as an act of kindness, given this incessant rain, really, it's no trouble at all, get in, get in, you're getting soaked. Obviously Raimundo Silva does not know whether she possesses a car, but all the signs suggest that she does, she has that unmistakable air, the modern, outgoing woman, you only have to observe the controlled, methodical gestures of someone who knows how to handle the gears at just the right moment and who has learned how to assess distance and the size of a parking space at a glance. He heard the elevator stop and looked back quickly, to see the Editorial Director himself holding the door to allow Dr Maria Sara to pass, they were having a lively conversation, no one else was in the elevator, Raimundo Silva tucked the book in between his jacket and shirt, a protective reflex, and quickly opening his umbrella, scurried off, keeping as close as possible to the buildings, cowering like a dog being stoned, its tail between its legs, They must be going out to lunch together, he thought to himself. He could not get the thought out of his mind as he went down the street, trying to fathom why the thought had ever occurred to him, but he only met with a blank wall, without inscriptions, he himself an interrogation.

To get home he used two buses and a tram, none of which left him at the door, needless to say, but there was no other way of getting there, not an empty taxi in sight. In any case, the rain did not spare him, after all, you don't get any wetter falling into the ocean or into the village brook, that is to say that if Raimundo Silva had made the entire journey on foot he would not have got any wetter than he is at this moment, drenched from head to foot, soaked to the skin. During the journey, there was one unpleasant, not to say terrifying moment, should we prefer to dramatise the situation, when he began to imagine Dr Maria Sara in the restaurant, telling the Editorial Director the amusing story about the proof-reader, So I told him to write his own version of the siege and he was horrified at the idea, then he tried to assure me that the Not he introduced into The History of the Siege of Lisbon was not the outcome of any mental disorder, would you

believe it, The man's a clown with that deadpan expression of his, but he's good at his job, there's no denying, and once he had committed this act of charity and forbearance with remarkable impartiality, the Editorial Director treats the matter as closed and passes to something closer to his heart, I say, Maria Sara, why don't we have dinner together one evening, then we might go on somewhere to dance and have a drink. On turning a corner, a sudden treacherous gust of wind turned the umbrella inside out, and Raimundo Silva got the full blast of the rain on his face, and that wind was a veritable cyclone, maelstrom, hurricane, it all happened so quickly, but terrifying while it lasted, only his book unharmed, safely tucked away between his jacket and his shirt. The whirlwind subsided, calm was restored, and the umbrella, despite the fact that one of the ribs is broken, can still be used, admittedly more as a symbol than adequate protection. No, thought Raimundo Silva, and stopped there, but we shall never know if this is the word Dr Maria Sara used to respond to the Editorial Director's invitation, or if this man who is climbing the Escadinhas de'São Crispim, where there is no sign of the stray dog, is finally persuaded that there are people in this world so cruel as to exploit a poor, defenceless proof-reader in this way. Not to mention, that Dr Maria Sara might well be having her lunch at home.

Having changed his clothes, and more or less dried off, Raimundo Silva set about preparing lunch, he boiled some potatoes to accompany the tinned tuna for which he had opted after considering the few alternatives available, and, supplementing this frugal meal with the usual plate of soup, he felt more cheerful, his energy restored. As he ate, he had a curious feeling of alienation, as if, a purely imaginary experience, he had just arrived after a lengthy, drawn-out journey through distant lands where he encountered other civilisations. Obviously, in an existence so little given to adventures, any novelty, however insignificant for others, can seem like a revolution, even if, to cite only this recent example, his memorable desecration of the almost sacred text of The History of the Siege of Lisbon had not affected him in the slightest, but now he has the impression that his home belongs to someone else, and that he himself is the stranger, the very smell is different, and the furniture seems out of place or distorted by means of a perspective governed by other laws. He prepared a piping hot coffee, as usual, and with the cup and saucer in his hand, taking tiny sips, he went round the apartment to see if he could familiarise himself with it once more, he began with the bathroom, where there were still vestiges of the dyeing operation he had carried out, never imagining that it would later cause him embarrassment, then the sitting-room which he rarely used, with the television, a low table, a divan, a tiny sofa and a bookcase with glass-panelled doors, and then the study which brought him back into contact with things he had seen and touched a thousand times, and finally the bedroom with its bed made of old mahogany, a matching wardrobe, and the bedside table, furniture designed for a larger room and unsuited to this confined space. On top of the bed, where he had thrown it down on entering the apartment, lies the book, the last Iroquois of that decimated tribe, taking refuge in the Rua do Milagre de Santo Antonio because of the inexplicable deference of Dr Maria Sara, inexplicable, say we, because it is not sufficient to have proposed, Write a

book, only out of irony, for any connivance, with all the intimacy that word implies, makes no sense here, or could it be that Dr Maria Sara simply wants to see how far he is capable of going down the path of madness, since he himself spoke of mental disturbance. Raimundo Silva put the cup and saucer on the bedside table, Who knows, perhaps one of the symptoms is this impression of alienation, as if this were not my home and this place and these things meant nothing to me, the question remained in suspense, unanswered, like all questions that begin with the words, Who knows. He picked up the book, the cover illustration had actually been copied from an old manuscript, French or German, and at that moment, obliterating everything, he was invaded by a sense of fulfilment, of strength, he was holding something that was exclusively his, admittedly despised by others, but for that very reason, Who knows, prized all the more, after all this book is loved by nobody else, and this man has no one to love except this book.

As everyone knows, we spend a third of our short lives sleeping, and we can confirm this from our own experience, between going to bed and getting up, counting is easy, allowing for the wakeful hours of those who suffer from insomnia and, in general, the time devoted to the nightly sessions of the art of loving, still enjoyed and practised as a rule at dead of night, despite the increasing popularity of more flexible timetables which, in this and other particulars, appear to be guiding us towards the fulfilment of the golden dreams of anarchy, namely, that desired age in which each one of us can do as we please, provided we do not prejudice or restrict what pleases others. Yes, there is nothing simpler, but the fact that up to the present we have not succeeded in even identifying our neighbours amidst a multitude of strangers with any lasting certainty, goes to prove, were such proof necessary, what tradition has taught us, that the difficulty of achieving the simple is infinitely more complicated than any other task or skill, that is to say, it is less difficult to conceive, create, construct and manipulate an electronic brain than to find in our own the wherewithal to be happy, but, in the words of Jesus, one age succeeds another, and hope is the last thing to be lost, Alas, we might start losing it right away, because the time it will take to achieve universal happiness has to be counted in astronomical measurements, and this generation does not aim to live that long, disheartened as it clearly is.

Such lengthy circumlocution, made irresistible by the way in which words bring others in their wake, thus giving the impression that all they do is to obey the will of someone who will finally have to answer for them, but misleading him, to the extent of frequently leaving the point of the narrative abandoned somewhere without name or history, pure discourse, without reason or objective, whose fluctuation will transform it into the perfect stage set or backdrop for any old drama or fiction, this circumlocution, which began by probing the hours of sleep and wakefulness in order to finish off with a feeble reflection on the transience of human life and the longevity of hope, this circumlocution, let us conclude, will be justified if we suddenly ask ourselves how often in life a person goes to the window, how many days, weeks, months has that person spent there and for what reason. We usually go to the window to see what the weather is like, to examine the sky,

to follow the clouds, to dream with the moon, to respond to someone's cry, to observe the neighbours, and also to occupy our roving eyes by distracting them, while our thoughts accompany the images they capture, born just as words are born, just like them. They are mere glimpses, instants, and lengthy musings about what cannot be seen, a smooth, blank wall, a city, the grey river or the water dripping from the eaves.

Raimundo Silva has not opened the window, he is watching through the window-panes, and is holding the book in his hands, opened at that false page, just as one speaks of false coinage minted by some forger. The dull patter of rain plays on the zinc roof of the verandah, and he does not hear it, although we would describe it, in an attempt to find a suitable comparison, as being like the distant sound of a cavalcade, a stamping of hooves on the soft, damp soil, a splashing of water from the marshes, a strange occurrence, inasmuch as wars were always suspended in winter, otherwise what would become of the men on horseback, scantily clad beneath their leather corslets and sleeveless coats of mail, with the drizzle penetrating the holes, rents and gashes, and the less said about the foot-soldiers the better, tramping practically barefoot in the mud and with their hands so frostbitten that they can scarcely hold the puny weapons with which they have come to conquer Lisbon, what a memory the king must have, to go to war in this appalling weather, But the siege took place in summer, murmured Raimundo Silva. Although less heavy, the rain on the verandah roof could now be heard clearly, as the sound of trotting horses returning to barracks grew fainter. With a rapid movement, surprising in someone not given to gestures, Raimundo Silva threw the window wide open, some of the drizzle sprinkled on to his face, but got nowhere near the book since he had taken the necessary precautions, and the same impression of brimming vitality took possession of him, body and soul, this is the city that was besieged, the ramparts descend over there all the way down to the sea, a name worthy of a river as wide as this one, and then they rise sharply until lost from sight, this is the Lisbon of the Moors, were the atmosphere less grey than on this winter's day we should have a better view of the olive-groves on the slope that goes down to the estuary, and also those on the other bank, at present invisible, as if covered by a cloud of smoke. Raimundo Silva looked and looked again, the universe murmuring beneath the rain, dear God, such sweet and gentle sorrow, may we never be without it, not even in moments of happiness.

CERTAIN AUTHORS, perhaps out of conviction or an attitude of mind not much given to patient investigation, hate having to acknowledge that the relationship between what we call cause and what we subsequently describe as the effect is not always linear and explicit. They allege, and with some justification, that ever since the world began, although we may have no way of knowing when it began, there has never been an effect without a cause, and every cause, whether because pre-ordained or by some simple mechanism, has brought about and will go on bringing about some effect or other, which, let it be said, is produced instantly, although the transition from cause to effect may have escaped the observer or only come to be more or less reconstituted much later. Going further, somewhat rashly, these authors argue that all the visible and recognisable causes have already produced their effects, and that now we need only wait for them to manifest themselves, and they also insist that all effects, whether manifest or about to be made manifest, have their inevitable causality, although our manifold limitations may have prevented us from identifying it in terms of establishing the respective relationship, not always linear or explicit, as we said at the outset. Putting it plainly, and before such laboured arguments draw us into more complicated problems, such as Leibniz's demonstration of the world's contingency or Kant's theory of cosmology, which would oblige us to ask whether God really exists or if He has been misleading us with vagaries unworthy of a superior being who ought to be able to do and say everything with the utmost clarity, what these writers claim is that there is no point in our worrying about tomorrow, because one way or another, everything that might happen has already happened, and as we have seen that is not quite the contradiction it might appear, because if the stone cannot be retrieved by the hand that threw it, we shall not escape the blow and wound if it has been well aimed and we do not get out of the way in time because we are distracted or unaware of the danger. In short, life is not only difficult, it is almost impossible, especially in those cases where in the absence of any apparent cause, the effect, if it can still be called that, raises questions, demanding that we should explain its basis and origin, and also its cause which in its turn it has started to become, inasmuch, as everyone knows, in this entire quadrille, it is up to us to find meanings and definitions, when we would rather close our eyes quietly and let this world go by, for it exercises much greater control over us than it allows us to exercise in return. If this should happen, that is to say, if we are confronted by what to all appearances looks like being an effect, and we can perceive no immediate or direct cause, the solution is to delay, to let time take its course, since the human species, about whom, let us remember, however absurd it may seem, we have no other opinion than that which it has of itself, is destined to await the effects for evermore, and go on seeking the causes for all eternity, at least, that is what it has done up to the present.

This conclusion, as providential as it is uncertain, allows us, by means of a subtle shift in the narrative plan, to return to the proof-reader Raimundo Silva at the precise moment when he is carrying out an act, the motives of which we ignore, distracted as we were in this exhaustive investigation of cause and effect, fortunately interrupted when it threatened to lapse into the traumas of existence and paralysing Angst. This action, like

any other, is an effect, but its cause, probably just as obscure for Raimundo Silva, strikes us as being impenetrable, for it is difficult to understand, taking into account the details we know, why this man is pouring down the kitchen-sink that highly esteemed restorative lotion he had been using to mitigate the ravages of time. In fact, without a proper explanation, which only he himself could give, and not wishing to hazard any assumptions and hypotheses, which would be no more than reckless, foolhardy judgments, it becomes impossible to establish that desired and reassuring direct relationship which would convert any human life to an irresistible chain of logical facts, all of them braced to perfection with their points of support and calculated arrows. So let us content ourselves, at least for now, with the knowledge that Raimundo Silva, on the morning following his visit to the publisher, and after a night of relentless insomnia, went into his study, grabbed the concealed bottle of hair-dye, and within a second, barely enough time for any further hesitation, poured the entire contents into the sink and turning the tap on full, literally made that ingenious lotion, misnamed The Fountain of Youth, disappear in a flash from the face of the earth.

Having made this remarkable gesture, he then proceeded to follow the usual routine, mentioned here for the last time unless there should be any significant variation, such as shaving, having a bath, preparing something to eat, and then opening the window to air every nook and cranny in the apartment, the bed, for example, with the sheets drawn right back and already cold, without any vestige of restless insomnia, even less of the dreams he had when he finally fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, mere fragments, meaningless images where no light reaches, impenetrable even for the narrator, whom the ill-informed believe to know all the facts and to be holding all the keys, were this so, one of the good things the world still possesses would be lost, privacy, the mystery surrounding characters. The weather is still wet, but the rain much less heavy than yesterday, the temperature appears to have dropped, so he might as well close the window, especially now that the air has been freshened by the breeze coming in from the straits, Time to work.

The History of the Siege of Lisbon is lying on the bedside table. Raimundo Silva picked up the book, allowed it to fall open by itself, the pages are as we know them, there will be no further reading. He went and sat at his desk, where the unfinished book of poems awaits him, that is to say he still has to finish the proof-reading, and he has only read one third of the novel, amended the odd lack of agreement, suggested some clarifications, and even discreetly corrected several spelling mistakes, after all, Costa assured him there was no urgency. Raimundo Silva put these obligatory tasks aside and, with The History of the Siege of Lisbon before him, rested his forehead on arched fingers and stared hard at the book, but soon no longer seeing it, as became apparent from the distracted expression that came into his face. The History of the Siege of Lisbon soon joined the novel and book of poems, the top of the desk has a clean, smooth surface, tabula rasa, to use the correct expression, the proof-reader sat there staring for a while, the vague sound of rain coming from outside, nothing more, the city appearing no longer

to exist. Then Raimundo Silva reached out for a blank sheet of paper, also clean and smooth, also tabula rasa, and, at the top, with the clear, neat handwriting of a proof-reader, he wrote The History of the Siege of Lisbon. He underlined the words twice, touched up the odd letter, and the next moment was tearing up the sheet, he tore it four times, any less and it might still have served some purpose, any more would have seemed an obsessive precaution. He took another sheet of paper, but not to write, since he scrupulously laid it out so that all four sides were parallel with the four sides of the desk, this meant twisting his entire body, what he wants is something he can ask, What am I going to write, and then wait for the reply, wait until his vision becomes blurred and he can no longer see the white, sterile surface of the page, nothing except a muddle of words emerging from the depths like drowned bodies just about to sink once more, they have not seen enough of the world, that is all they came for, they will return no more.

What am I going to write, this is not the only question, because another occurred to him almost immediately, just as peremptory and with such a sense of urgency that we might be tempted to accept it as the effect of a sudden reflex, but prudence tells us that we should not return to the debate in which we lost ourselves earlier, and which would require us, lest we end up mentally confused once more, to draw a distinction between essential and intimate relationships and casual relationships, this at the very least, since it would tell us whether Raimundo Silva after having asked, What am I going to write, then asked, Where shall I begin. You could say the first question is the more important of the two, inasmuch as it will determine the objectives and lessons of the book he is about to write, but Raimundo Silva is unable and unwilling to go so far back that he will end up having to draft A History of Portugal, fortunately brief having begun so few years ago and because its end is already in sight, which is, as has been said, The Siege of Lisbon and, because of the inadequate narrative framework in this story which only begins at that moment when the crusaders rejected the king's plea for help, then the second question assumes the character of a factual and chronological reference difficult to grasp, which is the same as asking in plain language, Where do I start from.

Yet it looks as if it might be necessary to step back a little, for example, to begin with the speech of Dom Afonso Henriques, which will permit, moreover, further reflection about the style and the words of the orator, perhaps even the invention of another speech, more in keeping with the age, the person and the place, or simply the logic of the situation, which because of its substance and detail, might justify that fatal refusal by the crusaders. This raises an earlier question, it would be useful to know the names of the king's interlocutors at that point, whom he was addressing, which people were present when he delivered his discourse. Fortunately, we can find out by turning to the primary sources, the writings of the chroniclers, the real History of the Siege of Lisbon sitting on Raimundo Silva's desk, it could not be more explicit, you only have to browse, search, discover, the information comes from a reliable source, some believe directly from the famous Osborn of Bawdsey, and so we learn that Count Arnold of Aarschot was there, the commander of the warriors from various regions of the German empire, Christian of

Ghistelles was there, leader of the Flemings and the men from Boulogne, and that a third of the crusaders were led by four constables, namely, Hervey de Glanville with a contingent of men from Norfolk and Suffolk, Simon of Dover with ships from Kent, Andrew with recruits from London, and Saher of Archelle in charge of the others. We should also mention Willelmus Vitulus of Normandy and his brother Radulphus, neither name easy to pronounce, who were not in charge of any major army, yet were endowed with authority, military power and political influence which allowed them to participate in any discussions.

But the disadvantage with sources, however truthful they try to be, is their lack of precision in matters of detail and their impassioned account of events, we refer to a certain internal faculty of contradictory germination which operates within facts or the version of those facts as provided, sold, or proposed, and stemming like spores from the latter, the proliferation of secondary and tertiary sources, some copied, others carelessly transmitted, some repeated from hearsay, others who changed details in good or bad faith, some freely interpreted, others rectified, some propagated with total indifference, others proclaimed as the one, eternal and irreplaceable truth, the last of these the most suspect of all. Naturally, everything depends on the greater or lesser quantity of documents available for consultation, on how much or how little time one is prepared to devote to this irksome task, but, in order to get an updated idea of the nature of the problem in hand, we need only imagine, in this day and age in which Raimundo Silva is living, that he or one of us needs to verify some regurgitated truth, constantly being modified by dint of repetition, in the newspapers, yet notwithstanding, the country is small and the population little given to reading, -scanning the titles alone gives them vertigo because, frankly, there are far too many of them, the *Diário de Notícias*, the *Correio de Manhã*, *O Século*, the *Capital*, *O Dia*, the *Diário de Lisboa*, the *Diário Popular*, *O Diário*, the *Comércio do Porto*, the *Jornal de Notícias*, *O Europeu*, the *Primeiro de Janeiro*, the *Diário de Coimbra*, and these are only the daily newspapers, because after glossing, summarising, commenting, forecasting, announcing, speculating, we have the weekly newspapers and magazines, *O Expresso*, *O Jornal*, *O Semanário*, *O Tempo*, *O Diabo*, *O Independente*, *O Sábado*, and *O Avante*, and *Acção Socialista*, and *O Povo Livre*, and the list would be never-ending if, in addition to the most important and influential publications, we were to include all the newspapers and magazines published further afield, where people also have the right to exist and voice their opinions.

Fortunately the proof-reader has other things to worry him, he wants to know who those foreigners were, who during those hot summer days engaged in conversation with our King Afonso Henriques, it appeared that everything had been clarified by consulting *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, beyond what had already been gathered from the manuscript attributed to Osborn and other ancient works of similar interest, such as *Arnulfo* and *Dodequino*, and marginally, the narrative account in the *Indiculum Foundationis Monasterii Sancti Vincentii*, but no, Sir, nothing has been explained, since, for example, in *The Chronicle of the Five Kings of Portugal*, which must have had its own

good reasons for revealing so little, sometimes extracting, sometimes adding, no important foreigners are mentioned apart from Guillaume of the Long Arrow, Gilíes de Rolim, and another Dom Gilíes whose surname is not given, note that none of these men are mentioned in The History of the Siege of Lisbon, allegedly based on the testimony of Osbern, in similar cases one generally opts for the earliest of the documents because closer to events, but we do not know what Raimundo Silva will do, since he clearly likes the medieval flavour of the name Guillaume of the Long Arrow, a knight whose very name destined him to carry out the most incredible feats of chivalry. One expedient is to look for a solution in a work of greater authority, such as, in this case, the Chronicle of Dom Afonso Henriques himself, written by Fray Antonio Brandão but, alas, this will not untangle the plot, only make it worse by referring to Guillaume of the Long Arrow as Guillaume of the Long Sword, and by introducing, according to the version of Setho Calvisio, a certain Euric, King of Damia, a bishop from Bremen, a duke from Burgundy, a certain Theodoric, Count of Flanders, and with reasonable likelihood, the aforementioned Gilíes de Rolim, also known as Childe Rolim, and Dom Lichertes, and Dom Ligel, and the brothers Dom Guillaume and Dom Robert de La Corni, and Dom Jordáo, and Dom Alardo, some of them French, others who were Flemish, Norman, or English, although it is doubtful whether in certain circumstances they would have revealed their nationality when questioned, considering that in those days and for some considerable time to come, a man, whether a nobleman or commoner, did not know his country of origin or still had not made up his mind.

But having reflected on these discrepancies, Raimundo Silva decided that ascertaining the truth would not be of much help, insofar as no more will be heard of these and other crusaders, however aristocratic or plebeian, once the king has made his speech, for whatever the consequences, the truth demands the negation inserted into this one and only copy of The History of the Siege of Lisbon. But since we are not dealing with unintelligent people, who, moreover, could rely on a multitude of clergymen to act as interpreters and spiritual counsellors, there must have been some serious motive behind their refusal to assist the Portuguese with the siege and capture of Lisbon, otherwise several hundred men would never have taken the trouble to disembark, while more than twelve thousand wait in the ships for the order to go ashore with weapons, coffers and knapsacks, and accompanied by the women travelling on board of whom no warrior should be deprived, even when engaged in holy wars, otherwise how could they possibly relieve and satisfy their corporeal needs. What that motive might have been, we must now investigate, if we are to give the slightest credibility and verisimilitude to this new account.

Let us see. The first hypothesis to come to mind is the climate, but this can be ruled out at once for, as we all know, foreigners, without exception, adore this warm sunshine, these gentle breezes, this incomparable blue sky, you only have to consider that we are already in late June, yesterday was the Feast of St Peter, and the city and the river were one and the same glory, but no one could tell whether beneath the gaze of the God of

the Christians or the Allah of the Moor, unless both were enjoying the spectacle together and laying wagers. A second hypothesis could be the aridity of the land, a veritable desert, a scene of utter desolation, but such nonsense could only be conceived by someone unfamiliar with Lisbon and its immediate surroundings, a garden to regale any good man's soul, just look at all those orchards stretching along the banks of the resplendent estuary wending inland, in this Baixa nestling between the hill on which the city is perched and the one in front lying to the west, the perfect manifestation of just how skilful the Moors are in cultivating the land. A third and final hypothesis, to conclude, would be an outbreak of deadly pestilence, not unlike those plagues that from time to time decimate the population throughout Europe and its immediate frontiers, not excepting the crusaders, but a few endemic cases are no cause for alarm, a person can get used to anything, it is like living on the edge of a volcano, foolish comparisons if we think about it for earthquakes are rather more common on the earth, as we shall see more clearly within the next six hundred years or so. Here then are three hypotheses and not one of them plausible. Therefore, hard as we may find it to accept, the reason, cause, motive and explanation must be looked for, and perhaps even found, in the king's speech. There, and there alone.

Raimundo Silva will turn back the pages of the book until he comes to the harangue discussed earlier, in order to read between the lines, to eliminate any superfluous embellishments and proliferations and reduce the text to the bare essentials, and then, by somersaulting like an acrobat, by forcing himself to identify with the mentality of the people who bore these names, origins and characteristics, to feel welling up inside him a rage, indignation and displeasure that would give him the courage to say adamantly, Your Majesty, here we remain, notwithstanding that warm sun you have there, those fertile plains, those pure skies, that wondrous river where sardines leap, Your Majesty keep it and much good may it do you, farewell. As he read this for a second time, it occurred to Raimundo Silva that the crux of the problem might lie in those words, not entirely his own, as we have seen, with which Dom Afonso Henriques tries to persuade the crusaders to carry out the operation on the cheap, telling them, presumably with an innocent expression on his face, Of one thing, however, we are certain, and that is that your piety will lead you to join us in this great crusade rather than any promise of financial rewards. This is what I, the crusader Raimundo Silva, heard with my own ears, and I was astonished that such a Christian king should have failed to observe those divine words, which as king he ought to have embraced as his guiding principle in politics, Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's, which, here in our narrative, means that the King of Portugal should not confuse two quite separate issues, it is one thing for me to serve God, another that I should be justly rewarded on this earth for this and other services, especially when I am risking my skin in the enterprise, and not just my skin but everything it carries inside. Of course there is a blatant contradiction between this passage of the royal speech and that other coming immediately before, when he affirms that he considers at your disposal, that is to say, of the crusaders, all that our land possesses, but it is just possible that this was an

expression of courtesy used at the time and which no well-educated person would have dreamt of taking literally, just as nowadays we say to people whom we have just met, I'm entirely at your disposal, imagine if they were to take us at our word and start treating us as if we were some flunkey.

Raimundo Silva has risen from his desk, he paces up and down the tiny space left in his study, moves into the corridor to rid himself as quickly as possible of another kind of tension that is getting a grip on him, and thinks aloud, This is not the problem, even though it may have provoked the conflict between the crusaders and the king, it is much more likely that all those disagreements, insults and feelings of mistrust, should we help, should we not help, stemmed from the question of payment for services, the king wants to make savings, the crusaders want rewards, but the problem I have to solve is different, when I wrote Not the crusaders went away, therefore my looking for an answer to the question is pointless, Why, in this history accepted as being true, must I myself invent another history so that it might be false and false so that it may be different. He got tired of pacing up and down the corridor, returned to his study, but did not sit down, scanned with nervous irritation the few lines that had survived the damage, six pages, one after the other had been torn up, and as for the amendments, they were like scars still waiting to heal. He realised that until he overcame the problem he would make no progress, and was surprised, accustomed as he was to books in which everything seemed fluent and spontaneous, almost essential, not because it was effectively true, but because any piece of writing, good or bad, always ends up appearing like a predetermined crystallisation, although no one can ever say how or when or why or by whom, he was surprised, as we said, for the following idea had never occurred to him, an idea which should have stemmed naturally from the previous idea, but, on the contrary, refused to emerge, or perhaps not even that, it simply was not there, did not exist even as a possibility. The seventh page was also torn up, the desk once more was clear, smooth, a tabula twice rasa, a desert, not a single idea. Raimundo Silva reached out for the proofs of the book of poems, he wavered for several more minutes between that nothing and this something, then, little by little, he began to concentrate on his work, time passed, before lunch the proofs had been revised and given another reading, ready for the publishers. Throughout the morning, the telephone had not rung, the postman scarcely ever calls at this address, and the calm in the street was rarely disturbed by the cautious passing of a car, tourist buses never come through this way, they turn into the Largo dos Lóios, and with all the rain there has been recently, few must have ventured all the way up here where there has been nothing to see except overcast skies. Raimundo Silva got to his feet, time to eat, but first he went to the bedroom window, the sky has finally cleared, it is no longer raining, and amidst the fleeting clouds patches of blue sky appear and disappear, a blue as intense as it must have been on that day, despite the difference in the time of year. For a moment, Raimundo Silva could not bring himself to go into the kitchen, heat up that eternal soup, forage amongst the tins of tuna and sardines, play about with a frying-pan or saucepan, not because he fancied eating something more elaborate, but simply, as it were, because of a sudden bout of mental

apathy. But neither did he feel like going out to find a restaurant To have to study the menu, to choose between a dish and the price, to sit amongst total strangers, to handle a knife and fork, all these actions, so easy, so commonplace, struck him as being intolerable. He remembered the nearby Café Graciosa where they serve toasted sandwiches with a cheese and ham filling, acceptable even for palates more discriminating than his, and with a glass of wine and coffee to finish off, his appetite will certainly be satisfied.

Having made up his mind, he left. His coat was still damp after the drenching of the previous evening, putting it on caused him to shiver, as if he were slipping into the skin of a dead animal, and the cuffs and collar were particularly uncomfortable, he ought to keep some dry clothes in reserve for such occasions, a necessity rather than a luxury, then he tried to recall whether Dr Maria Sara was wearing a long jacket or a coat when she stepped out of the elevator with the Editorial Director, but he could no longer remember, there had been no time to notice as he made his escape. This was not the first time he had thought about Dr Maria Sara throughout the morning, but before she had acted as a kind of vigilante, lodged somewhere in his mind, keeping an eye on him. Now she was someone who was moving, who was coming out of the elevator and engaged in conversation, under her coat or jacket she was wearing a tweed skirt belted at the waist, and a blouse or chemise, the name is not important since both words are of French origin, in a colour impossible to define, no, not impossible, because Raimundo Silva has already come up with the exact shade, the off-white of the sky at dawn, a colour that does not really exist in nature, since one morning can be so different from another, but that anyone who so wishes, can invent to his own liking and taste, even the blind muezzin unless he was conceived blind in his Moorish mother's womb.

In the Café Graciosa they did not serve wine by the glass. Raimundo had to wash down his buttered toast with a beer, not very appetising in this cold weather, yet somehow ended up by producing a similar effect in his body, a comforting sense of lassitude. An elderly man with white hair and the look of a retired officer was reading a newspaper at the next table. He did not appear to be in any hurry, he had almost certainly lunched at home and then installed himself here to have a coffee and read the newspaper which the owner of the Café, upholding an old tradition in Lisbon, provided for his customers. But what caught Raimundo Silva's attention was that white hair, how would he describe this shade of white, the crepuscular white of evening in contrast to the off-white of dawn, bearing in mind the man's advanced years, but that would be much too obvious, invention is all very well but it has to be justified. It has to be said, meanwhile, that Raimundo Silva was not simply preoccupied with the colour of the old man's hair, what worried him was the sudden thought that he could not really tell how many white hairs he himself might have, a fair amount or even a lot, when he had more than ten white hairs he started dyeing them, pursuing them with ferocious tenacity as if born for this one great battle. Disconcerted, stupefied, he foolishly began to wish that the time would pass quickly so that he might know his real face, the one that would appear

like a new arrival, that would slowly approach, beneath hair that to begin with would be two grotesque strands, the artificial one ever more faded and short-lived, the natural one inexorably gaining ground at the roots, After all, mused Raimundo Silva, you could say that time inclines towards whiteness, and letting his imagination take over, he saw the world coming to an end, life extinguished like a huge white head swept away by the wind, leaving nothing behind except wind and whiteness. The retired officer took a mouthful of coffee, slurping as he drank, and then downed half of the brandy from the liqueur glass sitting in front of him, Aha, he exclaimed, then went on reading. Raimundo Silva felt secretly annoyed with this old fellow, almost envious of his apparent tranquillity, his ingenuous faith in the stability of the universe, it is true that the comforting effect of brandy is infinitely superior to that of beer, and note how in practice, brandy, as alcohol goes, is perfectly acceptable down to the very last drop while this beer is already going flat at the bottom of the glass, only fit for pouring down the sink like rancid water. He quickly ordered a coffee, No thanks, I don't need a digestive liqueur, the adjective used by waiters in restaurants here to describe a wide variety of cognacs and other fortified spirits, and many swear by their medicinal properties. In one gulp, the retired officer drank the rest of his brandy, Aha, and tapping the glass with the tip of his forefinger, he signalled to the waiter to pour him a refill. Raimundo Silva paid his bill and left, observing in passing that there were thin, yellowish strands in the old man's hair, perhaps the remains of dye, perhaps the definitive sign of senility, like old ivory that darkens and starts to split.

Raimundo Silva has not visited the castle in months, but he is on his way there now, he has just made up his mind, although he thinks that may be why he decided to go out in the first place, otherwise the idea would not have occurred to him so naturally, at heart, let us assume, he felt a certain repugnance, an irresistible reluctance to enter the kitchen, but he did it all the better to deceive himself, he feared that to the suggestion, Let's visit the castle, he might churlishly have replied, To do what, and this is precisely what he was unable or at a loss to confess deep down. Savage gusts rent the air, the proof-reader's hair is windswept, the lapels of his coat flap like wet sheets. It is ridiculous to go to the castle in such weather, to climb those exposed towers, he could even be blown off one of those stairways without a handrail, the advantage is not to have anyone there, to be able to enjoy the place without any onlookers, to see the city, Raimundo Silva wants to see the city, although he cannot think why. The vast esplanade is deserted, the ground flooded with puddles of water transformed by the wind into tiny waves, and the trees creak as they are shaken about by the wind, this is almost a cyclone, an exaggeration permissible in a city which in the year nineteen hundred and forty-one suffered the as yet modest effects of the tail-end of a hurricane which people still speak of today when they complain of the damaging consequences there will be a hundred years hence in the wake of the great fire that destroyed the Chiado. Raimundo Silva goes up to the wall, looks way down into the distance, the roof-tops, the upper regions of the façades and gables, to the left the muddy river, the triumphal arch of the Rua Augusta, the tangle of intersecting streets, the odd corner of a square, the ruins of

the Carmo, as well as those resulting from the fire. He does not linger there, and not because he is greatly troubled by the wind, he vaguely knows that this unusual outing has a purpose, he has not come here to contemplate the towers of the Amoreiras, it was nightmare enough to have them appear in a dream. He entered the castle, he never ceases to be surprised that it should be so small, almost like a toy castle, another Lego or Meccano set. The high walls reduce much of the wind's impact, breaking it down into many contrasting currents that penetrate the arches and passageways. Raimundo Silva is on familiar territory, he will climb to the ramparts near São Vicente, from there to examine the lie of the land. And there is the mound of the Graça, facing the highest of the towers, and the descent to the Campo de Santa Clara, where Dom Afonso Henriques encamped his soldiers, our own men and the first parents of the nation, because their ancestors who were born much too soon, could not possibly have been Portuguese. This is an aspect of genealogy that is often overlooked, the need to examine what for all its lack of importance, gave life, place and occasion to the importance acquired by what we now consider to be important.

This was not the place where the meeting took place between the crusaders and the king, it must have been further down on the other bank of the estuary, but what Raimundo Silva is looking for, if the phrase has any meaning, is an impression of something visually tangible, something he would not be able to define, yet capable, for example, of transforming him this very moment into a Moorish soldier watching the shadowy forms of the enemy and the glinting of swords, but which, in this instance, by means of some secret mental circuit, hopes to receive, as tangible evidence, the detail missing from the narrative, namely, the indisputable reason for the crusaders' departure after that decisive Not. The wind continues to buffet Raimundo Silva, obliging him to hold on to the battlements in order to keep his balance. For a moment, the proof-reader feels utterly ridiculous, becomes aware of his theatrical, or better still, cinematographic posturing, his coat has become a medieval cloak, his flowing hair plumes, and the wind is no longer wind, but a current of air produced by a wind-machine. And just at that moment, as he became somewhat defenceless and innocent because of the irony directed at himself, there finally surfaced clearly in his mind and with no less irony, the much sought-after motive, the reason for that Not, the ultimate and irrefutable justification for his assault on historical truth. Now Raimundo knows why the crusaders refused to help the Portuguese to besiege and capture the city, and he is about to return home to write The History of the Siege of Lisbon.

IT IS STATED in The History of the Siege of Lisbon, the other one, that there was much excitement amongst the crusaders when it was announced that the King of Portugal was coming to make proposals whereby he hoped to enlist the support of those brave warriors who had set their sights on rescuing the Holy Land. Drawing on the providential source of Osbern, never actually written by Osbern, the author also states that nearly all of those people, both rich and poor, to quote his very words, on hearing that Dom Afonso Henriques was approaching, went to meet him in festive mood, so we are led to believe, otherwise they might as well have awaited his arrival, without further ado, as is the custom at such gatherings, that is to say, in the rest of Europe, when the king arrives, the people rush to shorten his journey and welcome him with cheers and applause. Fortunately, we were given this explanation right away, to chasten national pride, lest we should naively imagine that the Europeans of that time, like those of today, allowed themselves to fall completely under the spell of a Portuguese king of recent vintage, who was arriving on horseback with a troop of soldiers, Galicians like himself, some of them nobles, others clergymen, all of them rustic and uneducated. For we know that the monarchy at that time still had enough prestige to bring crowds out on to the road, saying to each other, Let's go and see the king, let's go and see the king, and the king is this bearded gentleman, smelling of sweat, with miserable weapons, and the horses are no thoroughbreds but simply unkempt beasts of burden, destined to die in battle rather than execute graceful voltes in some riding school, but despite there being so little to see in the end, one must not lose the opportunity, for when a king comes and goes, who knows whether he will ever return.

And so Dom Afonso Henriques arrived, and the leaders of the crusaders whom we have already mentioned, except where there are no reliable sources, were lined up with some of their men to greet him, since most of the soldiers were still confined to the ships until their masters decided their fate, not excluding their own. The king was accompanied by the Archbishop of Braga, Dom João Peculiar and the Bishop of Oporto, Dom Pedro Pitões, both well-versed in Latin, and enough dignitaries to form a royal cortege with some decorum, namely, Fernão Mendes, Fernão Cativo, Gonfalo Rodrigues, Martim Moniz, Paio Delgado, Pêro Viegas, also known as Pêro Paz, Gocelino de Sousa, another Gocelino called Sotero or Soeiro, Mendo Afonso de Refoios, Múcio de Lamego, Pedro Pelágio, or Pais da Maia, João Rainho, or Ranha, and others whose names have not been recorded but who were there. Both parties finally met up and having gone through the endless formalities of being introduced, for not only were the names and surnames of everyone given, but also a list of their achievements and personal qualities, the Bishop of Oporto announced that the king was about to make a speech, and swore before the laws of God and man that he would faithfully interpret his words. Meanwhile, the riders had dismounted from their mules, the king had climbed on to a boulder where he could be seen by everyone, and from where, moreover, he could see over the heads of the crusaders and get a splendid view of the entire estuary, the abandoned orchards destroyed by the Portuguese who for the last two days had stripped them of all the vegetables and fruit. Up there on the fortress, tiny human forms could be seen on the

battlements, and, descending, the city wall, with its two gates on this side, that of Alfafa and that of Ferro, shut and bolted, you could sense the disquiet of the Moors on the other side, for the moment in safety, as they wondered what was about to befall them, the river cluttered with ships and a large crowd gathered on the hill opposite, standards and pennants fluttering in the breeze, a fine spectacle, some fires burning, who knows for what reason, because the weather is warm and it is not yet time for eating, the muezzin listens to the explanations being given by a nephew and starts to fear the worst, another way of saying that the bad is still more or less bearable. The king then raised his powerful voice, Although we may live in this God-forsaken corner of the earth, we have heard good things about you, that you are men of great strength and unequalled when it comes to using weapons, and who would doubt it, judging from your impressive physique, and as for your skill in waging war we need only consider the list of your achievements, both religious and secular. Despite the difficulties we face, caused as much by this ungrateful soil as from the many deficiencies in the Portuguese character yet to be fully formed, we try to do our best, neither fish nor fowl, moreover we have had the misfortune to be landed with these Moors, people who have no great wealth if compared with those of Granada and Seville, all the more reason for getting them out of here once and for all, and this raises a question, a problem, I would ask you to consider, and it is the following, What we would need, in a manner of speaking, is some voluntary assistance, that is to say, you would remain here for some time to help us, and once this proved to be no longer necessary, you would be rewarded with some symbolic token of our appreciation and proceed to the Holy Land where you would be rewarded a hundredfold, both in material goods since the wealth of the Turks cannot be compared with that of the Moors, and in spiritual goods, which pour down on the believer the moment he sets foot on that soil, and let me warn you Dom Pedro Pitões that I know sufficient Latin to judge how the translation is going, as for you crusaders, I beseech you, don't get annoyed, what I meant by a symbolic token of our appreciation was that in order to guarantee our nation's future we are anxious to preserve all the riches we possess here in the city, which will come as no surprise, yet how true the proverb that says or will come to say, No one helps the poor like the poor themselves, people reach an understanding by talking to each other, you tell me how much you want for your services and we shall see if we can meet your price, although the truth that passes through these lips dictates that I have my own good reasons for believing that even if we should reach no agreement, we shall be able to overcome the Moors and take the city on our own, just as three months ago we captured the city of Santarém with a ladder and half a dozen men, and once the army went in they took the sword to men, women and children, no matter their age or whether they were armed or defenceless, the only survivors were those who managed to escape and they were few, now then, if we succeeded in Santarém, we shall also succeed in besieging Lisbon, and if we tell you these things, it is not because we despise your aid, but lest you should judge us lacking in strength and courage, not to mention that we Portuguese have faith in the succour of Our Lord Jesus Christ, be quiet Afonso.

Let no one think that anyone in the entourage or in that gathering of foreigners had the insolence to tell the king to be quiet, addressing him only with his name at baptism, as if they had once supped from the same plate, those were simply the words of someone talking to himself, just as one says, Shut your trap, which, as anyone accustomed to listening and searching for those subtle meanings that come to say more than the words themselves well knows, really means that the person who spoke is dying to say what he had apparently decided to suppress. Even so, he must reckon with the benevolent curiosity of others in order to remove this tactical obstacle, by raising, for example, a question more or less in these terms, Come now, out with the rest, don't leave us in suspense, but it might turn out otherwise, it depends on the person and the circumstances, in this case the intervention came from Guillaume Vitulo, that evil-looking fellow, who might or might not have been the one with the Long Sword, and with unseemly bluntness, he dared to express his doubts, Our Lord Jesus Christ helps all Christians alike, and so He should, otherwise it would be the end of religion if some were to be treated like sons and others like stepsons. Several crusaders looked disapprovingly at this meddler, but more because of the manner than the substance of his intervention, because when it came to the latter there must have been general agreement that in the king's speech, in addition to a reprehensible avariciousness that might have spoiled everything, there was much petulance and pride, he sounded more like a bishop than a simple king who does not even have the right to use that title since it is not recognised by the pope, who three years ago did him the great honour of treating him as dux, and he should consider himself fortunate. The silence did not last as long as this explanation might lead you to believe, but it lasted long enough for the atmosphere to become tense and increasingly hostile, Dom Afonso Henriques was displeased at this lack of confidence, and was about to open his mouth, almost certainly to speak his mind, when Saher of Archelles, one of the more diplomatic crusaders, struck a conciliatory note, That the Portuguese should have captured Santarém with a ladder, we are in no doubt, God assisting as on that memorable occasion when He allowed the walls of Jericho to fall to the sound of trumpets, not even blown by seven warriors but by seven priests, nor is it so very surprising that the Portuguese should have carried out such carnage, when in that same city of Jericho not only were men, women, children and the elderly slaughtered, but also the oxen, sheep and donkeys, what we find really odd is that any man, even though a king, should rashly invoke the name of the Lord, whose will, as we know, only manifests itself where and when He so wishes, not in response to prayers, pleas and supplications, and as for the question of sons and stepsons, I have nothing to say.

Dom Afonso Henriques was favourably impressed not only by this apt quotation from the Bible but also by the conciliatory tone adopted by Saher of Archelles, the substance of his words as suspect as those of Guillaume of the Long Arrow, but unlike the latter, he had chosen his words carefully, and after conferring for a few minutes with the Archbishop of Braga and the Bishop of Oporto which meant descending from the boulder, he got back on to it and said, Gentlemen, you should know that this Portuguese land on which you stand, not here, but further south, and as recently as eight years ago, was the

scene of a miraculous appearance of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and since I am not Joshua nor my people Hebrew, this had a different impact on enemies more formidable than those watching us from yonder as they tremble with fear, a victory to match that of Jericho and other such resounding victories, and, if we were able to carry off this mighty feat, there is no reason why the Saviour of the World should not reappear before the walls of Lisbon, wherefore, God willing, our military skills would be as useless as yours, and our joint forces would be nothing other than astonished witnesses of God's power and majesty. As the king was speaking, the Archbishop and Bishop nodded approvingly, and as he brilliantly rounded off his speech, both of them applauded rapturously, their enthusiasm shared by all the other Portuguese who were present. Bewildered, the crusaders eyed each other, momentarily at a loss for words, until finally Gilles de Rolim decided to speak out, telling them, I agree, Your Majesty, that Our Lord Jesus Christ could easily do all of these things, but what we want to know at this stage, is not what He might do, but what He did, therefore we would ask you to give us a detailed account of this great victory, which, as far as we have understood, would suffice to justify the long, arduous journey we have made to this land, yours, and for the present still that of the Moors. The king conferred once more with the Archbishop and the Bishop, and, having all three agreed, he told them, Now then, listen.

The telephone rang. It has one of those old-fashioned bells that are enough to awaken the dead, and Raimundo Silva was so deeply lost in thought, that the unexpected fright caused his hand to jerk leaving a scrawl on the paper, as if the world had suddenly accelerated and skidded beneath his pen. He waited, then asked, Who is speaking, and immediately recognised the voice of the telephonist at the publishers, I'm putting you through to Dr Maria Sara's extension, she replied. As he waited, he looked at his watch, ten to six, How the time has passed quickly, it was true, the time had passed quickly, but to think it had no other purpose than to serve as a precarious safeguard, like a screen of thin smoke scattered and swept away by the breeze, while Raimundo Silva pauses to think, How the time has passed quickly, that other time, this one into which he had suddenly been launched, would give him the illusion of allowing himself to slow down, a pause sustained on a vibration, his right hand appearing to tremble slightly as it rests on the paper. Then he could hear the telephonist, incorrigible as ever, say, You're connected Dr Maria Sara, Raimundo Silva clenched his fist, time became blurred, confused, then became diffused, flowed in its natural current, Good afternoon, Senhor Raimundo Silva, Good afternoon, Dr Maria Sara, How have you been, Fine, and how are things with you, Going very well, thank you, I'm still organising the work here, and I simply wanted to ask you how you are getting on with the proofs of that book of poems we gave you, I've just finished correcting the proofs this very minute, I have been working on them all day and can bring them to your office tomorrow, Ah, so you've been working on them all day, Well not quite all day, I spent about two hours reading the novel Senhor Costa left with me, You've had a busy day, In fact I have nothing better to do, An interesting phrase, Perhaps, but it was unintentional, it slipped out without my thinking, There's probably some advantage in this, What do you mean by this, To speak without thinking, to act

without thinking, On the contrary, I've always considered myself a reflective person, that is how I see myself, someone who reflects on things, Even though given to impulses, Do me a favour, Dr Sara, if I'm to be subjected to constant reminders about past errors, I'd better look for work with some other publishing house, Forgive me, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, I promise not to say another word on the subject, Many thanks, Now then, why don't you bring me those proofs tomorrow, and as for the novel, once you have another free day to devote to reading, perhaps you might be able to finish the work and deliver it without delay, Don't worry, it won't take me long, I'm not in the least worried, I know I can rely on your cooperation, I've never let anyone down who put their trust in me, Then you won't disappoint me, Trust me, Until tomorrow Senhor Raimundo Silva, Until tomorrow, Dr Sara. The hand holding the telephone glided slowly through the air, descended slowly, and after replacing the receiver lingered there, as if reluctant to be separated from it or awaiting some word that could not be spoken. Raimundo Silva would have done better to concern himself with those words that had been uttered, for example, anyone else would have seen that Dr Maria Sara was not convinced that he had spent the whole day working on the book of poems, even allowing for the feasible assumption that he had devoted two hours to reading the novel, however since she had no possible means of knowing how he had occupied his time during the day, she resorted to guessing, typical of women, all of them think of themselves as being sybils and sorceresses, and end up deceiving themselves like the most common of those feeble men whom they generally regard with ironic and indulgent benevolence. But what troubled Raimundo Silva most of all was that she should have said, and in all seriousness, without altering her tone of voice, Then you won't disappoint me, obviously she was only referring to the more than proven professional competence of someone who throughout his working life, pardon the repetition, but this is always overlooked, the working life of someone who only made one mistake, and the same was discovered, acknowledged and fortunately excused. Now then, having clearly excluded those motives of a more intimate nature which relations between them rule out from the outset, that leaves the strong possibility of an indirect reference to that famous suggestion that he should write A New History of the Siege of Lisbon, a suggestion to which he found himself doubly committed, not just because he had already made a start on the work, but also because he had replied just as seriously, Trust me, and at that moment he did not know what he was saying.

Raimundo Silva looked at the sheet of paper, Listen, then picked up his biro to carry on with the narrative, but realised that his mind was vacant, yet another blank page, or one covered with indecipherable alternatives or crossings-out. Given the declaration made by Dom Afonso Henriques, all that remained for him to do was to relate the miracle of Ourique in his own words, introducing, as you might expect, a predictable note of modern scepticism, authorised moreover by the great Herculano de Carvalho, and giving free rein to the language, without overdoing it, because proof-readers tend not to take all that many risks with texts closely scrutinised by public opinion. The tension, however, had been broken, or been substituted by another, perhaps the impulse would return later,

during the hours of night, like some new inspiration, without which we can achieve nothing according to those who should know. Raimundo Silva has heard that in similar cases it is preferable not to force what we call nature, to allow the body to follow the soul's weariness, above all that they should not fight each other, however heroic and edifying tales of such battles may be, and this is wise advice, although not that most favoured by those who have firm ideas about what each of us should do, even though they themselves are not inclined to put them into practice. The king continues to say, Now then, listen, but it is a cracked disk that turns round and round, hypnotically turning round. Raimundo Silva rubs his tired eyes, the page in his brain is blank, the paper page is half-written, with his right hand he reaches out for The Chronicle of Dom Afonso Henriques written by Fray Antonio Brandão, which will serve to guide him when, tonight or tomorrow, he resumes the narrative, and, incapable of writing at present, he reads in order to acquaint himself with the details of this mythical episode, he is on the second chapter, The gifts brought by the courageous prince, Dom Afonso Henriques, were not of sufficient quality to allow him to rest, nor did his thoughts occupied with the greatness of the enterprise in hand give him much cause for tranquillity and reassurance. And so to shake off his disquiet, he took up the Holy Bible which he kept in his tent, and on starting to read, the first thing he came across was the victory of Gideon, the illustrious leader of the Jewish people, who with three hundred soldiers routed the four Midianite kings and their armies, putting to the sword a hundred and twenty thousand men, not counting the even greater number who perished in the end. Delighted with the outcome of this encounter, and treating this victory as an auspicious forecast of further triumphs, he became even more determined to wage war and, with inflamed heart, his eyes turned towards Heaven, he poured out the following words: As you well know, my Lord Jesus Christ, it was in your service and in order to exalt your holy name that I embarked on this war against your enemies; You, who are all powerful, help me to win this war, inspire and fortify my soldiers so that we may overcome these enemies who blaspheme your most holy name. Having thus spoken, he fell into a gentle slumber, and began to dream that he was seeing an old man of venerable appearance, who told him not to lose heart because he would undoubtedly win that battle, and as a clear sign of God's love and favour he would see the Saviour of the World with his own eyes before entering into battle. Lulled as he was into this pleasant dream, neither fully asleep or fully awake, his aide João Fernandes de Sousa entered the tent and informed him that an old man had arrived seeking an audience, and as far as one could tell, it was a matter of some importance. The prince ordered that if he were a Christian, he should be brought before him, and the moment he saw him, he recognised him as being the same old man he had just seen in his dreams and this greatly consoled him. The venerable old man repeated to the prince the same words he had heard in his dream, and confirming his victory and the appearance of Christ, he added that he should have every confidence in the Lord who loved him, and who would cast his merciful eyes on him and his descendants unto the sixteenth generation, when his descent would dwindle, but even then the Lord would watch over, and protect them. In the name of that same Lord he warned him that on the following night when he heard the bell ring at the hermitage where he had been living for

the last sixty years, under the special protection of the Almighty, he should leave the camp, because God wished to show him the greatness of his mercy. On hearing this sovereign message, the Catholic prince received it with all due respect and with the deepest humility gave infinite thanks to God. The old man took his leave and returned to his hermitage, and the prince, awaiting the promised sign, spent the night in Fervent prayer until the second vigil, when he heard the bell ring; then taking up his shield and sword he went outside the encampment, and, raising his eyes to heaven, he saw the most glorious resplendence towards the east, which gradually spread and grew bigger. In the middle he could see the redeeming sign of the Holy Cross, and nailed thereon the Redeemer of the world, surrounded by a throng of angels, in the guise of the most handsome youths dressed in shining white robes, and the prince noticed that the Cross was enormous and raised some cubits from the ground. Startled by this wondrous vision, and with the fear and reverence due in the presence of the Saviour, the prince laid down his arms, removed his royal robes, and prostrated himself barefoot on the ground and, with much weeping, he began to beseech the Lord to protect his vassals, and said: What merits have you found, my God, in so great a sinner, that you should favour me with such sovereign mercy? If You are doing this in order to increase my faith, it seems unnecessary, because since receiving Baptism I have acknowledged you as the one, true God, Son of the Holy Virgin, of human descent and the Eternal Father through divine generation. Better that the infidels should witness this wondrous manifestation of your glory, so that by abominating the error of their ways, they might come to know you. Whereupon the Lord, in gentle tones the prince has no difficulty in hearing, spoke these words: I have not appeared to you like this in order to increase your faith but in order to strengthen your resolve in this enterprise, and to lay the foundations of your Kingdom on solid rock. Take heart, for not only will you win this battle, but all the others you may wage on the enemies of the Catholic Faith. You will find your people ready for war, and they will earnestly entreat you as their king to take up arms; do not hesitate to accept, but heed their petition, for I am the founder and destroyer of the world's Empires, and in you and your descendants I wish to found a great kingdom for myself that will spread my name far and wide. And so that your descendants may know from whose hand they have received this kingdom, you will buy your arms at the price I paid for mankind, the price paid for me by the Jews, and this kingdom will be sanctified and loved by me for the purity of its Faith and its exemplary piety. On hearing this singular promise, Dom Afonso prostrated himself on the ground once more and, giving praise to the Lord, asked him, What have I done, my God, to be worthy of so much compassion? But if this is your holy will, cast the eyes of your mercy on the successors you have promised me, protect the Portuguese people from all perils, and should you decide to punish them, I implore you to inflict that punishment on me and my descendants, and spare this people whom I love as an only child. All this the Lord graciously accepted, assuring him that he and his people could count on his mercy, for they had been chosen as his labourers so that they might reap a great harvest far and wide. Hereupon the vision disappeared, and the Infante Dom Afonso, his resolve and happiness understandably restored, made an inspection tour of the camps before withdrawing into his tent.

Raimundo Silva closed the book. Although weary, he felt like reading on and following the sequence of battles before the Moors were finally routed, but Gilíes de Rolim, speaking on behalf of the crusaders who were present, told the king that, having been informed of the memorable prodigy performed by Our Lord, Jesus Christ, in the remote region south of Castro Verde, at a place called Ourique in the province of Alentejo, they would give him their reply next morning. Whereupon, after complying with the usual greetings and formalities of protocol, they, too, withdrew to their tents.

THE KING SLEPT BADLY, his restless sleep constantly interrupted, yet heavy and gloomy as if he should never forget it, and it was a sleep without dreams or nightmares, no old man of venerable aspect announcing some pleasant miracle, I am here, no woman crying out, Don't ill-treat me, I'm your mother, nothing except a dense, mysterious blackness that seemed to enshroud and quell his heart. He awoke feeling thirsty and asked for water which he drank in great gulps, and then looked out of the tent to study the night sky, impatient with the slow movement of the stars. There was a full moon, one of those moons that transform the world into a ghosdy apparition, when all things, living and inanimate, whisper mysterious revelations, each expressing its own, and all of them discordant, therefore we never come to understand them and we suffer the anguish of almost but never quite knowing. The estuary shone between the hills, the river carried the gleaming waters as if ablaze, and the bonfires burning on the terraces of the castle and the huge torches distinguishing the various ships of the crusaders were like dying flames in that luminous darkness. The king looked to one side, then to the other, he tried to visualise those Moors and Franks watching the bonfires of the Portuguese encampment, to imagine their thoughts, fear and scorn, to fathom their next move and military strategy. He lay down once more on the bearskin with which he usually covered his pallet, and tried to sleep. The voices of men on patrol could be heard, now and then, the sound of weapons, the lantern inside the tent cast dancing shadows, then the king sank into silence and infinite darkness, he was asleep.

The hours passed, the moon descended and disappeared, night turned to night. Then the stars covered the entire sky, sparkling like reflections on the water, creating space for the Milky Way leading to Santiago, later, much much later, the first light of morning broke through behind the city, black against the light, little by little the minarets faded, and when the sun appeared, still invisible from this spot where we are standing, familiar voices could be heard echoing amongst the hills, those of the muezzins summoning the followers of Allah to prayer. The Christians are not such early risers, aboard the ships there is no sign of life, and the Portuguese encampment, save for the weary sentinels who are nodding off, continues to be immersed in a deep sleep, a lethargy interrupted by grunts, sighs, murmurings, which only much much later when the sun is already up, will free their limbs and untie their voices, the contrite and irrepressible morning yawn, the interminable stretching causing bones to creak, one day more, one day less. The fires have been lit and the cauldrons are now suspended over the flames, the men draw near, each with his wooden bowl, the guards arrive in a state of exhaustion, others who have rested disperse throughout the encampment as they chew one last mouthful of food, while at the same time, near the tents, the nobles nourish themselves on much the same food, unless we are talking about meat which is the main difference in their diet. They eat from large wooden platters along with the priests who have celebrated Mass before breaking their fast, and together they try to predict what the crusaders will decide to do, someone suggests they will not join them unless they are promised more generous rewards, another feels they might be content simply to serve for the greater glory of God, if compensated for their labours with a token sum of money. They keep a watchful eye on

the ships in the distance, probe the manoeuvres of the sailors, look out for any signs, in the hope of discovering whether the crusaders are planning to stay or, on the other hand, are already weighing anchor.

The king is waiting. He fidgets impatiently on the seat placed in front of his tent, he is fully armed, with only his head uncovered, and he sits there in silence, looking and waiting, nothing more. It is mid-morning, the sun is high in the sky, beads of sweat trickling down under his armour. The king is visibly annoyed yet anxious not to show it. A canvas awning erected over his head flaps gently in the breeze, in harmony with the royal standard. A silence different from that of night, but perhaps even more disquieting because during the day we expect movement and noise, a silence of foreboding hovers over the city, the river and the surrounding hills. The crickets are chirping but this is a sound from another world, the grating of the invisible saw cutting away at the world's foundations. Up on the walls, behind the battlements, the Moors are also watching and waiting.

At last there is a movement of boats between the three main galleys anchored at the mouth of the estuary, from each of them descend people who step into the boats, and now they are heading this way, you can hear the beating of oars on the smooth water, the splashing of spade oars, the general picture is almost one of pure lyricism, a clear blue sky, two small boats approaching without haste, all we need is a painter to record these subtle colours of nature, the dark city rising up the hill and surmounted by the castle, or, changing our perspective, the Portuguese encampment against a background of irregular hills, ravines, slopes, scattered olive-groves, some stubble, the vestiges of recent fires. The king is no longer there, he returned to his tent, because, being a royal personage, he does not have to wait for anyone, the crusaders have to assemble, waiting respectfully and then Dom Afonso Henriques, armed from head to foot, will appear to hear their message. Some of the high-ranking warriors who had conferred with the king now began to approach, their demeanour forbidding and impenetrable, we can already tell that they are about to refuse to help the Portuguese, but the latter are still in a state of holy ignorance, they nourish, as the saying goes, high hopes, it is difficult to imagine how they can justify such a grave decision, for there must have been a reason, otherwise they will be accused of being thoughtless and inconsiderate. The delegation includes Gilles de Rolim, Ligel, Lichertes, the La Corni brothers, Jordão, Alardo, also a German hitherto unmentioned, whose name is Heinrich, a native of Bonn, a knight of high repute and moral standing, as he will come to prove, and a learned English monk whose first name is Gilbert, and as spokesman, Guillaume Vitulo, he of the Long Sword or the Long Arrow, fear struck in the hearts of the Portuguese when they saw that he would do the talking, for they were well aware of his hostility towards the king, there are such enmities, for no good reason we take a dislike to someone and nothing will change our mind, I can't stand the fellow, I can't stand the fellow, and there is nothing more to be said.

Dom Afonso Henriques emerged from his tent accompanied by his advisers Dom

Pedro Pitões and Dom João Peculiar, and it was the latter, who after consulting the king, extended words of welcome to the emissaries, speaking in Latin, of course, with no detriment to the words themselves, and told them the king was anxious to hear the answer they had brought, which he had no doubt would be most profitable for the greater glory of Our Lord Jesus Christ. An astute form of words for since we obviously do not know what most befits God, we leave it to His judgment to choose, while we humbly resign ourselves if that choice is not in our best interests, and, on the other hand, not to overstate our gratitude if it turns out to be everything we could have wished for. The eventuality that God might be indifferent to yes and no, good and evil, cannot enter heads such as the ones we were given, for when all is said and done, God always has to serve some purpose. However this is not the moment to be pursuing such tortuous meanders, because Guillaume of the Long Sword, already adopting an attitude of blatant insolence quite out of keeping with his subordinate rank, is insisting that since the King of Portugal can count on so much favour and assistance from Our Lord Jesus Christ, such as, for example, during those critical moments during the battle of Ourique, then surely the Lord would take it amiss if the crusaders, who were after all in transit, should presume to take His place in this new enterprise, therefore the Portuguese would be well-advised to go alone into battle, for their victory was assured and God would appreciate this opportunity to show His might, as and when it might be sought. Guillaume Vitulo having spoken in his native language, the Portuguese listened throughout, pretending to understand as happens on such occasions, never suspecting for a moment that the decision was contrary to their own interest and advantage, but they found out soon enough when the friar accompanying the Knight of the Long Sword reluctantly began translating, his lips refusing to articulate words of such sarcasm, and others which demand a second hearing, given the undertones of blasphemous doubt cast on the divine power to quell or curtail wars, to propose or dispose, to grant or withhold victory, to allow one man to overcome a thousand, things only become difficult when Christians are fighting Christians, or Moors are struggling against Moors, although in the second case, this is a problem for Allah to resolve, so let him get on with it.

The king listened in silence, and silent he remained, his hands grasping the hilt of his sword, held to the right, the tip of the blade resting firmly on the ground as if he had already taken possession of this territory. And it was Dom João Peculiar who, crimson With holy indignation, uttered the phrase that ought to have shamed the provocateur, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God, a phrase understood by all, even by those weak in matters of doctrine, because rather than simply show his contempt for the Portuguese, Guillaume Vitulo, in other circumstances and with different words, had, in fact, done nothing more than repeat Satan's wicked ploy when he said to Jesus, If you be the Son of God, cast yourself down, for the angels will protect you and you will come to no harm, whereupon Jesus replied, You shall not tempt the Lord your God. These words ought to have shamed Guillaume but he felt no remorse, and even appeared to be sneering with contempt. Then Dom Afonso Henriques asked, Is this the crusaders' final decision, It is, replied the other, Then be gone, and may God accompany you to the Holy Land, where,

unless I am mistaken, you will no longer have any excuse for evading battle as on this occasion. It was now Guillaume Vitulo's turn to raise his hand to the sword that gave him his name, and this might have had the most dire consequences if his companions had not intervened, not so much physically as with the words spoken by one of them, this was Gilbert, the only member of the delegation who could outshine the interpreters when it came to expressing himself in Latin, as fluent as any learned high-ranking prelate, and these were his words, Your Majesty, Guillaume Vitulo is telling the truth when he says that the crusaders refuse to stay here, but he has failed to mention the material considerations which have prompted their refusal, after all, it's up to them, however some have decided to remain and these are the men you see here who have come with the delegation, Gilles de Rolim, Ligel, Lichertes, the La Corni brothers, Jordão, Alardo, Heinrich, and myself, the most insignificant and lowly of all and at your service. Dom Afonso Henriques was so pleased that his wrath soon passed, and, there and then, ignoring any niceties of protocol, he went up to Gilbert and embraced him, showing his disdain in passing for the insolent Guillaume who is truly well-named, and said aloud, This being your decision, I promise that you will be the first Bishop of Lisbon once the city becomes Christian, and as for you others who have chosen to stay with me, I can assure you that you will have no cause to complain of my magnanimity, whereupon he turned away and entered his tent. Here the waters parted, that is to say, Guillaume remained isolated, even the friar accompanying him moved three cautious paces away, looking suspiciously for any signs of a cloven hoof or goat's horns on this rash fanatic who had been put in his place.

Combining what was effectively written with what for the moment only exists in his imagination, Raimundo Silva arrived at this crucial climax, and he has made considerable progress, if we recall that besides his more than once confessed lack of preparation for anything other than the meticulous task of proof-reading, he is a man who writes slowly, forever conscious of agreements, sparing in the use of adjectives, painstaking in matters of etymology, punctilious in observing the rules of punctuation, which goes to show that everything that has been read here in his name, in the final analysis, is nothing more than a free version and adaptation of a text which probably has little in common with this one and that as far as we can foresee, will be kept back until the very last line, and out of reach of the lovers of naive history. Besides, we only have to see that the version at our disposal already consists of twelve extremely compact pages, and it is obvious that Raimundo Silva who has none of the characteristics of the writer, neither the vices nor the virtues, could not possibly within thirty-six hours have written so much with so many variations, as for the literary merits of what he wrote, there is nothing to be said, because this is history, consequently science, and because of the lack of what might strictly be called authoritative sources. These precautions are worth repeating so that we may bear in mind the importance of not confusing appearances with reality, but we do not know how or why we should doubt, when we thought we were certain of some reality which looks and sounds convincing, that it might simply be another version among many, or, worse still, be the only version and proclaimed as such.

It is the middle of the afternoon, time to pay a visit to Dr Maria Sara who is waiting for the proofs of the book of poems. The cleaner is tidying up the kitchen, or doing the ironing, he scarcely notices her as she goes quietly about her work, perhaps thinking that writing or correcting what has been written has something to do with religion, and Raimundo Silva who has not left the house all day, went and asked her, What is the weather like, since he never has much to say to her, he seizes the slightest opportunity, or invents one, therefore he did not go to the window as usual, and he should have done, today being such a special day, perhaps they already know in the city that the crusaders are going away, espionage is not an invention of modern warfare, and Senhora Maria replies, It's fine, a synthetic expression, which only means, in fact, that it is not raining, for by constantly saying, It's fine, but cold, or, It's fine, but windy, we never say nor ever will say, It's fine, but raining. Raimundo Silva goes in search of the complementary information, whether there is any threat of rain, or wind such as yesterday, and what the temperature is like. He can go out without any protection other than what is normal, his coat, dry as can be and now quite presentable, of the two scarves he possesses, the flimsy one. He went to the kitchen to settle the weekly accounts with Senhora Maria, she looked at the money and sighed, a habit of hers, as if on receiving the money she were already beginning to be parted from it, in the beginning Raimundo Silva used to get nervous, she appeared to be putting on a sad expression to show her displeasure at being so badly paid, therefore he felt quite uneasy until he was sufficiently informed about standard rates of payment amongst the lower middle class to which he belongs, coming to the conclusion that he was reasonably well off, one could not honestly say that he was exploiting the labour of others, but just in case, he increased her wages, but he could not cure her of that sighing.

There are three main routes connecting the street in which Raimundo Silva lives to the city of the Christians, one that follows the Rua do Milagre de Santo Antonio, and depending on which street of the trifurcation he chooses, he might end up in Caldas and the Madalena, or in the Largo da Rosa and its immediate surroundings, the Costa do Castelo above, the Escadinhas da Saúde and the Largo de Martim Moniz below, and, in the middle, the steep Canada de Santo André, the Terreirinho and the Rua dos Cavaleiros, another route takes him through the Largo dos Lóios in the direction of the Portas do Sol, and finally, the most common route of all, down the Escadinhas de'São Crispim which soon brings him to the Porta de Ferro, where the tram is waiting that will take him to the Chiado, or where he sets off, still on foot, for the Praça da Figueira, if he has to use the underground, as is the case today. The publishing house is situated near the Avenida do Duque de Loulé, much too far away for him to start climbing the Avenida da Liberdade at this late hour, he usually walks up on the right-hand side, for he has never liked the other side, he cannot explain why, although this impression of liking or disliking may not be constant, it has its ups and downs, whether it be here or there, but somehow he feels happier on the right-hand side. One day, even while telling himself that he was being obsessive, he took the trouble to mark out on a map of the city those stretches of the Avenida which he liked and those he disliked, and he discovered to his

surprise, that the agreeable part on the left side was more extensive, but taking into account the degree of satisfaction, the right side prevailed in the end, so that he would often go up on this side and look across at the pavement on the other side, wishing he were there. Obviously he does not take these little obsessions too seriously, he is not a proof-reader for nothing, only a few days ago, while holding a conversation with the author of *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, he argued that proof-readers have had wide experience of both literature and life, giving to understand that what they did not know or wish to learn about life, literature more or less taught them, especially when it comes to foibles and manias, for as everyone knows normal characters do not exist, otherwise they presumably would not be characters, which, summed up, may imply that Raimundo Silva may have looked in the books he proof-read for some striking features that, with the passage of time, would come to instil, in combination with any natural traits, this coherent and contradictory totality we normally refer to as character. Now that he is standing on the Escadinhas de'São Crispim, eyeing the dog who is watching him, he might well ask himself which fictional character it most resembles at this moment, a pity it is not a wolf or some other animal, for then St Francis would immediately come to mind, or a pig, and then it might be St Antonino, or a lion, and then it might be St Mark, or an ox, and then it might be St Luke, or a fish, and then it might be St Antony, or a lamb, and then it might be St John the Baptist, or an eagle, and then it might be St John the Evangelist, we could not simply describe the dog as being man's best friend, because the way the world is going it might well be his one and only remaining friend.

On condition that its friendship is returned, Raimundo Silva thinks to himself in the presence of this gaping mongrel, it is more than evident that the inhabitants of'São Crispim have no liking for the canine species, perhaps because the people in this district are the direct descendants of the Moors who saw it as their religious duty to abhor the dogs roaming the streets at that time, although both men and dogs are the brothers of Allah. The dog, with more than eight centuries of ill-treatment in its blood and genetic legacy, raised its head from afar to give a pitiful howl, a voice of unabashed frustration and despair begging for food, howling or stretching out a hand is not so much public degradation as inner abnegation. Raimundo Silva has no fixed appointment, Until tomorrow, was all Dr Maria Sara had said, but it is already getting late, worst of all is this dog preventing him from going on his way, the howl has turned to wailing, unlike what happens to humans who weep first then start howling, and what this dog is begging, pleading, supplicating and craving for, as if this simple man were God Himself, is a morsel of bread or a bone, rubbish-bins nowadays are difficult to open or tip over, hence my desperate need for something to eat, kind Sir. Torn between going on and feeling remorseful about having done so, Raimundo Silva decides to return home to find something that a famished dog dare not refuse, as he goes upstairs he looks at his watch, It's getting late, he repeated to himself, bursting into the apartment and giving the cleaner, whom he caught watching television, the fright of her life, but without appearing to notice he made straight for the kitchen, rummaged in drawers, peered into pots and pans, opened the fridge, Senhora Maria could not summon the courage to ask,

What are you looking for, or even register any surprise as well she might, for as we know, she was caught in the act, watching television when she should have been getting on with her work, and now she tries to collect herself, the television has been switched off and she is now busily moving furniture and making the most awful din as she puts on a show of frenetic activity, busying herself to no purpose, while Raimundo Silva, if he actually noticed that she was taking liberties, did not give it another thought, he was so worried about being late and making a favourable impression when he puts the fruits of his plunder before the dog, these he carries wrapped up in newspaper, a bit of cooked sausage, a slice of fatty ham, three morsels of bread, pity there is no bone to pacify the poor mongrel for there is nothing better while digesting than a bone to stimulate the salivary glands and to strengthen a dog's teeth. The door has slammed, Raimundo Silva is already descending the stairs, no doubt Senhora Maria has gone to the window to watch him leave, then gone back into the sitting-room to switch on the television, she had even lost five minutes of the soap opera, what's been happening.

The dog had not moved, but simply lowered its head, its nose almost touching the ground. Its protruding ribs, like those of some crucified Christ, tremble in the joints of its spine, this animal is an utter fool, refusing to leave the Escadinhas de'São Crispim where it has suffered starvation, despising the riches of Lisbon, Europe and the World, now these are facile judgments, this is not a case of stubbornness but rather of timidity, therefore worthy of our respect, the fearless never see any difficulties, for example, what confusion there would be in this dog's mind on discovering that the familiar one hundred and thirty-four steps suddenly had one more, not that any such thing has happened, this is merely a hypothesis, how wretched the mongrel would feel confronted with this unsurmountable abyss, for we have not forgotten how difficult the dog found it to follow this man the other day all the way to the Porta de Ferro, better not to repeat certain experiences. Standing three paces away, Raimundo Silva watches the dog go up to the parcel opened out on the ground, and the animal, wary of being landed a kick, cannot decide whether it should keep an eye on him, or pounce on the food, its very smell provoking unbearable pangs of hunger, the saliva rushes to its teeth, oh god of dogs, why have you condemned so many of us to a miserable existence, it is always the same, we blame the gods for this and that, when it is we who invent and fabricate everything, including absolution for these and other crimes, Raimundo Silva can see that the dog is afraid, he moves away, the animal advances a little, its nose quivering with desire, one minute the food was there and gone the next, swallowed up in a flash, and with its long, pale tongue the dog is licking the grease soaked into the paper. Fate has confronted Raimundo Silva with this sad spectacle, Dr Maria Sara already forgotten, and suddenly he finds himself identified with the fictional character who was missing, none other than St Rock who was assisted by a dog, and it was time the saint repaid the favour, thus proving the assertion that everything is reciprocated in this life, even if in reverse, from a human angle, needless to say, for when it comes to dogs, who can tell how they see Raimundo Silva, let us say, a living being with a human face, so that we may finally complete the aforementioned collection of apocalyptic animals and let Raimundo Silva also become the

St Matthew who was missing, but how will he cope with such a heavy burden.

But it cannot be all that heavy, if we observe the speed at which he began descending the steps, having suddenly remembered Dr Maria Sara who is waiting for him, now he will need to take a taxi in order to get there in time, and he cannot afford such luxuries, damn dog, me playing the Good Samaritan, you can be sure I wouldn't have gone back home to look for food had it been an old woman begging on the Escadinhas de'São Crispim, well, perhaps if it were an old woman, but certainly not for an old man, interesting to see how generosity itself, assuming that is what we are talking about, varies according to the situation and the circumstances, with our frame of mind and mood at that moment, generosity, if you will forgive the comparison, is rather like a piece of elastic, it stretches, contracts, is capable of embracing all humanity or the selfish individual who only knows how to be generous with himself, however an act of charity is always good for the soul, the mongrel remained there, deeply grateful, although it was so famished that this food would barely suffice to fill a hollow tooth, poor little creature, an expression of pity, for the dog is not all that small, what breed, all of them, except for the most timid of them that never appear on the streets, and if they do they are on a leash and wearing a cache-sexe, this one at least is free, enjoys pursuing stray bitches but will not get much enjoyment if he never leaves the Escadinhas de'São Crispim, if he never leaves the Escadinhas de'São Crispim. At this point Raimundo Silva consciously interrupted the musings in which he had been absorbed as the taxi carried him, he had become aware of a sudden malaise, not physical, rather as if someone asleep inside him had suddenly awoken and called out on finding himself plunged into total darkness, therefore he repeated, to allow his fear to pass, If he never leaves the Escadinhas de'São Crispim, who am I talking about, he asked himself, the taxi was climbing the Rua da Prata and he was inside it, after all, he belonged to the land of men, not that of dogs, and he could always leave the Escadinhas de'São Crispim whenever he wanted or needed to, such as now, when he is on his way to the publisher to speak to Dr Maria Sara who is in charge of the proof-readers, to deliver the final proofs of the book of poems, and then he may decide not to go back home just yet, he has finished proof-reading the book, although such a slender little volume that it scarcely passes for a book, he will do what he usually does, eat in some restaurant, go to the cinema, although he probably does not have enough money for such an ambitious programme, he does some mental arithmetic, the taxi-meter, he tries to remember how much he has in his wallet, and he is in the middle of these calculations when he realises he will not go out this evening, he must not forget that he has started on a new book, no, no it is not the novel delivered by Costa, he looked at his watch, almost five o'clock, the taxi goes up the Avenida do Duque de Loui , stops at traffic lights, drives on, drop me off here, please, and when Raimundo takes out the money to pay, he can see at a glance that he does not have enough money to go to a restaurant and the cinema, either one or the other, but the one without the other is not much fun, I'll eat at home and get on with my work, he means The History of the Siege of Lisbon, at one time he would have said it outright, when he was proof-reading a book with this title, in the days when he was innocent.

The lift is ancient and cramped, perfect for intimate encounters were it not for the transparency of the glass doors and the side panels, nevertheless there is an interval between two floors, and so long as you keep an attentive eye on the flights of stairs, going up on the one side, going down on the other, it is always possible to touch hands or even steal a furtive kiss, if you are feeling desperate. In all the years he has worked here, Raimundo Silva has used this mechanical cage, sometimes on his own, at others accompanied, and never before today, as far as he can remember, had he ever been assailed by such disquieting thoughts, it is true that in the beginning he preferred to use the stairs because he did not have the patience to wait when the lift was slow in coming, and also because he was still nimble on his feet and sound of heart, capable of competing with the junior staff in all the offices, including the staff in Editorial, although here the average age has always been on the high side. It is not much of a climb, only two floors, but bearing in mind that this is an old building where each floor is almost twice as high as those built today, similar in this respect to the very old building he inhabits in Castelo, in other words this is nothing new, the high has always been followed by the low and the low by the high, probably one of life's laws, even our own father once gave the impression of being a giant and now it is we who look over his shoulder, and he gets more and more decrepit from year to year, poor man, but let us say no more, so that he may suffer in silence. It strikes Raimundo Silva as being absurd that he should be remembering his deceased father in this elevator, just as he was beginning to be assailed by erotic thoughts, the truth is that the person who thinks only knows what he is thinking and not why he thought it, we think from the moment we are born, I suppose, but do not know what our first thought might have been, the one from which all others have subsequently come, the definitive biography of each one of us would be to ascend the river of thoughts to its primeval source, and presumably change our life, were it possible to retrace their course, to suddenly have another thought and pursue it, so that we might arrive at the day in which we find ourselves, unless by choosing another life we made it shorter, and that the life in question was not that of a proof-reader, and we would go up in another lift, perhaps to speak to someone other than Dr Maria Sara. As it happened, Raimundo Silva was standing on the side where he had seen the Editorial Director descend with the new employee appointed to supervise the work of the proof-readers, and we catch him looking at the empty space with severe disapproval, as if he were about to reprimand the woman who had stood there for her immoral conduct, for as you ought to know these are things one does not do in a hit, one does not do, I repeat, for I am well aware that there are people who do these things, and even worse, It was only a little groping, Mr Proof-reader, it was only a little kiss, Mr Proof-reader, No matter, that was more than enough, in the name of my own, incurable envy, I denounce you, during the last few centimetres of his ascent, Raimundo Silva moved to the centre of the elevator, there was no room for the others, they had to get out, thoroughly ashamed of themselves if there is any shame left in this world, most likely they are laughing at this hypocritical moralist, They're no good because they're still green, said the vixen.

To look, see and observe are different ways of using the organ of sight, each with its

own intensity, even when there is some deterioration, for example, to look without seeing, when someone is distracted, a common situation in traditional novels, or to see and not notice, when the eyes out of weariness and boredom avoid anything likely to tax them. Only by observing can we achieve full vision, when at a given moment or successively, our attention becomes concentrated, which may just as easily result from a conscious decision as from an involuntary state of synesthesia, whereby what is seen pleads to be seen once more, thus passing from one sensation to another, arresting, slowing down the process of looking, as if the image were about to be produced in two different places in the brain with a temporal discrepancy of a hundredth of a second, first the simplified sign, then the exact design, the clear, imperious definition of a thick handle in polished brass on a dark varnished door which suddenly becomes an absolute presence. Time and time again, Raimundo Silva has stood at this door waiting for them to open up from within, the click of the buzzer, and never as today has he been so keenly and almost terrifyingly aware of material things, a handle that is not simply a smooth polished surface, but an object whose density can be perceived until coming up against this other density, that of wood, and it is as if all of this were sensed, experienced, felt inside the brain, as if the senses, this time all of them and not just his vision, were observing the world after finally observing a handle and a door. The buzzer has clicked, fingers have pushed the door, inside the light seems overpowering, and although not true, Raimundo Silva feels as if he were floating in space without any bearings, just like those sets saturated with light that are much in vogue in films about the supernatural and extra-terrestrial apparitions with dazzling lighting effects, he waits for the telephonist to shriek in terror or fall into an ecstatic trance if he should manifest himself outwardly in a proliferation of sensitive tentacles or bright rays of ineffable beauty, the kaleidoscopic vibration into which, for a fleeting instant, his sensibility has been transformed. But the telephonist, whose duties, in addition to managing the switchboard, include pressing the button to release the lock and receiving anyone who arrives, gives him a little wave while she finishes a conversation on the telephone, and then friendly, familiar and unsurprised, greets him with, Hello, Senhor Silva, she has known him for many years and each time she sees him she finds him no different than one might expect with the passage of time, if asked within the next few minutes how she found the proof-reader, she would reply, although not with total conviction, Difficult to say, perhaps a little nervous, this is what she would say and nothing more, either she is not very observant or Raimundo Silva is his old self again, if anyone could really tell from outward appearances what was going on inside a person, even by observing them closely, I'd like to speak to Dr Maria Sara, he said, and the telephonist, who is also called Sara but without the Maria and who feels very proud of this semi-coincidence, informs him that Dr Maria Sara is in the director's office, she does not even have to say which director, she means the Editorial Director, it has always been the same, the others, from the Managing Director down to Costa, are people of no importance, and Raimundo Silva, somewhat brusquely for him, tells her to ask whether she can see him or whether he should leave the proofs of the book of poems here at the reception desk, she will know what he is referring to. Sara listens to what Dr Maria Sara is saying, nods her head, the dialogue is brief, but perhaps because of

whatever keen vision he still possesses, although now only a pale shadow of what it was on the other side of the door, Raimundo Silva observes, strand by strand, the telephonist's blonde hair, a colour resembling that of crushed straw, she keeps her head lowered, she cannot imagine the ferocity in his expression, ferocity is perhaps too strong a word, obviously the man bears the woman no malice, it is his eyes that are being irresponsible, he is simply waiting to be given instructions, he has come quite some distance and in haste, perhaps only to be told to leave the proofs in reception, as if he were an errand boy delivering a letter that requires no answer, Dr Maria Sara would like you to wait in her office, the telephonist has raised her head and is smiling, Many thanks, Sarita, she has always been called Sarita, and the name stuck even after she married and became a widow, some people are extremely fortunate, the women, of course, for as a rule, men have had little time to be boys and some never were, as is known and has been written, while others have never stopped being boys but dare not admit it.

Raimundo Silva did not have long to wait, three or four minutes at most. He had remained standing, looking around him, with the strange impression of entering this office for the first time, it is not surprising, he had no memory of being in this office before, most likely it had been used by the administration before the recent alterations, nor, as he now noticed to his amazement, had he retained those images when summoned by Dr Maria Sara, he could no longer remember, for example, if that vase with a white rose had been standing on the desk or that work-schedule on the wall where he could read his own name on the top line and below it the names of all the other proof-readers who worked for the publishing house, their names marked alongside the abbreviated titles of books, dates, coloured symbols, a simple geometrical square, a map, as it were, of the city of proof-readers, some six in all. We can picture them, each in his own home, in Castelo, in Avenidas Novas, perhaps in Almada or Amadora, or Campo de Ourique, or Graça, poring over the proofs of some book, reading and correcting, and Dr Maria Sara thinking about them, changing a date, substituting a green symbol for a blue one, very soon now the names themselves will no longer matter, be no more than a little diagram that will provoke ideas, associations, reflections, but for the moment each of these names represents an item of information that has to be assimilated, first Raimundo Silva, then Carlos Fonseca, Albertina Santos, Mario Rodrigues, Rita Pais, Rodolfo Xavier, this being an office one might expect them to be arranged in alphabetical order, but not at all, no Sir, Raimundo Silva appears on the top line, and perhaps there is a simple explanation, namely, that when the work-schedule was drawn up, he was Dr Maria Sara's main concern.

Whereupon, she walks in, and says, Sorry to have kept you waiting, the sound of the door and her voice startled Raimundo Silva, caught unawares, and he turned round hastily, It doesn't matter, I only came to, he does not finish the sentence, it is as if he were also seeing this face for the first time, how often had he thought about Dr Maria Sara in recent days, and in the end, he had no image of her in his mind, her name alone had occupied all the available space in his memory, progressively displacing her hair,

eyes, features, the gestures she made with her hands, all he could remotely recognise was the softness of that silk, not because he had ever touched it, as we know, nor was he having recourse to former sensations in order to imagine morbidly what touching it might be like, impossible as it may seem, Raimundo Silva knows everything about this silk, its sheen, the soft texture of the material, the floating pleats, like sand dancing, although its present colour is not as before, it, too, immersed in the mists of memory, at the risk of being disrespectful by citing the national anthem. I've brought you the proofs, as we agreed, said Raimundo Silva, and Dr Maria Sara took them from him, in passing as it were, now she is seated at her desk, having invited the proof-reader to be seated, but he replied, No, I won't bother, and averted his gaze to the white rose, so close to her that it can see into her most tender heart, and, since one word leads to another, he is reminded of a verse he had once revised, a line that spoke of the intimate murmur that makes roses bloom, he had been struck by the beauty of those words, one of those felicitous expressions to be found even in mediocre poets, The intimate murmur that makes roses bloom, he repeated to himself, and he could hear, incredible as it may seem, the ineffable caress of petals, or was it a sleeve rubbing against the curve of her breast, dear God, take pity on men who spend their lives imagining things.

Dr Maria Sara replied, As you wish. Only these three words, in a tone of voice that did not augur any further conversation, and Raimundo Silva, who could probe the meaning even of words half-spoken, understood, on hearing these three words, that he had no more business here, he had come to deliver the proofs, he had handed them over, all he had to do now was to take his leave, Good afternoon, or to ask, Do you need anything more of me, a common enough expression, as capable of expressing humble subordination as restrained impatience, and which, in this instance, using the appropriate tone of voice, might be turned into an ironic gibe, the unfortunate thing is that the person addressed often hears the phrase without noticing the intention behind it, they only have to be leafing through published proofs with a professional eye, even more attentive when checking the proofs of verses which require special care. No, I cannot think of anything more at present, she said, rising from her chair, and it was just then that Raimundo Silva, without meditating or premeditating, detached as he was from the act and its consequences, gently touched the white rose with two fingers, and Dr Maria Sara looked at him in astonishment, she could not have been more startled had he caused that flower to appear in an empty vase or pulled off some similar sleight of hand, but most unexpected of all, is that a woman so sure of herself should suddenly become perturbed to the point of blushing, it happened in a flash, but flagrant, it seems quite incredible that anyone should blush so in this day and age, what could she have thought, if she thought anything, it was as if the man, on touching the rose, had brought out a hidden intimacy in the woman, spiritual rather than physical. But the most extraordinary thing of all is that Raimundo Silva also blushed, and for much longer than she did, he felt so utterly ridiculous. How shameful, he said or is about to say to himself. In similar situations, when courage is lacking, and don't let's ask, Courage for what, the only salvation is to escape, our instinct for self-preservation is a wise counsellor, the worst comes afterwards, when

we repeat those horrible words, How shameful, we have all experienced these horrors and punched the cushion with rage and humiliation, How could I have been so stupid, and there is no answer, probably because we would have to be very intelligent to be able to justify our stupidity, just as well that we are hidden by the darkness in the room, no one can see us, even though night possesses, and that is why we fear it so much, this evil power of making even the most petty irritations seem monstrous and irremediable, let alone a disaster of this order. Raimundo Silva turned away abruptly, with the vague idea that he had nothing more to live for and that he would never again return to this establishment, It's absurd, absurd, he repeated in silence and he had the impression of saying it a thousand times as he made for the door, In two seconds I'll be out of this place, gone, far away, when at the very last moment he was detained by Maria Sara's voice, surprisingly calm, in such stark contrast to what is happening here this very moment, that it was as if the meaning of her words had vanished into thin air, had he not been so conscious of the absurdity of it all, he might have pretended that he had misunderstood, however he had no choice but to accept that she really had said, I'm leaving in five minutes, I only have to settle some business with the Editorial Director, can I offer you a lift. With his hand gripping the door-handle, he tried desperately to appear natural, and how much effort it cost him, one part of him commanded, Be off with you, the other eyed him like a judge and decreed, You won't get a second chance, all the blushings and surprises had lost any importance in comparison with the dramatic step taken by Maria Sara, but in which direction, dear God, in which direction, and this is how we humans are made, for notwithstanding the confusion of sentiments with which he was struggling, it is clear that he was still sufficiently indifferent to be able to recognise the annoyance the expression, can I offer you a lift, had caused him, a trite colloquialism altogether unsuited to the occasion and reminding him of some popular ditty, a spontaneous and irresistible jingle, lift, ride, ditty, Maria Sara could have said, I'll take you wherever you like, but she probably did not remember, or thought the better of using such an ambiguous phrase, I'll take you wherever you like, I'll take you wherever I like, how true that an elevated style tends to elude us when we need it most. Raimundo Silva managed to let go of the door and stand firm, an observation which might appear to be in dubious taste were it not the expression of an amicable irony as we wait for him to reply, Many thanks, but I don't want to take you out of your way, now here it should be said the sonnet is about to suffer with the correction and it only remains to the ill-starred proof-reader to bite his tongue if this tardy sacrifice would serve any purpose, fortunately, Maria Sara paid no attention, or pretended not to have understood the mischievous duplicity of the phrase, at least her voice was not trembling when she said, I won't be a minute, do take a seat, and he did his best to prevent his voice from trembling when he replied, I won't bother, I prefer to stand, from the way he had spoken earlier it seemed that he was refusing the offer, now he appears to be accepting. She goes out only to return within five minutes, meanwhile it is to be hoped that both of them recover the rhythm of their breathing, their sense of appraising distances, the regularity of their pulse, which will certainly be no small feat after such perilous exchanges. Raimundo Silva looks at the rose, it is not only people who do not know why they are born.

One day, perhaps because of some lighting effect reminiscent of this bright chilly afternoon which is already fading, someone will say, Do you remember, first the silence inside the car, awkward words, a tense and expectant glance, protestations and avowals, Drop me off in the Baixa, please, I'll catch a tram from there, Whatever next, I'm taking you home, it isn't any trouble, But you're going out of your way, The car is, not me, It's quite a climb up to the district where I live, At the foot of the castle, So you know where I live, In the Rua do Milagre de Santo Antonio, I saw the address on your file, afterwards a certain but still hesitant sense of relief, body and soul semi-relaxed, but his words ever cautious until the moment Maria Sara said, I think we're where the Moorish city once stood, and Raimundo Silva pretending not to notice the allusion, replied, Yes, we are, and tried to change the subject, but she persisted, Sometimes I try to imagine what it must have been like, the people, the houses, their way of life, and he remained silent, now obdurately silent, feeling that he hated her as one detests an invader, and he was on the point of saying, I'll get out here, my apartment is nearby, but she neither stopped nor replied, and they kept silent for the remainder of the journey. When the car came to a halt outside the front door, Raimundo Silva, although unsure as to whether this was an act of politeness, felt he ought to invite her up, and then repented, It is rather tactless, he thought, besides I mustn't forget that she is my boss, whereupon she said, Perhaps another time, it's getting late. We could debate for hours about this historic phrase, for Raimundo Silva could swear that the words she spoke just then were different, and no less historic, It is not yet time.

DURING THESE LAST FEW DAYS, had the muezzin been sleeping heavily, no doubt he would have been roused, if not altogether prevented from sleeping, by the tumult of an entire city living in a state of alert, with armed men up on the turrets and battlements, while the people are all excited, gathered in the streets and marketplaces, asking if the Franks and Galicians are about to attack. They naturally fear for their lives and possessions, but even more distressed are those who have been forced to abandon their homes outside the wall, for the moment being defended by the soldiers, but where the first battles will inevitably be fought, if this should be the will of Allah, praised be his name, and, even if Lisbon should overcome the invaders, this prosperous and thriving suburb will be reduced to ruins. High on the minaret of the largest mosque, the muezzin raised the same shrill cry as he did each day, knowing that he will no longer awaken anyone, at most the innocent children will still be asleep, and contrary to custom, when the final echo of the call to prayer is still hovering in the air, the murmurings of a city at prayer can already be heard, truly there was no need for anyone who had barely dozed off to come out of his sleep. The sky displayed all the beauty of a July morning, the breeze was soft and gentle, and, if experience is anything to go by, we are going to have a warm day. Having finished his prayer, the muezzin prepares to descend, when suddenly from down below comes the most dreadful and alarming uproar that the blind man is panic-stricken and for one moment thinks that the tower is collapsing, the next that those accursed Christians are storming the walls, only to realise in the end that they are cries of jubilation coming from everywhere and setting the city ablaze, the muezzin can now say that he knows what is meant by light, if it has the same effect on the eyes of those who can see as these joyful sounds have on his hearing. But what could be the cause for this rejoicing. Perhaps Allah, moved by the fervent prayers of the people might have sent the angels from his tomb, Munkar and Nakir, to exterminate the Christians, perhaps he might have dropped the inextinguishable flames of heaven on to the armada of the crusaders, perhaps, out of earthly humanity, the King of Evora, warned of the dangers threatening his brothers in Lisbon, has sent word by messenger, Let the villains stew there, for my soldiers from the Alentejo are already on their way, that is how we refer to people who come from beyond the Tagus, pointing out in passing, that the inhabitants of Alentejo existed before the Portuguese. At the risk of bruising his fragile bones on the steps, the muezzin descends the narrow spiral stairway in haste, and when he reaches the bottom, he is overcome by vertigo, he is a poor old man who gives the impression of wanting to bury himself underground, an illusion of ours based on past examples, now he can be seen struggling, to get to his feet, while questioning the darkness all around him, What happened, tell me what happened. Next moment arms reach out to lift him up, and a strong, young voice is almost shouting, The crusaders are leaving, the crusaders are withdrawing. The muezzin fell to his knees with fervour and emotion, but everything in its own good time, Allah will not be offended if the thanks due to him are a little slow in coming, first the faithful must give vent to their feelings of joy. The Good Samaritan lifted the old man off the ground and set him firmly on his feet, straightened his turban which had been knocked sideways in the heat of his descent and collapse, and he told him, Don't worry about your turban, let's go to the rampart and watch the infidels scatter, now these words, spoken without

any conscious malice, can only be attributed to the fact that the muezzin's blindness is caused by amaurosis, look, he is watching us, that is to say, he has his eyes fixed in our direction yet cannot see us, how sad, it is difficult to believe that such transparency and clearness are, in the final analysis, the outer surface of absolute opacity. The muezzin raises his hands and touches his eyes, But I cannot see, at this moment the man recognises him, Ah, you're the muezzin, and makes as if to move away, but quickly changes his mind, Never mind, Come with me to the rampart, I'll explain what's happening, kindly acts such as these we used to refer to as Christian charity, which goes to show once more to what extent words become ideologically disoriented.

The man pushed his way through the crowd huddling together as they tried to force their way up the stairway leading to the battlement, Make way for the muezzin, make way for the muezzin, my brothers, he pleaded, and people moved back and smiled with pure fraternal love, but so that all might not be roses, or because all is not roses, there was one suspicious onlooker who cursed this kind deed, he did not have the courage to show his face, but shouted from one of the back rows, Just look at that crafty old fellow trying to push in front of everyone else, and the muezzin who knew this was not the case, replied in the direction from which the voice came, May Allah punish you for such malice, and Allah must have taken careful note of the muezzin's words, because the slanderer will be the first man to die in the siege of Lisbon, even before any Christian, which tells us a great deal about the Almighty's wrath. And so the old man and his protector made it to the top, and by using the same strategy of warning and petition, favourably received by all, they were able to occupy an excellent vantage point, with an open view of the estuary, the wide river, the immense ocean, but it was not this particular splendour that caused the man to exclaim, Ah, such wonder, before saying to the muezzin, If only I could give you my eyes so that you might see what I can see, the fleet of the crusaders sailing down the river, the smooth water glistening as only water can, and all blue, the colour of the sky overhead, the oars move slowly up and down, the ships resembling a flock of birds that drink as they fly close to the surface, two hundred migratory birds named galleys, long-boats, and cargo-ships, and who knows what else, for I am a man of the earth, not the sea, and how swiftly they go, carried by the oars and the tide they anticipated so that they are now departing, those in front must have already felt the wind, they are about to raise their sails, ah, how wonderful if they should turn out to be white, this is a day for celebration, muezzin, yonder on the other bank, our brothers from Almada are waving, as happy as we are, also saved by the will of Allah, He who reigns supreme, the Merciful One, the Eternal, the Living God, The Comforter, the Merciful, thanks to Whom we have been liberated from the terrifying threat of those dogs sailing out of the straits, crusaders they are and may they be crucified, let the beauty of their departure perish and be forgotten with their demise, and may Malik, the custodian of hell, imprison and castigate them for evermore. Those present applauded this final rebuke, except for the muezzin, not because he disagreed, but because he had already done his duty as a moral vigilante, when he prayed that the suspicious and outspoken mischief-maker should be punished, besides it would scarcely be fitting for someone entrusted

with summoning his brothers to prayer to be spreading curses, to invoke punishment once daily is more than enough for a simple human being, and we do not know if God Himself can withstand such enormous responsibility for all eternity. Therefore the muezzin remained silent, besides he was blind and unable to see for himself if there was any real cause for so much rejoicing, Have all of them gone, he asked, and his companion, after pausing long enough to check, replied, The ships, certainly, What exactly do you mean, is there something else apart from the ships, It's just that they are lying way out on the margin of the estuary and now they're heading for the Galician encampment, about a hundred men are disembarking, taking arms and baggage with them, it isn't easy to count them from here, but there can't be more than a hundred. The muezzin remarked, If these men have stayed behind, they have either definitely made up their mind not to join the crusade, and have exchanged their lands for this one, or, in the event of there being a siege and battle, they will side with Ibn Arrinque when he attacks us, Do you really believe, muezzin, that with so few men of his own and this small contingent who will join him, that Ibn Arrinque, damn him and his offspring, will lay siege to Lisbon, He once tried with the help of the crusaders and failed, now he'll be anxious to show that he did not need them, the latter serving as witnesses, The spies report that the Galician has no more than some twelve thousand soldiers, scarcely enough men to surround and subdue a city, Perhaps not, unless they starve us into submission, So the future looks black, muezzin, It does, but then I'm blind. At this point another man who was with them stretched out his arm and pointed, Things are moving in the encampment, the Galicians are leaving, So you were mistaken, after all, said the muezzin's companion, Only when you can tell me that there is not a single Christian soldier to be seen anywhere, can I be sure that I was mistaken, Don't worry, I'll stay here to keep watch and then I'll come to the mosque to report, You're a good Moslem, may Allah grant you in this life and for all eternity the rewards you so richly deserve. Let us say here and now, in anticipation, that once again Allah will heed the muezzin's plea, because, as far as this life is concerned, we know that this man whom we have improperly called the Good Samaritan will be the penultimate Moor to die in the siege, and as for eternal life all we can do is to wait for someone who is better informed to come and tell us, when the time comes, what kind of prize that was and for what. For our part, we are taking this opportunity to show that we are also capable of exercising kindness, charity and friendship, now that the muezzin has asked, Who'll help me to go down the stairs. The proof-reader Raimundo Silva is also going to need someone to help him to explain how, after having written that the crusaders did not stay for the siege, some of them appear to have disembarked, about a hundred men, if we are to believe the calculation made by the Moors, from a distance and at a glance. Their presence certainly comes as no surprise, for we already knew ever since that unfortunate episode when Guillaume of the Long Sword spoke so rudely to the king, that several foreign nobles declared there and then that we could count on them, but no one explained the reason for this decision, nor did Dom Afonso Henriques express any desire to know, at least not in public, and, if it was clarified in private, private it remained, nothing has been recorded, nor would it have any bearing on subsequent events. Be that as it may, what Raimundo Silva cannot do is

to carry on with his version, in other words, that no crusader was prepared to negotiate with the king, since the Authorised History is there to inform us that, discounting the odd exception of whom we have no details, those gentlemen truly prospered on Portuguese soil, we need only recall, so that no one may think we are speaking in vain or disproving the maxim, Look out for number one, our good king gave Vila Verde to the Frenchman, Dom Alardo, to Dom Jordão, also French he gave Lourinhã, and to the La Corni brothers, who subsequently changed their name to Correia, was granted Atouguia, but where there is some confusion is with Azambuja, for we have no way of knowing if it was given immediately to Gilles de Rolim or later to one of his sons with the same name, this time it is not a question of there being no records, but the imprecision of those that do exist. Now then, so that these people and others may claim their benefices, it was necessary to begin by making them disembark, and so, there they are, prepared to win them with their arms, thus more or less conciliating the proof-reader's decisive Not with the Yes, or Perhaps and the Even So with which our national history has been written. We will be told that the men gathered there and others who have not been mentioned, will be little more than a half-dozen and that they are greatly outnumbered by the men advancing on the encampment, therefore it is only natural that we should be curious to know who these men are and if they, too, will have their labours rewarded with tides and property. I am aware that this is irrelevant and should be treated with contempt, but it is a sign of sound moral upbringing to be tolerant of blameless ignorance and patient with the reckless, therefore let us make it clear that the majority of these men, apart from a few mercenary conscripts, are servants who came as henchmen to do the loading and unloading, and whatever else might require to be done, without forgetting the three women brought along as concubines or mistresses to serve the particular needs of three nobles, one of them with the expedition from the outset, the others picked up wherever they happened to disembark to replenish their supplies of water, because, frankly speaking, no one has ever discovered better fruit or learned of its existence in unknown territories.

Raimundo Silva put down his biro, rubbed his fingers where the pen had left a crease, then with a slow, weary movement, he leaned back in his chair. He is in the room where he sleeps, seated at a small table which he has placed beside the window, so that by looking to the left he can see the surrounding roof-tops, and here and there, between the gables, the river. He has decided that when proof-reading the work of others he will go on using the study which has no windows, but what he is writing at present, whether it turns out to be the history of the siege of Lisbon or not, he will write in daylight, the natural light falling on to his hands, on to the sheets of paper, on to any words that might appear and remain, for not all words that appear remain, in their turn casting light on our understanding of things, as far as possible, and where, were it not for them, we would never arrive. He jotted down this thought, if it can be called that, on a loose sheet of paper, hoping to use it later, perhaps in some pondered statement about the mystery of writing which will probably culminate, following the definitive lesson of the poet, in the precise and sober declaration that the mystery of writing lies in the absence of any mystery whatsoever, which if accepted, might lead us to the conclusion that if there is no

mystery about writing, neither can there be any mystery about the writer. Raimundo Silva amuses himself with this farcical display of profound meditation, his memory as a proof-reader is filled with snatches of verse and prose, the odd line or fragment, and even whole sentences with meaning, hover in his memory like tranquil and resplendent cells coming from other worlds, the sensation is that of being immersed in the cosmos, of grasping the real meaning of everything, without any mystery. If Raimundo Silva could line up in the correct order all the separate words and phrases he has memorised, he would only have to say them, record them on tape, and there he would have, without the tiresome effort of having to write it, the History of the Siege of Lisbon he is still pursuing, and, were the order different, the history, too, would be different, and the siege, and Lisbon, and so on and so forth.

The crusaders are already on the open sea, ridding us of the pressing and awkward presence of thirteen thousand participants, however Raimundo Silva's task was not made much easier for there are at least as many Portuguese, and, if their numbers were to be combined, they are still greatly outnumbered by the Moors inside the city, including the fugitives from Santarém who have finished up here, trying to take shelter behind these fortifications, poor wretches, wounded and humiliated. How is Raimundo Silva to cope with all these people, is the formal question. We suspect he would prefer to take each of them separately, study their lives, their precedents and consequents, their loves, quarrels, the good and bad in them, and he would pay special attention to those who are soon to die, because who could foresee that closer to our own time there would be another opportunity to leave some written record of who they were and what they did. Raimundo Silva is well aware that his limited gifts do not match up to the task, in the first place because he is not God, and even if he were, neither God nor Jesus for all his fame never achieved anything like this objective, in the second place because he is not a historian, a human category which is closer to divinity in its way of looking at things, and in the third place, an initial confession, he never had any talent for writing creative literature, a weakness that will obviously make it difficult for him to manipulate with any conviction this imaginary fable in which we all participate. On the Moorish side, the most he has achieved so far is to have a muezzin appear from time to time and who finds himself in the least favourable situation possible, because being something more than a minor figure, there is not enough to transform him into a character. On the Portuguese side, leaving aside the king, the archbishop, the bishop and a number of well-known nobles who only intervene as the bearers of aristocratic names, what is patent and indiscernible is a great confusion of faces that cannot be identified, thirteen thousand men who speak who knows how and who, presumably possessed of feelings, express them so remotely from our way of thinking that they are closer to their Moorish enemies than they are to us who are their legitimate descendants.

Raimundo Silva gets up and opens the window. From here, if the information given in The History of the Siege of Lisbon which he proof-read is correct, he can see the location where the English, the Aquitanians and the Bretons set up camp, yonder to the south, on

the hillside of Trindade and all the way up to the ravine of the Calçada de'São Fransisco, give or take a metre, there stands the church dedicated to the Holy Martyrs, which is well-named. Now, in The New History, it is the encampment of the Portuguese, for the moment reunited, as they wait for the king to decide whether we remain or depart, or what. Between the city and the encampment of the Lusitanians, to give them the name they themselves never used, we can see the wide estuary, so vast, winding inland, that to go around it on foot would mean passing along the eastern strait, near the Rua da Palma, and, along the western strait, near the Rua das Pretas, quite a trek across the fields which only yesterday were carefully cultivated, and now, in addition to being stripped of their crops, are trampled and scorched as if the horsemen of the Apocalypse had passed through with hooves of fire. The Moor had declared that the Portuguese encampment was moving, and so it was, but soon they came to a halt once more because Dom Afonso Henriques wished to receive with his entire army the approaching crusaders who were heading the dwindling posse of soldiers who had disembarked, thus paying them special honour, all the more so since the departure of the others had made him so angry. Familiar as we are with these encounters and assemblies between personages of lineage and influence, it is time to see who else is there, whose soldiers are these, ours, dispersed between the Carmo and the Trindade, awaiting orders, without the consolation of a cigarette, there they are seated or at a standstill or strolling among friends, in the shade of the olive-trees, for with the recent good weather, few tents have been set up, and most of the men have been sleeping in the open air, their heads resting on their shields, absorbing the night's warmth from the soil before warming it in return with the heat of their own bodies, until that day when they will lie side by side, one cold corpse against another, may it be slow in coming. We have good reason to take a close look at these men, poorly armed if one thinks of the modern weapons used by Bond, Rambo and Company, in our search for someone here who might serve as a character for Raimundo Silva, because the latter, timid by nature or temperament, averse to crowds, has lingered at his window in the Rua do Milagre de Santo Antonio, without plucking up the courage to go down on to the street, and his behaviour is ridiculous, if he was not capable of going out alone, he could have asked Dr Maria Sara to accompany him, a woman, as we have seen, who is capable of taking decisive action, or, perhaps as a more romantic and interesting sign of solidarity, if not of blindness, he might have taken the dog on the Escadinhas de'São Crispim with him, what a pretty picture that would make, a rowing-boat crossing the placid estuary, over no man's waters, and a proof-reader rowing, while the dog, sitting astern, inhales the fresh air and, now and then, bites as discreetly as possible the fleas pinching its sensitive parts. So let us leave in peace this man who is not quite ready to look, even though he spends his life revising proofs, and who only occasionally, because of some passing psychological disturbance, notices things, and let us find him someone who, not so much for his own merits, ever questionable, as for some sort of fitting predestination, may take his place in the narrative quite naturally, so that people will come to say, as one says of self-evident coincidences, that they were made for each other, However, easier said than done. It is one thing to take a man and lose him in a crowd, as witnessed elsewhere, another to search for a man in a crowd and,

as soon as he is spotted, to say, That's the one. There are very few old men in the encampment, this is an age when most people die young, besides their legs would soon give way and their arms weaken in battle, for not everyone has the resistance of Gonçalo Mendes da Maia, the Warrior who even at the age of seventy gives the impression of being in his prime, and will only at ninety be struck down by the sword of the King of Tangiers and finally die. Let us go searching and listening, what a strange language our people speak, one more problem to add to all the others, for it is as difficult for us to understand them as it is for them to understand us, even though we belong to the same Portuguese motherland, so who knows, perhaps what we nowadays refer to as a conflict of generations is nothing more than a question of differences in the language we use. Here there is a circle of men seated on the ground underneath a leafy olive-tree, which, judging from the gnarled trunk and general signs of age, must be at least twice as ancient as the Warrior, and while he wounds and massacres, the tree is content to produce olives, both of them serving the purpose for which they were born, as the saying goes, but these words were invented for olive-trees rather than for men. The ones who are here, for the moment, do nothing except listen to a tall, short-bearded youth, with black hair. Some give the impression of having heard the story a thousand times before, but listen patiently, they are soldiers who were at Santarém at the time of the famous siege, the others, judging from their rapt attention, must be new recruits who have joined the army along the way, and like the others, the sold paid three months in advance, from sold comes soldiering and from soldiering soldier, and, until the war begins, they assuage their thirst for glory with the glorious deeds of others. This man will have to be acknowledged by name, undoubtedly he possesses one like the rest of us, but the problem is that we shall have to choose between Mogueime which he assumes to be his name, and Moigema as he will later come to be known, do not think that such mistakes only occurred in ancient and uncivilised tomes, we have been told that someone in this century spent thirty years saying his name was Diogo Luciano, until the day when he needed to consult some papers only to discover that his real name was Diocletian, and he gained nothing from this exchange, even though the latter was an emperor. You must not discount this question of names, Raimundo could never be José, Maria Sara would not wish to be Carlota, and Mogueime does not deserve to be called Moigema. That said, we can now draw near, sit on the ground if you wish, and listen.

Mogueime narrates, It was at dead of night as we were waiting for dawn to break in a hidden and secluded valley so close to the town that when we heard the sentinels on the wall call out, we quietly took up the reins, making sure the horses did not neigh, and when the quarter moon appeared and our captains were sure that the guards were dozing off, we left, leaving the pages behind in the valley with the animals, taking a byway we were able to reach the fountain of Atamarma, so called because of the sweetness of its waters, and travelling on we approached the wall just as the patrol was passing so that we were forced to wait once more, silent as could be in a field of wheat, and when Mem Ramires, as commander of the soldiers who were with me, thought the moment was right, we lost no time in climbing the slope, the plan was to secure a ladder

against the wall by sending it up on a spear, but ill-fortune decreed, or Satan, that we should run into difficulties, the ladder slipped and came crashing down with the most awful din on the roof of a pottery, everyone was in a panic, if the guards were to awaken the enterprise was in danger of failing, we got back down concealed by the shadow cast by the wall, and then, since the Moors were giving no sign of life, Mem Ramires summoned me as the tallest man there, and ordered me to climb on to his shoulders, and I secured the ladder on top, then he climbed up, with me behind him, and another behind me, and as we waited for the rest of the men to follow, the guards woke up and one of them asked, Menfu, which means, Who goes there, and Mem Ramires, who speaks Arabic as well as any Moor, replied that we were with the patrol and had been ordered to return, and the Moor, having come down from his turret, had his head cut off and thrown down, thus reassuring our men that we had entered the stronghold, but the other guard realised who we were and began shouting at the top of his voice, Anauchara, anauchara, which in their language means, An assault by the Christians, at this point there were ten of us on top of the wall as the patrol came running and swords clashed on both sides, Mem Ramires called out, invoking the help of Santiago, the patron saint of Spain, and the king, Dom Afonso, who was down below, shouted back, Santiago and the Holy Virgin Mary come to our assistance, before going on to say, Kill all of them, let no man escape, in a word, the usual incitements, meanwhile elsewhere, twenty-five of our men scaled the wall and rushed to the gates which they only managed to open after smashing the locks and bolts with an iron mallet, and then the king entered with his men, and falling to his knees at the entrance, began giving thanks to God, but rose quickly to his feet when he saw the Moors rushing to defend the gates, but the hour of their death had come and, advancing pell-mell, our soldiers massacred them along with their women and children, and their numerous livestock, and there was so much blood that it flowed though the streets like a river, and this was how Santarém came to be won, a battle in which I took part, and others who are here with me. Some of those named, nodded their heads in agreement, no doubt they would have their own deeds to relate, but being men who are always at a loss for words, firstly because they do not have enough words, secondly because words never come to mind when needed, they remained as they were, seated in silence in a circle and listening to this fellow who was much more loquacious and skilful in the incipient art of speaking Portuguese, disregard this gross exaggeration, for we must have the most advanced language in the world if eight and a half centuries ago, a simple soldier could already concoct such an eloquent speech, where not even the felicities of narration are missing, the alternation of long and short sentences, the sudden break, the transition from one plane to another, the element of suspense, and even a hint of irreverent satire in making the king get to his feet in the middle of his prayers of thanksgiving, in case the scimitar might fall before he can say amen, or, having recourse for the thousandth time to the inexhaustible treasury of popular wisdom, Trust in the Virgin rather than flee, and much good may it do you. One of the recruits, whose only experience of war had been to watch the army file past, but endowed with a sharp mind and commonsense, on seeing that none of the old guard were prepared to speak up, said what everyone else must surely have been thinking, It's fairly obvious that Lisbon is going

to be a harder bone to crack, an interesting metaphor which recalls the story about the dog and the dogs, for it would take lots and lots of them to get their teeth into those tall, massive walls confronting us from afar and where weapons and white burnouses are gleaming. This warning plagued the spirits of our companions with dark omens, when it comes to wars you can never tell who is going to lose their life, and there really are fortunes that happen once and nevermore, the Moors would have to be quite mad to settle down to sleep when the fatal hour arrives, we wager that this time it will not be necessary for a sentinel to call out, Menfu, for they know perfectly well who is there and what they want. Fortunately this gloom was dispelled by the presence of two pages who had stayed behind to look after the horses in that hidden and secluded valley of Santarém, and they were frolicking about and laughing their heads off as they recalled what they along with others had done to a number of Moorish women who had fled the town and been guided here by destiny, a black destiny, for after being raped over and over again, they were butchered without mercy, as befitted infidels. Mogueime in the meantime disapproved, using his authority as a front-line combatant, for it may be all right, in the heat of battle, to kill women indiscriminately, but not like this, after having abused them sexually, it would have been more Christian to have let them go, a humanitarian attitude the pages contested, arguing that these women should always be put to death, raped or otherwise, so that they would conceive no more of those damn Moorish dogs. It seemed that Mogueime might have no answer to such a radical statement, but from some hidden recess of his mind he extracted a few words which left the pages speechless, Perhaps you have massacred the sons of Christians in those wombs, and they were at a loss for words, because they might well have replied that they are only Christians if the mother, too, is Christian, what must have silenced them was a sudden awareness of their importance as apostles, leaving traces of Christianity wherever they sowed their seed. A clergyman who happened to be passing, a military chaplain, would finally clarify this issue, erasing any doubts from souls and strengthening convictions and faith, but all the clergy are with the king, awaiting the foreign nobles, and now they must have arrived, judging from the cries of acclamation, each man celebrates as best he can, within limits, on this occasion so much for so little.

As for Raimundo Silva, whose main concern is to defend as best he can the unorthodox theory that the crusaders refused to take part in the conquest of Lisbon, he will be as satisfied with one character as with another, although, obviously, being a somewhat impulsive fellow, he cannot avoid sudden feelings of sympathy or aversion, peripheral, as it were, to the crux of the matter, which often allow acritical preferences or personal antipathies to prevail over rational judgments, or, as in this case, historical facts. He was drawn more by young Mogueime's lack of inhibition than his powers of narration as he listened to his account of the attack on Santarém, more by his humanitarian sentiments than any literary skills, indicative of a sound morality untainted by the negative influences of the milieu, that had led him to take pity on the Moorish women, and it is not because he does not care for the daughters of Eve, however degenerate, for had he been in the valley, instead of striking down their husbands with

his sword, he would have indulged his flesh as avidly as the others, but to slit the throats of these women a minute after having kissed and bitten them with sheer pleasure, never. Therefore Raimundo Silva assumes Mogueime as his character, but believes certain points ought to be clarified beforehand, so that there will be no misunderstandings that might later prejudice, once the bonds of inevitable affection that tie the author to his worlds become binding, prejudice, as we were saying, the full assumption of causes and effects that must tighten this knot with the double force of necessity and fatality. It is necessary, in effect, to know who is lying here and who is telling the truth, and we are not thinking about the question of names, whether it is Mogueime or Moqueime as some will get round to calling him, or Moigema, as has been said, names are certainly important, but only become so once we know them, until then, a person is simply a person, and nothing more, we look at him, he is there, we recognise him somewhere else, I know him, we say, and leave it at that. And if we eventually come to know his name, it is more than likely that of his full name we shall limit ourselves to choosing or accepting, with more precise identification, only a part of it, which goes to prove that if the name is important, not all of it has the same importance, that Einstein should have been called Albert is of no real interest, just as we are indifferent to the fact that Homer had other names. What Raimundo Silva would dearly love to confirm is whether the waters of the fountain of Atamarma were really as sweet as Mogueime claimed, announcing the future lesson of The Chronicle of the Five Kings of Portugal, or whether they were, in fact, bitter, as expressly stated by Fray Antonio Brandão, whom we mentioned earlier, in his esteemed Chronicle of Dom Afonso Henriques, who actually goes so far as to say that it was because the waters were so bitter that the fountain was called Atamarma, which if put into the vernacular and made intelligible would strictly be called the Fountain of the Bitter Waters. Although it may not be the most important problem to resolve, Raimundo Silva took the trouble to reflect long enough to conclude that, logically, although as we well know reality does not always follow the straightforward path of logic, it would not make sense, waters on land generally being sweet, to presume to distinguish a fountain by the properties associated with fountains, just as we would not call a fountain surrounded by ferns, a fountain of maidenheads, then he thought, until he had further evidence of other fountains, historical and authenticated, that the waters of Atamarma must have been bitter, and, continuing to think, that one day he will find out by the most practical means, namely, by drinking them, whereby he will finally reach the firm conclusion, in terms of experimentation and probability, that they are brackish, thus satisfying everyone, since you could say that brackish is somewhere between sweet and bitter.

Raimundo Silva is less concerned, however, with names and taste buds as may appear, despite the extent and duration of these latest debates, perhaps simply indicative of that oblique thinking Dr Maria Sara thought she could detect, even before she really got to know him. What really worries the proof-reader, now that he has accepted Mogueime as his character, is to find him in contradiction, if not in flagrant falsehood, a situation for which there can be no other alternative than the truth,

inasmuch as there is no space left here for a new fountain of Atamarma capable of offering in conciliation, waters that are neither yea nor nay. Mogueime described, and explained quite clearly, how he climbed on to Mem Ramires's shoulders to secure the ladder between the battlements, which, moreover, would serve to demonstrate, on the basis of historical evidence, what we might imagine those ages to have been, so close to the golden age that they still retained the brilliance of certain deeds, in this case that a nobleman from the court of Dom Afonso should have loaned his precious body as support, plinth and pedestal for the thoroughly plebeian feet of a soldier with no other apparent merit than that of having grown more than the others. But what Mogueime said, and, on the other hand, is confirmed by Fray Antonio Brandão, contradicts the earliest version of The Chronicle of the Five Kings, where it is written, no more no less, that Dom Mendo was most anxious lest he should arouse suspicions by making a noise so he paused for a moment in silence and then asked the young Mogueime to bend over and he climbed on to his back with the king's approval and hoisted the ladder against the wall, and notwithstanding the lexical and orthographical peculiarities of the original text, it is quite clear that Mogueime, obeying orders, bent over so that Mem Ramires might climb on to his shoulders, and all the interpretations and linguistic casuistry of this world cannot justify a different reading. Raimundo Silva has the two versions of the text before him, he compares them, there can no longer be any doubt, Mogueime is a liar, as we can logically deduce both from the difference in their rank, the one a common soldier, the other a captain, as from the particular source on which he relies, the much earlier Chronicle of the Five Kings. People who are only interested in broad historical syntheses are certain to find these issues far-fetched, but we have to consider Raimundo Silva, who has a task to complete and who from the outset finds himself struggling with the problem of coping with such a dubious character, this Mogueime, Moqueime or Moigema, who, as well as being unable to prove his identity, is probably abusing the truth which, as an eyewitness, it is his duty to respect and transmit to posterity, namely, to us.

But as Jesus said, let him who is without sin cast the first stone. It is, in fact, very easy to make accusations, Mogueime is lying, Mogueime lied, but those of us here present, who know rather more about the lies and truths of the last twenty centuries, with psychology nurturing souls, and the much misinterpreted psychoanalysis, together with all the rest which it would take some fifty pages to list, should not hold the defects of others up to ridicule, when we tend to be so indulgent with our own, the proof being that there is no recorded evidence of anyone who, as a severe and intransigent judge of their own actions, carried that judgment to the extreme of stoning their own body. Besides, returning to the quotation from the gospel, we are entitled to question whether the world at that time was so hardened by vice that its salvation could only be brought about by the Son of a God, for it is the episode itself about the adulteress which illustrates that things were not going all that badly there in Palestine, not like today when they are at their worst, consider how on that remote day not another stone was thrown at the hapless woman, Jesus only had to utter those fatal words for aggressive hands to withdraw, their owners declaring, confessing and even proclaiming in this manner that,

yes, Sir, they were sinners. Now a people that was capable of acknowledging its sins in public, however implicitly, could not have been entirely lost, it preserved intact an inner principle of kindness, thus authorising us to conclude, with the minimum risk of being proved wrong, that there was some precipitation in the coming of the Saviour. Today, His coming would have done some good, for not only do the corrupt persevere on the path of corruption, but it becomes increasingly difficult to find any reason for interrupting the stoning once it gets under way.

At first sight, it will not appear that these moralising digressions are in any way related to the reluctance Raimundo Silva has shown in accepting Mogueime as a character, but their usefulness will become apparent when we remember that Raimundo Silva, assuming that he is immune from any greater faults, is habitually guilty of another, certainly no less serious, yet tolerated everywhere because so very widespread and accessible, and that is deception. Besides, he knows there is no real difference between lying about who climbed on to whose back, whether I climbed on to that of Mem Ramires or Mem Ramires on to mine, and; to give but one example, the mundane act of dyeing one's hair, everything, in the final analysis, is a question of vanity, the desire to keep up appearances, both physically and immorally, it being possible even now to imagine a time in which all human behaviour will be artificial, disregarding without further thought sincerity, spontaneity, simplicity, those most excellent and shining qualities of character which were so difficult to define and put into practice in times long since past when, although conscious of having invented falsehood, we still believed ourselves capable of living the truth.

Halfway through the afternoon, during a pause between coping with the problems of the siege and the trivialities of the novel which the publisher is waiting for, Raimundo Silva went out for a break. This was all he had in mind, to take a little stroll, amuse himself, mull over ideas. But on passing a florist's shop, he went in and bought a rose. White. And now he is returning home, a trifle embarrassed to be seen carrying a flower in his hand.

WITHOUT ANY WARNING, Japanese aeroplanes suddenly made a surprise attack on the United States fleet that was docked in Pearl Harbour, an act of destruction, as everyone knows, that was nothing out of the ordinary regarding the loss of human lives, if we compare it with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but with catastrophic consequences in terms of material losses, battleships, aircraft-carriers, destroyers, and the rest, a serious financial loss, thirteen ships sunk in all without a single shot being fired seriously, apart from the usual manoeuvres. One remote cause of this naval disaster was having lost, at some hour in that night of ages that guards secrets, having lost, as we were saying, the gentlemanly custom of declaring wars with three days' notice, in order to give the enemy enough time to prepare themselves or, if they preferred, to seek refuge, also so that anyone who might decide to break the truce should not be accused of having sullied military honour. Those times are gone for ever. Because, when all is said and done, it is one thing to attack at dead of night, without either drums or trumpets, but having sent a message, and another to arrive surreptitiously and with blackened weapons, enter gates that have been carelessly left unlocked, and massacre everyone in sight. We know that no one can escape his destiny, and it is obvious that the women and children of Santarém were fated to die that night, this had been agreed between the Allah of the Moors and the God of the Christians, but at least the poor wretches could not complain that they had not been warned, if they remained it was of their own free will, for our good king, had despatched Martim Moab along with two companions to the town of Santarém to warn the Moors that there would be war in three days' time, so there was no guilt on the part of Dom Afonso Henriques when he told his men, before engaging in battle, Kill regardless of sex or age, no matter whether a babe in arms, some senile old man, a young maiden, or a decrepit old woman, because he imagined, having given the notice prescribed in the code, that they might be expecting to find only Moorish warriors awaiting them, all male and in their prime.

Now then, in this episode with which we are concerned, namely, the Siege of Lisbon, any warning would have been superfluous, not only because the peace, in a manner of speaking, had been broken since the capture of Santarém, but also because the objectives of whosoever had assembled this huge army on the hills beyond were clear for all to see, and he had only been prevented from adding several more divisions because of a typographical error aggravated by feelings of resentment and wounded pride. But even so, formalities have to be observed and respected, adapting them to every situation, therefore the king determined that Dom João Peculiar together with Dom Pedro Pitões, and a fair representation of nobles, backed up by the appropriate number of armed men, should enter into discussions with the city governor, as much for the pomp and ceremony as for reasons of security. With a view to avoiding the unpleasant surprise of some irreparable betrayal, they decided not to cross the estuary, for one does not have to be a strategist like Napoleon or Clausewitz to realise that if the Moors were to lay hands on the messengers and the latter tried to escape, the estuary would prevent any kind of rapid withdrawal, if the Moorish frigates had not already surrounded and destroyed the flat-boats used for disembarking. So our men took the circuitous route they had been

advised to take, along the Rua das Taipas below as far as Salitre, then, with the natural fear of anyone entering the enemy camp, they went skidding through the mud in the direction of the Rua das Pretas, followed by much climbing and descending, first up the Monte de Santa Ana, then along the Rua de'São Lázaro, they then forded the brook that comes from Almirante Reis, before embarking on yet another climb, what a silly idea, to set out to conquer a whole city with all this climbing and descending, along the Rua dos Cavaleiros and the Calçada de Santo André as far as the gate we now call the Porta de Martim Moniz for no good reason. It was a long trek, worse in this heat, despite their early morning start, the hide of the mules is covered in scum, and the horses, few in number, are in a similar if not worse state, insofar as they are more delicate animals and do not have the same resistance as hybrids. As for the infantry, although sweating profusely, they do not complain, but as they wait for the gate to be opened, they must be quietly hoping that after all the effort of cutting their way through the undergrowth, there will be no fighting to be done. Mogueime is here, as it happened he was sent with the detachment, and ahead, close to the archbishop, we can also see Mem Ramires, it is an interesting coincidence that two of the main protagonists in the siege of Santarém should join forces at this historic hour, both of them equally influential in the outcome of events, at least until we can verify which of them served as a stepping stone for the other. The people convened for these formal discussions were all Portuguese, the king having deemed it inappropriate that foreigners should be involved in reinforcing an ultimatum, although, it should be said in passing, there are still grave doubts as to whether the Archbishop of Braga had any Portuguese blood in him, but then, even in those remote times we already had the reputation we have enjoyed to this day, of extending a warm welcome to outsiders and providing them with duties and benefices, and this Dom João Peculiar, let's face it, repaid us a hundredfold in patriotic deeds. And if, as is also claimed, he really was Portuguese, and from Coimbra, we may see him as a pioneer of our migratory vocation, of our magnificent dispersion, for he spent his entire youth studying in France, and here we should draw attention to the marked contrast in the fortunes of recent emigrants to that country, plutôt restricted to filthy and heavy labour. One unmistakable foreigner, but considered separately, because here on a special mission, and neither a political nor military figure, is that sandy-haired, freckled friar over there, whom we have just heard being called Rogeiro, but whose real name is Roger, which would leave open the question as to whether he is English or Norman, were this of any relevance to the matter in hand. The Bishop of Oporto had warned him to be prepared to write, which suggests that Roger or Rogeiro joined the expedition as a chronicler, as becomes clear when he starts removing writing materials from his knapsack, only the stylus and writing-tablets, because the swaying of his mule would spill the ink and cause his lettering to sprawl, all of this, as you know, the mere speculation of a narrator concerned with verisimilitude rather than the truth, which he considers to be unattainable. This Rogeiro does not know a word of either Arabic or Galician, but in this case ignorance will be no impediment, because the entire debate, lead where it may, will inevitably end up in Latin, thanks to the translators and simultaneous interpreters. The Archbishop of Braga will speak in Latin, one of the friars in the group will translate it into

Arabic, unless it is thought preferable to consult Mem Ramires, the representative of an illustrious army, who has shown more than sufficient competence, then the Moor will reply in his own language, which the same friar or one of his companions will translate into Latin, and so on and so forth, what we do not know is whether there is anyone here entrusted with translating into Galician a summary of what is said, so that the Portuguese might be able to follow the debate in a single language. What is more than certain, with all these delays, is that if the speeches turn out to be long, we shall be here for the rest of the afternoon.

Terraces, battlements and communication trenches are crowded with dark, bearded Moors making threatening gestures, but in silence, refraining from hurling insults, after all, the Christians might withdraw as they did five years ago, in which case they might as well save their breath. The two panels of the gate were opened wide, reinforced by iron bands and nails, and a number of Moors emerged at a slow pace, one of them, getting on in years, could be the governor, a tide which serves for everything and which in this case is used in the absence of any certainty about his precise title and the difficulty of choosing the right one from amongst several possibilities, besides it is just possible that they have sent out an *alfaquí*, *cadi* or *amir*, or even a *mufti*, the rest being functionaries and soldiers, their numbers strictly the same as those of the Portuguese outside, this explains why the Moors were slow in coming out, first they had to organise their delegation. We are usually led to believe that civil, military and religious authorities in ancient times were endowed with stentorian vocal organs, capable of being heard from afar, so much so that in historical narratives when some chief has to harangue his troops or other multitudes, no one is surprised that he should have been heard without difficulty by hundreds and thousands of noisy onlookers, often quite restless, when everyone nowadays knows how much work is involved in installing and tuning electronic sound equipment so that people in the back rows can hear perfectly, without any of those distortions or blurring of sound that would obviously affect the senses and change the meaning of what is being relayed. Therefore, contrary to custom and convention, and with the deepest regret at having to contradict the much applauded traditions of spectacle and historical stage sets, we are obliged out of love for the simple truth to declare that the envoys on both sides were only a few paces away from each other, and they spoke at close range as this was the only way of making themselves heard, while those looking on, whether the Moors in the fortress or the Portuguese with the delegation, awaited the outcome of this diplomatic colloquium, or whatever news the messengers might rapidly communicate as it was taking place, the odd phrase or snatch of rhetoric, sudden anxieties or dubious hopes. So it is established once and for all, that the exchanges in the debate did not echo over hill and dale, the heavens were not moved, the earth did not shake, nor the river turn back, in fact, human words have never been capable of making such an impact, not even words of threat and war such as these, contrary to what we might have believed by innocently trusting in the far-fetched descriptions given in the epics.

As the archbishop spoke, Rugeira summarised his words in shorthand, later adding any rhetorical flourishes before addressing them afar to Osborn, wheresoever he might be and whosoever he might have been, adding in the meantime his own embellishments, the fruit of his own vivid imagination, We have come here to make peace, were the archbishop's opening remarks, and he continued, For we have thought that since all men, both you and we, are offspring of the same nature and the same origin, it seems wrong that we should pursue this more than regrettable conflict, and we wish to reassure you that we have not come here to conquer the city or take it from you, this ought to convince you of the goodwill of Christians in general, who even when they exact what is rightfully theirs, do not steal from others, and if you should argue that this is precisely what we came for, we can reply that we are only claiming this city as our rightful possession, and if you had any sense of natural justice, without any further pleas on our part, you would take your baggage, money and possessions, your women and children and return to Moorish territory from whence you came, leaving us with what is ours, no, let me finish, I can see you shaking your heads back and forth, showing with a gesture what you still have not put into words, bear in mind that you who belong to the race of the Moors and the Moabites fraudulently stole from your and our kingdom the land of Lusitania, destroying, even to this day, towns and villages and churches, for the past three hundred and fifty-eight years you have unjustly taken possession of our cities and lands, but after all, since you have occupied Lisbon for all this time and were born here, we are prepared to be generous and only request that you should hand over the keep of your castle, each of you will continue to enjoy your former freedom because we have no wish to drive you from your homes, where, I promise, you may observe your own customs, unless, through conversion, you wish of your own free will to join the ranks of the one true Church of God, I speak these words in friendship, a city as prosperous and seemingly contented as Lisbon excites much envy, take a look at those encampments, those ships, the hordes of men conspiring against you, therefore, I implore you, do not allow your fields and fruits to be destroyed, think of your riches, take pity on your own people, accept the peace offered while we are still in a generous frame of mind, for you ought to know that peace without a struggle is preferable to that achieved with much bloodshed, just as the health one has never lost is preferable to health drawn and rescued by force from serious and almost fatal illness, I am not telling you these things at random, observe how grave and dangerous the illness is from which you are suffering, because unless you take decisive action, one of two things will happen, either you will succeed in overcoming your illness or you will succumb, and instead of trying to look for other alternatives, be on your guard, for you have reached your end, so look after your health while there is still time, remember the Roman motto, The gladiator takes counsel in the arena, and do not tell me that you are Moors and not gladiators, for all I can say is that the motto applies as much to you as to them once you are about to die, that is all I have to say to you, if you have something to say, speak up, and be brief.

These did not sound like the words of a shepherd of souls, this chilling disdain you could sense lurking beneath the blandishments and honeyed words, before finally coming

out with a blunt warning, however, before proceeding any further, let us repeat, this time with special emphasis, the somewhat unexpected acknowledgement of the fact that everyone here, whether Christian or Moor, is offspring of the same nature and the same origin, which leads us to assume that God, the father of nature and responsible for the origin from which all other origins have come, is unquestionably the father and creator of these estranged sons, who, in fighting against each other, deeply hurt the undivided love of their common father, and we could go so far as to say, without exaggerating, that it is over the helpless body of God the Father that his creatures battle unto death. The Archbishop of Braga's words clearly implied that God and Allah are one and the same, and going back to the time when nothing and no one had a name, there were no differences then between Moors and Christians apart from those that are apparent between one man and another, colour, girth, physiognomy, but what the prelate probably overlooked, nor should we expect so much of him, bearing in mind the backwardness and widespread illiteracy at that time, is that problems always arise the moment God's intermediaries are invoked, be they Jesus or Mohammed, not to mention the minor prophets and evangelists. We can be only too grateful that an Archbishop of Braga should have immersed himself so deeply in theological speculation, armed and equipped as he was for war, with his coat of mail, his broadsword dangling from the pommel of his saddle and his helmet with a nose-piece, arms which might well prevent him from reaching any conclusions based on humanitarian logic, because even at that time it was possible to see to what extent the artefacts of war can bring a man to think differently, something we are much more aware of today, although we are still incapable of removing the arms of those who tend to use them instead of their brains. However, nothing could be further from our thoughts than to offend these men who are still so little Portuguese that they are about to engage in combat in order to create a motherland that may serve them, openly whenever necessary, by treachery whenever expedient, for this is how motherlands have emerged and prospered, without exception, which explains why once the stain of ignominy has descended on all of them it can pass as an adornment and symbol of mutual absolution.

By allowing our mind to dwell on these somewhat hazardous thoughts, we lost the opening words of the Moorish governor's reply, and we are sorry, because as far as the herald could make out and summarise, he had started out by casting some doubt about the propriety or even the simple geographical relevance of the allusion to the kingdom of Lusitania. We are sorry, we repeat, inasmuch as the controversial question of boundaries and, more importantly, the question as to whether we really are the descendants and historical heirs of the famous Lusitanians, might perhaps have received, as reasoned by such illustrious men as the Moorish scholars at that time, some clarification, even if they were to reject it because damaging for the pride and patriotic pretensions of those who feel that they might as well be dead unless they can prove that they have two or three drops of the Lusitanian chief Viriato's blood in their veins. And it is not improbable that, having decided we have even less than this inheritance from Lusitania, and that consequently André de Resende should feel less inclined to derive *lusiad* from *Luso*, we

are almost convinced that Camoens could not have found a better solution than to mundanely call his epic, *The Portuguese*. Since we are Portuguese, even if it profits us little. And now, before the rest of his speech is also lost, let us listen attentively to the Moorish governor, noticing at once how composed he sounds, speaking in the tone of voice of someone quietly discussing self-evident facts from which he has no intention of departing, How can you expect us, he asked, to believe you when you insist that you are only demanding that we should hand over the keep of our castle, that you have no desire to drive us from our homes, when we recall how you behaved in Santarém, where you inflicted the most atrocious death, even robbing the aged of the little life they had left, beheading defenceless women like innocent lambs and butchering little children whose suffering left you completely unmoved, now do not try to tell me that you have blotted these tragic events from your memory, for if it is true that we cannot confront you with the corpses of Santarém, we can certainly summon all the wounded, disfigured and mutilated who still had the strength to seek refuge in our city, these same people whom you are now about to exterminate once and for all, and us along with them, because you were not satisfied with that initial crime, but make no mistake, we never had any intention of peacefully handing over Lisbon or surrendering it to your control, even if you were to allow us to remain here, for surely you must agree that it would be most ingenuous on our part if we were to exchange certainty for uncertainty, security for instability, trusting only in your word which is worth so little. The Bishop of Oporto reacted violently, as if he were about to interrupt the Moor, but the Archbishop cautioned him, Be quiet, let us hear him out, you will have the final word. The Moor continued. This city was once yours, but now it is ours, and in the future it may be yours once more, but that is up to God who chose to give it to us and will take it from us whensoever He wishes, because no rampart is impregnable against His holy will, of this we are convinced, and we desire only what is pleasing to God, who has rescued us from your hands on so many occasions, wherefore it is only right that we should never cease to worship Him and marvel at His irrevocable designs, not only because He holds power over all evils, but also because it is His sublime reason that submits us to disasters, sorrows and injuries, so be gone from here, only by force can the gates of Lisbon be opened, and as for these inevitable disasters promised us, should they ever occur, that is something for the future, and to torment us with what has yet to come is nothing more than madness and a deliberate provocation of misfortune. The Moor paused as if searching for other arguments, but probably thinking it pointless, he shrugged his shoulders and concluded, Remain here no longer, do whatever you like, as for us we shall obey God's will.

Raimundo Silva was favourably impressed by these thoughtful words, not simply because the Moor was leaving it to God to resolve the differences which in his holy name and solely on his behalf bring men to fight each other, but because of the Moor's admirable serenity in the face of possible death, which, being ever certain, becomes fatalistic, as it were, when it comes in the guise of the possible, that sounds like a contradiction but you only have to think about it. Comparing the two speeches, it

saddened the proof-reader that a simple Moor deprived of the light of the true faith, even though bearing the tide of governor, should outshine the Archbishop of Braga in prudence and eloquence, despite the prelate's wide experience of codicils, bulls and dogmas. It is only natural that we should prefer to see our own side always gain the upper hand, and Raimundo Silva, although suspicious that there might be more Moorish blood than that of Aryan Lusitanians in the nation to which he belongs, would have liked to applaud Dom João Peculiar's reasoning rather than find himself intellectually outwitted by the exemplary speech of an infidel whose name has been forgotten. However, there is still a possibility that we might finally prevail over the enemy in this rhetorical joust, and that is when the Bishop of Oporto, also armed, begins to speak and, resting his hand on the hilt of his broadsword, he says, We addressed you in friendship, in the hope that our words would fall on friendly ears, but since you have shown annoyance at what we had to say, the time has come for us to speak our mind and tell you how much we despise this habit of yours of waiting for events to take their course and evil to strike, when it is clear for all to see how fragile and weak hope can be, unless you trust in your own valour rather than in the misfortunes of others, it is as if you were already prepared for defeat, only to speak later about the uncertain future, take heed that the more often an enterprise turns out badly, the harder we have to try to make it succeed, and all our efforts against you having been frustrated so far, we are now making another attempt, so that you may finally meet the destiny awaiting you when we enter these gates you refuse to open, yes, live in accordance with God's will, that same will is about to ensure us victory, and there being nothing more to add, we are withdrawing without any further formalities, nor do we expect any from you. Bidding them farewell with these offensive words, the Bishop of Oporto took up the reins of his horse, although in terms of rank, he was not entitled to take this initiative, he had acted out of pique, and was now taking the entire party with him, when the Moor unexpectedly spoke up, without any trace of the intolerable stoicism that had sent the prelate into a rage, now he spoke with the same arrogance and pride, and here is what he had to say, You are making a grave mistake if you confuse patience with cowardice and fear of death, no such mistake was made by your fathers and grandfathers whom we defeated a thousand and one times in armed combat throughout the length and breadth of Spain, and beneath this very soil you tread lie the corpses of those who thought they could challenge our domain, can you not see that your days of conquest are over, your bones will be broken against these walls, your grasping hands cut off, so be prepared to die, for as you well know, we are ever prepared.

There is not a cloud in the sky, the warm sun shines on high, a flock of swallows flies back and forth, circles with much twittering over the heads of these sworn enemies. Mogueime looks up at the sky, gives a shudder, perhaps brought on by the wild screeching of the birds or the Moor's threats, the heat of the sun affords him no comfort, a strange chill makes his teeth chatter, the shame of a man who with a simple ladder brought down Santarém. The silence was broken by the Archbishop of Braga's voice giving an order to the scribe, You must make no mention, Fray Rogeiro, of what the Moor said, words thrown to the wind when we had already departed and were descending the

slope of Santo André on our way to the encampment where the king awaits us, he will see, as we draw our swords and raise them to the sunlight, that battle has commenced, and that is something you can certainly write down.

DURING THOSE FIRST DAYS after he had thrown away the dyes which for years had concealed the ravages of time, Raimundo Silva, like an ingenuous sower waiting to see the first shoot break through, examined the roots of his hair, day and night, with obsessive interest, morbidly relishing his anticipation of the shock he would almost certainly get once the natural hairs began to appear amongst the dyed ones. But because one's hair, from a certain age onwards, is slow in growing, or because the last dyeing had tinged, or tinted, even the subcutaneous layers, let it be said in passing that all of this is no more than an assumption imposed by the need to explain what is, after all, not very important, Raimundo Silva gradually lost interest in the matter, and now combs his hair without another thought as if he were in the first flush of youth, although it is worth noting a certain amount of bad faith in this attitude, a certain falsification of self with oneself, more or less translatable in a phrase that was neither spoken nor thought, Because I can pretend that I cannot see, I do not see, which came to be converted into an apparent conviction, even less clearly expressed, if possible, and irrational, that the last dyeing had been definitive, like some prize conceded by fate in recompense for his courageous renunciation of the world's vanities. Today, however, when he has to deliver to the publisher the novel which he has finally read and prepared for the printers, Raimundo Silva, on entering the bathroom, slowly put his face to the mirror, with cautious fingers he pushed back the tuft of hair on his forehead, and refused to believe what his eyes were seeing, there were the white roots, so white that the contrast in colour seemed to make them whiter still, and they had an unexpected appearance, as if they had sprouted from one day to the next, while the sower had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion. There and then, Raimundo Silva repented the decision he had taken, that is to say, he did not quite get round to repenting, but thought that he might have postponed it a little longer, he had foolishly chosen the least opportune moment, and he felt so vexed that he wondered whether there might be a bottle which he had forgotten and was still lying around somewhere, with some dye left, at least just for today, tomorrow I'll go back to sticking to my resolution. But he did not start searching, partly because he knew he had thrown out the lot, partly, because he feared, assuming that he found something, that he would have to make another decision, as it was quite possible that he might decide against it and end up playing this game of coming and going for lack of the willpower to refuse to succumb once and for all to the weakness he acknowledges in himself.

When Raimundo Silva wore a wristwatch for the first time many years ago, he was a mere adolescent, and fortune pandered to his immense vanity as he strolled about Lisbon and proudly sported his latest novelty, by crossing his path with that of four different people who were anxious to know the time, Have you the time, they asked, and generous fellow as he was, he did indeed know the time and lost no time in telling them so. The movement of stretching out his arm in order to draw back his sleeve and display the watch's shining face gave him a feeling of importance at that moment that he would never experience again. And least of all now as he makes his way to the publishing house, trying to pass unnoticed in the street or amongst the passengers on the bus, withholding the slightest gesture that might attract the attention of anyone who, also

wanting to know the time, might stand there staring in amusement at that unmistakable white line of the parting on the top of his head while waiting for him to overcome his nerves and disentangle his watch from the three sleeves that are covering it today, that of his shirt, his jacket and his coat, It's half past ten, Raimundo Silva finally replies, furious and embarrassed. A hat would come in handy, but that is something the proof-reader has never worn, and if he did, it would only resolve a fraction of his problems, he certainly has no intention of walking into the publishers wearing a hat, Hello there, how is everyone, the hat still stuck on his head as he marches into Dr Maria Sara's office, I've brought you the novel, obviously, it would be best to act as if the colours in his hair were all quite natural, white, black, dyed, people look once, do not look a second time, and by the time they look a third time, they notice nothing. But it is one thing to acknowledge this mentally, to invoke the relativity that conciliates all differences, to ask oneself, with stoic detachment, what a white hair on earth means in the eyes of Venus, another dreadful moment is when he has to confront the telephonist, to withstand her indiscreet glance, to imagine the giggles and whisperings that will while away idle moments in the next few days, Senhor Silva has stopped dyeing his hair, he looks so comical, before they used to mock him because he dyed it, but then there are people who always find something to amuse themselves at the expense of others. And suddenly all these foolish worries disappeared because the telephonist Sara was saying to him, Dr Maria Sara isn't here, she is ill and hasn't come to work for the last two days, these simple words left Raimundo Silva divided between two conflicting sentiments, relief that she should not see his white hair reappearing, and deep distress, not caused by her illness, of the seriousness of which he was still unaware, it could be a flu without complications, or a sudden indisposition, the sort of complaint that affects women, for example, but because he suddenly felt lost, a man risks so much, subjects himself to vexations, just to be able to hand over in person the original manuscript of a novel, and there is no hand there, perhaps it is resting on a pillow beside a pale face, where, until when. Raimundo Silva realises in a second that he has lingered so long in handing over the work in order to savour, with unconscious voluptuousness, the anticipation of a moment that was now eluding him, Dr Maria Sara isn't here, the telephonist had informed him, and he made as if to leave, but then remembered that he ought to entrust the original manuscript to someone, to Costa presumably, Is Senhor Costa here, he asked, suddenly realising that he was deliberately standing in profile to avoid being observed by the telephonist, and, irritated by this show of weakness, he turned around in order to confront all the curiosities of this world, but young Sara did not as much as look at him, she was too busy inserting and pulling out plugs on the old-fashioned switchboard, and all he got was an affirmative gesture as she nodded vaguely towards the inner corridor, all this meaning that Costa was in his office, and that as far as Costa was concerned, there was no need to announce this visitor, something Raimundo Silva did not need to be told because before the arrival of Dr Maria Sara all he had to do was to walk straight in and look for Costa who, as Production Manager, could be found in any of the other offices, pleading, remonstrating, complaining, or simply apologising to the administration, as he always had to do, no matter whether he was responsible or not for any slip-ups in the schedule.

The door of Dr Maria Sara's office is closed. Raimundo Silva opens it, peers inside and feels a knot in his stomach, not so much because of her absence as because of a dispiriting sense of emptiness, of final abandonment, suggested perhaps by the tidy arrangement of objects which, it occurred to him one day, is only tolerable when disturbed by a human presence. Over the desk drooped a withered white rose, two of its petals having already been shed. Raimundo Silva nervously shut the door, he could not stay there in case someone appeared, but this idea of an empty office, where a single life, that of a rose, was slowly withering, close to death because of a progressive depletion of cells, filled him with evil premonitions, with dark omens, all quite absurd, as he would subsequently reflect, What have I got to do with this woman, but not even this feigned detachment will put his mind at rest. Costa received him cordially, Yes, Dr Maria Sara is ill, I'm looking after things, superfluous words, all of them, Raimundo Silva already knew that Maria Sara was ill, that Costa should be dealing with her work was only to be expected, and, as for the rest, no need to worry; he could not care less about the novel's immediate or future destiny, what he needed was some information that no one was likely to give him unless he asked, after all, an employee on sick leave scarcely justifies the publication of hourly medical bulletins. So at the risk of rousing Costa's curiosity as to why he should be so interested, Raimundo Silva finally plucked up the courage to ask, Is it serious, Is what serious, the other asked in return, having failed to grasp what he was talking about, Dr Maria Sara's illness, now Raimundo Silva is worried at the thought that he might be blushing at this very moment, Oh, I shouldn't imagine so, and steering the conversation towards more professional matters, Costa added, introducing a subtle note of irony, directed both at the absent Dr Maria Sara and the proof-reader who is present, Even if she were to stay at home for a while, you may rest assured that work will proceed as normal. At this point Costa ever so slightly averted his eyes, a hint of smiling malice creeping into his expression. Raimundo Silva frowned, waiting for some further remark, but Costa had already turned to the novel, was leafing through it as if searching for something he could not quite define, but his attitude was not altogether conscious, and now it was the proof-reader's turn to smile as he remembered that day when Costa had leafed through another book, the erroneous proofs of The History of the Siege of Lisbon, their falsification finally frustrated, yet the cause of these radical changes, these outrageous alterations, a new siege, an encounter no one could have foreseen, certain feelings that slowly began to stir, like the impenetrable waves of a sea of mercury. Suddenly, Costa became aware that he was being observed, thought he understood why, and like someone carrying out tardy revenge, asked, Have you by any chance inserted the odd Not this time, and Raimundo Silva answered with tranquil irony, Put your mind at rest, this time I put in a yes. Costa abruptly pushed aside the bundle of page proofs and said drily, If there is nothing else I can do for you, he left the phrase in suspense, with invisible dots of suspension, but thanks to his lengthy experience as a proof-reader, Raimundo did not need them in order to know that it was time for him to leave.

Young Sara takes advantage of a quiet moment to give all her attention to a fingernail that had broken a few minutes earlier in that infernal bustle of inserting and

pulling out plugs, she has already repaired the damage and is now deeply absorbed in gently smoothing the nail with her file, she is certainly not going to reply to Raimundo Silva as he would wish, having had the bright idea whilst walking down the corridor perhaps helped by the dialectic parrying with Costa, these are the advantages of an intellectual gymnastic exercise, but now we shall see if it will serve any purpose, the question being the following, Do you know if Dr Maria Sara is well enough to receive telephone calls, it's just that I have some business, another interrupted phrase, an anxious look, in fact, he could not have chosen a worse moment, the inevitable annoyance of someone who has just broken a long, oval-shaped fingernail, and besides the number will have to be traced in the telephone directory, assuming the telephonist is willing to divulge it, Just my luck, muses Raimundo Silva, that this should have happened, the broken nail, the file, Ah, Senhor Silva, if only you knew the trouble I have with these nails, how I wish they would get rid of this old contraption and give me a modern push-button electronic switchboard, whether she is well enough to receive telephone calls, I cannot say, but here is her number if you'd like to write it down. She knew it by heart, one of her little vanities, to memorise as many numbers as she could, to boast of her memory, Sara has a phenomenal memory, and just as well, because she had to repeat the number twice, Raimundo Silva was in such a muddle, first of all because he could not find anywhere to write, then he got the numbers mixed up, hearing six instead of three, at the same time as his brain pursued a nagging question he could not resist raising in a tone of voice feigning nonchalance, Obviously if no one has called her from here, then she isn't receiving any calls, No calls have passed through me, but, the administration may have called her on a direct line, of course, the direct line does not pass through the telephonist, one can speak at will by means of a direct line and Raimundo Silva seems to remember there having been a direct line in the Editorial Director's office. Young Sara has finished repairing her broken nail and critically appraises the result, bearing in mind the seriousness of the damage, she has done her best and is moderately satisfied, which may explain why she asks him, If you wish, I can call her from here, leaving Raimundo Silva speechless, he shook his head vigorously, and just at that moment, divine providence, the switchboard signalled an incoming call, two signals that were almost simultaneous, the world went into its routine orbit, or so it will seem to anyone who does not know that Raimundo Silva is already carrying Maria Sara's telephone number in his pocket, and this makes a vast difference to the universe.

Contrary to his habitual thriftiness, he returned home by taxi, no great surprise, for he could not wait to get back to his desk, pick up the telephone and dial Maria Sara's number, tell her, I heard you were ill, I trust it's nothing serious, I've just delivered the novel to Costa, I'm glad to know you're feeling better, you're right, you have to be healthy to succumb to illness, a silly expression, but that's life, at least half the things we say don't make much sense, no, Costa hasn't given me any more work, well, it doesn't really matter, I need a rest, yes, a rest, so that I can put my papers into some order, sort out my life, in a manner of speaking, obviously, what I do is to think that I am thinking about life and I'm not really thinking about anything, but I didn't mean to bore you with

my personal problems and difficulties, yes, in coping with life, I wish you a speedy recovery and hope to see you back at work soon, goodbye for now. But Senhora Maria, despite this not being her day, has turned up for work, she explains that she has to take her nephew to the doctor tomorrow when she should have been coming here, so she decided to come today instead, Raimundo Silva had no idea that his charlady had a nephew, My sister can't afford to stay off work, That's fine, it doesn't make any difference, and he shut himself away in his study in order to use the telephone. But his courage failed him. Even with the door shut, he would feel uneasy about making a simple call to find out about the state of health of someone higher up the ranks, How have you been, Dr Maria Sara, perhaps it would be different, certainly easier, if his superior were a man rather than a woman, although Raimundo Silva would have to admit, if called to account, that whenever any of the other directors had been ill in all these years, our proof-reader had never once remembered to ring up and inquire about their precious health. In brief, what Raimundo Silva appeared not to want, for some obscure, not to say, clear reason, if we take into account what we have learned of this man's personality, withdrawn, indecisive, was that Senhora Maria should suspect that her employer was holding a telephone conversation with a woman. The outcome of this absurd conflict will be to request that his lunch should be left on the kitchen table while he goes out to rid himself of two obsessive presences, that of the telephone and that of Senhora Maria, both clearly innocent and oblivious of the war in which they have become involved. Raimundo Silva is eating the usual plate of soup with beans and greens, while a meat and potato stew, already heated up, is waiting on the stove, when the voice of Senhora Maria can be heard asking from the other room, Can I throw out this withered rose, and almost in a panic, he replies, No, no, leave it alone, I'll deal with it, he could not hear the charlady's closing remarks, but she made some comment, which may not have been resentful but sounded very much like it, a further reminder that it is impossible to deceive a woman, even if only a charlady, when a rose, a white rose if you please, suddenly appears in a man's apartment where no flower has ever been seen before, and it is just possible that what Senhora Maria said was, There's a Moorish ship on the coast, a historical and popular saying expressing grave suspicion, dating from the time when the Moors who had already been driven out of Portuguese territory were forever attacking our shores and coastal towns, and nowadays a mere rhetorical reminiscence, but serving some purpose, as has just been seen.

Without the help of the crusaders, who are already way out on the open sea, Raimundo Silva finds himself deprived of the military weight of these twelve thousand men in whom we had placed so many hopes, leaving him with no more than roughly the same number of Portuguese, not nearly enough men to constitute a vanguard capable of surrounding the entire city, and being in full view of the Moors, they will find it impossible to move away together, to carry out an attack, for example, on one of the gates, without their movements alerting those inside that they have sufficient time to reinforce the position about to be attacked by those on the outside who have to pass over hill and dale and a fair amount of water. It becomes necessary, therefore, to reconsider their strategy,

and in order to examine the theatre of operations in loco, Raimundo Silva once more climbs up to the castle from whose lofty towers he can survey the terrain, rather like a chessboard, where the pawns and knights will fight each other, objectively speaking, beneath the gaze of the king and bishops, perhaps with the assistance of several additional towers, built, if the suggestion of one of the foreigners who remained with us should be taken up, Let's raise them to the height of the walls and push them up close, so that all we have to do is to jump over and kill the infidels, It sounds easy, replied the king, but we must see if we have enough carpenters, Don't let that worry you, retorted the other, that Heinrich who bore his name and was a man of great piety, fortunately we live in an age when every man can turn his hand to anything, sow grain, harvest the wheat, mill it, bake bread, and eventually eat it, unless he dies beforehand, or, as in this case, construct a wooden tower and climb it, sword in hand, to kill the Moor or be killed by him.

As the debate proceeds, inconclusively as yet, but with a clear forecast of losses, Raimundo Silva mentally verifies the location of the gates, that of Alfafa, on top of whose wall he lives, that of Ferro, that of Alfama, that of Sol, which look directly on to the city, and the gate known as Martim Moniz, the only gate of the castle facing on to the open countryside. So it is obvious that the twelve thousand soldiers of King Afonso will have to be divided into five groups in order to cover all the gates with the same manpower, and for five, read six, because we must not forget the sea, which is not really the sea, but a river, however by force of habit the Moors, always referred to it as the sea, and this is what we call it even today, now then, things being so, we are talking about the groups, what we have here is the absurd situation of two thousand men for each battle front. Not to mention, God help us, the problem created by the estuary. As if the steepness of the various points of access were not enough, with the exception of the Gate of Alfama, which is at ground level, there was this estuary getting in the way and complicating even more the already difficult deployment of the troops, scattered for the moment along the heights and slopes of the Monte de'São Francisco as far as'São Roque, where they are resting, replenishing their strength in the gentle shadows, but if no attack could be launched from such a distance, nor arrows reach their target, this would scarcely be a siege worthy of the name with that unguarded estuary down below, giving free passage to reinforcements and supplies from the other side, for it was most unlikely that the fragile line of the naval blockade about to be set up would prove a lasting obstacle. This being the case, there would appear to be no other solution than to move four thousand men to the other side, while the others will follow the route taken by the emissaries João Peculiar and Pedro Pitões, before finally taking up positions in front of the three gates facing north and east, namely that of Martim Moniz, that of Sol and that of Alfama, as previously explained and now repeated here, to satisfy the reader and round off the discourse. Returning to that cautious and vacillating phrase of Dom Afonso Henriques, everything sounds so easy, however, a quick glance at the map will soon expose the complexity of the problems of strategy and logistics which have to be faced and resolved. The first problem is directly concerned with the number of ships available, these are

scarce, and this is where the assistance of the crusaders would be most useful, with their entire fleet and those hundreds of boats and other service vessels, which, if they were here, in the twinkling of an eye would be able to transport the soldiers to form the most extensive line of attack imaginable, obliging the Moors to disperse along the riverbank and therefore weaken their defence. The second, and most pressing problem right now, is to decide the point or points of disembarkation, a matter of crucial importance, because they have to take into account not only the greater or lesser proximity of the gates, but also the hazards of the terrain, from the swamps at the mouth of the estuary to the precipitous rock faces defending the access to the gate of Alfafa from the southern side. The third, fourth and fifth problems, or sixth and seventh, could also be listed were it not for the fact that all of them follow on, more or less in mathematical order, from the first two, so we shall simply mention one further detail, but of considerable importance because of what it tells us about the veracity of other details in this narrative, the aforementioned detail being the very short distance separating the Porta de Ferro from the shore of the estuary, no more than a hundred paces, or, in modern measurements, some eighty metres, which rules out any possibility of disembarking here, because as the flotilla of canoes, with their heavy load of men and arms, would come crawling forward awkwardly in mid estuary, the city walls on this side would already be garrisoned with soldiers, while others, stationed at the water's edge, would be waiting for the Portuguese to approach in order to riddle them with arrows. And so Dom Afonso Henriques will tell his chief of staff, It isn't easy, after all, and as they discuss other possible tactics let us recall that fat woman in the Café Graciosa, at the outset of these events, commenting on the wretched state of the people fleeing from the advancing forces, who said she had seen them enter, covered in blood, through the Porta de Ferro, which at the time people accepted to be true, because testified by an eyewitness. But let us be logical. Undoubtedly, because of its proximity to the shore of the estuary, the Porta de Ferro would be used mainly for the river traffic of people and merchandise, which obviously would not deter fugitives from entering, were it not for the fact that it was located, in a manner of speaking, at the southern tip of the wall, thus making it the most distant of all the points of access for anyone ousted from the north or from the region of Santarém. That some unfortunates, driven out of the territory between Cascais and Sintra, should have reached the city along routes that ended up at the estuary, and, on arriving there, should still have found ferrymen to transport them to the shore on this side, is quite possible. Such cases, however, would be rare, and scarcely authorise the fat woman to make special reference to the Porta de Ferro, when she herself was so close to the Porta de Alfafa, which even the least attentive observers of maps and topographies would recognise as being more appropriate, as it was no less true of the gates of Sol and Alfama, to receive this sad invasion. And what is most curious is that no one among those present should have contradicted this inaccurate version of the facts when the evidence was so readily available, which only goes to show how lacking in curiosity some people are and how slow their minds work, when confronted with such a dogmatic statement, wheresoever it may come from and whatever its reliability, whether from a fat woman or Allah, not to cite other well-known sources.

The king said, Having heard your wise opinions and after considering the advantages and disadvantages of the various plans proposed, it is my sovereign will that the entire army should move from this place and go off to besiege the city from closer by, for here we shall never achieve victory even if the world were to end, so we shall proceed as follows, a thousand men experienced in navigation will go in the barges since we do not have enough vessels for any more, even counting the boats the Moors were unable to take inside the walls or destroy and which we had captured, and these men will be entrusted with cutting off all communications by sea, making sure that no one may enter or leave, and the remaining body of troops will be concentrated on the Monte da Graça, where we shall finally divide, two fifths moving to the gates on the eastern side, another two fifths to those on the western side, and the rest will remain over there to guard the northern gate. Then Mem Ramires intervened, pointing out that since the task was much more arduous and dangerous for the soldiers being sent to attack the gates of Alfafa and Ferro, because stuck, as it were, between the city and the estuary, it would be prudent to reinforce them, at least until such time as they were able to consolidate their positions, for there would be the most terrible disaster if the Moors were to make a sudden incursion and push the Portuguese back to the sea, where we would be forced to choose between drowning or being slaughtered, caught, as the saying goes, between sword and fire. The king was impressed by this advice, and there and then appointed Mem Ramires captain of the western group, postponing the nominations for other commands until later, As for me, destined as I am by nature and my royal obligations to be the commander of all of you, I shall also assume under my direct orders a body of the army, namely the one on Monte da Graça where the general headquarters will be. It was now the turn of the Archbishop Dom João Peculiar to intervene to say that God would be displeased to find that those killed in this battle for the conquest of the city of Lisbon were being buried here and there throughout these hills and valleys, when they should be receiving a Christian burial on consecrated ground, and that since from the time of their arrival here, some had already died because of illness or in some brawl, and had been buried somewhere outside the encampment, the cemetery which, in effect, had already been started, should be established there. At this point, Gilbert from England spoke up on behalf of the foreigners, arguing that it would be indecent, because confusing, that in the aforesaid cemetery, the Portuguese should be buried alongside the crusaders, because the latter, should God will that they lose their lives in these parts, had every right to be considered martyrs, just as those who were even now sailing to meet their deaths in the Holy Land were promised martyrdom, so that in his opinion not one but two cemeteries ought to be consecrated, allowing each dead man to be buried alongside his peer. The king liked this suggestion, although resentful mutterings could be heard amongst the Portuguese, who even at the hour of death saw themselves being deprived of the glories of martyrdom, and without wasting any time, they were soon all on their way to mark out the provisional boundaries of the two cemeteries, postponing their consecration until the territory was finally rid of these living sinners, and orders have already been given that in due course those first stray corpses should be disinterred and reburied elsewhere, all of them, as it happened, Portuguese. Once he had carried out this inspection, the king

closed the meeting, duly recorded with all the appropriate formalities, and Raimundo Silva returned home as evening began to draw in.

To Raimundo Silva's annoyance, Senhora Maria was no longer there, not because she might have left half the chores unfinished, but because there was now no one to come between him and the telephone, no indiscreet witness who, with her presence, might absolve him from the cowardice, or timidity, a less offensive word, that had overwhelmed him on confronting that other self who, with such subtle cunning, had persuaded the telephonist at the publishing house to divulge Maria Sara's number, and, as we saw, one of the world's best kept secrets. But this other Raimundo Silva is an unpredictable fellow, he has his days, or not even that, simply hours or seconds, at times he erupts with a force that seems capable of moving worlds, both outside and within, but it never lasts, no sooner does that force come than it is gone, a fire that is barely alight when it dies out. The Raimundo Silva who is here before the telephone, incapable of lifting the receiver and dialling a number, was the man, at the top of the castle with the city stretching out below, the man, we insist, to plan the best possible tactics for the mammoth task of besieging and capturing Lisbon, but he is now close to repenting that moment of reckless bravado when he gave in to another person's wishes, and he is about to search in his pockets for the paper on which he jotted down the number, not to use it, but in the hope that he might have lost it. He has not lost it, the piece of paper is there, crumpled up in his open hand, as if, and this is what it was, even though Raimundo Silva does not remember, he were afraid of losing it during all that time he had spent searching and fumbling. Seated at his desk, with the telephone beside him, Raimundo Silva imagines what might happen if he were to decide to dial the number, what conversation would he engage in other than the one he had invented beforehand, and as he considers the various possibilities, it occurs to him, and it is absurd that it should occur to him for the first time, that no one knows anything about Maria Sara's private life, whether she is married, a widow, spinster or divorcee, if she has any children, if she lives with her parents, or with only one of them, or neither, and this unknown reality becomes threatening, it shakes and demolishes the fragile architecture of the dream and foolish hopes he had been building for several weeks on sandy terrain without any solidity, Suppose I were to dial the number and a man's voice answers telling me she cannot come to the telephone, that she is in bed, but if I should like to leave some message or inquiry, not really, I only wanted to know if she is feeling better, yes, I'm a colleague of hers and as I spoke I would be asking myself once more if the word colleague is appropriate in the case of a professional relationship between a proof-reader and his boss, and as our conversation came to a close, I would ask, To whom am I speaking, and he would reply, I'm her husband, now it is true that she does not wear a wedding ring but that does not mean anything, there are plenty of married couples around who do not wear rings and consider themselves just as happy, or they are unhappy and then it does not matter, besides the man's reply would be the same whatever the circumstances, He would say, I'm her husband, even if he were not, he most certainly would not say, I'm her companion, the word companion is no longer used, and even more unlikely, I'm the man

she lives with, a vulgar expression no one would use, but there is something about Maria Sara that tells me she is not married, it is not just the absence of a wedding ring, it is something difficult to define, the way she speaks, the way she pays attention while giving the impression that her mind is elsewhere, and when I say married, I also mean living with a man, or to have a man although not actually living with him, what is usually referred to as an affair, or a casual relationship, without any ties or commitments, the most common situation of all nowadays, although I cannot claim to have much experience of such blessings, I simply observe the world and learn from those who know, ninety per cent of the knowledge we claim to possess comes to us in this way, not from first-hand experience, and therein also resides the merest premonition, that nebulous information wherein occasionally shines that sudden light we call intuition, now then, my premonition and intuition tell me that there is no man in Maria Sara's life, impossible though it may seem for one so pretty, no raving beauty, but most appealing, as for her body, the first impression is good, but bodies can only be judged when they are naked, this is sound advice, judge on the evidence, better still afterwards, once you know what was covered and have found it to your liking.

Everyone agrees that the powers of imagination are infinite, as this instance has once more proved, when Raimundo Silva began to feel his own body, what was happening inside it, first the sensation of a weak earth-tremor, almost imperceptible, then a sharp palpitation, insistent, urgent. Raimundo Silva looks on, with half-closed eyes he follows the process as if he were mentally recalling a familiar page, and he remains quiet, waiting, until his blood little by little recedes like the tide abandoning a cavern, slowly, from time to time still tossing fresh waves in rebellion, but it is futile, the tide ebbs, these are the final assaults, finally there is nothing but the quiet trickling of rivulets of water, the algae spread limply over the rocks where tiny crabs scurry in terror to take shelter, leaving signs on the wet sand that are barely discernible. Now in a pleasant state of semi-numbness, Raimundo Silva asks himself where these grotesque little creatures might have come from and what they are trying to tell him with their strange, disconcerting movements, as if nature had initiated its predictable general upheaval, In future, we'll all be crabs, he thought, and suddenly he could visualise the soldier Mogueime on the bank of the estuary, washing blood from his hands and watching the crabs of that time escape, to the right, into the darkest depths, their earthen colour merging with the shadows of the water. The image quickly disappeared, another came, like passing slides, once more it was the estuary, but now there was a woman washing clothes at the water's edge, Raimundo Silva and Mogueime knew who she was, they had been told she was the concubine of the aforementioned knight Heinrich, a German from Bonn, picked up in Galicia when some crusaders disembarked there to replenish their supplies of drinking-water, one of their servants abducted her, now the knight has been killed in ambush along with his servant, and the woman goes around, more or less with any man whom she chances to meet, we say more or less, but with caution, because sometimes she has been taken against her will, two fellows who tried it were discovered several days later stabbed to death, those responsible were never found, with such a

large gathering of men, it is difficult to avoid disorder and violence, not to mention that it might have been the work of Moors who had infiltrated the encampment and were secretly carrying out treacherous assaults. Mogueime got close to the woman, and a few paces away, sat on a rock and watched her. She did not turn round, she had seen him out of the corner of her eye as he approached, she recognised him from his appearance and familiar gait, although she did not yet know his name, only that he was Portuguese, having heard him speak Galician on one occasion. The swaying movement of the woman's hips perturbed Mogueime. Besides, he had his eye on her ever since the knight's death, and even long before then, but a common soldier, and medieval at that, would never dare to pursue another man's woman even if a concubine. He had felt angry and resentful when he then saw her carried off by others, but she had not stayed with any of them, however much they loved her, like those men stabbed to death who had desired her so much that they wanted to take her by force. To take her by force himself was never Mogueime's intention, especially here in this wilderness in full view of everyone, soldiers who were off duty, stable-lads washing down their masters' mules, a truly peaceful scene which seemed remote from the imminent siege and assault on the city, especially if, as now, we turn our backs on the city and castle and contemplate the tranquil surface of the waters of the estuary as it wends its way inland where the broad swell of the river cannot reach, and ahead the hills with trees scattered here and there on terrain that is yellowish one minute and dark green the next depending on whether it is covered by perennial scrub or pasture scorched by the sun. It is midday and the heat is intense, eyes have to be averted from the water in order not be dazzled and blinded by the constant glare of the sun, but not the eyes of Mogueime who goes on staring at the woman. She now straightens up, raises and lowers her arm to beat the clothes, the sound of smacking travels over the water, an unmistakable sound, then another smack, and another, and then silence, the woman rests both hands on the white rock, an ancient Roman sarcophagus, Mogueime looks without moving, at that moment the wind carries the shrill cry of a muezzin, almost muffled in the distance, yet still intelligible for anyone who, although not familiar with the Arabic language, has been listening to that cry for almost a month, three times a day. The woman turns her head slightly to the left as if trying to hear the muezzin's invocation more clearly, and Mogueime being on this side, a little way behind, it was inevitable their eyes should meet. Any physical desire Mogueime might have felt died instantly, his heart beating fast as if in panic, it is difficult to probe the matter any further for one has to take into account the primitive nature of feelings at that time, there is always the risk of falling into an anachronism, for example, to put diamonds on crowns of iron or invent subtleties of refined eroticism in bodies that are content to go all the way after making a quick start. But Mogueime had already shown himself to be somewhat different from the common soldier when the debate took place about the conquest of Santarém and the rape and beheading of the Moorish women, and if it is true that at the time he betrayed a tendency to let his imagination run riot, then, ironically enough, it could be that for this very same reason, if truth is to prevail, we will find the difference in his nature stemming from doubt, from the subsequent re-ordering of a fact, from the oblique verification of his motives, from an ingenuous questioning of the

influence each one of us has over the actions of others without knowing it, an influence deliberately denied by those who claim to be entirely responsible for their own actions. With his bare feet on the rough wet sand, Mogueime feels the weight of his whole body, as if he had become part of the rock on which he is seated, now the royal trumpets might well give the signal to attack but in all likelihood it will not be heard, what is echoing in his head, however, is the cry of the muezzin, he continues to hear it even while watching the woman, and when she finally averts her eyes the silence becomes absolute, true there are sounds all around but they belong to another world, the mules pant and drink from a freshwater stream that flows into the estuary, and probably because he could not find any better way of embarking on what has to be done, Mogueime asks the woman, What is your name, how often we must have asked each other that question since the world began, What is your name, sometimes going on to give our own name, I'm called Mogueime, to open up the conversation, in order to give before receiving, and then we wait until we hear the reply, when it comes, when the question is not met with silence, but not on this occasion, My name is Ouroana, she said.

The paper with the telephone number is still lying there on his desk, nothing could be easier, dial six numbers, and hear a voice at the other end of the line, a few kilometres away, so simple, it no longer matters whether it is the voice of Maria Sara or that of her husband, what is important is to note the differences between then and now, in order to speak, or to kill, it is necessary to get close, that is what Mogueime and Ouroana did, she arrived from Galicia, brought by force to the siege, the concubine of a crusader who is now dead and subsequently washerwoman for the nobility in order to earn a living, while he, having conquered Santarém, came in search of greater glory, before the imposing walls of Lisbon. Raimundo Silva dials five numbers, he only needs one more but cannot make up his mind, he pretends that he is savouring the foretaste of pleasure, a shiver of fear, he tells himself that if he wanted to, he could complete the number, only one to go, but he declines, muttering, I cannot, and he replaces the receiver as if getting rid of a heavy load threatening to crush him. He gets to his feet, thinks, I'm thirsty, and goes to the kitchen. He fills a glass with water from the tap, drinks slowly, relishes the coolness of the water, it is a simple pleasure, perhaps the simplest of all, a glass of water when one is thirsty, and as he drinks he can picture the stream flowing towards the estuary, and the mules stirring the water's surface as they drink, seven hundred and forty years ago, the stable-lads spur them on with a whistle, how true that there is not much that is new under the sun, not even King Solomon was capable of imagining how right he was. Raimundo Silva put down his glass, turned round, there was a note lying on the kitchen table, the usual and quite superfluous explanation from the charlady, Goodbye for now, I've left everything in good order, but not this time, not a word about her obligations, a quite different message this time, A lady rang, she wants you to call this number, and Raimundo Silva does not have to dash into the study to know that it is the same number as that on the crumpled piece of paper which had been so difficult to find Or not to lose.

RAIMUNDO SILVA'S MOTIVE for not telephoning Maria Sara was as simple as it was tortuous, a statement which gives the immediate impression of not being very precise, inasmuch as these adjectives should be applied with greater rigour to the reasoning with which the aforesaid motive was obliged to conform. As in the classic detective novels, the nub of the question lay in the time factor, that is to say, the fact that Maria Sara's call came during Raimundo Silva's absence, at an unspecified hour, which might have been exactly one minute after he went out, or one minute just before the cleaner left, another unspecified hour, to mention only these final minutes. In the first instance, more than four hours must have passed before Raimundo Silva became aware of the message, in the second instance, judging from her normal practice, some three hours. All things considered, this means that Maria Sara, if she was waiting for a return call, had time to think that Raimundo Silva had probably returned home very late, at an hour at which it would have been in bad taste to telephone anyone at home, especially if indisposed. Although, a restrictive expression but not ironic, her illness was not so serious as to prevent her from personally making a telephone call to this apartment near the castle, where Raimundo Silva searches in vain for an answer to the inevitable question, What does she want from me. He spent the rest of the afternoon and evening working out endless variations on this theme that went from the simple to the complicated, from the general to the particular, from any request for information, which would be absurd in view of the circumstances, to the even greater absurdity of wishing her to declare her love for him, just like that, over the telephone, as if no longer able to resist such sweet temptation. His irritation with himself at having allowed this mad thought to carry him to this hypothesis reached such an extreme that, in a fit of temper, he grabbed the white rose which was already withering in the vase and threw it into the rubbish-bin, before slamming the lid in a gesture of finality, I'm a fool, he said aloud, but failed to explain whether this was because he had allowed his thoughts to run riot or because he had ill-treated an innocent flower that had bloomed for several days and deserved to be allowed to fade quietly, to wilt, its scent lingering and the last traces of whiteness concealed in its inner heart. Meanwhile it should also be said that, already in bed at dead of night and unable to sleep, Raimundo Silva got up and went to the kitchen, pulled out the rubbish-bin from under the cooker and retrieved the defiled rose which he gently cleaned and rinsed under a trickle of water in order not to disturb the limp petals before putting it back in the vase, resting its drooping corolla on a pile of books placed one on top of the other, the last one, by an interesting coincidence, being The History of the Siege of Lisbon, a copy not for sale. Raimundo Silva's final thought before falling asleep was, Tomorrow I'll ring her, a peremptory declaration so very much in keeping, so long as it is just a promise, with his vacillating nature, as if it had been spoken with a genuine sense of purpose by someone more decisive, the fact is that not everything can be achieved today, a firm intention is enough unless we leave it until the day after tomorrow.

The following morning, Raimundo Silva awoke with a clear idea as to how the troops should finally be deployed on the ground for the assault, including certain strategic details of his own making. A good sleep, assisted by intermittent dreams, had dispelled, once

and for all, any remaining doubts, natural in someone who had never been trained to cope with the hazards and dangers of a real war, not to mention the onerous responsibilities of being in command. It was more than obvious that any so-called surprise element was now out of the question, that sudden attack taking the enemy by surprise before they can respond or show any reaction, especially when they find themselves unexpectedly besieged, because by the time they realise what is happening it is already much too late. With all this flaunting of military force, this coming and going of envoys, these manoeuvres to surround the city, the Moors are all too aware of what to expect, proof of which are those terraces swarming with soldiers, those walls spiked with lances. Raimundo Silva finds himself in an interesting situation, that of someone who is playing chess on his own and knows the final outcome beforehand, prepared to play as if he did not know and determined, moreover, not to favour consciously either the one side or the other in this contest, the black or the white, here the Moors or the Christians, according to the colours. And he has shown this quite openly, as can be seen from the sympathy, not to say esteem, with which he has treated the infidels, especially the muezzin, not to mention the respect he has shown when describing the city's spokesman, his eloquence and nobility when compared with a certain coldness, impatience, and even cynicism, that always comes to the surface whenever he refers to the Christians. However, we should not conclude that Raimundo Silva's sympathies are reserved entirely for the Moors, his attitude should be seen as one of spontaneous charity because, much as he might try, he cannot forget that in the end the Moors will be defeated, besides since he, too, is a Christian, though not a practising one, he deplores certain forms of hypocrisy, envy and infamy that are given carte blanche in his own camp. In a word, the game is on the table, so far only the pawns and several knights have moved, and in Raimundo Silva's wise opinion an assault should be carried out simultaneously on the five gates, Lisbon has two less than the city of Thebes, with the objective of testing the military strength of the besieged and, with any luck, one of their battalions may prove to be weak, which would soon secure our victory and greatly reduce the number of innocent victims on both sides.

Meanwhile, before embarking on this enterprise, he must make a telephone call. To prolong silence for yet another day would not only be impolite but create difficulties for any fixture relationship between them, professional, of course. Therefore Raimundo Silva will make the call. But first he will ring the publishing house because it is feasible, even very likely, that having recovered from her brief spell of illness, Maria Sara is back at work today, which might even be the reason for the call taken by the cleaner, perhaps to ask him to come to her office next day to discuss, without further delay, another proof-reading assignment. Raimundo Silva is so convinced that this was her reason for calling that when the telephonist tells him she is not there, She's ill, Senhor Silva, don't you remember me telling you yesterday, he replies, Are you sure she's not back at work, do check, the secretary takes offence and rebukes him, I know who is here and who is not, She might have arrived without you noticing, I see everything, Senhor Silva, nothing escapes me, and Raimundo Silva trembled on hearing those prophetic words which

sounded threatening, as if she were warning him, I'm nobody's fool, or, Don't imagine you can pull the wool over my eyes, and without even attempting to pursue the insinuation, he blurted out some mollifying phrase and rang off. Dom Afonso Henriques harangues his troops gathered on the Monte da Graça, he speaks to them about the motherland, as it was known even at that time, about their native land, about the future awaiting them, the only thing he did not mention was their ancestors because few existed so far, but he warned them, Bear in mind that if we do not win this war, Portugal will be finished before it has even got under way, which will make it impossible for so many kings yet to come to be Portuguese, so many presidents, so many soldiers, so many saints, and poets, and ministers, and farm-labourers, and bishops, and navigators, and artists, and workers, and clerks, and friars, and directors, all in the masculine gender, without, however, forgetting all those Portuguese women, queens, saints, poets, ministers, farm-labourers, clerks, nuns, and directors, therefore, if we want to include all these people in our history, along with all the others whom I shall not mention otherwise my speech will be too long, and since we do not yet know all of them, if we want to include them then we had better make a start by capturing Lisbon, so let us be off. The troops acclaimed the king, and then, under orders from their lieutenants and captains they marched off to take up their positions, their leaders carrying strict instructions that at noon next day, while the Moors were at prayer, the assault should be carried out simultaneously on five fronts, may God protect all of us, for we are fighting in His name.

Raimundo Silva must have whispered a similar plea, transposed into the first person singular, as he set about dialling the number of his destiny, but in a whisper so low that it scarcely passed his lips, a plea as tremulous as that of any adolescent, he himself now has more food for thought, if he thinks, whether his body is not simply one huge kettledrum where the bell of the telephone rings and rings, not the bell, the electronic signal, awaiting the sudden interruption of the call, and a voice that says, Speaking, or, What can I do for you, perhaps Hello, perhaps Who's calling, there is no lack of possibilities amongst the conventional phrases and their modern variants, however, dazed as he was, Raimundo Silva was unable to hear what was being said, only that it was a woman speaking, so he asked disregarding any niceties, Is that Dr Maria Sara, no, it was not, Who's speaking, it was as if Raimundo Silva wanted to know his editor's voice, this was not a truth beyond question, but served as a simple form of identification, we are certainly not going to suggest that he introduced himself as Raimundo Benvindo Silva, proof-reader, working for the same publishing house, and even if he had, the reply would have been the same, Wait a moment, please, I'll see if Dr Maria Sara can take your call, never had a moment been so brief, Don't ring off, I'm carrying the telephone through, then silence. Raimundo Silva could visualise the scene, the woman, almost certainly her maid, removing the plug from the socket, childishly cradling the telephone in her bosom with both hands, that is how he pictured her, and entering a bedroom in shadows, then stooping down to reconnect the telephone to another socket, How are you, her voice taking him by surprise, Raimundo Silva had expected to hear the maid say something more, such as, I'm passing the telephone to Dr Sara, that would have meant a further

postponement of three or four seconds, but instead this direct question, How are you, reversing the situation, for surely it was up to him to express interest in her state of health, I'm fine, thank you, and quickly added, I wanted to know if you're feeling better, How did you know I've been ill, At the office, When, Yesterday forenoon, So you decided to ring to see how I am, Yes, Many thanks for being so thoughtful, you're the only proof-reader to have shown any interest, Well, I felt I had to, I hope I haven't disturbed you, On the contrary, I'm deeply grateful, I'm feeling better, I think probably tomorrow or the day after, I'll be back at the office, Well, I mustn't tire you, I wish you a speedy recovery, Just before you ring off, how did you find my telephone number, Young Sara gave it to me, Ah, the other Sara, Yes, the telephonist, When, As I told you, yesterday forenoon, And you waited until today to call me, I was afraid of disturbing you, But you overcame your fear, I suppose so, otherwise I wouldn't be speaking to you right now, Meantime, you should have been told that I wanted to speak to you. For two seconds, Raimundo Silva thought of pretending that he had not received the message, but before the third second passed, he found himself answering, Yes, Therefore I can assume that you couldn't help calling me once I had taken the initiative, You may assume what you please, that's up to you, but you must also assume that if I asked the telephonist for your number it wasn't just to carry it around in my pocket, waiting for who knows what, there was another reason, What, Simply a lack of courage, Your courage appears to have been limited to that little proof-reading episode you don't like me mentioning, In fact, I'm only telephoning to inquire about your state of health and to say I hope you'll soon be better, And don't you think it's time you asked me why I called you, Why did you call me, I'm not sure that I like your tone of voice, Words are more important than the way they're spoken, I would have assumed that your experience as a proof-reader must have taught you that words mean nothing unless spoken in a certain tone of voice, The written word is mute, Reading gives it a voice, Except when read in silence, Even then, unless Senhor Raimundo Silva believes the brain is a silent organ, I'm only a proof-reader, like the shoemaker, I make do with carpet-slippers, my brain knows me, I know nothing about my brain, An interesting observation, You still haven't answered my question, What question, Why did you telephone me, I'm no longer certain that I feel like telling you, So, I'm not the only coward, I don't recall having said anything about cowardice, You spoke about a lack of courage, That's not the same thing, The two sides of a coin are different, but the coin is one and the same, Valour is only to be found on one side, This conversation is getting beyond me and I suggest we drop the subject, besides it's most unwise to argue like this, given your state of health, This cynicism doesn't become you, I'm not being cynical, I know, so stop pretending, Seriously, I don't think we know what we're talking about, Speak for yourself, Then explain it to me, There's no need for any explanations, You're evading the question, It's you who are evading the question, you're hiding from yourself and want me to tell you what you already know, Please, Please what, I think we ought to ring off, this conversation has got out of hand, You're to blame, Me, Yes, you, You're much mistaken, I like things to be clear, Then try being clear and tell me why you are so aggressive whenever you speak to me, I'm never aggressive with anyone, I don't have this modern vice, Then why are you aggressive with me, It isn't true, Since the first

day we met, should you need reminding, Circumstances, But those circumstances have changed yet you've gone on being aggressive, Forgive me, that was never my intention, Now it's my turn to ask you not to use such meaningless words, Agreed, I'll say no more, Then listen, I telephoned you because I was feeling lonely, because I was curious to know if you were working, because I wanted you to take an interest in my health, because, Maria Sara, Don't say my name like that, Maria Sara, I like you, a long pause, Is that so, It's the truth, You took your sweet time before telling me, And perhaps I might never have got round to telling you, Why not, We're different, we belong to different worlds, What do you know about all these differences between us and our worlds, I can guess, observe, draw my own conclusions, These three operations can just as easily lead us to draw the right or the wrong conclusions, Agreed, and my biggest mistake right now is to have confessed that I like you, Why, Because I know nothing about your private life, whether you are, Married, Yes, or, In any way spoken for, to use an old-fashioned expression, Yes, Well, let's imagine that I am already married or engaged, would that prevent you from being fond of me, No, And if I really were married or engaged to someone else, should that prevent me from being fond of you, if that was how I felt, I don't know, Then you should know that I am fond of you, a long pause, Is that true, Yes, it's true, Listen Maria Sara, Tell me, Raimundo, but first you should know that I got divorced three years ago, that I ended an affair three months ago and haven't had any more affairs since, that I have no children but would dearly love to have them, I live with a married brother, and the person who answered the telephone was my sister-in-law, and you don't have to tell me who took down my message, she's your cleaner, and now, Mr Proof-reader, you may speak, pay no attention to this wild outburst, it's just that I'm brimming over with joy, Tell me, why do you like me, What can I say, I just like you, And aren't you afraid that once you get to know me, you won't like me any more, It sometimes happens, in fact, it happens quite a lot, So, So, nothing, it takes time to get to know each other, I like you, I believe you, When can we see each other, As soon as I can get up from this bed of pain, Where's the pain, All over, What is actually wrong with you, Nothing serious, or rather, the worst flu I've ever experienced, From where you are, you can't see me, but I'm smiling, Now that's really something, I don't believe I've ever seen a smile cross your lips, Can I confide that I love you, No, simply say that you are fond of me, I've already said so, Then keep the rest for the day you truly love me, should that day ever come, It will come, Let's not bank on the future, better to wait and see what it has in store for us, and now this weak, feverish woman asks to be left in peace to rest, to recover her strength in case it occurs to someone to call back again today, To speak to you, Or you, for the phrase could just as easily refer to either of us, Ambiguity isn't always a defect, So long, Let me leave you with a kiss, The time will come for kisses, For me it has been slow in coming, One last question, Tell me, Have you started to write your History of the Siege of Lisbon, Yes, I have, Good, for I'm not sure that I could have gone on liking you if you'd said no, Goodbye.

The word she used was, Goodbye. Lying down in her bedroom, Maria Sara slowly replaces the receiver at the same time as Raimundo Silva, seated at his desk, does the

same at his end. With a billowing movement, she indolently buries herself between the sheets, while he leans right back in his chair. The two of them are happy, so happy that it seems quite unfair to detach ourselves from the one in order to speak of the other, as we shall be more or less obliged to do, although, as we see in another more fanciful tale, it is physically and mentally impossible to describe the simultaneous actions of two characters, especially if they are far away from each other, to suit the whims and preference of an author who is always more preoccupied with what he believes to be the objective interests of his narrative than with the wholly legitimate aspirations of this or that character, however secondary, and with giving preference to his modest sayings and tiniest actions over the actions and words of his protagonists and heroes. And speaking of heroes, take for example those marvellous encounters between the knights of the Round Table or the Holy Grail with wise hermits or mysterious maidens who crossed their path, once having entertained us to yet another edifying episode, the knight would move on to fresh adventures and reunions, and of necessity, we the readers would move on with him, often abandoning for evermore the hermit on one page, the maiden on another, when we should have liked to know more about the fate awaiting them, whether some queen, out of love, would rescue the hermit from his hermitage, whether the maiden, instead of remaining in the forest to await the next knight errant, would go looking for a man somewhere in this wide world. When dealing with Maria Sara and Raimundo Silva, things get very complicated, since both of them are crucial characters, just as their gestures and thoughts will become crucial, from amongst which, given the insurmountable problem, we have no other solution than to choose something that the reader might consider to be essential, for example, in the case of Maria Sara, to observe that there was also a certain voluptuousness in her movement which we earlier described simply as being indolent, and that Raimundo Silva has parched lips as if a sudden fever, a raging fever, had taken possession of his body as he began trembling from head to foot, the outcome of all that nervous tension during their conversation, deceptively relaxed as they briefly made their farewells, and now humming like stretched wires, or, respecting the beauty and emotion of that moment, an Aeolian harp plucked by the wind, as ferocious as any cyclone. It is also worth mentioning that when Maria Sara went on smiling, her expression that of someone who was genuinely happy or looking the part, her sister-in-law asked her out of curiosity, Who is this Raimundo Silva who has got you into such a nervous state, and still smiling, Maria Sara replied, I still haven't discovered. Raimundo Silva has no one to talk to, he simply smiles, now little by little he regains his composure, he has finally got to his feet, a rejuvenated man emerges from the study and heads for the bedroom, and looking into the mirror he does not recognise himself, but so very conscious of being what he sees there that on observing the white line at the roots of his hair, he merely shrugs his shoulders with genuine indifference, at most a trifle impatient, perhaps because truth progresses so slowly. Maria Sara checks the time on her watch, it is too soon to expect him to ring back or for her to telephone him, the real test of wisdom is to bear in mind that even feelings must learn how to use time. Raimundo Silva checks the hour on his watch and goes out. He lost no time in heading for the nearest florist to buy four roses, in the most delicate shade of white he could find. This involved him in an animated dialogue

with the assistant to ensure that they were just as he wanted them, and in the end, he had to give her a more generous tip than usual, especially for him, because the assistant was not easily persuaded by the various arguments he used, first trying to convince her that the difference between two and twelve roses is purely arithmetical and irrelevant, then making mysterious and veiled allusions to the fulfilment of a promise he swore never to reveal, much as he would like to confide in her, What else could he do to recompense so much patience and kindness. With that reassuring tip already in her apron pocket, the assistant allowed herself to be impressed, and, as the conversation continued, no one could be blamed for thinking that money had nothing to do with the enthusiasm with which she responded to the customer's unusual request, yes, unusual, for no matter how you look at them, two roses are not twelve, nor even an orchid, for the latter can stand on its own, and even prefers it so. Rather than miss her call which would be twice as frustrating, Raimundo Silva returned home by taxi, ran upstairs, a gymnastic feat which prevented him from breathing for several minutes, Such imprudence, he thought to himself, climbing the Calçada da Glória like this at my age, he said glória without thinking, then amused by his own excesses, physical as well as verbal, he went to remove the withered rose from the vase, change the water, and then began arranging the two roses with the painstaking artistry of a Japanese floriculturist.

From the window, clouds could be seen slowly passing, dark and heavy, in the violet evening sky. Although advanced, spring had not yet decided to open its doors to the heat, to the warm southern wind, that encourages us to unfasten our collars and roll up our sleeves, to some extent, Raimundo Silva is going to live in two ages and in two seasons, blazing July that causes the weapons surrounding Lisbon to shine and glow, and this damp, grey April, sometimes with glinting sunshine that makes the light as hard as that of a bright, impenetrable diamond. He opened the window, rested his elbows on the parapet of the verandah, felt at peace with the world despite the inclement weather, fortunately his apartment was protected from the north wind blowing at this moment in sudden little gusts that come round the corner and brush against his face like a cool caress. He gradually begins to feel chilly and wonders if he should not go back inside, when he suddenly turns numb, literally numb, on remembering that from where he is standing he will not hear the telephone if Maria Sara should ring. He rushed back inside and dashed into the study as if trying to hear those final bleeps, the telephone was there, silent, as black as ever, but no longer a threatening animal, an insect armoured with prickly spines, more like a cat asleep, curled up in its own warmth, and once awake, no longer a danger with those claws of a tiny and often lethal wild beast, but waiting for an outstretched hand where it is all too ready to rub itself voluptuously. Raimundo Silva went back inside, sat at the small table near the window without putting on the light, and waited. He rested his forehead in his hands, a characteristic gesture of his, and with his fingertips distractedly scratching at the roots of his hair where another story might be written, because this one already started can only be read by those with perceptive and open eyes, not by a blind man, however keen his sense of touch, for his fingers cannot tell him about this latest colour appearing in certain hairs. Although evening is drawing in,

the shadows in the room would not be so deep, were it not for the verandah, which even on clear days shuts out the light, and even now plunges the room into the darkness of night, while immediately outside, between the slow rents in the clouds, the nearby sky still allows itself to be pierced by the last rays which the sun, passing behind the sea, casts into the upper regions of space. Erect in the slender vase, the two roses seem even whiter in the purplish darkness of the room, Raimundo Silva's hands add several indecipherable black lines to the last written page, perhaps in Arabic, if only we had paid attention to the muezzin's cry, the sun lingered on for one long minute, settled on the bright horizon, waiting, then sank from view, too late now for any words. Raimundo Silva's indistinct form gradually merges with the denseness of the shadows while the roses still absorb from the window the almost imperceptible light preserved in the window-panes and bathe therein, at the same time releasing an unexpected scent from the intimate depths of their corollas. Raimundo Silva slowly raises his hands and reaches out to touch them, first the one, then the other, as if two cheeks were touching, a prelude to the gesture that follows, his lips slowly drawing close to the petals, the flower's multiple mouth. Now the telephone must not ring, let nothing interrupt this moment before it is ready to end, tomorrow the soldiers gathered on the Monte da Graça will advance like two pincers, to the east and west, as far as the margin of the river, they will pass under the gaze of Raimundo Silva who lives in the tower north of the Porta de Alfafa, and whenever he looks out on to the terrace, curious, holding a rose in his hand, or two, they will shout up to him from below that it is too late, that this is no longer a time for roses, but for final bloodshed and death. Along this side, in the direction of the Porta de Ferro, will descend the battalion of troops captained by Mem Ramires, amongst his men is Mogueime and when the leader sees and finally recognises him beneath the beard everyone wore at that time, he will call out to him amiably with a broad, medieval smile, Hey there, my friend, I'm afraid these walls are much too high for me to be able to climb back on to your shoulders and throw up a ladder as we did in Santarém to our own benefit and that of our king, and Mogueime, treated with familiarity, but with no intention of questioning his leader's version of the relative position of the constituent parts of that now famous human ladder, reacts as philosophically as that soldier on his way to war who calls out to the general passing in his jeep, If we ever see each other again, it will be a sign that we have both won the war, but if either of us should fail to turn up, then he has lost it, and now raise your shield, your Majesty, for there's a shower of arrows coming this way. Raimundo Silva switched on the table-lamp, the sudden light momentarily appeared to obliterate the roses, then they reappeared as if they had reconstituted themselves, but without any aura or mystery, contrary to what is commonly believed because of those famous words circulated by a botanist, A rose is a rose is a rose, whereas a poet would simply have said, A rose, before contemplating it in silence.

The telephone rang at long last. Raimundo Silva jumped to his feet, pushing back his chair which swayed and fell as he reached the passageway, just ahead of someone who observed him with gentle irony, Whoever would have thought, my dear fellow, that anything like this could happen to us, no, say nothing, save your breath, it's •a waste of

time trying to answer rhetorical questions, we've often discussed this, go, be off you, I'm right behind you, I'm never in a hurry, whatever might be yours one day, will also be mine, I'm the one who always arrives later, I live each moment lived by you, as if I were inhaling your scent of roses preserved only in memory, or, less poetically, your plate of greens and beans, wherein your infancy is constantly being reborn, yet you cannot see it, and would refuse to believe it were you to be told. Raimundo Silva pounced on the telephone, in a moment of doubt he thought, And suppose it isn't her, but it was her, the voice of Maria Sara telling him, You shouldn't have done it, Why not, he asked in dismay, Because from now on I shall be expecting roses every day, I'll see that you're not disappointed, I'm not talking about roses, roses, About what then, No one should be able to give less than they have given before, roses shouldn't appear today and a wilderness tomorrow, There won't be any wilderness, That's only a promise, how can we be sure, How true, we don't know, just as I didn't know that I would send you two roses, while you, Maria Sara, don't know that I have two roses exactly the same as yours here in a vase, on a table where there are written pages about the history of a siege that never happened, beside a window that looks on to a city that does not actually exist as I picture it, It would be nice to see where you live, You probably wouldn't approve, Why not, I can't say, it's a simple apartment, not even that, nothing fancy, me and a few items of furniture that don't match, lots of books, they're my whole life, yet I'm always the outsider, even when I correct a printing error or some mistake made by the author, rather like someone strolling in a park who feels obliged to keep the place tidy and lifts any Utter in sight, then not knowing where to put it, shoves it into his own pocket, that's all I carry with me, dry withered leaves, no fruit worth eating, May I come and visit you, There's nothing I'd like better, he paused for a second before adding, Right now, but, as if regretting what he had just said or feeling he had been tactless, he corrected himself, Forgive me, that was unintentional, and when she remained silent he came out with words he would never have imagined himself ever capable of saying, direct, frank, explicit in themselves, and not because of any game of cautious insinuation, Of course it was intentional, and I'm sorry. She laughed, cleared her throat, My problem in this situation is to know whether I should have blushed before or if I should be blushing now, I can recall having seen you blush once, When, When I touched the rose in your office, Women blush more easily than men, we're the weaker sex, Both sexes are weak, I was also blushing, How come you know so much about the weakness of the sexes, I know my own weakness, and something about the weakness of others, if books are to be trusted, Raimundo, Tell me, As soon as I'm on my feet again, I'll come and see you, but..., And I'll be waiting for you, Such fine words, What do you mean, Once I arrive there, you must go on waiting for me, just as I shall go on waiting for you, meanwhile we still don't know when we shall arrive there, I'll be waiting, Until soon, Raimundo, Don't be long, What will you be doing once we ring off, Camp in front of the Porta de Ferro and pray to the Most Holy Virgin that the Moors don't decide to attack at dead of night, Are you afraid, Trembling with fear, Is it that bad, Before engaging in this battle, I was a simple proof-reader whose only concern was to mark in a deletur correctly in order to make it clear to the author, There seems to be some interference on the line, What you are hearing are

the cries of the Moors shouting threats from up there on the battlements, Look after yourself, Don't worry, I haven't come all this way to die before the walls of Lisbon.

IF WE ACCEPT and rely on the facts as written by the aforementioned Fray Rogeiro in his letter to Osbern, then Raimundo Silva will have to be told not to deceive himself about the presumed easiness of camping, without further ado, in front of the Porta de Ferro or any other gate, for this perverse race of Moors is not so timorous as to have locked themselves in with seven turns of the key without putting up a struggle, relying on a miracle from Allah who is capable of dissuading the Galicians from their evil intentions. Lisbon, as we said before, has houses outside its walls, many houses and villas and not simply for summer retreats, but more like one city surrounding another, and if it is known that, within days, when the encirclement finally becomes a geometrical reality, the military headquarters will be comfortably installed here and all the dignitaries, both military and religious, thus spared the relative discomfort of the tents, now they will have to fight hard in order to expel the Moorish hordes from these delightful suburbs, from street to street, from patio to patio, from terrace to terrace, a battle that will last at least a week, and which the Portuguese only managed to win because they were more numerous on that occasion and because the Moors had not sent out all their battalions and the troops inside could not intervene in the confrontations 'with catapults and beasts for fear of wounding their brothers who, willingly or otherwise, had sacrificed themselves by fighting on the front line. Therefore do not let us censure Raimundo Silva, who, as he himself has never tired of telling us, is merely a simple proof-reader exempt from military service and with no experience of warfare, notwithstanding that amongst his books there is an abridged edition of the works of Clausewitz, bought from an antiquarian bookseller years ago and never opened. Perhaps he wanted to abbreviate his own narrative, considering that, after so many centuries, what counts are the main episodes. Nowadays people have neither the time nor the patience to keep historical data and minutiae in their heads, that might have been all right for the contemporaries of our King Dom Afonso the First, for they clearly had less history to learn, a difference of eight centuries in their favour is no joke, the advantage we enjoy is having computers, we can feed any encyclopaedia or dictionary into them, and hey presto, we no longer need to rely on our memory, but this way of understanding things, let's say it before someone else says it for us, is totally reactionary and quite unacceptable, because the libraries of our parents and grandparents served this very purpose, so that the neopallium should not become overloaded, it already does a great deal for its size, minuscule, buried deep down in the brain, surrounded by circuits on all sides, so when Mem Ramires said to Mogueime, Get ready, for I'm going to climb on to your shoulders, you might think this phrase was not the work of the neopallium, wherein there resides not only the memory of ladders and good soldiers, but also the intelligence, convergence or relationship between cause and effect, something no computer can boast of, because despite knowing everything, it understands nothing. Or so they say.

Lisbon is surrounded at last, the dead have already been removed for burial, the wounded transported with them in the same ships to the other bank of the estuary and from there, carried uphill, some to the cemeteries, others to field hospitals, the latter indiscriminately, the former according to social rank and nationality. In the encampment,

if we discount the sorrow and mourning for the losses suffered, and not all that demonstrative, because these people are stoical and not much given to tears, you can detect much confidence in the future and an exalted faith in the intercession of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who on this occasion need not take the trouble of appearing as He did in Ourique, He has already worked enough wonders by making sure that the Moors, in the haste of their retreat, should have left behind to satisfy the appetite of their enemy, that is to say, ours, generous stocks of wheat, barley, corn and vegetables to feed the entire city, and which for lack of space were stored in open caves halfway up the slope, between the Porta de Ferro and the Porta de Alfafa. And when this fortunate discovery was made, Dom Afonso with a wisdom rare in one so young, at the time he was only thirty-eight, a mere stripling, uttered those famous words which immediately entered the thesaurus of Portuguese sayings, He that saveth his dinner, will have the more for supper, before prudently giving orders that these supplies should be requisitioned before it became necessary to invent another maxim, Better belly burst than good food lost, the best time for rationing is when there is plenty, he concluded.

A week had passed since Raimundo Silva had made his mistaken forecast, that of his first strategy, when he thought that by noon on the day after the troops moved from the Monte da Graça, there would be a simultaneous attack on all the city gates, in the hope of finding a weak spot in the enemy's defence where an entry could be forced, or, of attracting reinforcements to the spot, thus leaving the other fronts unprotected with the obvious consequences. There is nothing more to be said. On paper, all plans seem more or less feasible, however reality has shown its irresistible urge to deviate from what is written on the page and to tear up all plans. It was not simply the fact that the Moors had converted the outskirts into strongholds, this problem had just been solved, although with numerous casualties, the question now is knowing how to penetrate securely locked gates, defended by posses of warriors perched on the towers that flank and protect them, or how to attack the Moors at such a height, beyond the reach of ladders and where the guards are never asleep. In a word, Raimundo Silva is in an excellent position to judge the difficulties of the enterprise, because from his verandah he can see that he would not even need to have an accurate aim to kill or wound any Christians who might try to get near this Porta de Alfafa, were it still here. The news spreads throughout the encampment that disagreements are brewing between their leaders, divided between two operational proposals, the one favouring an immediate assault with all the means at their disposal, starting with a heavy bombardment to drive the Moors off the battlements and ending with the use of huge battering-rams to storm the gates until they cave in, the other less adventurous that defends the setting up of a blockade so tight that not even a rat could leave or enter Lisbon, or, to be more precise, let those who wish leave, but let no one enter, for we shall finally bring the city to its knees. The opponents of the first proposal argue that the outcome, that is to say, the victorious entry into Lisbon, is based on a false premise, namely, the assumption that the bombardment would be enough to drive the Moors off the battlements, This, dear friends, is what is known as counting your chickens before they're hatched, the chances are that the Moors won't budge an inch,

besides all they have to do is to provide themselves with some form of cover, a roof of some kind to afford them shelter, so that in all safety they might shoot us at their ease from above or douse us with boiling oil, as is their wont. Those in favour of an immediate attack insist that to wait for the Moors to succumb to famine would scarcely be worthy of nobles of such high lineage as those present and that it was already an act of undeserved charity to have suggested that they should withdraw, taking with them all their wealth and possessions, now only blood can wash from Lisbon's walls this infamous stain that for more than three hundred and fifty years has contaminated these places which must now be restored to Christ. Having listened to the arguments of both factions, the king finds their proposals unacceptable, for while recognising that it scarcely befits his dignity to wait for the fruit to fall from the tree when ripe, he is not convinced that an attack launched at random will have any effect, even if he were to storm the Moorish gates with all the battering-rams in his realm. Then the knight Heinrich asked to be allowed to remind everyone present that in all the sieges mounted throughout Europe, mobile wooden towers were used to the best possible effect, that is to say, mobile up to a point, because to move anything so gigantic into place requires a multitude of people and animals, what matters is that at the top of the tower, once it has reached the right height, we shall build a cat-walk, which, well-protected from any assaults, will gradually advance towards the wall where our men, like an irresistible torrent, will launch themselves, carrying the nefarious rabble before them without mercy or recourse, and he ended this explanation by telling them, This is only one, amongst many, of the modern strategies Portugal will adopt from other parts of Europe to good effect, although at first you might encounter some difficulty in understanding such modern technology, I myself know enough about building these towers to teach everyone here, Your Highness need only give me orders, confident as I am that when the day comes to distribute honours my contribution will be recorded alongside that of other benefactors on whom Portugal, notwithstanding the defections verified, relied at this decisive moment in her history.

Having listened to these wise words, the king was about to announce his decision when two other crusaders, one from Normandy, the other French, got to their feet and asked to be allowed to intervene, explaining that they, too, were experienced in building towers and were willing to show, there and then, how their competence, not to mention the superiority and economy of their methods, both in terms of design and construction, were just right for this initiative. As for their conditions, they, too, confided in the king's magnanimity and gratitude, thus offering their support to the knight Heinrich, and making his words theirs on the same grounds. This unexpected turn in the debate displeased the Portuguese, whether they were in favour of waiting or of taking immediate action, although for different reasons, both factions only in agreement that they should reject the hypothesis, though alarmingly feasible, that foreigners should get the upper hand, while those who belonged here were reduced to anonymous manual labour, without any right to have their name inscribed on the honorary roll of benefactors. It was true that this idea of building towers was not entirely rejected by those who argued for a passive siege, because it was becoming quite obvious that they could not be built amidst the tumult and

confusion of battle, but patriotic pride had to be given precedence over these considerations, and so they ended up making common cause with those urging prompt and direct action, thus hoping to postpone any acceptance of the foreigners' proposals. Now then, the proof that Dom Afonso Henrique truly deserved to be king, and not just king, but our king, is that like Solomon, another example of enlightened despotism, he knew how to merge conflicting theories into a single strategic plan, by arranging them into a harmonious and logical sequence. First of all, he congratulated those in favour of an immediate attack for their courage and daring, then praised the engineers of towers for their commonsense, enhanced by the modern gifts of invention and creativeness, and finally expressed his gratitude to the others for their admirable wisdom and patience, the enemies of unnecessary risks. This done, he concluded, I have therefore determined that operations will be carried out in the following order, first, a general assault, second, should that fail, the German, French and Norman towers will advance, third, should all fail, to keep up the siege indefinitely, they will have to surrender sooner or later. The applause was unanimous, either because it is only to be expected when a king speaks, or because everyone present was reasonably satisfied with the decision taken, which came to be expressed with three different sayings or mottoes, one for each faction, the partisans of the first group said, The lamp that goes before illuminates twice, those in the second group retorted. The first corn goes to the sparrows, while those in the third group quipped ironically, He who laughs last, laughs best.

The evidence provided by most of the events that have so far constituted the main core of this narrative has convinced Raimundo Silva that it was pointless trying to impose his own point of view even when it stemmed directly, as it were, from that negative introduced into a history which, until he made the change, had remained prisoner of this particular fatality we call facts, whether they make sense in relation to other facts, or inexplicably surface at a determined moment in our state of consciousness. He recognises that his freedom began and ended at that precise moment when he wrote the word Not, that from then on a new and no less imperious fatality had got under way, and that he has no other choice than to try and understand what, having initially appeared to stem from his initiative and reflection, is now seen to have resulted from a mechanism that was, and continues to be, external, of whose functioning he only has the vaguest idea and in whose activity he only intervenes with the aleatory handling of levers and buttons the real function of which escapes him, aware only that this is his role, to be the button or lever moved in their turn at will by the emergence of unexpected impulses, or if predictable and even self-induced, totally unpredictable as regards their consequences, whether immediate or remote. Therefore we can confirm, since he effectively never foresaw that he would write a new history of the siege of Lisbon, as narrated here, that he suddenly finds himself confronted with the outcome of a necessity as implacable as that other, from which he thought he could escape by the simple inversion of a sign only to find himself falling for it once more, now negatively, or, to speak in less radical terms, as if he had written the same music lowering all the notes half a tone. Raimundo Silva is seriously thinking of bringing his narrative to a full stop, of returning the crusaders to the

Tagus, they cannot be far away, perhaps somewhere between the Algarve and Gibraltar, thus allowing the history to materialise without variations, as a mere repetition of the facts, as they appear in manuals and The History of the Siege of Lisbon. He considers that the tiny tree of the Science of Errors he planted has already given its true fruit, or promised it, which was to make this man encounter this woman, and if this has been accomplished let this new chapter begin, just as one interrupts the diary of a sea-voyage at the moment of discovering uncharted land, obviously it is not forbidden to continue writing the diary kept on board, but that would be another story, not that of the voyage which has ended, but that of the discovery and what was discovered. Raimundo Silva suspects, however that such a decision, if he were to take it, would not please Maria Sara, that she would look at him with indignation, not to say an unbearable expression of disappointment. This being so, there will be no final stop in the meantime, only a pause until the announced visit takes place, besides, at this very moment, Raimundo Silva would be incapable of writing another word, since he has lost all composure as he starts imagining that Mogueime on the eve of the planned mass assault, on setting eyes on Lisbon's walls shining in the glow of the flares on the terraces, might have turned his thoughts to a woman he had seen several times in recent days, Ouroana, the concubine of a German crusader, who at this very hour is probably sleeping with her master, up there on the Monte da Graça, almost certainly inside a house on a mat stretched out on cool tiles where no Moor will ever rest again. Mogueime felt stifled inside the tent and came out to get some air, Lisbon's walls illuminated by the bonfires appeared to be made of copper, Let me not die, My Lord, without having savoured life. Raimundo Silva now asks himself what similarities there are between the picture imagined and his relationship with Maria Sara, who is nobody's concubine, if you'll pardon that indelicate word which is no longer relevant in describing sexual mores, after all what she said was, I ended an affair three months ago and since then there have been no more affairs, the situations are obviously different, and we can assume all they have in common is desire, felt as deeply by Mogueime at that time as by Raimundo now, such differences as exist, are purely cultural, yes, Sir.

As he turned over these thoughts in his mind, Raimundo Silva was distracted from his worries by the sudden memory that never at any time had Maria Sara shown any curiosity in his emotional life, to use a phrase that embraces everything. Such indifference, at least formally there was no other name for it, provoked a feeling of resentment, After all, I'm not all that advanced in years, what does she think, and suddenly he realised that he sounded almost childish, yet forgivable since it is well known that men, all of them, are children at heart, his pique aggravated by the ill humour of someone who feels that his virility has been offended. Male pride, foolish pride, he muttered, and the lapidary eloquence of this sound precept was not lost on him. In fact, Maria Sara's attitude might be attributed to her natural discretion, some people are quite incapable of forcing the doors of another's privacy, yet on reflection, this cannot be said of Maria Sara who at all times, from the very beginning, took up the reins and the initiative without a moment's hesitation. So there must be another explanation, for example, Maria Sara might feel that

her frankness should be spontaneously repaid, and, this being so, she might even now be harbouring evil thoughts, such as, Mistrust the man who does not speak and the dog that does not bark. Nor should we rule out the possibility, more in keeping with modern attitudes to morality, that she might consider any eventual liaison he might have as a matter of no importance, in the manner of, I only have to show what I am feeling, no need to find out beforehand if the gentleman is free or not, it's up to him to say. In any case, anyone who has taken the trouble to go through the staff files in order to find a proof-reader's address, might just as easily have used the opportunity to check his marital status, even if the information were out of date. Single is what appears on Raimundo Silva's file, were he to have married later, it is certain that no one would have remembered to register his change of status. Besides, as everyone knows, between the status of bachelor and married, or divorced, or widower, there are a number of other possible situations, before, during and after, capable of being summed up in the replies each of us finds when asked, Whom do I love, independently of loving anyone, naturally including here all the main and secondary variants, whether active or passive.

During the next two days, Maria Sara and Raimundo Silva chatted frequently on the telephone, repeating things they had already said, sometimes marvelling at some new discovery and searching for words to express it better, a feat, as we know, that is practically impossible. It was in the afternoon of the second day that Maria Sara announced, Tomorrow I'm going back to work, I'll leave an hour earlier and call at your apartment. From that moment, Raimundo Silva began to confirm everything that has been said about the childish nature of men, restless, as if he felt the need to get rid of excess energy, impatient of time becoming one of the slowest moving things of this world, capricious too, or stubborn, as Senhora Maria mentally called him, on seeing her cleaning routine upset by the quite absurd demands of a man who was usually so accommodating. She first became suspicious that there might be Moors on the coast when she saw the rose in the vase, and this became a near certainty, albeit a certainty without any object, when the roses became two, finally turning into a firm conviction before the somewhat unseemly agitation of someone who had been on the point of showing a forefinger covered in dust gathered on a door ledge, thus repeating that disagreeable tradition of housewives obsessed with cleanliness. Raimundo Silva only became aware that he must control himself when Senhora Maria asked him provocatively, Would you like me to change the sheets today or can it wait until Friday as usual. Men are not only childish, they are also transparent. Just as well Raimundo Silva was not in the bedroom at that moment, otherwise Senhora Maria would have seen him become flustered, although all she needed as confirmation that she had touched on a sore point was the unmistakable tremor in his voice, readily identified by someone with her keen hearing. I can see no reason for changing the domestic routine, a phrase that failed to deceive her and served to provoke another worry, vague and devious, that tried to check the only words with which he could sincerely express himself, too crude to be introduced into his interior monologue, If we were to end up in bed, will the sheets be clean enough, he would ask, and he does not know the answer, he can hear Senhora Maria with just the

right note of facetiousness, no more no less, I thought you'd want them changed, he sheepishly remains silent, if she wants to change the sheets that is up to her, fate will decide. Only when the cleaner departs will he go and investigate only to discover that the sheets have been laundered, for all her faults, Senhora Maria is a kind-hearted soul, but he cannot make up his mind whether to be pleased or disgruntled. What a complicated life.

Shortly after five, the bell rang. A light, rapid ring, which caused Raimundo Silva to rush to the door as if afraid that it would ring but once only and never again, only in Beethoven's symphony does destiny summon more than once, in life it is different, there are times when we had the feeling that someone was out there waiting, and when we went to see there was no one, and at other times we arrived just a moment too late, not that it mattered, the difference here being that we can go on asking ourselves, Who could it have been, and spend the rest of our life dreaming about this. Raimundo Silva will not need to dream. Maria Sara is there on the threshold and makes her entrance, Hello, she said, Hello, he replied, and both of them lingered in the narrow passageway, rather gloomy now that the door is closed. Raimundo Silva switched on the light, murmuring, Excuse me, as if he had divined a suspicious and equivocal thought going through Maria Sara's mind, What you want is to take advantage of the dark, you think I don't see through you, frankly this much desired visit has got off to a bad start, these two who could be so intelligent and witty on the telephone, have said nothing to each other so far apart from, Hello, it is difficult to believe that after so many implicit promises, this game of roses, these courageous steps she had taken, who can tell whether she is disappointed at the manner in which she is being received. Fortunately, in such difficult situations, the body is quick to understand that the brain is in no fit condition to give orders and acts of its own accord, generally doing what is necessary and by the shortest route, without words, or using only those that have preserved some hint of innocence and spontaneity, this was how Raimundo Silva and Maria Sara found themselves in the study, she has not yet sat down, her hand in his, perhaps neither of them aware that they have been like this since she arrived, all they know is that they are holding hands, his right hand holding her left hand, Maria Sara looks for a chair, and that is when Raimundo Silva, as if there were no other way of detaining her even for an instant, raises her hand to his lips, and it worked, yes, Sir, for the next moment Maria Sara was looking straight at him and he drew her gently towards him, his lips barely grazing her forehead, close to the roots of her hair. So close, and then so far, for she drew back without being brusque, saying as she did so, This is a visit, remember. He gently released her, I remember, he said, and pointed to a chair, There's a little sitting-room next door with more comfortable chairs, but I think you'll feel more at ease in here, and with these words, he went and sat at his desk in the only remaining chair, the two of them separated by the table as if they were in a consulting room, Tell me what's wrong, but Maria Sara said nothing, they both knew that it was up to him to speak, even if only to welcome her. And he spoke. The words came out in a uniform tone, practically devoid of any modulations of persuasion or insinuation, each word intended to count in its own right, because of the naked meaning

it might have at that moment and in those circumstances. I've lived alone in this apartment for many years, there are no women in my life except when the urge becomes irresistible, and even then I feel I'm on my own, I'm a person without any special qualities, normal even in my defects, and I haven't wanted much from life apart from keeping in good health which is a blessing, and not to be without work, these have been my only ambitions and I realise that I might be asking too much, but what I now want from life is something I cannot remember ever having, that taste of life that must surely exist. Maria Sara listened without taking her eyes off him, except for one fleeting moment when her concentration was replaced by an expression of surprise and curiosity, and when Raimundo stopped talking, she said, We're not here to discuss a contract, and besides, there's no need to tell me things I already knew, This is the first time I've mentioned the details of my private life, The things we consider private are nearly always known to everyone, you cannot imagine what one can find out from two or three apparently disinterested conversations, Have you been going around asking questions about me, Only the usual routine inquiries about the proof-readers working for the publishing house simply to form some impression, but people are usually prepared to say more than has been asked of them, they only need a little encouragement, a little prompting without them noticing, I could see you had this ability when we first met, But I only exploit it for the right reasons, Don't think I'm complaining. Raimundo Silva ran his hand over his forehead for a second, then said, I used to dye my hair but no longer, white roots are not a pretty sight, forgive me, in time my hair will get back to its natural colour, Mine has stopped being natural, because of you I went to the hairdresser today to have these venerable white hairs tinted, They were so few I shouldn't have thought it worth the bother, So you did notice, I looked at you closely enough, just as you must have looked at me and asked yourself how a man of my age could be without white hairs, No such question entered my mind, it was obvious that you dyed your hair, who did you think you were deceiving, Probably only myself, Just as I've decided to start deceiving myself, It comes to the same thing, What do you mean by the same thing, Your reason for dyeing your hair, mine for no longer dyeing it, Explain yourself, I stopped dyeing my hair in order to be as I am, And what about me, why have I tinted my hair, To go on being as you are, Smart thinking, I can see that I'll have to practise mental gymnastics daily in order to keep up with you, I'm no more intelligent than you are, simply older. Maria Sara smiled quietly, Irremovable evidence that clearly worries you, Not really, our age only matters in relation to that of others, I suspect I'm young in the eyes of someone who is seventy, but I'm in no doubt that a youth of twenty would consider me an old man. And in relation to me, how do you see yourself, Now that you've tinted the few white hairs you possess and I'm allowing all of mine to show, I've become a man of seventy in the presence of a girl of twenty, You can't count, there is only a difference of fifteen years between us, Then I must be thirty-five, They both laughed and Maria Sara suggested, Let's come to an agreement, What agreement, That we say no more about people's ages, I'll try not to bring up the subject again, You'd better do more than try if you want to hold a conversation with me, I'll speak to the mirror, You can speak to yourself if you wish to, but that isn't why I came here, I suppose it would be presumptuous to ask why you came,

Or impolite, I'm not expressing myself very well, a phrase suddenly slips out and spoils everything, Forget it, you haven't spoilt anything, the fact is that we're both terrified, Suppose I were to get up and give you a kiss, Don't, but if you do, give me no warning, From bad to worse, any other man in this situation would know exactly what to do, Any other man in this situation would have another woman here, I give up, I told you it was only a visit, and I asked you to be patient, I'm prepared to wait but I know what I want, I concede it's important to know what one wants, everybody has these words on their lips, but in my opinion it is much better to want what one knows, it takes more time, of course, and people don't have the patience, Once again, I give in, so what do you suggest I do, You can start showing me your apartment, Tell me how you live and I'll tell you who you are, On the contrary, I'll tell you how you shouldn't live if you tell me who you are, Let me try and tell you who I am, And I'll try to discover how we should live. Raimundo Silva rose to his feet, Maria Sara did the same, he sidled round the desk, drew close, but not too close, he merely touched her on one arm, as if indicating that the visit was about to begin, yet she lingered, looked at the table, the objects on top of it, the lamp, papers, two dictionaries, Is this where you work, she asked, Yes, this is where I work, I see no signs of a certain siege, You're about to see them, the fortress is not simply this study.

We know that there is not much more than this, the bathroom, which until a few weeks ago was also a cosmetics laboratory, the kitchen where he toasted bread and ate the same old frugal meals, the study where we are right now, the sitting-room, inhospitable and abandoned, this door that leads into the bedroom. With his hand on the door-handle, Raimundo Silva appears to hesitate in opening it, he holds back respectfully as if observing some superstition, decidedly a man of another age, who is fearful of offending a woman's modesty by confronting her with the libidinous vision of a bed, even if she herself had asked, Show me your apartment, which allows us to assume that she knew very well what to expect. The door is finally opened, it's the bedroom with its heavy mahogany furniture, in front, standing lengthwise, the bed, the thick, white bedspread, under the pillow, the immaculate folds of the sheet, light filtering in through the window and softening the outline of things, as well as a silence that seems to breathe. We are in April, the evenings are drawn out, the days slow in passing, this probably explains why Raimundo Silva does not switch on the light, not to mention his reluctance to spoil the onset of twilight, which in its turn, makes him feel uneasy lest Maria Sara should misunderstand his intentions, we know all too well, from experience or hearsay, how often one can be dazzled along the path of obscurity, in the depths of darkness. Maria Sara immediately spotted the two roses in a vase on the tiny table by the window, and the sheets of paper, one half-written in the middle, to the left a little pile of sheets, now Raimundo had to switch on the lamp to create an atmosphere, but decided not to, he was standing right at the foot of the bed, as if he were trying to hide it from view, and waited for words, trembling as he tried to imagine what words might be spoken, he was not thinking of gestures or actions, only of words, here, in this room.

Maria Sara went up to the table. For several seconds she remained there without moving, as if waiting for the guide to follow on with a detailed description, he might say, for example, Look at the flowers, and she would have to avert her eyes, show some interest in the roses, the matching pair of those others in her apartment, and then she would make an understanding allusion, a discreet expression perhaps of loving sentiments, Our roses, accentuating the pronoun, but he remains silent and she does nothing except look at the half-written page, she does not need to be told that these are the signs of the siege, still indecipherable in the dim light despite the chronicler's neat handwriting. She realises that Raimundo will not speak, much as she would wish and at the same time does not wish that he should say something, that anything should break this uncanny silence, but that something should happen to prevent another world from irrupting into the one in which we find ourselves, perhaps death itself, the only other world, in fact, which, poised between the Martian and the terrestrial, will always have something in common with life. At just the right moment, she drew back the chair a little and sat down, with her left hand she switches on the lamp, the light covers the table and casts a halo of faint and impalpable mist over the entire room. Raimundo Silva has not moved, he tries to analyse the vague impression that with her gesture Maria Sara has just taken material possession of something previously possessed in her mind, and he suddenly thinks that, however long he may live, he will never experience another moment such as this, no matter how often she might return to this apartment and this room, even if, an absurd idea, they were to spend the rest of their lives here. Maria Sara has made no attempt to touch the paper, her hands are folded in her lap, and she reads from the first line, ignorant of what has been written on the previous page, and on the pages before that, where the history begins, she reads as if these ten lines embraced everything she had to know about life, a final judgment, one last summary, or, on the contrary, sealed orders where she will find instructions about the new route to be navigated. She finished reading, and, without turning round, asks, Who is this Ouroana, and this Mogueime, who is he, their names were written there and little else, as we know. Raimundo Silva took two short steps in the direction of the table and came to a halt, I'm still not sure, he said and fell silent, after all, he should have guessed that Maria Sara's first words would be to inquire who these two were, these, those, whosoever else, in a word, us. Maria Sara seemed satisfied with the reply, she was an experienced enough reader to know that the author only knows what his characters have been, even then not everything, and very little of what they will become. Raimundo Silva said, as if he were replying to an observation made aloud, I doubt whether they could be called characters, People in books are characters, objected Maria Sara, As I see them they belong somewhere in between, free in a different way, so that it would not make sense to talk either about the character's logic or about the contingent necessity of the person, If you can't tell me who they are, at least tell me what they do, He's a soldier who took part in the conquest of Santarém, she was picked up in Galicia to become a crusader's concubine, So there's a love intrigue, If you can call it that, Why the uncertainty, It's just that I don't know how people loved at that time, that's to say, I'm capable of imagining their feelings, but I have no idea or any certain knowledge of how the common man and

woman expressed their feelings in those days, language, in this case, would not have been an obstacle, both of them spoke Galician, Invent a love story without any amorous words, sans mots d'amour, assuming such a thing is possible, From what I've seen and read, I very much doubt it, at least in real life, And what about this Ouroana, as the concubine of a crusader who was presumably a nobleman, how does she come to end up with Mogueime, Life takes many twists and turns, we humans even more so, and the last of them is death, crusader Heinrich, as he is called, will soon meet his death, Oh, so this crusader of yours is the same character mentioned in that other History of the Siege of Lisbon, Precisely, Then you'll also narrate the miracles he worked after his death, Too good an opportunity to miss, The miracle of the two mutes, Yes, but with a slight modification, and Raimundo Silva's reply was accompanied by a smile. Maria Sara rested her hand on the small pile of paper, May I look, she asked, Surely you don't want to read this right now, besides I've a long way to go yet, the history is incomplete, I shouldn't have the patience to wait, besides there aren't all that many sheets, Please, not today, But I'm curious to know how you solved the problem of the crusaders' refusal, Tomorrow, I'll make some photocopies and bring them to your office, Fine, that's settled, since I cannot persuade you otherwise. She got up, Raimundo Silva was very close, It's getting late, said Maria Sara, looking towards the window, Could you open it, she asked, Don't worry, said Raimundo Silva, I won't do you any harm, bearing in mind that you're paying me a visit and nothing more, You might also bear in mind that you're talking nonsense, I want some air and would like to see the view of the city from here, that's all.

There was a gentle twilight, the coolness of evening barely perceptible. Side by side, their elbows resting on the balcony, Maria Sara and Raimundo Silva watched in silence, conscious of each other's presence, the arm of the one feeling the arm of the other, and, little by little, the warmth of their blood. The pounding of Raimundo Silva's heartbeat echoed in his ears, that of Maria Sara threatened to shake her from head to foot. His arm drew closer, hers remained where it was, expectant, but Raimundo Silva dared go no further as fear crept in, I might make a mess of things, he thought, he could not see clearly, or did not want to, what was there to mess up, but this very uncertainty only served to increase his panic. Maria Sara could feel his entire being recoil like a snail withdrawing ever deeper into the protection of its shell, and she remarked cautiously, It's a nice view. The first lights appeared in the windows where the last rays of daylight still lingered, the street-lamps had just come on, someone in the nearby Largo dos Lóios spoke in a loud voice, someone replied, but the words were incomprehensible, Raimundo Silva asked, Did you hear them, Yes, I did, It was difficult to make out what they were saying, The same here, I didn't understand a word they said, We'll never know to what extent our lives would change if certain phrases, heard but elusive, had been understood, Much better, in my opinion, to start by not pretending that we did not understand those other words which were clear and direct, You're quite right, but there are some people, the dreamers, who prefer doubt to certainty, who are much less interested in the object than in its traces, in the footprints in the sand rather than in the animal that left them behind, You are clearly one of them, Up to a point, although I must remind you that it

was not my idea to write this new history of the siege, Let's say that I sensed I had the right person before my very eyes, Or that, wisely, you prefer not to be responsible for his dreams, Would I be here if this were true, I suppose not, The difference being that I do not look for footprints in the sand, Raimundo Silva knew that he did not need to ask what it was that Maria Sara was looking for, now he could put his arm around her shoulders, as if unintentionally, a simple gesture, nothing other than fraternal for the moment, allowing her to react, perhaps gently relax her body, perhaps, as one might say, curl up, letting her body curve ever so slightly to one side, her head a trifle bent, awaiting the next gesture. Or she might become tense, protesting silently, anxious that he should see that it was still too soon, So when, Raimundo Silva was asking himself, forgetful of the fear he had felt, After what we've just said, what we've explicitly promised each other, the logical thing would have been, at least, to embrace and kiss, yes, at the very least. He straightened up as if suggesting that they should go back inside, but she continued to lean over the balcony, and he asked her, Don't you feel cold, No, not at all. Fighting back his impatience, he went back to his former position, without knowing what he could talk about, perversely imagining that she was amusing herself at his expense, it was all so much easier when he telephoned her at home, but he could not very well say to her, Go home and I'll call you. Then it occurred to him that he might get out of this embarrassing situation if he were to touch on some neutral topic, That building over there occupies the very spot where one of the towers defending the gate in this locality once stood, you can still see the markings on the ground, And the other tower, where was that, for there must have been two, Right here, where we are, Are you sure, Not absolutely sure, but there is every indication that I'm right, considering what we know about the former plan of this section of the walls, Well then, here on this tower, what are we, Moors or Christians, For the time being, Moors, we're here precisely to prevent the Christians from entering, We won't succeed, nor will it be necessary to await the end of the siege, have you seen the tiled panels depicting the miracles of St Antony at the entrance to the street, Abominable, You mean the miracles, No, the tiles, Why is this street called the Milagre de Santo Antonio, when on the panels alone there are three, I can't answer that, perhaps the saint worked a special miracle for the city fathers, Milagres de Santo Antonio would certainly sound nicer, but the one thing we mustn't do is to imagine that St Antony might have helped with the conquest of Lisbon in any military sense for he wasn't even born then, Two of the miracles on the panels are familiar, the apparition of the Child Jesus and that of the broken pitcher, the third one I don't recognise, there's a horse or a donkey, I didn't pay much attention, It's a donkey, How do you know, I have it here in a book, an old manuscript dating from the eighteenth century which describes all the miracles including this one, Tell me about it, You'd better read it for yourself, Another time, When, I can't say, tomorrow, after tomorrow, one day. Raimundo Silva took a deep breath, he could not pretend that he had not understood these words and he swore in his heart that he would definitely remind Maria Sara of them, as a definite promise demanding to be fulfilled. He felt so happy, so relaxed and free, that without thinking, he placed his hand on her shoulder and said, No, I'll read you the story about the donkey, come inside, Is it long, Like any story it can be told in ten words, or a hundred, or a thousand, or never

end.

Raimundo Silva closed the window and went to his desk. Maria Sara could hear him muttering, It isn't here, where the devil have I put it, and then he went into the sitting-room, opened and closed the doors of the bookcase, finally announcing, Here it is. He reappeared with a quarto manuscript bound in leather, old in appearance, almost certainly the original text, and he came back with the satisfied expression of someone who has searched and found, but not just the book, You'll be more comfortable sitting down, he said, whereupon she sat on the chair by the table, her hand resting on the sheet of paper where the names of Ouroana and Mogueime were written, he remained standing, looked much younger, and happy, Now listen carefully, for this is interesting, I'll start with the title, here it goes, Sun Risen in the West and Set at Sunrise, St Antony, the Greatest Portuguese Luminary in the Firmament of the Church Between the Minor Constellations in the Sphere of Fransisco, A Historic and Panegyricl Précis of His Exemplary Life and Prodigious Deeds, Written and Offered to the Most Serene, August, Sublime, and Sovereign Family of the Royal House of Portugal, Whose Illustrious Names and Surnames are Complimented and Adorned with the Sacred Denominations of Fransiscos and Antonios, by the most Reverend Antonio Teixeira Alveres of His Majesty's Council, May God Protect him, Judge of the Royal Court of Appeals, Member of the General Council of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, Doctoral Canon in the Cathedral of Coimbra, and Distinguished Emeritus Professor in the Faculty of Canon Law, etcetera, Brás Luís de Abreu, from the left bank of the Tagus, Member of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, whew. Maria, Sara laughed, If I've understood correctly, the author of this admirable work is this Brás Luís de Abreu, from the left bank of the Tagus, Yes, you've understood correctly, congratulations, now listen, page one hundred and twenty-three, pay attention, I'm about to start, On hearing the news that some Provinces of that Realm, the realm in question being France, had become infected by this disease, this heretical depravity, as explained several lines above, Antonio de Lemonges left for Toulouse, a city as rich in trade as in vices, and worst of all, a pestilent hotbed of the Sacramental Heretics who deny the real presence of Christ in the Consecrated Host. The Saint was no sooner placed in this den of apostasy than he began to descend into the area of conflicts, only so that he might ascend in the chariot of triumphs. Fired with the burning zeal of God's glory and the infallible truths of his faith, he hoisted the flags of doctrine on the banners of charity, on the shields of penance the arms of the Cross, and transformed into the Evangelical Trumpet of the Divine Word, he raised voices to eradicate vices. His implacable hatred for the Heretics was matched only by his untiring activity driven by zeal. Everything was sacrificed on the altars of Faith, victims of his cruelty, like someone who with so many truths had exposed life for death, his affections for martyrdom. Those Birds of ill omen who, living in the dark night of their errors, only surrender their obstinate pride to the weapons of light, took care to concoct secret poisons against his life, diabolical wiles against his honour, infernal machinations against his reputation, seeking, as far as the powers of their malice would permit, to discredit and obscure the lights of so much doctrine, the triumphs of so much Sanctity. St Antony began to preach to the

applause and admiration of all Catholics, and all the more so because, recognising that he was a Foreigner, they heard him speak in their own language with such eloquence and ease that he appeared to have become naturalised in an idiom which, like him, had taken root in people's affections. The news soon spread of the wonderful effect his words were having on Souls, and the Preaching Heretics, once they saw the damage being done to their reputation by this new preacher who was attracting many converts, with that arrogance and presumption so characteristic of this rabble, decided to engage in a mercurial debate with Antony, relying on their specious fallacies to achieve a resounding victory.

So far no signs of the donkey, said Maria Sara. At that time the paths of the world were awkward and those of writing even more so, observed Raimundo Silva, and he went on, To achieve their objective, they enlisted the services of a distinguished Dogmatist from Toulouse, the most capable and respected of scholars, named Guialdo, fearless, presumptuous and overbearing, deeply versed in Holy Scripture and with an excellent command of Hebrew, a sharp wit and fiery temperament, and well-prepared for the most testing debates. The Saint did not reject the letter of challenge in order to satisfy the duel of Faith, putting all his trust in God as the only Agent of his cause. He fixed the day and the place for the contest. A huge crowd gathered of both Catholics and Sectarians. The Heretic spoke before Antony, for Malice has always prevailed on the world stage, ranting on with vain ostentation about his ill-used learning, and introducing torrents of verbiage with all the loquaciousness of captious syllogisms. The Saint listened patiently to this flood of words, full of artifice, devoid of truth, and then proceeded to refute his depraved errors, with so many quotations from Holy Scripture, enhanced by such clear reasoning, by such convincing arguments and pertinent words that the Heretic's obstinacy was soon overcome, as much for the worn-out discourses of reason, if he had not held out firmly, as for the diabolical caprices of the will. I shall not go into detail about the subtle arguments with which Antony ennobled this battle of wits, because superior to the narrative, they succumb to the silence of history like the mysteries of fame, suffice it to say that he spoke so wisely that he surpassed himself, his success all the more glorious as it had appeared to be impossible. Now listen carefully, Maria Sara, you can already hear the sound of the donkey's hooves. The perverse Dogmatist found himself humiliated and confounded on seeing himself defeated in the presence of those very same followers who with so much pride had hoped to see his deceptions prevail. And on seeing the artificial mesh of his fraudulent sophistries undone, he began to test the Saint's modesty and humility with this malicious discourse, Now then, Father Antony, enough of speeches, conceits and disputes, time we turned to deeds, and since as a beloved son of the Roman Catholic Church you believe in miracles, which as confirmation of the Articles of Faith were in remote times the most powerful motives for cautious belief, I should acknowledge my acceptance of the article of faith proclaiming the Real Presence of Christ's body in the Sacrament if God were to work some miracle. Antony, who in order to emerge victorious from all conflicts, always had God by his side, confidently replied, I'm happy to oblige, and confide in the mercy of my Lord Jesus Christ, who, in order to win

over your soul and that of so many others, with shameful blindness following the impious Dogmas of their errors, will manifest his divine power on behalf of-Catholic truth. Responding to this bold and holy resolution, the Heretic told him, It must be left to me to choose the miracle. I keep a donkey on my property. If the donkey after not having eaten or drunk for three days, will, in the sight of the Sacred Host, not so much as look at food however much it is coaxed, I shall firmly accept Christ's presence in the Holy Sacrament as an infallible truth. Moved by Divine inspiration, the Saint at once saw in the proposed event a cause for quiet confidence in victory, and the only disquiet to invade his heart was that of excitement. And confident that this was so much God's cause, he felt certain of victory, preparing for the contest both with the arms of Humility, and the escutcheon of Prayer.

I feel quite nervous, said Maria Sara, with the solemnity of the moment, and with the vernacular, but this so-called escutcheon strikes me as being the most awful gallicism, Just so, and lest we forget that flaws are to be found everywhere, let us continue, The appointed day arrived, a vast crowd assembled on both sides, that of the Catholics, confident but humble, that of the Heretics, not simply incredulous but presumptuous. Antony celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in the nearest Church, and taking the Consecrated Host into his hands with all due reverence, went out to where the starving Beast stood warily. They brought before its eyes and up close to its mouth a ration of ripe barley, as the Saint said aloud in a commanding voice, In the virtue and name of Jesus Christ, Whom I am holding in my unworthy hands, I order you, irrational creature, to reject this sustenance so that you may pay due homage to your Creator and mankind might be persuaded to abandon its wilful stubbornness and embrace the truths of the Roman Catholic Faith, convinced by the less stubborn instinct of Beasts. Antony had not quite finished uttering these words, when the foul beast, belying its true nature by rejecting the food it had started to devour, and overcoming its pressing hunger, came up to the Saint and kneeling before him, paid homage to Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, to the astonishment and wonder of all those present. All gathered there, witnessed this wondrous spectacle with tears in their eyes, but with varying reactions, for what were tears of devotion and tenderness in the Catholics, were tears of compunction and remorse in the Heretics. The Catholics celebrated the triumphs of Faith while most of the Heretics deplored the errors of the Sect, only one or two rebels, in the face of the evidence, clung to their cherished absurdities and appeared to court disgrace. But they could not deny their amazement, so that those very men who before the contest were predicting triumphs, were so petrified by events that they became like the first statues erected to commemorate the victory.

Raimundo Silva paused to observe, The following paragraph describes the conversion of Guialdo along with his relatives and friends, I'll spare you this passage, but what you must hear is the peroration, How admirable the enduring virtue of St Antony. A virtue capable of transforming Beasts into humans to confound Mankind. David complained that the irrational servants were only familiar with the stable where they found sustenance,

while ignoring their Lord who provided for them, but on this occasion by order of St Antony, the ingratitude of its nature forgotten, this grateful living creature's scorned sustenance and the stable in order to worship the true Lord who had given it both life and nourishment. Oh blessed Animal. You have now shown that judicious Beasts do exist, for you have given due warning to so many brutish Men. Once in Bethlehem, you refrained from munching the hay in order to protect the new-born Jesus, now in Toulouse you refrain from eating barley in order to worship God in the Holy Sacrament. You ignored the hay in the Manger in order to adore the Child Jesus made manifest in the house of bread, you ignored the barley during the contest in order to venerate Christ concealed in the substance of bread. You have thus shown yourself capable of reason and deserve our applause. Your instinct may be fantasy, but has all the appearance of discourse, your notions may not be reasoning, yet seems akin to understanding. Deprived of memory, you appear to know what you are venerating, deprived of willpower, you show affection for what you adore, without understanding, you appear to discover judgment in what you know. St Antony worked two miracles in you with a single prodigy that might be infinitely prodigious in this one portent. He made your brute instinct look like a rational idea because you adored, he made your bestial hunger look like penitential abstinence because you did not eat. There were not simply two surprises, because there were many more brutes present on this occasion. Guialdo was blind in his acceptance of that mystery, slow to show Faith in that presence, but Antony's faith opened his eyes before this singular miracle, Guialdo's faith stirred when confronted with this wonder never before witnessed. Behold how a single action by sovereign St Antony brought about three incredible miracles, because thrice refined in virtue whereby one became triple, because thrice miraculous in its works in that single miracle it became a wondrous superlative. Amen.

Raimundo Silva closed the formidable book with a gesture of mock solemnity and repeated, Amen. Does this amen appear in the author's discourse, or was it introduced by you, asked Maria Sara, An oratorical bombast such as this demanded no less, What a strange world it must have been, that such things should have been believed and written, I'd prefer to say in which such things are not written, but believed even today, We're positively mad, Do you mean us, No, I was referring to people in general, I'm one of those people who thinks that human beings have always been mentally deranged, As platitudes go, that isn't bad, Perhaps it will sound less like a platitude if I tell you that in my opinion, madness is the result of the shock produced in man by his own intelligence and we still haven't recovered from the trauma three million years later, So, according to this hypothesis of yours, we're going from bad to worse, I'm no fortune-teller but I fear so. He went to put the book on the table just as Maria Sara was getting to her feet, they stood facing each other, neither can escape nor wants to. He took her by the shoulders, the first time he had touched her in this way, she raised her head, her eyes were shining brightly, caught by the dim light of the lamp, and whispered, Say nothing, not a word, don't tell me that you like me, that you love me, simply give me a kiss. He drew her gently towards him without their bodies touching, and slowly leaned forward until his lips

touched hers, at first the merest touch, the most delicate contact, and then, after some hesitation, their mouths quickly opened, their sudden kiss total, intense, and eager. Maria Sara, Maria Sara, he murmured, not daring to use other words, but she made no reply, perhaps she still did not know how to say Raimundo, for anyone who thinks it is easy to pronounce a name for the first time when you're in love, is much mistaken. Maria Sara drew back, he tried to hold on to her, but she shook her head, moved away, slipped quietly from his arms, I must go, she said, give me my coat, it's in the study, and my bag, please. When Raimundo Silva returned, she was holding a sheet of paper in her hand and smiling, The world is full of such madmen, she said, and Raimundo Silva replied, Mogueime, I can see him below, in front of the Porta de Ferro, awaiting the order to attack, Ouroana, now that dusk has fallen, will be summoned to the knight Heinrich's tent so that he might take his pleasure, as for us, we're the Moors up here on a tower where we think we can watch destiny advance. Maria Sara took her coat, without putting it on, and her bag, and made for the bedroom door. He accompanied her, tried once more to detain her, No, she said, losing no time in opening the door on to the landing, from where she announced, I'll be back tomorrow, there's no need to bring me the photocopies at the office, and please, no telephone calls.

Raimundo Silva scarcely ate any dinner and stayed up late writing, when the time came to go to bed he realised he would be incapable of turning down the covers, of lying on those laundered sheets, or so much as disturbing the pillow on top of the bolster. He took two extra covers from the wardrobe and carried them into the sitting-room, improvised a bed on the narrow divan and settled down to sleep.

IT IS GENERALLY CONSIDERED a show of unsurpassable bravura when a man condemned to death himself gives the firing squad the order to shoot, and even the most peaceful or cowardly of us, attended by favourable circumstances, at some time must have dreamed of this glorious demise, especially if someone survived to tell the tale, for glories without anyone to narrate them are valued less. In fact, it is necessary to have come into the world with nerves of steel, or, if shaky and cracking, to be possessed of a patriotic or similar zeal beyond the ordinary, to cry out with a hoarse and then for ever afterwards silent voice, Fire, somehow alleviating the conscience of the assassins from any sense of guilt, while elevating our own conscience in one last glow to the sublime heights of sacrifice and total abnegation. It is possible that the common spectacle of such gestures, especially when transferred to the screen, contributes to an exaltation capable of turning the most mediocre person into a hero, only by chance absent from the scene of the drama, precisely because they decided to come to the cinema today, to see, one minute feigned, the next real, how the famous actor simulated death or how, with the realism of a documentary, an executed man without a name died for good. There is no hint of malice in this doubt, only what we assume to be true, that no one condemned to the electric chair, gallows, guillotine, garrote or stake will have given the order to switch on the current, open the trap-door, release the blade, turn the screw, or spark the match, perhaps because such deaths are so undignified, including those with the longest tradition in art, perhaps because they lack the military factor, the institution of arms, where heroism is more readily found, for even when the condemned man was no more than a common civilian, the shots he received in the chest turned out to be a ransom for his mediocrity and were the viaticum, the safe-conduct, thanks to which he will be permitted, when the time comes, to enter the paradise of heroes, without any wrangling over meaning and cause, for there one loses any notion of these differences on earth.

This lengthy circumlocution had no other justification than to show how, in all innocence, it can happen that a person gives voice to his own death, even if it should not be imminent, and how, in this case, words spoken in piety are transformed into enraged serpents that would not turn back for anything in this world. It was noon, and the muezzins had climbed up on to the balcony of the minarets to summon the faithful to prayer, because although the city is under siege and plunged into the turmoil of warfare, the rites of worship must not be neglected, and although the muezzin of the great mosque knew that he could be seen on all sides by the Christian soldiers, especially by those besieging the nearby Porta de Ferro, he remained unconcerned, firstly because he was not so close that he might be hit by a stray javelin, secondly because his own words would protect him from any danger, La ilaha ilia llah, he was about to cry out, Allah is the one and only God, and what good would it do him if he were not in the end. At this moment, positioned before the five gates, the Portuguese forces no sooner hear this cry than they launch a general and simultaneous attack, the first of the three strategic points, as we know, drawn up in the definitive plan of combat, as established by our good king after consulting his chief of staff. Out of habit, we might be tempted to describe this ironic touch of putting the order to attack into the mouths of the unsuspecting Moors as

Machiavellian, but Machiavelli was not even born at this time nor did any of his ancestors, contemporary or preceding the conquest of Lisbon, distinguish themselves internationally in the art of deception. The utmost care has to be taken in the use of words, never using them before the epoch in which they came into the general circulation of ideas, otherwise we shall immediately be accused of an anachronism, which, amongst the reprehensible acts in the terrain of writing, is second only to plagiarism. In fact, if we had been as important a nation then as we are today, then it would not have been necessary to wait three centuries for Machiavelli to enrich the practice and vocabulary of political astuteness, and without further ado, we would describe this ingenious stroke as obsolete, Allah is the one and only God cries the muezzin, and, as one man, the Portuguese, shouting their heads off to summon their courage, advance steadily on the city gates, even though the most ordinary observer, so long as he is impartial, could not fail to notice a certain lack of conviction in the advancing armies, as if disbelieving that with so little they might get so far. It is true that the bows and the crossbows fired a veritable shower of arrows and other missiles over the battlements in order to drive back the guards and to give some respite to the assailants on the front line so that they might attempt to break down the gates with axes and hammers, while others, manning the heavy battering-rams, push them forward in a regular rhythm, but the Moors refused to give way, firstly because they were protected by the shelters they had built, and then, when these began to burn, set alight by flaming torches tied to the larger javelins, they came crashing down on to the heads of the Portuguese, who were forced to retreat, scorched like pigs after slaughter. Once they had put out some of the more dangerous fires, which meant that some of Mem Ramires's soldiers had to dive into the waters of the estuary, from where they emerged shivering and pleading for ointments, the artillery launched another barrage of missiles, this time more cautious, and preferring to use stones and missiles of hardened clay, for those fiendishly wicked Moors hit us back with our own munitions, causing at least one Portuguese soldier to die, showing that no man escapes his destiny, when a javelin was thrown back which he himself had been the first to aim.

From the balcony of the minaret, the muezzin heard the fateful turmoil, so different from the uproar of animated voices that had reached his ears in that very same spot, when the crusaders departed. This time he did not need to come rushing down to find out what was happening, he knew all too well that the battle was starting up again after the pause following the loss of the nearby suburb, but he was not worried, the cries he heard coming from his brethren were not those of despair and defeat, but of courage, that is how they sounded to him, and he knew he was right because, being blind, he had been compensated with the keenest of hearing which did not abandon him even in old age. On the other minarets throughout the city, the muezzins were probably hearing the same uproar, some six, eight, ten blind men assigned to other mosques and perched between heaven and earth in total darkness. All of them were responsible for this attack, they were the ones who had given the order, but, innocent as they were, they did not connect the words spoken with their obvious effect, each of them no doubt saying to himself,

what a coincidence, and preferring to think, as the echoes of their holy summons to prayer continued to hover in the air, although already mingled with the howls and curses of the combatants, that it was as if the palpable presence of Allah were protecting the city, an enormous cupola made from the myriads of other vibrant little cupolas that were descending all the way down the slope from the castle as far as the river, while all around, the God of the Christians appears to have been lacking in enough shields to defend his sceptical soldiers from the missiles raining down from on high. Startled by the commotion, dogs are barking on these slopes, they run for shelter and start burying bones, their instinct must serve some purpose when even people endowed with judgment can foretell evil times ahead.

This allusion to Moorish dogs, that is to say, the dogs that still lived with the Moors at the time, clearly in their condition as the most impure of animals, but who would soon begin to feed with their foul flesh on the emaciated bodies of the human creatures of Allah, this allusion, as we were saying, reminded Raimundo Silva of the dog on the Escadinhas de'São Crispim, unless, on the other hand, it was an unconscious memory on his part, that led to the introduction of the allegorical picture with that brief commentary about judgment and instinct. As a rule, Raimundo Silva boards the tram at the Portas do Sol, although the distance is greater, and he comes back the same way. If we were to ask him why he does it, he would reply that because he has such a sedentary occupation, it is good for him to walk, but that is not entirely true, the fact is that he would not mind descending the hundred and thirty-four steps, gaining time and benefiting from those sixty-seven flexions of each knee, if, out of male pride, he did not also feel obliged to climb up them with the inevitable weariness everyone suffers if they pass this way, as we can see from the small number of mountaineers around. A reasonable compromise would be to go down that way as far as the Porta de Ferro and come back up by the longer but easier route, but to do this would mean acknowledging, all too clearly, that his lungs and legs are no longer what they were, a mere assumption, because the period when Raimundo Silva was in his prime does not come into this history of the siege of Lisbon. On the two or three occasions that he took this route down in recent weeks, Raimundo Silva did not encounter the dog, and thought to himself that, tired of waiting for even the barest ration from the miserly neighbours, the dog had emigrated to richer pastures, or had simply given up the ghost when it could wait no longer. He remembered his act of charity and told himself that he could have done it more often, but when it comes to dogs, you know what it is like, they live with the fixation of acquiring a master, to encourage and feed them is to have them at your feet for evermore, they stare at us with that neurotic anxiety and there is no other solution than to put a collar round their neck, pay for a licence and take them home. The alternative would be to leave them to die of hunger, so slowly that there would be no room for remorse, and, if possible, on the Escadinhas de'São Crispim, where no one ever passes.

News arrived that another burial site had been consecrated on a plain facing the fortress, beneath the slope on the left-hand side of the royal encampment, because of

the work involved in transporting corpses across ravines and marshes as far as the Monte de'São Fransisco, who arrived more battered than a load offish and, in this hot weather, smelling worse than the living. As with this new site for burial, the cemetery of'São Vicente is divided into two sections, Portuguese on one side, foreigners on the other, to all appearances a waste of space yet responding, in the final analysis, to that desire for occupation inherent in human nature, and in this sense serving both the living and the dead. When his hour comes, knight Heinrich will end up here, for whom that other hour is at hand when he will prove the tactical excellence of the assault towers, now that direct attacks on gates and walls have met with failure, the first item on the strategic plan. What he does not know, nor could anyone have told him, is that the moment the hopeful eyes of the soldiers are upon him, with the exception of the envious who already existed even then, this very moment, on the threshold of glory, will be that of his unfortunate death, unfortunate in military terms, let's say, because to that other and greater glory, was finally destined he who had come from so far away. But let us not precipitate. The thirty native casualties who lost their lives during the attempted assault on the Porta de Ferro still have to be buried, their corpses will be transported by boat to the other bank of the estuary then carried uphill on improvised litters made from rough pieces of wood. On the edge of the common grave they will be stripped of any clothing that might be used by the living, unless they are much too bloodstained, and even these will be snatched up by the less scrupulous and squeamish, so that generally speaking the dead are lowered into their grave as naked as the earth that receives them.

Lined up, with their bare feet touching the first fringe of mud kept moist and soft by the high tides and waves, the corpses are subjected to the stares and taunts of the victorious Moors up on the battlements, as they lie there waiting to be carried on board. There is some delay in transporting them because there are more volunteers than are actually needed, which may seem surprising when the task is so painful and lugubrious, even if we take into account the enticement of being rewarded with clothing, but in fact everyone is trying to get hired as a boatman or drover, because just recently, there alongside the cemetery, prostitutes have gathered from the ravines and outlying districts where they were awaiting the outcome of the war, if it were to be a case of *veni, vidi, vici*, any precarious arrangement would do, but if it turned out to be a long, drawn-out siege, as looks likely, forcing them to look for greater comfort, they would select some shady spot out of the heat where they might rest from their labours, and set up some wattle huts and use branches to make an awning, for a bed requiring nothing more than an armful of hay or entwined plants which in time will turn to humus and merge with the ashes of the dead. It would not take much learning to observe, as much today as in those medieval times, despite the Church's disapproval of classical similes, how Eros and Thanatos were paired off, in this case with Hermes as intermediary, for it was common practice to use the clothes of the dead to pay for the services of women who, being in the infancy of their art and the nation as yet in its early stages, still accompanied the raptures of their clients with genuine pleasure. Confronted with this, the following discussion will come as no surprise, *I'll go, I'll go*, which is not a sign of compassion for

their lost comrades nor a pretext to escape the contingencies on the front line of battle for a few hours, but rather the insatiable cravings of the flesh, their gratification dependent, would you believe it, on the likes and dislikes on the part of some sergeant-major.

And now let us take a little stroll past this line-up of filthy, bloodstained corpses, lying shoulder to shoulder as they await embarkation, some with their eyes still open and staring heavenwards, others who with half-closed eyelids appear to be suppressing an irresistible urge to burst out laughing, a grim spectacle of festering sores, of gaping wounds devoured by flies, no one knows who these men are or might have been, their names known only to their closest friends, either because they hailed from the same place, or because thrown together as they faced the same dangers, They died for the fatherland, the king would say if he were to come here to pay his last respects, but Dom Afonso Henriques has his own corpses there in his encampment without having to travel all this way, his speech, were he to make it, should be interpreted as that of someone contemplating on equal terms all those who more or less at this hour await despatch, while important matters are being discussed, such as who should be hired as crew or assigned to the cemetery as grave-diggers. The army will not need to inform the relatives of the deceased by telegram, In the fulfilment of his duty, he fell on the field of honour, undoubtedly a much more elegant way of putting it than by simply explaining, His head was smashed in by a heavy stone that some bastard of a Moor threw down from above, the fact is that these armies do not as yet keep a register, the generals, at best, and somewhat vaguely, know that at the outset they had twelve thousand men and that from now on what they must do is to discount so many men each day, a soldier in the front line scarcely needs a name, Listen, simpleton, if you draw back, you'll get a thick ear, and he did not draw back, and the stone came hurtling down and he was killed. He was called Galindo, it's this fellow here, in such a sorry state that even his own mother would not recognise him, his head smashed in on one side, his face covered in congealed blood, and on his right lies Remígio, pierced with arrows, two side by side, because the two Moors who targeted him at the same time had the eye of an eagle and the strength of Samson, but the delay is no disadvantage, their turn will come within the next few days when they too will be exposed to the sun as they await burial inside the city, which being under siege means they cannot get to the cemetery where the Galicians have carried out the most wicked acts of profanation. In their favour, if such a thing can be said, the Moors only have the farewells of their families, the loud lamentations of their womenfolk, but this, who knows, could be even worse for the morale of the soldiers, subjected to a spectacle of tears of sorrow and suffering, of mourning without consolation, My son, my son, while in the Christian encampment only the men are involved, for the women, if there are any, are there for other reasons and purposes, to open their legs for the first man who turns up, whether a soldier be dead or at his post, any differences of length or width are not even noticed after a while, except in exceptional cases. Galindo and Remígio are about to cross the estuary for the last time, if they have ever crossed it before in this sense, for the siege being in the early stages there is no lack of men here

who did not get to relieve themselves of secret humours, they entered death full of a life that profited no one. With them, stretched out at the bottom of the boat, one on top of the other, packed tightly because of the confined space, there are also the corpses of Diogo, Gonçalo, Fernão, Martinho, Mendo, Garcia, Lourenço, Pêro, Sancho, Álvaro, Moço, Godinho, Fuas, Arnaldo, Soeiro, and those who still have to be counted, some who have the same name, but not mentioned here so that no one starts complaining, He's been named already, and it would not be true, we might have written, Bernardo is in the boat, when there were thirty corpses with the same name, for we shall never tire of repeating, There is nothing in a name, as proved by Allah himself who despite his ninety-nine names, has only succeeded in being known as God.

Mogueime, too, is in the boat, but alive. He escaped unharmed from the assault, not as much as a scratch, and not because he sheltered from the fighting, on the contrary, one could swear that he was always in the line of fire, handling the battering-rams like Galindo, although the latter was less fortunate. To be sent to the funeral is as good as an official summons, an act of commemoration with the troops on parade, a day off duty, and the sergeant is in no doubt how his men will use their time between going and returning, his great disappointment is not to be able to be part of the retinue, he is going with his captain Mem Ramires to the prince's encampment, where the leaders have been convened to weigh up the outcome, clearly negative, of the assault, which only goes to show that life in the superior ranks is not always a bed of roses, not to mention the more than likely hypothesis that the king would put the blame for this fiasco on his captains, who in their turn would criticise the sergeants, who, poor things, could scarcely excuse themselves by accusing the soldiers of cowardice, for as everyone knows, any soldier owes his worth to his sergeant. If this should happen, there is every chance that permits for burial will be refused, for when all is said and done, these corpses who sail alone have only one route and the time has come to begin the story of the phantom ships. From the hillside opposite, the women at the gates watch the boats approach with their cargo of dead bodies and desires, and any woman who might be indoors with a man will fidget disloyally in order to get rid of him quickly, for the soldiers accompanying these funereal gondolas, perhaps because of an unconscious need to balance the fatality of death with the demands of life, are much more passionate than any soldier or civilian on routine duty, and as we know, generosity always increases in proportion to the satisfaction of ardour. However little a name may be worth, these women, too, have a name, in addition to the collective tide of whore by which they are known, some are called Tareja like the King's mother, or Mafalda, like the queen who came from Savoy last year, or Sancha, or Maiores, or Elvira, or Dórdia, or Enderquina, or Urraca, or Doroteia, or Leonor, and two of them have precious names, one who is called Chamoia, another known as Moninha, enough to make one feel like rescuing them from the streets and taking them home, not out of pity, as Raimundo Silva did with the dog on the Escadinhas de'São Crispim, but in order to try and discover what secret links a person to a name, even when that person scarcely matches up to the name itself.

Mogueime is making this crossing with two declared aims and one that is private. Much has already been said about the declared purpose of the journey, the open trenches are there to receive the dead and the women with open legs to receive the living. His hands still soiled with the dark, moist earth, Mogueime will unfasten his breeches and, pulling up his jacket without taking off any clothes, he will go up to the woman of his choice, she too with her skirt hitched up and bundled round her belly, the art of making love has yet to be invented in these newly-conquered lands, the Moors are said to have taken all their knowledge about love with them, and if any of these prostitutes, being Moorish in origin, has been forced by circumstances to offer her services to foreigners, she will reveal nothing of the amatory skills of her race, until she can begin to sell these novelties at a higher price. Needless to say, the Portuguese are not entirely ignorant in this matter, after all the possibilities depend on means more or less common to all races, but they obviously lack refinement and imagination, have no talent for that subtle gesture or prudent interruption, in a word, are devoid of civilisation and culture. Do not forget that as the hero of this story, Mogueime is more competent and refined than any of his comrades. Lying next to him, Lourenço grunted with pleasure and Elvira screamed, and Mogueime and his whore responded with the same vehemence, Doroteia is determined not to be outdone by Elvira in expansive prodigality, and Mogueime, who is enjoying himself, has no reason to keep quiet. Until the poet Dom Dinis becomes king, let us content ourselves with what we have.

When the boats returned to the other bank, much more swiftly, Mogueime will not return with them. Not because he has decided to desert, any such idea would never have crossed his mind, given his reputation and the fact that his place is already assured in The Grand History of Portugal, these are not things to be thrown away lightly in a reckless moment, after all, this is the same Mogueime who took part in the conquest of Santarém, enough said. His secret objective, which he will not confide even to Galindo, is to go from here, along the routes that were described when the army moved from the Monte de'São Francisco to the Monte da Graça, as far as the king's encampment, where he knows the crusaders have their separate tents, where he hopes, by some happy coincidence, to find the German's concubine around some corner, she is called Ouroana and she is forever in his thoughts, although he has no illusions that he could ever win her favours, for a soldier without any rank can only aspire to a common prostitute, concubines are reserved for the pleasure of gentlemen, at most swapped around, but always amongst equals. Deep down, he does not believe that he will have the good fortune to see her but how he would love to feel once more that throbbing in the pit of his stomach he has experienced on two occasions, despite everything he has no cause for complaint, for with so many randy men on the prowl, the women are kept under guard, even more so if they go out to get some fresh air, as proved by Ouroana who was always accompanied by one of knight Heinrich's servants, armed as if for battle, although merely a member of the domestic staff.

There are enormous differences between peace and war. When the troops were

camped here while the crusaders decided whether they would stay or leave, and there was no warfare apart from the brief skirmish or exchange of arrows and insults, Lisbon looked almost like a jewel resting against the slope and exposed to the voluptuaries of the sun, sparkling all over, and surmounted on high by the mosque of the fortification, resplendent with green and blue mosaics, and, on the slope facing this side, the neighbourhood from where the population had not yet withdrawn, a scene that could only be compared with the ante-chambers of paradise. Now, outside the walls, the houses have been burnt down and the walls demolished, and even from a distance you can see the onslaught of destruction, as if the Portuguese army were a swarm of white ants as capable of gnawing wood as stone, although they might break their teeth and the thread of life in this arduous task, as we have seen, and it will not stop here. Mogueime is not sure if he is afraid of dying. He finds it only natural that others should die, in war this always happens, or is it for this reason that wars are fought, but were he capable of asking himself what he really fears at this time, he would perhaps reply that it is not so much the possibility of meeting his death, who knows, perhaps in the very next assault, but something else which we shall simply call loss, not of life in itself, but of what might happen in life, for example, if Ouroana were to be his the day after tomorrow, unless destiny or Our Lord Jesus Christ should ordain that he must die tomorrow. We know that Mogueime has no such thoughts, he travels by a more straightforward route, whether death comes late or Ouroana comes soon, between the hour of her arrival and the hour of his departure there will be life, but the thought is also much too complicated, so let us resign ourselves to not knowing what Mogueime really thinks, let us turn to the apparent clarity of actions, which are translated thoughts, although in the passage from the latter to the former, certain things are always lost or added, which means that, in the final analysis, we know as little about what we do as about what we think. The sun is high, it will soon be midday, the Moors are certain to be observing any movements in the encampment, watching to see whether the Galicians will stage another attack like that of yesterday when the muezzins summon the faithful to prayer which only goes to show how little respect these heartless creatures have for the religion of others. In order to shorten his journey, Mogueime fords the estuary at the level of the Praça dos Restauradores, taking advantage of the low tide. Soldiers from the detachment assigned to the Porta de Alfafa roam these parts, seeking some distraction from the horrors of battle and trying to catch small fish in the estuary, they have certainly come a long way, and even in those days there was the saying, Out of sight, out of mind, but the allusion here is not to interrupted love affairs, but a question of finding some respite away from the arena of warfare, a sight the more delicate find unbearable once the heat of battle is over. And to avoid any desertions, commanding officers patrol the area, like shepherds or their dogs guarding the flock, there is no other solution, for the soldiers have been paid until August and there is much to be done, day by day, until this period expires, save for any impediment resulting beforehand because another period of expiry has been completed, that of life. Mogueime cannot ford the second branch of the estuary, for it is deeper, even when the tide is out, so he goes up the embankment until he comes to the freshwater streams, where one day he will see Ouroana washing clothes and he will ask her, What is

your name, a mere pretext to start up a conversation, for if Mogueime knows anything about this woman, it is her name, he has said it to himself so often that, contrary to appearances, it is not only the days that go on repeating themselves, What is your name Raimundo Silva asked Ouroana, and she replied, Maria Sara.

It was almost seven o'clock in the evening when Maria Sara arrived. Raimundo Silva had been writing until five, his attention constantly distracted, with great difficulty he would compose two or three lines and then start staring out of the window, clouds in the sky, a pigeon that would settle on the balcony from time to time, looking at him through the window-pane with its fierce crimson eye, shaking its head with movements that were at once rapid and fluent, the wastepaper basket which he had brought through from the study was full of torn-up sheets of paper, a disaster, if all the days from now on were to turn out like this, there was every danger that his history would never be finished, the Portuguese remaining before this invincible city of Lisbon until the end of time, without the courage to conquer it or the strength to relinquish it. During the day he had to resist the temptation to telephone a thousand times, which contributed to distracting him even more from what he wanted to write, the outcome being that in terms of work he had advanced no more than a page, and even so, thanks to that benevolence that so often leads us to tolerate what has no other merit than that of not being insufferable. He has spent the last half-hour out on the verandah, now and then showing himself without dissembling, like someone who is waiting and does not care who knows or comments, but nearly always leaning against the inner frame of the window, with half of his body concealed, and gazing furtively towards the Largo dos Lóios where Maria Sara will park her car. He saw her appear on the corner of the building with the murals of St Antony, walking at a steady pace, neither quickly nor slowly, she was wearing a jacket and skirt he had seen before, her bag over one shoulder, her hair dancing freely in the breeze, and desire brought a sudden knot into the pit of his stomach, not as happened to Mogueime, for the latter had felt his heart pound. He perceived that this was genuine desire, that yesterday it had been more like a convulsive and constant throbbing throughout his entire body that might be resolved by means of rapid physical contact that probably, if consummated, would leave signs of frustration or, worse still, of disenchantment. He went to open the door and stepped out on to the landing, Maria Sara was already climbing the stairs and was looking up with a smile, and he smiled back, Why so late, he asked and she replied, You know what the traffic can be like, yesterday was different because I left the office earlier, and on reaching the landing she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and entered the apartment. The nearest door, as we know, is that of the bedroom, there would be no point, things being as they are, in looking for another, all the more so because this bedroom is not simply a bedroom but also, however provisional, a work-room, and for this reason, we repeat, somehow neutralised. But Raimundo Silva removed the bag from her shoulder, slowly, as if he were removing her clothes, it was an unpremeditated gesture, one of those moments when intuition helps out where science has sometimes forgotten, Yesterday, when you said goodbye, you somehow sounded more friendly, Forgive me, I need a little more time to get used to being on intimate

terms, Maria Sara replied, Would you prefer to go through to the study, No, we're fine here, but you have nowhere to sit, Wait, I'll go and fetch a chair. When he returned, Maria Sara was reading the last page of the manuscript, You haven't made much progress, she said, And why should that be, asked Raimundo Silva, Yes, why should that be, she replied, this time without smiling, and looking at him as if awaiting some reaction, Take a look at the bed, What about the bed, and in another tone of voice, she said, I seem to be alone in dropping the formalities, It's probably more difficult for me to be familiar, but let's try again, you've asked me to look at the bed and I'm asking you, What about the bed, Do you notice anything different from yesterday, It's the same bed, Of course it's the same bed, what I want you to tell me is whether it looks as if it has been slept in, being a woman you won't find it difficult to see that the folds of the sheets have not been disturbed, that there isn't a crease on the bolster or pillow, that the bedcover is pristine and all the fringes straight, Yes, it's true, Just as my cleaner left it yesterday, So you didn't sleep here last night, No, Why not, where did you sleep then, Let me answer the second part of the question first, I slept through there on a divan, But why, Because I'm like a child, an adolescent whose grey hairs have come much too soon, because I could not bring myself to sleep here alone, that's all. Maria Sara put the sheet of paper down on the table, went up to him and embraced him, You will never need to tell me that you love me, Oh yes, I will, But not like this, I'll put it into words, And I want to hear them, I know I shall forget most of them, the moment, the place, the hour, but I shall never forget this, or that moment when you touched the rose. They were in each other's arms but still had not kissed, they looked at each other and smiled a lot, their expression one of happiness, and then their smile slowly withdrew, like water being sucked up and savoured by the earth, until they both became serious, staring at each other, a sudden, subtle shadow hovered in the room, it came only to disappear, and then immense and powerful wings enfolded Maria Sara and Raimundo Silva, drawing them together as if they were one body, and their kiss began, so different from the kiss they had shared here yesterday, they were and they were not the same two people, but to say this is to have said nothing, because no one knows what a kiss is really like, perhaps some impossible deglutition or diabolical communion, perhaps the beginning of death. It was not Raimundo Silva who led Maria Sara to the bed, nor did she gently draw him there as if distracted, they simply found themselves there, seated first of all on the edge of the mattress, crumpling the white bedcover, then he tilted her back and they went on kissing, her arms round his neck, his right arm supporting her head while his left arm appeared to hesitate, not knowing what to do, or knowing but not daring, as if an invisible wall had been erected between them at the eleventh hour, guided by a wise hand, he touched Maria Sara's waist, went down as far as the small of her back until it came to rest ever so gently on the curve of her thigh, only to travel slowly up her body once more as far as her breast, now his knowing fingers recognise the soft texture of this blouse he was touching for the first time, the sensation was fleeting and instantly mitigated by the disturbing awareness that beneath a man's clumsy hand there was this miracle of a breast. Dazed by this contact, Raimundo Silva raised his head, he wanted to look, see, know, be certain that it was his own hand that was there, now the invisible wall was really collapsing,

beyond stood the city of the body, streets and squares, shadows and light, a melody that comes from who knows where, infinite windows, an interminable peregrination. Maria Sara placed her hand on that of Raimundo Silva, and he kissed it profusely until she withdrew it taking his hand with her, and her erect breast, still covered, offered itself to his kisses. It was she herself who, without haste, unbuttoned and removed her blouse, beneath the white lace of her bra her skin was like lace in the palest gold, the nipples rose-coloured, dear God, then Raimundo Silva's hand was back, gentle, violent, and with one resolute gesture he uncovered her breast, elastic and dense. Maria Sara moaned when his lips eagerly sucked her nipple, her whole body shuddered, and then more deeply because Raimundo Silva's hand had come to rest on her belly, before descending almost naturally to her sex, where it twitched, persistent and invasive. They were still dressed, she only with her jacket open and her blouse unbuttoned, and it was Raimundo Silva who covered her breast once more, so delicately that Maria Sara's startled eyes became moist with tears. The shadows in the room suddenly lit up, no doubt because over by the straits the evening clouds had opened up, and the last rays of sun were coming through the window, oblique, casting over that side of the wall a flickering light the colour of cherries, which in its turn sent an invisible vibration throughout the entire room, a sudden pulsation of atoms aroused by the waning light, as if the world had just been born and was still without strength, or had aged from so much living, its strength gone forever. Maria Sara and Raimundo Silva, either out of modesty or intuition, did not undress completely, they kept their private parts covered and she was still wearing her bra. Lying together under the covers, they trembled. He held her hands and kissed them, she repeated the gesture, with an undulating movement their bodies came together, so close that their breathing merged, then their mouths touched and their kiss became an avid devouring of lips and tongues, while the hands of the one pursued the body of the other, they held each other tightly, hugged, caressed, then their words could be heard, disconnected, convulsive, breathless, my darling, I love you, how was this possible, I don't know, it had to be, embrace me, I want you, that ancient murmur, which, with these and other words sweeter still, or crude, or rough, or brutal, has pursued from the beginning of time, if we may be allowed to repeat the expression, the ineffable. Raimundo Silva's hand struggled clumsily with the fastener of her bra, but it was Maria Sara who with the merest touch and movement of her shoulders undid it, releasing her breasts from their prison and offering them to his eyes, his hands and mouth. Then they undressed completely, the one helping or encouraging the other, Undress me, they said, when, in fact, they were already naked, but now they could touch, fondle and probe each other, Raimundo Silva suddenly threw back the covers and there was Maria Sara, her breasts, belly, swollen sex, long thighs, and he, without any sense of shame, his fears forgotten, exposing himself to the light, little as there was, only the white sheet was shining as if flooded by moonlight, night was slowly descending over the city, it seemed as if the external world had settled down to await some new miracle, yet no one noticed when it happened, here, when these two came into sexual contact for the first time, when for the first time they moaned with pleasure in each other's arms, when they called out in muffled tones, when all the floodgates opened over the earth and its waters, and

then calm, the broad estuary of the Tagus, two bodies drifting side by side, holding hands, the one says, Oh, my love, the other, May this last forever, and suddenly they were both afraid of the words they had spoken, and they embraced, the room was dark, Switch on the light, she said, I want to know if this is real.

MARIA SARA SPENT THE NIGHT at Raimundo Silva's apartment. After having asked him to switch on the light and confirmed with all her senses that she really was there, naked and with this naked man beside her, looking at him and touching him, and offering herself freely to his eyes and hands, she said, between two kisses, I'm going to call my sister-in-law. Wrapping the white bedspread around her, she ran barefoot to the study, from the bedroom, Raimundo Silva could hear her dial the number, and then, It's me, followed by silence, most likely her sister-in-law was expressing her surprise that she had not been in touch sooner, asking her, for example, Has something turned up, and Maria Sara who had so much to tell, replied, No, I simply wanted to warn you that I won't be coming home tonight, which really was most unusual, bearing in mind that this was the first time anything like this had happened ever since she went to live at her brother's house after her divorce. Further silence, her sister-in-law's discreet surprise at these words which immediately made her an accomplice, Maria Sara laughed, I'll explain later, and tell my brother he needn't play the protector of widows and virgins, for that would scarcely be appropriate in my case. At the other end of the line her sister-in-law would naturally have expressed her concern, I hope you know what you're doing, the least one can say in similar situations, and Maria Sara replied, for the moment, all I need to know is that this is real, and after another pause, she simply said, Yes, it is, and that was sufficient for Raimundo Silva to surmise that Maria Sara's sister-in-law had asked, Is it the proof-reader, and Maria Sara replied, Yes, it is. After having rung off, she remained there for several moments, suddenly everything had taken on an air of unreality, this furniture, these books, and through there in the bedroom there was a man lying on the bed, she could feel a cold caress pass over the inside of her thighs, and thinking to herself, It's his caress, she shivered and drew the bedspread more closely around her, but this gesture made her aware that she was completely naked, and now the memory of recent sensations tussled with a vexing thought she could not shake off, Suppose he were still lying naked on top of the bed, the thought stopped there, or it was she who refused to pursue it any further, but clearly this was a threat, a decision taken, even if it was not very explicit who was under threat. She was surprised he had not called her, he must have heard her ring off, silence seemed to be taking over the apartment like some furtive and disquieting foe, and then she thought she had found an explanation, he did not know what to call her, yes, he would say Maria Sara, but the problem was not in the words, it was in the tone with which they were said, how to choose between the commanding tone of someone who believes himself already the proprietor of a body and the expression of loving tenderness that we would not describe as affected, but which was much too self-conscious to sound natural. She headed back to the bedroom, thinking to herself, as she made her way along the corridor, He's covered up, he's covered up, as anxiously as if the future of all the words and actions that had been said and done here depended on this. Raimundo Silva had drawn the covers up over his shoulders.

They dined in a restaurant in the Baixa, she asked how the history of the siege was coming along, Reasonably well, I'd say, considering how absurd it is, How soon do you expect to finish it, Three lines would be sufficient if I were to adopt the formula of then

they married and lived happily ever after, or as in our case, the Portuguese with supreme effort took the city, or I set about listing the arms and baggage, and then I shall never get to the end, one alternative would be to leave the text as it stands, now that we have met each other. I'd rather you finished it, you must resolve the lives of that Mogueime and Ouroana, the rest will be less important, in any case we know how the story must end, the proof being that here we are dining in Lisbon, being neither Moors nor tourists on Moorish territory, The boats probably passed this way carrying the corpses of those who lost their lives when storming the city gates, When we return home I'm going to read it from the beginning, Unless we happen to be doing something more interesting, We have all the time in the world, dear Sir, Besides the history is brief, you will have read all of it within half an hour, I restricted myself, as you will see, to what I thought essentially stemmed from the fact that the crusaders went away without helping the Portuguese, And would make a good novel, Possibly, but when you set me this task, you knew that I was nothing more than an ordinary, run-of-the-mill proof-reader with no other qualities, But enough to take up the challenge, Provocation might be the better word, All right, let's call it provocation, What did you have in mind when you talked me into this, what were you looking for, At the time, I didn't see things too clearly, however much I might have justified them to myself, or to you, if you had asked for some explanation, but it's now quite obvious that I was looking for you, For me, for this thin, serious man with badly-dyed hair, as sad as a dog without a master, A man to whom I felt attracted the moment I saw him, a man who had deliberately committed an error he was obliged to correct, a man who had realised that the distinction between no and yes stems from a mental operation that is only thinking about survival, A good enough reason, It's a selfish reason, And socially useful, Undoubtedly, although everything depends on who the owners are of that yes and no, Let's be guided by norms based on consensus and authority obvious as it is that any variation in the authority varies the consensus, You give no leeway, Because there can be no leeway, we live cooped up in a room and paint the world and the universe on its walls, Don't forget that men have already gone to the moon, Your claustrophobic little room went with them, You're a pessimist, Not quite, I'm simply a sceptic of the radical kind, A sceptic is incapable of love, On the contrary, love is probably the last thing in which the sceptic can still believe, He can, Rather let us say he has to. They finished their coffee, Raimundo Silva asked for the bill, but it was Maria Sara who, with a quick gesture, drew a credit card from her wallet and placed it on the saucer, I'm your boss, I can't allow you to pay for the dinner, there would be no more respect for the hierarchy if underlings were to start outshining their superiors, I'll allow it this time, but don't forget that I'll soon be an author, and then, Then you won't pay under any circumstances, whoever heard of an author treating his editor to dinner, really, you know very little about public relations, I've always been led to believe that editors lunch and dine off their wretched authors, Such shameful slander, a base display of class hatred, As a simple proof-reader, I'm not involved in this conflict, If the idea upsets you, No, not at all, you can pay, but my reasons for allowing it are not what you think, What are they then, Simply that with this long, drawn-out history of the siege, I've scarcely done any proof-reading, and since you're responsible for the precarious state of my finances, it's

only right that you should pay and in recompense, I'll make you some toast for breakfast tomorrow, You're going to leave me with a terrible debt on my hands.

Maria Sara had parked her car in the Largo dos Lóios and they both fancied the idea of a walk on such a mild evening. Before descending the Limoeiro, they lingered on the belvedere to watch the Tagus, this wide, mysterious inland sea. Raimundo Silva had put his arm round Maria Sara's shoulder, he knew this body, he knew it, and from knowing it came this feeling of infinite strength, and, on the other hand, a feeling of infinite emptiness, of indolent weariness, like a great bird hovering over the world and postponing the moment to settle. Now they were returning home, slowly, the night seemed interminable, there was no need to run in order to arrest the hours, or hasten them on, for this is all time permits. Maria Sara said, I'm curious to read what you've written, you could be right when you say you're on the way to becoming an author, Surely you didn't take me seriously, One can never tell, one can never tell, our best clothes are not simply there to attract stains, If I'm already condemned to the punishments of hell, just think what my fate would be as an author, Worse than hell, I suppose there is only limbo, Agreed, but I'm rather too old for limbo, and, since I'm baptised, should I escape the punishments, I won't escape the rewards, for it is said there are no alternatives, here stood the Porta de Ferro, they demolished it some two hundred years ago, what was left of it, of course, as for the Moorish gate, no one knows what it was like, Don't change the conversation, the idea is a good one, What idea, That your history of the siege should be published, By our publishing house, Why not, You'd make a hopeless Editorial Director, allowing feelings to cloud your judgment, But starting from the principle that the book was good enough, And do you think that our bosses would agree after seeing themselves ridiculed, If they have any sense of humour, I've never given it a thought, which could be my fault for being slow on the uptake, Finish the book then we'll see, there's nothing to be lost in trying, What I have there at home is not a book, only a few dozen pages with separate episodes, It's a start, Very well, but on one condition, Such as, That I should proof-read my own book, But why, when everyone knows that the author is the last person to be trusted with checking his own work, So that I don't find someone inserting a yes where I've written not. Maria Sara laughed and said, I really do like you. And Raimundo Silva replied, I'm doing my utmost to make sure you go on liking me. They were climbing the Canada do Correio Velho, that very same route he always tried to avoid, but today he felt elated and relaxed, and any fatigue he felt was somehow different, demanding not so much rest as further exertions. At this hour the street was deserted, the place and circumstances were propitious, Raimundo Silva kissed Maria Sara, there is nothing more common nowadays than kissing in public, but we must bear in mind that Raimundo Silva belongs to a much more circumspect generation that was not given to showing its feelings, let alone its desires. His boldness, after all, would go no further, the street was empty and badly lit, but it's a start. They went on climbing, paused at the foot of the Escadinhas de'São Crispim, there are a hundred and thirty-four steps, said Raimundo Silva, and as steep as those of the Aztec temples, but once we get to the top we're almost home, Who's complaining, let's go, If you look up there, under those large

windows there are still traces of the wall built by the Goths, at least, according to the experts, And you're now one of them, Nonsense, I've simply done a little reading, I've amused or educated myself little by little, discovering the difference between looking and seeing, between seeing and observing, Sounds interesting, It's elementary, I even imagine true knowledge depends on our awareness of the change from one level of perception, as it were, to another, Barbarian, more Goth than anyone, the person moving from one level to another is me ever since we started clambering up this mountain, let's rest for a moment on this step until I get my breath back. These words and what followed suddenly reminded Raimundo Silva of that day, when terrified of being confronted by an indignant and threatening Costa, he had rushed down the Escadinhas and sat on one of these steps, hiding from those accusing eyes he imagined, not only his cowardice but also the shame it would cause him. One day, when he feels more confident about this love affair springing up between them, he will tell Maria Sara about these base traits in his nature, although, on the other hand, he might decide to say nothing rather than tarnish any positive image he might one day give of himself, and preserve. But even at this moment, when he still has not taken any decision about what he will finally do, he can sense the discomfort of a neglected scruple, the remorse that anticipates failure, a mental thorn. He promises that he will not forget this premonitory warning of his conscience, and suddenly becomes aware of the silence that has come between them, perhaps a constraint, but no, Maria Sara's expression is tranquil, serene, touched by the light of a waning moon that somehow dilutes the shadows in this place where they find themselves and where there are no street-lamps, a constraint inside him, for no other reason than knowing that he is hiding something, let us say not so much the shame of fear, but fear of shame. If Maria Sara does not speak it is because she feels that she should remain silent, if Raimundo Silva is about to speak it is because he does not wish to explain the real reason for his being silent, Some time ago there was a dog here, a mastiff, that disappeared, and departing from this statement, he began telling the tale of his encounter with the animal, adding enough imaginative detail to make it sound more real and authentic. It refused to leave this spot, on two or three occasions I fed it and I believe some neighbours were also giving it food but not all that much, because the poor beast always looked famished, I don't know what became of it, whether it found the courage to go wandering off in search of life, or perished right here for want of nourishment, I now feel I should have done something more, after all, it wouldn't have cost me anything to feed it some scraps every day or buy it some of this dog-food you find on sale everywhere nowadays, at no great expense. For several more minutes, Raimundo Silva repeated his responsibilities and omissions, conscious, in the meantime, that he was covering up with false remorse his real remorse, the latter suspect, the one to come uncertain, then suddenly, he fell silent, he felt ridiculous, childish, all these scruples because of a stray dog, all it needed now was for Maria Sara to make some off-hand comment, for example, Poor beast, and that is precisely what she said, Poor beast, before getting to her feet and saying, Let's go.

Seated at the little table where he has written The History of the Siege of Lisbon,

looking at the last page as he awaits that providential word that by means of attraction or repulsion will reactivate the interrupted flow, Raimundo Silva was no doubt saying to himself, like Maria Sara on the Escadinhas de'São Crispim last night, Let's go, write, push ahead, develop, abbreviate, annotate, perfect, but without any of the gentle modulation of that other Let's go, which, incapable of remaining suspended in space, went on reverberating inside them like an echo slowly becoming louder until transformed into glorious song when the bedclothes were drawn back once more to receive them. The memory of that splendid night distracts Raimundo Silva, the surprise of awakening in the morning and seeing and feeling a naked body beside him, the ineffable pleasure of touching it, here, there, softly, as it were one great rose, saying to himself, Slowly, don't awaken her, let me come to know you, rose, body, flower, then those eager hands, that prolonged, insistent caress, until Maria Sara opens her eyes and smiles, when they said together, My love, and embraced. Raimundo Silva searches for the word, on any other occasion these same words would have served, My love, but it is doubtful whether Mogueime and Ouroana would have used them, not to mention that at this stage, they still had not met, let alone declared such sudden feelings whose expression seems beyond their understanding.

Meanwhile, the unwitting instrument of destiny, knight Heinrich debates in his intimate forum, whether he should take Ouroana with him to Mem Ramires's quarters, or leave her behind in the royal encampment, under the care and vigilance of his trusted squire. But he is so accustomed to having this squire with him that he does not feel inclined to dispense with his services, so after giving the matter careful consideration, he summoned him and told him to prepare their baggage and arms because early next morning they will descend from these sheltered heights in order to join the troops gathered at the Porta de Ferro, where, under his command and authority, they will build an assault tower, Let's see who finishes first, us, or the French, or the Normans, at the Portas do Sol and the Porta de Alfama. And what about your concubine, Ouroana, what will you do with her, asked the squire, She will come with me, There are many dangers, down there the Moors and Christians are directly facing each other, Later we'll see what's to be done, since I'm certain that these infidels have not dared to engage in battle outside the walls. Having thus agreed, the squire went to warn Ouroana and to organise the move, five of his armed bodyguards would also accompany knight Heinrich, because this German was not such a great lord as to have a private army at his disposal, his speciality was more in the line of engineering, which nearly always depends on having a large number of men to build the machines, and always on the engineer's knowledge, skill and imagination. Early next morning, as stated before, after attending holy mass, knight Heinrich went to kiss the king's hands, Farewell, Your Majesty, I'm going to build the tower. Standing a little way off, were his squire and armed bodyguards who were not entitled to speak with the king, and Ouroana in her litter, more to satisfy her master's vanity than to display the fairness of her complexion, for in the fields of Galicia where she had been abducted, she was the daughter of peasants and like them she laboured, tilling the soil. Dom Afonso Henriques embraced the knight, May the Holy Virgin Mary

accompany and protect you, he said, and help you to erect this tower the likes of which has never been seen before in these parts, you will be working with ship's carpenters, the only suitable men we could find for the job, but if they should prove to be as good apprentices as you are reputed to be a master, then any further sieges I undertake with assault towers will only be carried out by native craftsmen without hiring any foreign labour, Your Majesty, many reports have reached my country praising the humility, frugality and spirit of abnegation of the Portuguese, ever ready and willing to serve family and fatherland, now if to so many rare qualities they were to add some intelligence and much greater strength of character and willpower, then I can assure Your Royal Highness that no tower will be beyond their capabilities, whether it is built tomorrow or at any other time. These reassuring sentiments made a deep impression on the king, especially coming from whom they came, and such was his satisfaction, that taking knight Heinrich on one side, he confided his private concern, You must have noticed that some of my chiefs of staff are unhappy with this idea of using assault towers, they're traditionalists who cling to old-fashioned methods of warfare, so if any of them try to put up obstacles or delay the work on some defeatist pretext or other, tell me at once, for as I take pride in being a modern king, I am determined to proceed with this enterprise without further delay, all the more so because this war has drained my finances and the last thing I want is to find myself obliged to pay the soldiers their wages at the end of August when the three months expire, for although our troops earn little, all told it comes to a tidy sum, it would indeed be fortunate if we were to succeed in capturing the city in the meantime, so you can imagine how much I'm relying on these towers, therefore you have all my support and encouragement to forge ahead with this plan, and have no fears about being generously rewarded, for you have all those possessions of the Moors with which to pay yourselves ten times as much. Knight Heinrich assured the king that he could put his mind at rest, with God's help he would secure victory, he would reveal nothing about the treasury's difficulties, and under no circumstances should he worry about rewarding him for his services, For the best reward, Your Majesty, is in heaven above, and to gain the citadel of paradise other towers are needed, those erected by good works, such as this pledge of ours not to leave a single Moor alive if they stubbornly go on refusing to surrender. The king took his leave of the knight, thinking to himself that he must bear him in mind, for such a man would make as good a bishop as a general, and if this business of the towers should succeed he will suggest that he should become naturalised and be rewarded with lands and a title to start a new life.

It soon became clear that knight Heinrich had no intention of wasting time for no sooner had he arrived at the Porta de Ferro than he was discussing with Mem Ramires the number of men he needed for this ambitious project, starting at once with the felling of the trees in those parts, some produced by nature, others planted by the Moors themselves, who could not have foreseen that they were literally providing wood for their own sacrifice, these are, let us repeat once more, the ironies of destiny. But we must go no further with these descriptions, without first mentioning the excitement caused by the arrival of the knight and his retinue, and little wonder, for here was a foreign technician,

a German, if you please, which is to be a technician twice over, some, sceptical by nature or persuaded by others, were cautious about the enterprise and its outcome, others felt it was wrong to condemn something that had not yet had time to prove its worth, finally the practical and impartially-minded prevailed by acknowledging from the evidence that it was preferable to fight the Moors in direct confrontation and at the same height rather than have them up there throwing down stones and taking advantage of the laws of gravity, with us down below suffering the effects. Detached from these polemical matters relating to the military-cum-industrial enterprise that was under way, and with eyes only for the woman arriving on a litter, Mogueime could scarcely believe his good fortune. Never more would he need to go prowling around the encampment of Graça, in constant danger of running into a military police patrol, wanting to know, What are you doing here so far away from your own camp, now the mountain truly came to the Prophet, not because the Prophet did not want to go to the mountain, we are all reliable witnesses of how hard he tried, but because above the Prophet as we know there is the sergeant-major, the second lieutenant, the captain, and, this being a time of war, there are even fewer passes for leave than opportunities, even when assisted by invention. This Ouroana who is arriving, if she does not spend all her time shut away in her tent waiting for knight Heinrich to interrupt his carpentry in order to relieve inside her the anxieties which can so easily pass from a soul that wants to be mystical with God to the flesh that only longs to be mystical with flesh, this Ouroana, taking into account the reduced space in this theatre of operations, will be much more often and more readily in sight, when strolling and daydreaming through the encampment or when standing on the river-bank to watch the porpoises leap, during those tranquil hours we associate with evening, when the troops go off to try and recover from their exertions during the fierce heat of the day and the even fiercer heat of battle, It is to be hoped, meanwhile, that all efforts will now be concentrated on building those towers, because given the shortage of able-bodied men it would be tantamount to suicide to disperse them in activities with little chance of success, except for the odd diversion intended to keep the enemy occupied, so that the carpenters can get on in peace with their risky task. In his annotations to Osbern's letter, Fray Rogeiro provided, though he would make no mention of it in the definitive version, a detailed description of knight Heinrich's arrival at the encampment at the Porta de Ferro, including a certain reference, clearly irresistible, to the woman accompanying him, Ouroana in name, as lovely as the dawn, as mysterious as moonrise, to cite the words of the friar, which his own chastening prudence, on the one hand, and the delicate modesty of the person to whom these words were being addressed, on the other, advised him to erase. Now it is quite possible that this and other repressed stirrings of the soul might have been the cause, by means of sublimation, of the care with which Fray Rogeiro began to follow the sayings and doings of the German knight until this point, but above all after his unfortunate, but in no sense ignominious death, as will become clear in time. Putting it more clearly, we would say that because he was unable to satisfy his lust for Ouroana, Fray Rogeiro could find no better excuse, beside one he kept to himself, than to praise to the skies the man who enjoyed her favours. When it comes to human nature, you can expect anything.

Senhora Maria came at the usual time after lunch, and no sooner had she arrived than she began muttering in a manner at once discreet and obvious, a difficult feat to achieve, because it has the dual aim of trying to disguise the fact that you know something, while showing at the same time that you are not prepared to allow the other person to play the innocent. It is a diplomatic art par excellence, yet guided by intuition, if not by instinct, and which, generally speaking, has achieved its main objective, namely to give the proof-reader a vague feeling of panic, as if his most intimate secrets were about to be revealed in public. Senhora Maria is a sadist without knowing it. She greeted him from the bedroom door, muttered twice to warn Raimundo Silva that she might only be a poor cleaner but she still had enough sense of smell to pick up any remaining traces of perfume in the air. Raimundo Silva returned her greeting and went on writing after giving a rapid glance in her direction, determined to pretend that he did not know what was going on, Senhora Maria, taken aback to begin with, and then with that peculiar expression on her face, as much as to say, Just as I thought, eyeing the bed, which, instead of the quick tidying-up at which Raimundo Silva was adept lest it be mistaken for a migrant's bunk, was irreproachable and showed every sign of a woman's touch. She coughed to attract attention, but Raimundo Silva pretended to be distracted, although his heart was in a state of foolish turmoil, I don't have to account for my life, he thought, annoyed with himself for seeking cowardly excuses, he who had just embarked on such a serious love affair, so he raised his head and asked, Did you want something, in a dry, brusque tone of voice which disarmed the woman's impertinence, No, Sir, nothing, I was simply looking. Raimundo Silva could have satisfied himself with this embarrassed reply, but he preferred to taunt her, Looking at what, Nothing, the bed, What's wrong with the bed, Nothing, it's been made, So what, Nothing, nothing, Senhora Maria turned away, too intimidated to ask the question that was on the tip of her tongue, Who made it, and so would never know what answer Raimundo Silva might have given, not that he knew himself. From then on, Senhora Maria stayed away from the bedroom, as if letting Raimundo Silva know that she considered that part of the house outside her jurisdiction, however, she was either unable or unwilling to repress her ill-tempered frustration, and making no attempt to go silently about her chores, she did her utmost to make as much noise as possible. Raimundo Silva decided to shrug this off with a smile, but the din was so loud that he was obliged to step into the corridor and plead, Could you make less noise, please, I'm trying to work, Senhora Maria could have retorted that she, too, was trying to get on with her work and that she did not have the luck of certain people who can earn a living seated in peace and quiet, but necessity, even when as conflictive as this, is stronger than willpower, and she said nothing. What annoys Senhora Maria most of all is that these dramatic changes are taking place without her knowledge, were she not the astute person she is, and one of these days she will unexpectedly find the other woman in the apartment, without being able to ask him the itching question, Who is this woman, who asked her to come here, men are such insensitive fools, what would it have cost Raimundo Silva to have taken her into his confidence, for however much it might hurt it would always be something of a palliative, for such bitter jealousy, for this is the evil afflicting Senhora Maria although she does not know it. Other considerations of a

practical and prosaic nature also occupy her mind, uppermost amongst them being the danger that she might lose her job if this other woman, assuming it is not just some casual affair, should start to interfere with her work. Clean this again, while holding up a dirty finger that has collected dust from the moulding on the door, that hateful gesture to which no cleaner has ever been known to respond with a phrase worthy of being recorded for posterity. If you stick it up your arse, you'll collect even more dirt. God help those who only came into this world to take orders, Senhora Maria thinks to herself, and she polishes the door for a second time, while, for no apparent reason, tears spring to her eyes just as she happens to glance into the mirror in the bathroom, and at that moment, not even the sight of her lovely hair consoles her. In the middle of the afternoon the telephone rang, Raimundo Silva took the call, it was from the publishers, a routine conversation about work to Senhora Maria's disappointment. Yes, I'm available, he was saying. Send me the manuscript at your convenience, unless you'd prefer me to come and pick it up, and the rest of the conversation was in much the same vein, revisions, deadlines. Senhora Maria had heard these monologues so many times before, the only difference being that the person at the other end of the line was inaudible, before it had been a certain Costa, now it was some woman, perhaps this was why Raimundo Silva's tone of voice became all lovey-dovey, one of Senhora Maria's favourite expressions. Ah, these men, but for all her cunning it never occurred to her that Raimundo Silva was actually speaking to the woman with whom he had slept the previous night, relishing the ineffable pleasure of using neutral words which they alone could translate into another language, that of emotion and capable of evoking other meanings, to utter the word book and hear the word kiss, to say yes and understand it to mean always, to hear good afternoon and sense the person is really saying, I love you. Had Senhora Maria known anything about the art of cryptography then she would have gone from here with the mystery solved, laughing up her sleeve at anyone who thought they could laugh at her, a somewhat laboured way of thinking because of her resentment, for neither Raimundo Silva nor Maria Sara have any idea that they are making Senhora Maria suffer, and if they did they would not ridicule her, otherwise they would not be deserving of so much happiness. This said, it is not inconceivable that Senhora Maria might come to like Maria Sara, you can expect everything of the heart, even the harmony of its contradictions.

Raimundo Silva is once more alone, for several seconds he was left wondering what to make of the amiable tone with which Senhora Maria took her leave, a disconcerting woman who turns up in a bad mood one minute and is all solicitous the next, but The History of the Siege of Lisbon brought him back to another reality, to the building of the tower destined to break, once and for all, the resistance of the Moors, and knowing that the existence of a nation depends on this, we cannot interrupt our work, although Raimundo Silva would have preferred to have Maria Sara here than to have to cope with operations about which he knows nothing, the dressing of joists, the trimming of wooden planks, the moulding of pegs, the twining of ropes, all these materials contributing to the construction of a tower which is not that of Babel, this present one will rise no higher than the battlements on the wall, and as for tongues, Dom Afonso Henriques has no

intention of repeating their multiplicity, but of uprooting this one, both in the figurative and allegorical sense as in the literal and physical sense. When Maria Sara returns tomorrow afternoon as she promised on departing, to stay the night and the night after that, as well as the day in between which is a Sunday, he hopes to have made some progress with his writing, because there are other matters demanding his attention, and time has changed its name and is now called urgency, Calm down, Maria Sara will tell him, you can't fit more things into a year than a minute just because the one is a minute and the other a year, it's not the size of the glass that counts, but rather what each of us manages to put into it, even if it should overflow and be lost. Just as this tower will also be lost.

The construction took more than a week. From morning until night, knight Heinrich only lived for his project, and, even when resting in his tent, he would wake up imagining that one of the supporting beams was not strong enough, and it got to the point where he would get up in the middle of the night to check the solidity of certain joints and the tension of the ropes. He was such an admirable and compassionate man that when the work was at its peak, he was not above lending a hand if one of the soldiers happened to be showing signs of fatigue. On one of these occasions he found Mogueime at his back, for Mogueime, too, was helping to build the tower, and it so happened that Ouroana had come by to see how the work was progressing and naturally to keep her eyes on her lord and master, the only man for whom she should have any eyes, but this did not prevent her from noticing how the tall soldier behind kept staring at her, she had noticed him from the very first day, staring at her wherever they met, there in the encampment of Monte de'São Francisco, then in the Royal encampment, and now in this narrow stretch of land, so narrow that it was something of a miracle that all the troops could gather there without tripping over each other's feet, for example, this man and woman, who have done nothing more than look at each other. Mogueime could see a handspan away the nape of the German's broad neck, covered by a mane of sandy-coloured hair matted with dust and sweat, to kill him amidst all the confusion would not be difficult thus giving Ouroana her freedom, but bringing her no closer than she is at present. The temptations of violent death, intensifying one's remorse for having indulged them, should be taken to one's confessor, but to discover into the bargain that the friar also coveted the victim's woman, even if only a concubine, was more than he could face. In fury and rage he made a brusque gesture and struck the German on the back causing him to turn round, but calm and showing no surprise, such incidents were common in gatherings involving so much effort, and his steadfast look was enough to quell Mogueime's wrath, he was incapable of hating a man who had never done him any harm, just because he coveted his woman.

The tower was finished at last. It as an extraordinary piece of military engineering that moved on massive wheels and consisted of a complicated system of internal and external bracings which held together the four platforms that defined the vertical structure, one at the bottom resting on the fixed axles of the wheels, another at the top

stretching out threateningly towards the city, and two intermediate ones that served to reinforce the entire structure and would afford temporary protection to the soldiers as they prepared to climb up. A pulley manoeuvred from below would allow baskets filled with weapons to be hoisted up without delay even in the heat of battle. When the job was judged to be finished, the troops raised cheers and applause, eager to launch their attack and confident that conquest would now be easy. Even the Moors must have felt alarmed for a bewildered silence had suppressed the insults that were constantly raining down from on high. The excitement in the encampment at the Porta de Ferro became even greater when it was reported that the towers of the French and the Normans were still not ready, therefore glory was within their reach, all they had to do was to push the assault tower up against the wall and the moment had come for Mem Ramires as captain to give the order, Push, lads, let's go for them, and they strained with all their might. Unfortunately no one had noticed that the terrain ahead was sloping, and therefore, as they advanced, already under enemy fire, the tower started leaning backwards and upwards, making it clear that even if they managed to reach the wall, the uppermost platform would be too far away to serve any purpose. Then knight Heinrich, embarrassed at his lack of foresight, gave orders to stop and start all over again, now the carpenters would give way to the pioneers, it was a question of digging a straight path and to the right, a truly dangerous task, for the diggers would have to work without cover under an avalanche of missiles of all kinds falling from above, and all the more lethal the nearer they came. Even so, and despite the casualties suffered, some twenty metres were opened up along which the tower could advance, serving as protection from the next onslaught. This was the situation, each man struggling to do his best, Moors on one side, Christians on the other, when suddenly the ground gave way on one side, causing three of the wheels to sink in up to the hubs and the tower to lurch precariously. There was a general outcry of fear and concern in the Portuguese camp, of fiendish triumph on the battlements where those swarthy Moors watched from their vantage point. Balancing dangerously, the tower creaked from top to bottom, the wooden frame subjected to tensions no one had allowed for, some of the couplings having already been shattered. In despair, watching to his chagrin what was supposed to be a magnificent demonstration of his ingenuity end in failure, knight Heinrich tore his hair out, ranted and cursed in the German tongue in a manner scarcely befitting someone of his reputation and worth, but which the coarseness inherent in these primitive times more than justified. Finally regaining his composure, he went to assess the situation and examine the damage at first hand only to conclude that the only solution, if it worked, would be to secure the upper beams on the side opposite to the inclination with long ropes, and get all the men with one mighty heave to release the buried wheels and wedge them progressively with stones until the tower went back to being upright. The plan was perfect, however, in order to achieve the desired effect it was necessary, first, to undertake the highly risky operation of freeing the wheels and removing the soil which at, this juncture, was still supporting the heavy construction, for that was where the sloping lower platform was stuck. It was an obstacle, a tangled knot, a handicap, a terrifying equation of enormous uncertainty, but there was no other solution, although, strictly speaking, we ought to call

it the merest probability. This was the moment the Moors chose to despatch from on high a shower of javelins with incendiary torches that droned through the air like swarms of bees dispersing before settling haphazardly here and there, fortunately the strong wind upset the aim of the javelin throwers, but when the pitcher goes too often to the well it is broken at last, it only needed one javelin to hit its target for the others to follow suit, ill fortune finally bringing the tower down, not so much because of the incline aggravated by the excavation of the earth, but because of all the frantic efforts to extinguish the fires that had started up in various parts. Its sudden collapse left the soldiers who were securing the ropes on top of the tower either dead or seriously injured, and the same fate befell others who were working with spades at the wheels, and finally, an irreparable loss, knight Heinrich himself, struck down by an ignited javelin which his generous blood was still able to extinguish. With him, but crushed by a falling beam that landed on his chest, died his faithful squire, thus leaving Ouroana alone in the world, something which, recalled on an earlier occasion, is mentioned here, bearing in mind ' the importance of the fact for the continuation of this history. Impossible to describe the wild rejoicing of the Moors, reassured as they were, if any such reassurance were necessary, of Allah's supremacy over God, as confirmed by the resounding destruction of that cursed tower. No less easy to describe is the grief, anger and humiliation of the Portuguese, although there were some amongst them who could not refrain from muttering that anyone with a grain of commonsense or experience of warfare would have known that battles are won with swords and not with foreign inventions that can be as much of a disadvantage as an advantage. Once destroyed, the tower burned like a bonfire of giants, and it was never discovered how many men were reduced to crackling and ashes after being trapped by falling debris. A catastrophe.

Knight Heinrich's corpse was carried to his tent, where Ouroana, already informed of the tragedy, wept as was expected of a concubine, and that was that. The knight was laid out on his bunk, his hands joined in prayer and bound to his chest, and death having come so quickly, the expression on his face was quite serene, so serene that he might have been asleep, and, looking more closely, ' even wearing a smile, as if he were before the gates of paradise, with no other tower or weapon than the worth of his deeds on earth, but as certain of enjoying eternal bliss as of being dead. The heat is so intense that within hours his features will become distorted, his happy smile will disappear, between this illustrious corpse and another devoid of any special merits there will be no difference, sooner or later we all end up as equals in the face of death. Ouroana had uncombed her hair, as fair as that of any fair Galician, and she was weeping, somewhat weary of feeling no sorrow other than quiet pity for this man against whom her only complaint was that he should have abducted her by force, otherwise he had always treated her well, if we can imagine what the relationship must have been like between a concubine and her lord and master eight centuries ago. Ouroana was anxious to know what had happened to the faithful squire, for he must either be dead or gravely wounded not to be here mourning for his master, and they told her his body had been carried off immediately to the cemetery on the other side of the estuary, using this opportunity to

clear away the charred beams and trunks lest they should impede the manoeuvre, so that both debris and intact corpses were removed in a single operation, while any smaller remains encountered were rapidly buried in a depression on the slope on this side, where it will be difficult for them to rise when the trumpets are sounded on the Day of Judgment. So Ouroana was now free of any master, direct or indirect, as she was at pains to show at the first opportunity, when one of knight Heinrich's armed guards, disregarding any respect for the deceased, tried to grab her when he found her on her own. In a flash, Ouroana was brandishing a dagger which she had removed with providential foresight from the knight's belt when they brought him to his tent, a crime that fortunately went undiscovered, for a knight must go to his grave, if not with all his weapons, at least with the smaller ones. Now then, a dagger in the frail hands of a woman, even if accustomed to working the land and looking after livestock, was not the kind of threat to dissuade a Teutonic warrior, undoubtedly aware of the superiority of his Aryan race, but there are eyes worth all the armaments of this world, and if the latter were incapable of scrutinising the heart of this wicked man, they could intimidate him from three paces away and their message could not have been clearer, If you lay a finger on me, I either kill you or I kill myself, Ouroana told him, and he drew back, less from fear of dying than for being held responsible for her death, even though he could always allege that the wretched woman, beside herself with grief, had taken her own life before his very eyes. But the soldier preferred to withdraw, imploring God that if he should survive these adventures on foreign soil, he might one day meet here, if here he were to remain, or in distant Germany, a woman like this Ouroana, who even if not Aryan he would accept with the greatest pleasure.

Rairriundo Silva laid down his biro, rubbed his tired eyes, then re-read the closing lines, his own. He was rather pleased with them. He got up, placed his hands on his hips and leaned backwards, sighing with relief. He had been working for hours on end, had even forgotten dinner, he was so absorbed by the subject matter and the words that sometimes escaped him, had not even thought of Maria Sara, an omission that would be quite unforgivable if her presence inside him, save for the exaggeration of the metaphor, were not like the blood in his veins, something we had not really thought about, but which, being there and circulating, is an absolute condition of life. We repeat, save for the exaggeration of the metaphor. The two roses in the vase are standing in water from which they draw nourishment, it is true that they do not last long, but relatively speaking, neither do we. He opened the window and gazed down at the city. The Moors are celebrating the tower's destruction. The Amoreiras, smiled Raimundo Silva. On that side yonder stands the tent of knight Heinrich who will be buried tomorrow in the cemetery of São Vicente. Ouroana, not a tear in her eyes, keeps vigil over the corpse which is starting to smell. One of the five armed guards who has been wounded is missing. The one who tried to grab Ouroana stares at her from time to time, and remains pensive. Here outside, keeping out of sight, Mogueime prowls round the tent like a moth attracted by the light of the torches coming from the opening in the canvas flaps. Raimundo Silva consults his watch, if Maria Sara does not ring within the half hour, he will telephone her,

How are you, my love, and she will reply, Alive, and he will say, It's a miracle.

FRAY ROGEIRO STATES that it was about this time that signs of famine in the Moorish stronghold were becoming apparent. And no wonder, if we consider that imprisoned behind those walls as if held in a garrote, were over sixty thousand families, a number that at first sight seems alarming and when looked at a second time seems even more alarming, inasmuch as, in those backward times, families consisting of a father, mother and one child were dubious exceptions, and even if we were to estimate such a low number of people in each family we would arrive at a population of two hundred thousand inhabitants, a calculation in its turn called into question by another source of information, according to which the men alone in Lisbon numbered a hundred and fifty-four thousand. Now then, if we consider that the Koran allows each man to have as many as four wives, all of whom naturally bear him children, and taking into account the slaves who although scarcely treated like humans still have to eat, and therefore must have been the first to feel the want of food, then we end up with numbers that prudence tells us we should treat with extreme caution, some four or five hundred thousand persons, just imagine. In any case, if there were not quite as many, we at least know that the number was high, and from the point of view of those living there, too high by far.

Were it not for that constant thirst for glory that from time immemorial gives not a moment's peace to kings, presidents and military leaders, this conquest of Lisbon from the Moors could have been achieved with all the tranquillity in this world, after all, only a fool steps into the lion's cage to engage in combat instead of depriving it of food and sitting down to watch it die from starvation. It is true that with the passing of the centuries we learn something, and nowadays it is fairly common practice to use the privation of food and other necessities and such other reasons as a means of persuading those who out of stubbornness or a lack of understanding have refused to capitulate. However, these five hundred thousand are different just as their history would be different. What is important here is to observe the concurrence of two quite distinct episodes, such as the destruction and burning down of the tower at Porta de Ferro and the first signs of famine in the city, which, united and compared in the minds of the king's chiefs of staff, made it clear that while they should continue with the struggle, in the strict meaning of the word, for the honour of the Portuguese army, good strategy would dictate intensifying the siege, because in due course not only would the Moors have devoured everything down to the last crumb and rat, but they would end up devouring each other. If the French and the Normans were to carry on building their towers, if the Lusitanians for their part were to apply the lessons learned from knight Heinrich in order to erect their own war machine, if the artillery were to keep up regular bombardments, and the archers were to throw darts, arrows, spears and javelins, thus putting to good use the daily output of weapons workshops of Braço de Prata, these would be nothing more than symbolic gestures to inscribe in the epics, when compared with the last and conclusive solution, famine. And so the various captains gave strict orders to their armies that they should guard the outer walls day and night, not just the gates, but above all any secluded corners, certain hidden angles that might afford protection, and also any stretches facing the sea, not because any supplies could be brought into the city by that

route, for there could never be enough of them to meet their needs, but to prevent any messengers from getting through the blockade and carrying pleas for help to the villages in the Alentejo, both for provisions and volunteers to attack the assailants along the coast, the one being as welcome as the other. Their caution soon proved to be well-founded, when at dead of night with no moonlight a tiny canoe was discovered trying to sneak out between the galleys of the fleet and when the oarsman was brought before the admiral, he confessed to carrying letters addressed to the mayors of Almada and Palmela, from which it became clear how desperately the wretched inhabitants of Lisbon were in need of food. Despite the vigilance, the odd messenger must have crossed the lines, for weeks later, floating at the bottom of the wall that looked on to the river, the corpse of a Moor was picked up and when hoisted up on to the nearest watch-tower was found to be carrying a letter from the King of Evora, that fortunately never reached its destination, so cruel, inhuman and hypocritical was its message, considering that these were brothers of the same race and religion, and this was what the letter said, the King of E/ora wishes the inhabitants of Lisbon their freedom, for some time now I have held a truce with the King of the Portuguese, and I cannot go back on my word and trouble him and his subjects with war, ransom your lives with your money, so that what should be used for your salvation is not used for your downfall, farewell. This man was king, and in order not to break the truce he had drawn up with our Afonso Henriques, forgetting that this same Afonso had broken it to storm and capture Santarém, he allowed the doomed populace of Lisbon to die an ignominious death, while the courier who had left Lisbon with a plea for help did not take advantage of the opportunity to escape to safe territory, but returned with the evil tidings, only to die before delivering the message announcing abandonment and betrayal. How true that men are not always in their right place, this Moor would have rushed to Lisbon had he been the King of Evora, but the King of Evora would obviously have fled right on the first mission, were it not for the fact that they brought him under escort as far as Cacilhas with the reply and told him, Go throw yourself into the sea and make no attempt to come back.

To transport the body of knight Heinrich to the cemetery of São Vicente along those tortuous paths at the foot of the sheer slope, two paces away from the water to avoid being stoned or something worse, was, as people were already beginning to tell themselves, a most hazardous task. But the nobility of the deceased man and the magnitude of his final achievement justified this difficult undertaking, which after all bears no comparison with the torments suffered by the troops who now find themselves outside the Porta de Ferro and who took this very same route, an episode described somewhat superficially at the time. Four armed guards were carrying the coffin, with an escort of Portuguese soldiers sent by Mem Ramires, and Ouroana walked behind, as is only to be expected of someone who has lost the master whose pride and vanity she served. In other words, since she was no more than a casual concubine, she was not obliged to accompany the cortège, but she felt in all conscience that it would scarcely be fitting as a Christian to deprive him of this last token of respect, death had not separated them any more than life had, master and concubine for several days. Another life,

however, instant and pressing, is coming from behind, a soldier who follows at a distance, not the cortège but this woman who on noticing him, asks herself, What do you want from me, man, what do you want from me, and no reply comes, but she knows very well that he wants to take the place of knight Heinrich, not the place he now occupies under a shroud in this swaying coffin, but another place, any old place where the living can surrender their bodies to each other, a real bed, a grassy patch, a pile of hay, a comfortable spot on the sand. Mogueime was in no doubt that Ouroana would be snatched up by some lord who took a fancy to her, this did not worry him, perhaps because, deep down, he was not convinced that one day, even with the assistance of fate, he might lay a finger on her, and if she, because no one really cared for her, should find no other solution than to join up with the women on the other side, not even then would he push open the gate of the hut she occupied in order to satisfy his male lust with a body that, because it was at everyone's disposal, could never be his. This soldier Mogueime who can neither read nor write, who no longer remembers the country where' he was born nor why he was given a name that frankly sounds more Moorish than Christian, this soldier Mogueime, a simple rung on that ladder used to enter Santarém and now in this siege of Lisbon a poorly armed foot-soldier, this soldier Mogueime trails behind Ouroana like someone who knows no other way of avoiding death, while knowing that he will confront it time and time again and refusing to believe that life is no more than a finite series of postponements. But nothing could be further from soldier Mogueime's thoughts, soldier Mogueime wants that woman, and Portuguese poetry has not yet been born.

It was written sometime earlier, thanks to one of those lucid insights into the future that have no rational explanation, that one day Mogueime washed his bloodstained hands in the waters of the estuary, and that the corpses of two soldiers from the royal encampment who had taken Ouroana by force were subsequently discovered, both of them having been stabbed to death. Knowing with what agility Ouroana wielded knight Heinrich's dagger against the first armed man who tried to grab her, then we can easily imagine that in order to avenge her offended honour, the said Ouroana, unseen by witnesses in the waning light of evening or dawn, at an opportune moment, when her aggressors got within reach, plunged her dagger into their stomachs just below their coats of mail. These soldiers were definitely murdered, but not by Ouroana. But the fertile imagination runs on and bearing in mind that Mogueime's infatuation might have driven him out of jealousy to commit these crimes, the earlier description of Mogueime washing his bloodstained hands would make sense were it the blood of those two wretches which the waters quickly dissolved and swept away just as life evaporates with time. This might have been what happened but, in fact, nothing of the kind, the deaths of these men were mere coincidence, coincidences existed even then although no one paid much attention. One day when they had finally spoken to each other and entered into other intimacies, Ouroana would ask Mogueime if he was responsible for the murder of those lecherous soldiers, No, he replied, thinking to himself that he should have killed them in order to be more deserving of this woman's love.

Every cloud has a silver lining, a delightful proverb, predating any of the philosophical relativisms that have been spawned, and which wisely teaches us that it is pointless trying to judge life's events as if we were separating the wheat from the chaff. Our Mogueime had feared losing all hope of ever winning Ouroana if some nobleman, out of whim or bravado, or, who knows, because of some more serious but inconstant sentiment, should claim her for himself, removing her from the valley of life at least for the duration of the war. Fortunately, this did not happen, but the reason why it did not happen was most unfortunate, for it had become a public scandal that this solitary woman, although not a prostitute, had sold her favours to common soldiers, two of whom were to die in mysterious circumstances, an episode of no real historical interest, but which, as we know, served to reinforce the reasons for her neglect by gentlemen who do not want other men's leftovers and who are sufficiently superstitious not to tempt the devil, even if he should appear in the guise of such a ravishingly beautiful woman. Therefore abandoned by all for such conflicting reasons, Ouroana was washing clothes in a stream that flowed into the estuary, an honest occupation that earned her a living, when out of the corner of her eye she saw that soldier approach who follows her wherever she goes. Even though beards can make men look alike, it would not be difficult to recognise this fellow, for he is at least half a head taller than all the others, and his general appearance is most favourable. He sat on a boulder nearby, and there he remained in silence, watching, now she is straightening up her body, raising and lowering her arm to beat the clothes, the noise travels over the water, the sound is unmistakable, one smack followed by another, and then there is silence, the woman rests her two hands on the white stone, an ancient Roman sarcophagus, Mogueime looks but does not stir, and just at that moment the wind brings the shrill cry of the muezzin. The woman quickly turns her head to the left as if to hear his summons more clearly, and, Mogueime being on this side, a little further back, it would have been impossible for their eyes not to meet. Barefoot on the thick, damp sand, Mogueime can feel the weight of his entire body, as if he had become part of the boulder on which he is sitting, if the royal trumpets were now to give the signal to attack, he would hear nothing, what is echoing in his head is the muezzin's cry and he goes on hearing it as he watches the woman, and when she finally averts her eyes the silence becomes absolute, true there are sounds all around but they belong to another world, the mules pant and drink from the stream, and perhaps because he could find no better way of beginning what has to be done, Mogueime asks the woman, What is your name, how often we must have asked each other that question since the world began, What is your name, sometimes going on to give our own name, I'm Mogueime, to make a start, to give before receiving, and then we wait, until we hear the reply, when it comes, when we are not answered with silence, but not in this instance, My name is Ouroana, she told him, he already knew, but this was the first time he was hearing it from those lips.

Mogueime got to his feet and went up to her, six paces, a man walks for leagues and leagues during his lifetime only to end up exhausted and with blisters on his feet not to mention his soul, and then there comes a day when he barely takes six paces and finds

what he is looking for, here, during this siege of Lisbon, this woman who was on her knees and has now risen to her feet to greet me, her hands are wet, her skirt drenched, and I do not know how we came to find ourselves in the shallow water, I can feel the gentle caress of the current on my ankles, the grating of tiny pebbles below, one of the stable-lads watering the mules, said in jest, Hey, big fellow, as if saying, Hey, bull, before making himself scarce, Mogueime hears nothing, has eyes only for Ouroana, her face comes close, so close he could touch it like a flower in bloom, in silence, stroking it with only two fingers that pass slowly over her cheeks and mouth, over her eyebrows, first the one, then the other, following their outline, then her forehead and hair, before asking her as his hand comes to rest on her shoulder, Would you like to stay with me from now on, and she replies, Yes, I would, then Mogueime's ears pricked up, all the king's trumpets were ringing out in jubilation and in such deafening tones that the trumpets of heaven must have joined in. Ouroana finished the washing there and then that she had promised to deliver that day while Mogueime told her about his life, nothing about his kinsmen because he did not know them, and she, on the other hand, told him nothing of her life after her abduction, and as for that other life it was like that of any country dweller, even then it was so, and not by coincidence. Ouroana took the clothes to the encampment at Monte da Graça, where she was living at the time, they told her to come back for payment, in kind, of course, but she did not mind, nor should anyone mind waiting for payment when they serve the gentry, for she was leaving for another life with this man by her side, and anyone who wants to find me will have to look for me where the battle is at its fiercest, before the Porta de Ferro, but not tonight, for this is our first night together, husband and wife, as far away as possible from the encampment where no one will see us give ourselves to each other under the starry sky, listening to the lapping of the waves, and when the moon comes up our eyes will still be open, Mogueime will say, There is no other paradise, and I shall reply, It was not paradise for Adam and Eve because the Lord told them they had sinned.

Maria Sara arrived at the appointed hour. She brought some food, provisions might be the better word, for she came with enough supplies to see them through a war and deeply conscious of her responsibilities, Yes, one kiss, two, three, but don't get distracted, you were working, carry on, there's a time for everything, however brief, and we shall have two whole nights and an entire day, an eternity, just give me a kiss, and now sit down, simply tell me how the history is coming along, Mogueime and Ouroana have already met, In plain language, you mean they've slept together, Yes, after a fashion, Why after a fashion, Because they had no bed, they slept under the light of the stars, Such good fortune, A warm night, they were together and the tide was rising, I hope you've written down those words, No, I haven't written them down, but there's still time. Maria Sara carried her parcels to the kitchen, while Raimundo Silva, standing, was examining the sheets of paper with the expression of someone whose thoughts are elsewhere, Couldn't you write some more, she asked coming back into the room, or has my arrival distracted you, It's not really a question of you being or not being here, we're not some elderly couple who have lost their feelings and even any memory of ever having

had them, on the contrary, we are Ouroana and Mogueime at the outset, Then I am distracting you, Thank God, but it did occur to me that I won't carry on writing here, why not, Difficult to say, moving out of the study was one way of escaping routine, of breaking a habit in the hope that it might help me to penetrate another age, but now that I am on the point of returning, I feel like going back to the chair and desk where I do my proof-reading, after all, that is my profession, Why this insistence on describing yourself as a proof-reader, So that things will be clear between Mogueime and Ouroana, Explain yourself, Just as he will never be captain, I shall never be a writer, And you're afraid Ouroana will turn her back on Mogueime when she discovers that she will never be a captain's wife, It has happened before, Yet this Ouroana had a better life when she was with her knight, but now she has made love with Mogueime, I assume he didn't force her, I'm not talking about Ouroana, You're talking about me, I know, but I don't like what I'm hearing, I can imagine, However long our relationship may last, I want to live it honestly, I liked you for what you are, and I hope that what I am does not prevent you from liking me, and that's that, Forgive me, Don't keep asking to be forgiven, you men are to blame, all you machos, when it isn't a question of your profession, it's your age, when it's not your age it's your social class, when it's not social class, it's money, when will you men learn to be your natural selves, No human being is natural, You don't have to be a proof-reader to know that, anyone with a grain of intelligence is aware of the fact, We seem to be at war, Of course we're at war, and it's a war of siege, each of us besieges the other and is besieged in turn, we want to break down the other's walls while defending our own, love means getting rid of all barriers, love is the end of all sieges. Raimundo Silva smiled, You're the one who should be writing this history, Your idea would never have occurred to me, to negate an incontrovertible historical fact, I myself no longer know what made me do it, Frankly, I'm convinced that the great divide between people is between those who say yes and those who say no, I'm well aware before you remind me that there are rich and poor, weak and strong, but that isn't the point, blessed are those who say no, for theirs should be the kingdom on earth, Why did you say Should be, The conditional was intentional, the kingdom on earth belongs to those who have the wit to put a no at the service of a yes, having been the perpetrators of a no, they rapidly erase it to restore a yes, Well said, dear Ouroana, Thank you, dear Mogueime, but I am only a simple woman for all my education, And I a simple man, despite being a proof-reader. They both laughed, and then between them, they carried his papers through to the study, a dictionary, other reference works, Raimundo Silva insisted on carrying the vase with two roses himself, Leave this to me, for I'm the one who thought of it. He arranged everything on the desk, sat down, looked very seriously at Maria Sara as if appraising from her presence there, the effect of the change of ambience, I'm now going to write about the miraculous events attributed after his death and burial to the much celebrated Heinrich, a German knight from the city of Bonn, as narrated in Fray Rogeiro's letter to that Osbern who was to achieve fame as a chronicler, a letter of little trust but of the greatest conviction which is what counts, And I, replied Maria Sara, until it is time for dinner which will be prepared and eaten at home this evening, will settle here on the sofa and read this edifying book about the miracles of St Antony, my appetite having been

whetted by your reading of that prodigious moment when the mule exchanged its barley for the Blessed Sacrament, a phenomenon that was never to be repeated, because the aforesaid mule, being as sterile as all the others, left no offspring, Let us begin, Let us begin No more than a week had passed since knight Heinrich had been buried in the cemetery of São Vicente, the plot for foreign martyrs, than Fray Rogeiro was in his tent compiling the notes he had taken while touring the camps astride his faithful mule, which truly had all the qualities of its species, but suffered from an incurable gluttony that left not a blade of grass or grain of corn safe from its yellow teeth, Fray Rogeiro was still working well into the night, when, tired after his journey, he dozed off gently three times before falling into a deep sleep that seemed almost supernatural. It says here, that missing choir on Christmas eve because he was in the infirmary ministering to a dying priest, St Antony was rewarded when the walls divided so that he might adore the Blessed Sacrament during holy mass. Fray Rogeiro was asleep when an armed knight entered his tent with all his smaller weapons apart from his dagger, and going up to him he shook him by the shoulder three times, the first time gently, the second time vigorously, the third time with force. It says here that when St Antony was preaching in the open air it began to rain but only in the immediate surroundings so that his audience remained dry. Fray Rogeiro opened his startled eyes and saw standing before him knight Heinrich who told him, Arise, and go to that spot where the Portuguese buried my squire, remote from me, and take his corpse and bring it here to be buried alongside my grave. It says here that the plea of a devout woman was heard by St Antony a league away and that he restored the tresses of another that had been shorn from her head. Fray Rogeiro looked, and no longer seeing either the knight or any sign of a tomb, he thought he was sleeping and dreaming and so as not to be undeceived, he went back to sleep. It says here that when St Antony encountered a penitent whom he judged deserving of pardon, he absolved him, at the same time erasing all the letters from a sheet of paper on which the sinner's transgressions were listed. Fray Rogeiro had fallen back into a deep sleep in which he dreamt that some rancid food had given him that bad dream, when the knight reappeared, once more roused him and said, Wake up, friar, for I ordered you to go and find the corpse of my squire in that grave remote from mine, and you heard me but ignored my command. It says here that on spilling wine in a cellar, St Antony restored it to the cask. Fray Rogeiro must have been very tired to have gone back to sleep at once, disdaining first the request, then the order, but he was now troubled in his sleep as if aware that it would soon be interrupted, and so it happened, the knight entered in a towering rage and with a fierce and intimidating expression, solemnly rebuked him, You'll be in serious trouble if I have to ask you once more to carry out my orders. It says here that with the sign of the cross, St Antony turned a toad into a capon, and then with the same sign of the cross transformed the capon into a fish. Now then, Fray Rogeiro would not be worthy of his sacred ministry if he had not learned from the example of St Peter, which tells us that you may deny or refuse twice, but to do so a third time, even without the cock crowing, will expose you to serious reprisals, especially where there is the intervention of ghosts, whose material strength probably exceeds that of the living a hundredfold. It says here that St Antony with the sign of the cross plucked out the eyes of

a heretic as a punishment, but out of compassion then restored them. Rising quickly from his pallet and picking up a lamp, Fray Rogeiro went down to the estuary, giving a fright to many a sentinel who thought they were seeing a ghost, stepped into a boat and, straining at the oars, crossed to the other side. It says here that St Antony miraculously repaired two broken glasses and restored spilled wine to its cask for a woman who pleaded his intercession, thus showing that miracles can be repeated without their efficacy being diminished in the slightest. Where Fray Rogeiro found the necessary strength for the Herculean task assigned him, it is difficult to say, unless fear itself drove him on, but he lost no time in opening the grave and removing the squire's corpse, which he carried on his back to the boat, and breaking out into a cold and hot sweat, returned to the point of his departure, carried the heavy burden uphill as far as São Vicente, and alongside the knight's tomb he dug another grave and reburied the squire's corpse. It says here that when St Antony was in Sicily, he saw one of his devotees fall into a swamp and immediately fished her out unscathed and spotlessly clean. Fray Rogeiro entered his tent and slept like a log for the rest of the night, and when he woke up next morning and remembered what had happened, he was not only suspicious, for his hands and habit were soiled with mud and other disagreeable stains, but outraged at the ingratitude of the knight who had not even come to thank him after so rudely interrupting his precious sleep. It says here that when St Antony was in Rome, he preached in only one language yet people of various nationalities understood him perfectly. Now then, this feat was not the last of knight Heinrich's wondrous manifestations, for it came about that at the head of his tombstone there appeared a palm similar to those the pilgrims would carry in their hands from Jerusalem three centuries later. It says here that in Ferrara, St Antony rescued a woman from an unjust death being plotted by her husband, by making a new-born child speak and declare its mother's innocence. The palm grew, produced leaves and became increasingly tall, and the king came and all the soldiers and ordinary people from the encampments and together they offered heartfelt thanks to God. It says here that in Rimini where he was stoned by the heretics, St Antony walked along the seashore and calling upon the fish, he delivered an admirable sermon. The sick began arriving and took leaves from that palm, and placing them on their neck they were cured there and then of all their ailments. It says here, that passing from Rimini to Padua, St Antony converted twenty-seven thieves with a single sermon. Such wonder, such an edifying miracle. It says here that after firmly reprimanding a boy who had kicked his own mother, the youth was so upset and sorry about the wrong he had done, that he went off to fetch a cutlass and without any warning cut off the offending foot. Others who were sick gathered the palms and then scorched and crushed them, and mixing the dust with water or wine, they drank it, whereupon all their aches and pains disappeared at once. It says here that the penitent youth lost so much blood that he was in danger of losing his life, and his cries brought everyone running from nearby to find out what was happening, and weeping bitterly he explained that Fray Antony had told him this was the punishment he deserved, and at that moment his mother arrived and protested that the friar had murdered her son, attributing the latter's rashness to the saint's excessive zeal. News of the palm's healing powers soon spread, so much so that very shortly the earth was stripped bare of

both leaves and stalks, and because there was no effective vigilance, some came at night and pulled up that which had remained underground and carried it off. It says here that St Antony rushed to the youth's assistance and picking up the foot severed from his leg, he fitted it back into position with his own hands, made a quick sign of the cross, and the leg and foot were joined up as firmly and securely as before. There would be no end to the blessed inventory of knight Heinrich's miraculous deeds if we were to list all of them in every detail, besides it would take us well beyond the scope of this narrative, which is not simply to trace out the destiny of Lisbon, something everyone knows, but to explain how we managed, without the help of the crusaders, to bring off the patriotic enterprise of our King Afonso, the first with this name and first in everything. It says here that when St Antony was preaching in Milan, he appeared in Lisbon and had his father acquitted from a debt he did not owe, and it also says that when he was preaching in Padua, he appeared at the same time in Lisbon, where he made a dead man speak and rescued his father from death. Now then, after having witnessed so many marvellous events, two deaf-mutes who had arrived with the fleet, however no one knows whether English, Aquitanian, Breton, Fleming or from Cologne, went one day to the knight's tomb and lay down beside it, pleading with the utmost devotion that he might show them mercy and compassion. It says here that these were the most significant of the miracles worked by St Antony during his lifetime, but that innumerable miracles were recorded after his death and of such repute that they have compared more than favourably with those instigated by his actual presence, and to give but one example, St Antony made a sterile woman fertile, and transformed the shapeless lump she conceived into a comely creature, thus converting half a miracle into a complete one. Now as the two deaf-mutes lay there, they both fell asleep and knight Heinrich, in the guise of a pilgrim, appeared to them in a dream, and in his hand he was carrying a staff fashioned from palm and he spoke to those two young men and told them, Arise and rejoice, go forth in the knowledge that because of my merits and those of the martyrs who lie here, you have gained the Lord's grace, and that grace goes with you, and that said, he disappeared, and on awakening they found they could hear and also speak, but with such a stutter that it was impossible to tell which language they were speaking, whether it was English, Aquitanian, Breton, Flemish, or the dialect of Cologne, or, as many claimed, the language of the Portuguese, And then, Then the two stutterers returned to the knight's grave with even greater devotion, if that is possible, but their prayers were to no avail, and stutterers they remained for the rest of their lives, and only to be expected, for when it comes to miracles knight Heinrich cannot be compared to St Antony.

Let's have some dinner, suggested Maria Sara, and Raimundo Silva asked her, What do we have for eating, Perhaps some fish, perhaps a capon, but if miracles can also work in reverse, don't be surprised if a toad jumps out of the frying-pan.

MORE THAN TWO MONTHS have passed since the siege began, three months beyond the last payment of the soldiers' wages. Dom Afonso Henriques had high expectations, as we were informed in due course, of the skills of military engineering of knight Heinrich, and also of those unnamed Frenchmen and Normans, but the holy man's calamitous death, even though the mother of further prodigies, and the destruction of the tower that would be used to attack the wall south of the Porta de Ferro, caused the warring zeal of all to pass from incandescent heat to a gentle flame, as may be seen from the delay in the work of those foreigners and from the endless arguments in which the Portuguese master-carpenters waste their time, unable to agree whether it is worth repeating such and such of the German's inventions, by respecting the patent or introducing structural modifications that, in a manner of speaking, might add a national touch to the future tower. The king's aforesaid expectations had been strengthened for two reasons, the one stemming directly from the other, the first reason being that the favourable outcome of the assault meant that the city had been captured, and therefore, the second reason, he could disband the soldiers and send them home until the next campaign, thus saving on wages. Dom Afonso had been honest enough not to conceal the dire straits in which he found himself, his treasury depleted; something that could be turned to his advantage, because simplicity and candour are not qualities commonly found amongst those who govern the world with the exception of our own rulers. But this method of playing politics is never duly rewarded, and here we now have a king with the desirable city of Lisbon before his eyes but out of reach, and obliged moreover to scrape the bottom of his coffers to pay an army that is already grumbling about the delay. Of course this is not the first time that the Crown is late in paying, especially in a state of war, we need only think of the vicissitudes during a time of conflict, the problem of collecting money, transport, the question of exchanges, all these factors combined means that the summons to be paid is usually late and at an inconvenient hour, causing such distress that the poor soldier often dies before receiving his wages, sometimes a matter of minutes beforehand.

If only Dom Afonso Henriques had obtained the money a few days earlier then the history of this siege would have been different, not in its known conclusion, but in its intermediate results. The fact is that with the passage of time, it was already mid-September, and no one knowing how and where this unprecedented idea had come from, the soldiers began to mutter amongst themselves that being as manly or unmanly as the crusaders, they should be considered just as deserving of recompense, and that being subjected to the same death, they should have exactly the same rights as the others when it came to being paid. Putting it bluntly, what they wanted to know was what papal bulls gave the crusaders the mandate to plunder, and it has to be said that most of them had lost any interest in the enterprise, while the wretched Portuguese soldiers had to be content with miserable wages as they watched the foreigners feasting and rejoicing. Rumours of these stirrings and encounters reached the captains, but their pretension was so absurd and opposed to all laws and customs, whether written or transmitted by custom, that their only reaction was to shrug their shoulders and say dismissively, They're being childish, by which they meant, They're being small-minded, in those days people

had some regard for etymology, unlike today when you cannot call anyone childish, even though patently minor, without a summons being served immediately for slander. Undecided, the captains sent a missive to Dom Afonso Henriques advising him to pay out the wages without further delay, inasmuch as discipline was breaking down and the troops were becoming more restive each time the sergeants ordered them to attack, muttering to themselves, Why doesn't he go, after all he's wearing the stripes, and the commentary was most unfair, for no sergeant ever stayed behind in the trenches to watch the outcome of an assault, when he should advance to gather the laurels or remain to censure the cowardly deserters. At the end of yet another week, when subversive opinions were no longer being expressed in whispers but proclaimed aloud in gatherings either spontaneous or concerted, word spread that the soldiers were finally about to be paid. The captains sighed with relief, but soon held their breath when the pay-masters reported that no one had come forward to be paid. In the king's own encampment the turn-out was very small, and even that had to be interpreted as the result of intimidation, for the soldiers were in danger of coming face to face with Dom Afonso Henriques at any minute who would ask them, So, you've been to receive your wages, and where would the timid private find the courage to reply, No, I have not, Your Majesty, unless they pay me the same rate as the crusaders I shall be doing no more fighting.

The captains' greatest fear was that the Moors might learn of the disaffections spreading throughout the Christian encampments, and should take advantage of the unrest and sally forth from the five gates simultaneously sweeping some out to sea and sending others down the slopes to their death. Therefore, before it was too late, they summoned, not the officers for there were none, but a group of soldiers who, because they were always making their voices heard, had gained a certain ascendancy over the others, and fate decreed that at the Porta de Ferro, one of those soldiers should happen to be Mogueime whose love for Ouroana did not distract him from his responsibilities to society and from pursuing personal and collective interests. So three delegates went to the captain and when questioned they presented their case. Mem Ramires's impassioned speech, no doubt like those delivered in the other encampments, was full of patriotic exhortations, yet for all their novelty, they failed to dissuade the soldiers, and even the loud threats that followed produced little effect, and finally turning to Mogueime, an emotional Mem Ramires exclaimed, How is it possible that you Mogueime of all people could be involved in this conspiracy, you, who were my comrade in arms at Santarém, where you generously loaned me your shoulders and height so that I might throw a rope-ladder up to the battlements that all of us later climbed, and now, forgetful of the vital role you played on that glorious day, having repudiated your captain and shown ingratitude towards your king, there you are scheming with a gang of ambitious scoundrels, how is it possible, whereupon Mogueime, unperturbed, simply replied, Captain, if you should need to climb on to my shoulders again in order to reach the tallest battlement in Lisbon with your sword, your hands or a ladder, you may count on me, let's go at once, if you want, but that is not the question, our concern is that we should be paid like the foreigners, and take note, Captain, just how reasonable our demands are,

for we have not come to ask that the foreigners should be paid what we have been paid. The other two delegates assented in silence, for such eloquence needed no repeating, and the conference ended.

Mem Ramires sent his report to the king, which was essentially the same as that of the other captains, suggesting with all respect that His Royal Highness should summon the leaders of this movement in the armed forces, who, perhaps in the presence of Your Majesty, might be rather less audacious and unreasonable. Dom Afonso Henriques was hesitant about making any such concession, but the situation was serious, the Moors might suddenly come to realise that their enemies were vacillating, and as a last resort, but furious, he sent for the leaders. When the five men entered the tent, the king with a fierce expression, his powerful arms crossed over his chest, gave vent to his wrath, I cannot decide whether I should order the feet that have brought you here to be cut off or your heads from which, should you dare, you will spout defiant words, and he stared with blazing eyes at the tallest of the delegates, who was, as one might have suspected, Mogueime. Now then, it was nice to see, perhaps only possible in those innocent times, how Mogueime grew in stature and his voice rang out clearly as he replied, If Your Royal Highness orders our head and feet to be cut off, your entire army will be without head or feet. Dom Afonso Henriques could not believe his ears, that a hired common soldier from the infantry should presume to claim for his base fraternity privileges reserved for a cavalry of noblemen, for there is a real army, the foot-soldiers only serving to surround the enemy on the battlefield or to form a cordon during a siege such as this one. Even so, and because nature had endowed him with some sense of humour, in keeping with the circumstances at that time, he found the delegate's reply amusing, not so much for the substance of the argument, which he thought more than debatable, but because of the felicitous play on words. Turning to the other four leaders who had also been convened, he said in jovial mockery, This country would appear to be getting off to a bad start, and then, altering his expression and looking directly at Mogueime, he added, I've seen you before, who are you, I took part in the conquest of Santarém, Your Majesty, replied Mogueime, and it was I who lent my shoulders to captain Mem Ramires who is standing over there, And do you think that gives you the right to come here to complain and make impossible demands, Not at all, Your Majesty, but my comrades insisted that I should act as their spokesman, And what exactly do you want, Your Majesty knows what we want, that we should be given our fair share of the booty, for we have come here prepared to shed our blood which when spilled is the same colour as that of the foreign crusaders, just as we will stink like them if death should strike and our corpses rot, And if I should refuse you any share of the booty, Then, Sir, you will capture the city with the few crusaders who have stayed behind, This is an act of insurrection you are committing, Sir, I beseech you not to take this attitude, for while it is true that there is some desire for gain on our part, bear in mind that it is also an act of justice to pay the same wages for the same task, and this new country will get off to a bad start unless it is fair-minded from the outset, remember, Sir, the words of our forefathers, That which is born crooked rarely ever grows straight, do not let Portugal become crooked, Sir, I implore you, Who

taught you to speak with more eloquence than a prelate, The words are there, Sir, in the air, anyone can learn them. Dom Afonso Henriques was no longer scowling and stroking his beard with his right hand began to think, and there was something sad about his expression as if questioning so many of the decisions he had taken, and those others, as yet unknown, that he would have to weigh up in future according to his state of mind when he came to confront them, and lost in thought for several minutes, with a silence no one there present dared to interrupt, he finally spoke, telling them, Begone, your captains will inform you anon of the outcome of our discussions.

There was rejoicing in the five encampments, and even on the Monte da Graça all fears were dispelled when, the troops having gathered on parade, the heralds arrived to announce that in his bounty the king had decided that all the soldiers, no matter their rank or seniority, would have the same right to plunder the city, in keeping with the customs of the day and excepting the booty reserved for the crown and that promised to the crusaders. There was so much cheering and at such length, that the Moors genuinely feared that the moment had come for the final assault, although there had been no earlier preparations to warn them. No such assault, in fact, took place, but from the walls above they could see that the encampments were in a ferment of activity, the men like ants excited at the sudden discovery of a table laden with food at the side of a road where hitherto they had carried off nothing except dry awns of wheat and the odd crumb. Within an hour the master-carpenters had reached an agreement, within two hours the joiners were hard at work on the rot that had slowly been corroding the towers under construction, a figurative expression, since hylotrupes and anobia are not endowed with cutting and perforating instruments capable of coping with green wood and devouring it, and within three hours someone had the idea that by digging a deep tunnel under the wall and then filling it up with wood and setting it alight, the heat of this furnace would expand the stones and cause the joints to crumble, whereby, with a little assistance from God as well, the entire wall would come tumbling down before you could say amen. Here the sceptics will murmur and those who are always denigrating human nature that these men, formerly insensitive to any love for the fatherland and indifferent to the future of generations to come, out of their love for filthy lucre were now revealing themselves, not only by their hard physical labour, but also in the invisible and superior operations of soul and mind, but it has to be said that they are much deceived, because what moved wills and generated happiness there stemmed infinitely more from the spiritual satisfaction of forging equal justice for everyone as an integral and unassailable right.

With this renewed morale amongst the Christians that even from a distance was much in evidence, the Moors began to feel disheartened, and if in the majority of cases it was in the necessary struggle itself against nascent weakness that they sought new strength, there were some who succumbed to fears real and imagined and who tried to save their body by seeking with a hasty Christian baptism the condemnation of their Islamic soul. At dead of night and using improvised ropes, they descended from the walls and, concealed amidst the surrounding ruins and amongst the bushes, they awaited dawn

in order to come out by daylight. With raised arms, and the rope they had used to descend wound round their neck as a sign of surrender and obedience, they walked towards the encampment, shouting all the while, Baptism, baptism, confiding in the saving virtue of a word which hitherto, resolute in their faith, they had found abhorrent. From afar, on seeing those submissive Moors, the Portuguese thought they were coming to negotiate the surrender of the city itself, although they found it strange that the gates had not been opened for them to leave nor the military protocol prescribed on such occasions been observed, and above all, as the presumed emissaries drew closer, it became all too apparent from their filthy and tattered clothes that these were not men of any social standing. But when it finally became clear what they wanted, impossible to describe the fury and demented wrath of the soldiers, suffice it to say that there were enough severed tongues, noses and ears there to fill a butcher's shop, and, as if that were not enough, they chased them back to the walls with blows and insults, some, who knows, hoping in vain for an unlikely pardon from those whom they had betrayed, but it was a sad affair, and all of them ended up there, fatally wounded, stoned and riddled with arrows by their own brethren. After this tragic episode, a heavy silence fell over the city, as if they had to rid themselves of a deeper mourning, perhaps that of an offended religion, perhaps the unbearable remorse of acts of fratricide, and that was the moment when, breaking down the last barriers of dignity and circumspection, famine showed itself at its most obscene in the city, for there is less obscenity in the intimate manifestations of the body than in seeing that body expire from starvation under the indifferent and ironic gaze of the gods who, having stopped feuding with each other, and being immortal, distract themselves from eternal boredom by applauding those who win and those who lose, the former because they have killed, the latter because they have died. In reverse order of ages, lives were extinguished like spent oil-lamps, first the babes in arms who could not suck a single drop of milk from their mothers' withered breasts, their insides rotted by the unsuitable nourishment forced down their throat as a last resort, then the older children who needed more food to survive than that the adults took from their mouths, especially the women, for they deprived themselves so that the men might have enough energy left to defend the walls, nevertheless, the elderly were those who resisted best of all, perhaps because of the scant nourishment required by their bodies which had decided for themselves to enter death as light as possible rather than overload the boat that would transport them across the ultimate river. By then the cats and dogs had already disappeared, the rats were pursued into the fetid darkness where they sought refuge, and now that in patios and gardens plants were stripped to their roots, the memory of feasting on a dog or cat was tantamount to dreaming of an era of abundance when people could still afford the luxury of throwing away bones that had barely been stripped of meat. Scraps were salvaged from rubbish dumps either for immediate consumption or to transform by some means or other into food, and the scavenging became so frenetic that the few remaining rats emerging from the darkness of night, found almost nothing to satisfy their indiscriminate voraciousness. Lisbon groaned in its misery, and it was a grotesque and terrible irony that the Moors had to celebrate Ramadan when hunger had made fasting impossible.

And so the Night of Destiny arrived, as described in chapter ninety-seven of the Koran commemorating the prophet's first revelation, and where, according to tradition, all the events throughout the year are recorded. For these Moors of Lisbon, however, destiny will not wait so long, it will be fulfilled within the next few days, and it has come quite unexpectedly, for it was not revealed on the Night a year ago, nor did they know how to read its secrets, that accursed Ibn Arrinque and his army of Galicians deceived because the Christians were still so far north. It is far from clear why the Moors should have lit great bonfires all along the battlements, which, like an enormous crown of flames circling the city, burned all that night, instilling fear and remorse in the hearts of the Portuguese, whose hopes of victory might have been shaken by that terrifying spectacle had they not been reliably informed of the desperate situation to which their wretched enemies had been reduced. At daybreak, when the muezzins summoned the faithful to prayer, the last columns of black smoke rose into the limpid sky, and tinged with crimson by the rising sun, they were wafted by a gentle breeze over the river in the direction of Almada, like some ominous warning.

The time had actually come. The excavation of the mine was finished, the three towers, Norman, French, and also that of the Portuguese, which had been quickly built to the height of the other two, rose up near the walls like giants ready to raise a mighty fist that would reduce to rubble and ashes a barrier fast losing the cement of willpower and the bravery of those who have defended it so far. Somnambulant, the Moors see the towers approach, and feel that their arms can barely raise their sword and stretch the cord of their bow, that their bleary eyes can no longer measure distances, they are facing defeat, worse than any death. Below, the flames engulf the wall, smoke belches from the tunnel, as if from the nostrils of an expiring dragon. And that is when the Moors with one final effort, trying to muster whatever strength remains from their own desperation, erupt from the Porta de Ferro in order to set fire once more to that threatening tower which they failed to destroy from above where it was better protected. On all sides people are killing and dying. The tower catches fire but the blaze has not spread, the Portuguese defend it with a fury equal to that of the Moors, but there came a moment when in terror, some wounded, others pretending they were, throwing down their arms or still bearing them, some fled, jumping into the water, shameful, just as well there are no crusaders present to see their cowardice and report it abroad where reputations are made and lost. As for Fray Rogeiro, there is no danger, he was elsewhere at the time, if anyone had told him what happened here, we can always ask, How can he be so sure if he was not there. The Moors in their turn began to weaken, while the Portuguese with greater courage were now advancing, imploring the intercession of all the saints and of the Holy Virgin Mary, and, either because of this, or because all materials have a limit to their resistance, the wall well and truly came crashing down, so that, once the dust and smoke had settled, the city could be seen at last, its narrow streets, the congested houses, people everywhere in a panic. The Moors, embittered by this disaster, withdrew, the Porta de Ferro slammed shut, not that it mattered, for another gap had appeared nearby where there was no gate, its only defence being the stalwarts amongst the Moors who rushed to

cover the opening with such desperate wrath that they caused the Portuguese to vacillate once more, this made it all the more urgent to raise the tower over here to the height of the wall, at the same time as cries of fear and anguish could be heard coming from the other part of the city where the other two towers pushed up against the wall formed bridges for the soldiers who called out, Courage, courage, as they invaded the battlements, Lisbon had been conquered, Lisbon had been lost. After the fortress's surrender, the bloodshed ceased. However when the sun began to go down in the direction of the sea and touched the clear horizon, the voice of the muezzin could be heard coming from the great mosque, calling out for the last time from on high where he had taken refuge, Allahu akbar. The Moors came out in goose pimples at the summons of Allah, but the plea did not reach its end because a Christian soldier, more zealous than most, or thinking one more casualty was needed to conclude the war, went racing up the steps of the minaret and with one blow from his sword beheaded the old man, in whose blind eyes a light flickered at the moment of death.

It is three o'clock in the morning. Raimundo Silva puts down his pen, slowly gets to his feet, supporting himself with both hands spread on the table, as if suddenly overcome by the burden of all his years on this earth. He goes into the bedroom that is barely illuminated by a dim light, and carefully undresses, trying not to make a noise, but hoping deep down that Maria Sara will wake up, for no particular reason, simply so that he can tell her that the history has come to an end, and she, who was not asleep, after all, asks him, Have you finished, and he replied, Yes, I've finished, Would you like to tell me how it ends, With the death of the muezzin, And what about Mogueime, and Ouroana, what happened to them, As I see it, Ouroana will return to Galicia, and Mogueime will go with her, and before they leave they will find in Lisbon a dog that has survived in hiding and will accompany them on their journey, What makes you think that they should go away, Difficult to say, the logical thing would be for them to stay, Forget it, we're staying. Maria Sara's head is resting on Raimundo's shoulder, with his left hand he strokes her hair and cheek. They did not fall asleep at once. Beneath the verandah roof a shadow sighed.

Afterword

This novel, whose title suggests a book on Portuguese history, permits the author to speculate about the difference between historiography, historical novels and "stories inserted into history" which is the type of book José Saramago himself prefers to write.

By questioning the validity of a historical source and imagining an alternative version of recorded events, the proof-reader Raimundo Silva not only rewrites an important chapter of Portuguese history but in the process irrevocably transforms his own life. This History of the Siege of Lisbon is therefore neither conventional history nor historical novel, but demonstrates Saramago's contention that history and fiction are constantly overlapping.

The book operates on two planes of action: one set in the twelfth century, packed with key episodes of the alternative history of the siege of Lisbon the proof-reader Raimundo Silva feels compelled to write; the other in the twentieth century, dealing with the routine existence of the proof-reader's daily life and a significant encounter with a new editor who challenges him to justify his radical departure from established historiography. Raimundo Silva who dominates the novel could be the alter ego of Saramago who refuses to accept history as it is traditionally presented and speculates about the gaps left in historical records which historians frequently gloss over with questionable theories and hypotheses. By placing real people into such historical lacunae, Saramago attempts to fill these voids more plausibly and in keeping with the modern reader's expectation of historical verisimilitude. Thus when the proof-reader Raimundo Silva starts writing the alternative history of the reconquest of Lisbon, he emulates Saramago's technique of placing human experience against a historical background, in other words, he tries to write a hybrid narrative embodying past events and contemporary reactions to another age so remote yet tangibly present.

In the pursuit of this parallel plot, Saramago raises a number of issues which are also a central concern in many of his other books. How reliable are historical sources, and how trustworthy are historians in dealing with uncertainties, improbabilities and the gaps or lacunae? How are we to interpret speeches allegedly made by historical characters? What can we know about the private emotions of the people who make these speeches and those who record them with varying degrees of accuracy? All these questions are discussed in the form of a series of dialogues. The dialogue between the proof-reader and the author reveals once more Saramago's iconoclastic attitude to history. For Saramago, historiography itself is fiction for it results from a selection of facts coherently organised, leaving forgotten or committing to oblivion many other facts which, had they been taken into consideration, would have given a different shape to the same history. This attitude is further illustrated in the dialogues the proof-reader has with his alter ego, the witness of human adventures during the siege of Lisbon, and with his editor, Maria Sara, who provides the challenge that motivates him to try his hand at writing his own history.

Placing the main action within present-day Lisbon, Saramago removes the novel from the genre of historical narrative while providing a platform for reflections on the art of reconstructing the past and the difference between writing history and fiction.

As in his other novels, Saramago's paragraph-long sentences, minimally interrupted by punctuation, challenge the reader to follow his continuous stream of thought, thus permitting a stronger sense of interaction and a more diverse interpretation of phrases and clauses. Keen that his reader should move easily back and forth between the present, the recorded and the imagined past, in this novel Saramago also freely shifts between past and present tenses, conveying the impression of the timelessness of the human imagination. This temporal fluidity is further emphasised by the strategic location of the proof-reader's flat within the precinct of the old Moorish fortress, a kind of watchtower from where the perception of past and present alternate according to the proof-reader's mood.

Beneath these speculations about the function and form of historical writing, we discover that the central concerns of Saramago's novel focus on our ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, to differentiate between reliable and suspect historical reporting, and the difficulty of drawing the frontier between the two, or in Saramago's own words: "The truth is that history could have been written in many different ways and this idea of infinitude and variation are the essence of my writing. The possibility of the impossible, dreams and illusions, are the subject of my novels."

Giovanni Pontiero
Manchester, December 1995

BLINDNESS

Translated from the Portuguese
by Giovanni Pontiero

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A C E D B

For Pilar
For my daughter Violante

IN MEMORIAM
Giovanni Pontiero

If you can see, look.
If you can look, observe.
FROM THE Book of Exhortations

The amber light came on. Two of the cars ahead accelerated before the red light appeared. At the pedestrian crossing the sign of a green man lit up. The people who were waiting began to cross the road, stepping on the white stripes painted on the black surface of the asphalt, there is nothing less like a zebra, however, that is what it is called. The motorists kept an impatient foot on the clutch, leaving their cars at the ready, advancing, retreating like nervous horses that can sense the whiplash about to be inflicted. The pedestrians have just finished crossing but the sign allowing the cars to go will be delayed for some seconds, some people maintain that this delay, while apparently so insignificant, has only to be multiplied by the thousands of traffic lights that exist in the city and by the successive changes of their three colours to produce one of the most serious causes of traffic jams or bottlenecks, to use the more current term.

The green light came on at last, the cars moved off briskly, but then it became clear that not all of them were equally quick off the mark. The car at the head of the middle lane has stopped, there must be some mechanical fault, a loose accelerator pedal, a gear lever that has stuck, problem with the suspension, jammed brakes, breakdown in the electric circuit, unless he has simply run out of gas, it would not be the first time such a thing has happened. The next group of pedestrians to gather at the crossing see the driver of the stationary car wave his arms behind the windshield, while the cars behind him frantically sound their horns. Some drivers have already got out of their cars, prepared to push the stranded vehicle to a spot where it will not hold up the traffic, they beat furiously on the closed windows, the man inside turns his head in their direction, first to one side then the other, he is clearly shouting something, to judge by the movements of his mouth he appears to be repeating some words, not one word but three, as turns out to be the case when someone finally manages to open the door, I am blind.

Who would have believed it. Seen merely at a glance, the man's eyes seem healthy, the iris looks bright, luminous, the sclera white, as compact as porcelain. The eyes wide open, the wrinkled skin of the face, his eyebrows suddenly screwed up, all this, as anyone can see, signifies that he is distraught with anguish. With a rapid movement, what was in sight has disappeared behind the man's clenched fists, as if he were still trying to retain inside his mind the final image captured, a round red light at the traffic lights. I am blind, I am blind, he repeated in despair as they helped him to get out of the car, and the tears welling up made those eyes which he claimed were dead, shine even more. These things happen, it will pass you'll see, sometimes it's nerves, said a woman. The lights had already changed again, some inquisitive passersby had gathered around the group, and the drivers further back who did not know what was going on, protested at what they thought was some common accident, a smashed headlight, a dented fender, nothing to justify this upheaval, Call the police, they shouted and get that old wreck out of the way. The blind man pleaded, Please, will someone take me home. The woman who had suggested a case of nerves was of the opinion that an ambulance should be summoned to transport the poor man to the hospital, but the blind man refused to hear of it, quite unnecessary, all he wanted was that someone might accompany him to the entrance of

the building where he lived. It's close by and you could do me no greater favour. And what about the car, asked someone. Another voice replied, The key is in the ignition, drive the car on to the pavement. No need, intervened a third voice, I'll take charge of the car and accompany this man home. There were murmurs of approval. The blind man felt himself being taken by the arm, Come, come with me, the same voice was saying to him. They eased him into the front passenger seat, and secured the safety belt. I can't see, I can't see, he murmured, still weeping. Tell me where you live, the man asked him. Through the car windows voracious faces spied, avid for some news. The blind man raised his hands to his eyes and gestured, Nothing, it's as if I were caught in a mist or had fallen into a milky sea. But blindness isn't like that, said the other fellow, they say that blindness is black, Well I see everything white, That little woman was probably right, it could be a matter of nerves, nerves are the very devil, No need to talk to me about it, it's a disaster, yes a disaster, Tell me where you live please, and at the same time the engine started up. Faltering, as if his lack of sight had weakened his memory, the blind man gave his address, then he said, I have no words to thank you, and the other replied, Now then, don't give it another thought, today it's your turn, tomorrow it will be mine, we never know what might lie in store for us, You're right, who would have thought, when I left the house this morning, that something as dreadful as this was about to happen. He was puzzled that they should still be at a standstill, Why aren't we moving, he asked, The light is on red, replied the other. From now on he would no longer know when the light was red.

As the blind man had said, his home was nearby. But the pavements were crammed with vehicles, they could not find a space to park and were obliged to look for a spot in one of the side streets. There, because of the narrowness of the pavement, the door on the passenger's side would have been little more than a hand's-breadth from the wall, so in order to avoid the discomfort of dragging himself from one seat to the other with the brake and steering wheel in the way, the blind man had to get out before the car was parked. Abandoned in the middle of the road, feeling the ground shifting under his feet, he tried to suppress the sense of panic that welled up inside him. He waved his hands in front of his face, nervously, as if he were swimming in what he had described as a milky sea, but his mouth was already opening to let out a cry for help when at the last minute he felt the other's hand gently touch him on the arm, Calm down, I've got you. They proceeded very slowly, afraid of falling, the blind man dragged his feet, but this caused him to stumble on the uneven pavement, Be patient, we're almost there, the other murmured, and a little further ahead, he asked, Is there anyone at home to look after you, and the blind man replied, I don't know, my wife won't be back from work yet, today it so happened that I left earlier only to have this hit me. You'll see, it isn't anything serious, I've never heard of anyone suddenly going blind, And to think I used to boast that I didn't even need glasses, Well it just goes to show. They had arrived at the entrance to the building, two women from the neighbourhood looked on inquisitively at the sight of their neighbour being led by the arm but neither of them thought of asking, Have you got something in your eye, it never occurred to them nor would he have been

able to reply, Yes, a milky sea. Once inside the building, the blind man said, Many thanks, I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you, I can manage on my own now, No need to apologise, I'll come up with you, I wouldn't be easy in my mind if I were to leave you here. They got into the narrow elevator with some difficulty, What floor do you live on, On the third, you cannot imagine how grateful I am, Don't thank me, today it's you, Yes, you're right, tomorrow it might be you. The elevator came to a halt, they stepped out on to the landing, Would you like me to help you open the door, Thanks, that's something I think I can do for myself. He took from his pocket a small bunch of keys, felt them one by one along the serrated edge, and said, It must be this one, and feeling for the keyhole with the fingertips of his left hand, he tried to open the door. It isn't this one, Let me have a look, I'll help you. The door opened at the third attempt. Then the blind man called inside, Are you there, no one replied, and he remarked, Just as I was saying, she still hasn't come back. Stretching out his hands, he groped his way along the corridor, then he came back cautiously, turning his head in the direction where he calculated the other fellow would be, How can I thank you, he said, It was the least I could do, said the good Samaritan, no need to thank me, and added, Do you want me to help you to get settled and keep you company until your wife arrives. This zeal suddenly struck the blind man as being suspect, obviously he would not invite a complete stranger to come in who, after all, might well be plotting at that very moment how to overcome, tie up and gag the poor defenceless blind man, and then lay hands on anything of value. There's no need, please don't bother, he said, I'm fine, and as he slowly began closing the door, he repeated, There's no need, there's no need.

Hearing the sound of the elevator descending he gave a sigh of relief. With a mechanical gesture, forgetting the state in which he found himself, he drew back the lid of the peep-hole and looked outside. It was as if there were a white wall on the other side. He could feel the contact of the metallic frame on his eyebrow, his eyelashes brushed against the tiny lens, but he could not see out, an impenetrable whiteness covered everything. He knew he was in his own home, he recognised the smell, the atmosphere, the silence, he could make out the items of furniture and objects simply by touching them, lightly running his fingers over them, but at the same time it was as if all of this were already dissolving into a kind of strange dimension, without direction or reference points, with neither north nor south, below nor above. Like most people, he had often played as a child at pretending to be blind, and, after keeping his eyes closed for five minutes, he had reached the conclusion that blindness, undoubtedly a terrible affliction, might still be relatively bearable if the unfortunate victim had retained sufficient memory, not just of the colours, but also of forms and planes, surfaces and shapes, assuming of course, that this one was not born blind. He had even reached the point of thinking that the darkness in which the blind live was nothing other than the simple absence of light, that what we call blindness was something that simply covered the appearance of beings and things, leaving them intact behind their black veil. Now, on the contrary, here he was, plunged into a whiteness so luminous, so total, that it swallowed up rather than absorbed, not just the colours, but the very things and beings, thus

making them twice as invisible.

As he moved in the direction of the sitting-room, despite the caution with which he advanced, running a hesitant hand along the wall and not anticipating any obstacles, he sent a vase of flowers crashing to the floor. He had forgotten about any such vase, or perhaps his wife had put it there when she left for work with the intention of later finding some more suitable place. He bent down to appraise the damage. The water had spread over the polished floor. He tried to gather up the flowers, never thinking of the broken glass, a long sharp splinter pricked his finger and, at the pain, childish tears of helplessness sprang to his eyes, blind with whiteness in the middle of his flat, which was turning dark as evening fell. Still clutching the flowers and feeling the blood running down, he twisted round to get the handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it round his finger as best he could. Then, fumbling, stumbling, skirting the furniture, treading warily so as not to trip on the rugs, he reached the sofa where he and his wife watched television. He sat down, rested the flowers on his lap, and, with the utmost care, unrolled the handkerchief. The blood, sticky to the touch, worried him, he thought it must be because he could not see it, his blood had turned into a viscous substance without colour, into something rather alien which nevertheless belonged to him, but like a self-inflicted threat directed at himself. Very slowly, gently probing with his good hand, he tried to locate the splinter of glass, as sharp as a tiny dagger, and, by bringing the nails of his thumb and forefinger together, he managed to extract all of it. He wrapped the handkerchief round the injured finger once more, this time tightly to stop the bleeding, and, weak and exhausted, he leaned back on the sofa. A minute later, because of one of those all too common abdications of the body, that chooses to give up in certain moments of anguish or despair, when, if it were guided by logic alone, all its nerves should be alert and tense, a kind of weariness crept over him, more drowsiness than real fatigue, but just as heavy. He dreamt at once that he was pretending to be blind, he dreamt that he was forever closing and opening his eyes, and that, on each occasion, as if he were returning from a journey, he found waiting for him, firm and unaltered, all the forms and colours of the world as he knew it. Beneath this reassuring certainty, he perceived nevertheless, the dull nagging of uncertainty, perhaps it was a deceptive dream, a dream from which he would have to emerge sooner or later, without knowing at this moment what reality awaited him. Then, if such a word has any meaning when applied to a weariness that lasted for only a few seconds, and already in that semi-vigilant state that prepares one for awakening, he seriously considered that it was unwise to remain in this state of indecision, shall I wake up, shall I not wake up, shall I wake up, shall I not wake up, there always comes a moment when one has no option but to take a risk, What am I doing here with these flowers on my lap and my eyes closed as if I were afraid of opening them, What are you doing there, sleeping with those flowers on your lap, his wife was asking him.

She did not wait for a reply. Pointedly, she set about gathering up the fragments of the vase and drying the floor, muttering all the while with an irritation she made no

attempt to disguise, You might have cleaned up this mess yourself, instead of settling down to sleep as if it were no concern of yours. He said nothing, protecting his eyes behind tightly closed lids, suddenly agitated by a thought, And if I were to open my eyes and see, he asked himself, gripped by anxious hope. The woman drew near, noticed the bloodstained handkerchief, her vexation gone in an instant, Poor man, how did this happen, she asked compassionately as she undid the improvised bandage. Then he wanted with all his strength to see his wife kneeling at his feet, right there, where he knew she was, and then, certain that he would not see her, he opened his eyes, So you've wakened up at last, my sleepyhead, she said smiling. There was silence, and he said, I'm blind, I can't see. The woman lost her patience, Stop playing silly games, there are certain things we must not joke about, How I wish it were a joke, the truth is that I really am blind, I can't see anything, Please, don't frighten me, look at me, here, I'm here, the light is on, I know you're there, I can hear you, touch you, I can imagine you've switched on the light, but I am blind. She began to weep, clung to him, It isn't true, tell me that it isn't true. The flowers had slipped onto the floor, onto the bloodstained handkerchief, the blood had started to trickle again from the injured finger, and he, as if wanting to say with other words, That's the least of my worries, murmured, I see everything white, and he gave a sad smile. The woman sat down beside him, embraced him tightly, kissed him gently on the forehead, on the face, softly on the eyes, You'll see that this will pass, you haven't been ill, no one goes blind from one minute to the next, Perhaps, Tell me how it happened, what did you feel, when, where, no, not yet, wait, the first thing we must do is to consult an eye specialist, can you think of one, I'm afraid not, neither of us wears glasses, And if I were to take you to the hospital, There isn't likely to be any emergency service for eyes that cannot see, You're right, better that we should go straight to a doctor, I'll look in the telephone directory and locate a doctor who practises nearby. She got up, still questioning him, Do you notice any difference, None, he replied, Pay attention, I'm going to switch off the light and you can tell me, now, Nothing, What do you mean nothing, Nothing, I always see the same white, it's as if there were no night.

He could hear his wife rapidly leaf through the pages of the telephone directory, sniffing to hold back her tears, sighing, and finally saying, This one will do, let's hope he can see us. She dialled a number, asked if that was the surgery, if the doctor was there, if she could speak to him, No, no the doctor doesn't know me, the matter is extremely urgent, yes, please, I understand, then I'll explain the situation to you, but I beg of you to pass on what I have to say to the doctor, the fact is that my husband has suddenly gone blind, yes, yes, all of a sudden, no, no he is not one of the doctor's patients, my husband does not wear glasses and never has, yes, he has excellent eyesight, just like me, I also see perfectly well, ah, many thanks, I'll wait, I'll wait, yes, doctor, all of a sudden, he says he sees everything white, I have no idea what happened, I haven't had time to ask him, I've just arrived home to find him in this state, would you like me to ask him, ah, I'm so grateful to you doctor, we'll come right away, right away. The blind man rose to his feet, Wait, his wife said, first let me attend to this finger, she disappeared for several

moments, came back with a bottle of peroxide, another of iodine, cotton wool, a box of bandages. As she dressed the wound, she asked him, Where did you leave the car, and suddenly confronted him, But in your condition you couldn't have driven the car, or you were already at home when it happened, No, it was on the street when I was stationary at a red light, some person brought me home, the car was left in the next street, Fine, let's go down, wait at the door while I go to find it, where did you put the keys, I don't know, he never gave them back to me, Who's he, The man who brought me home, it was a man, He must have left them somewhere, I'll have a look round, It's pointless searching, he didn't enter the flat, But the keys have to be somewhere, Most likely he forgot, inadvertently took them with him, This was all we needed, Use your keys, then we'll sort it out, Right, let's go, take my hand. The blind man said, If I have to stay like this, I'd rather be dead, Please, don't talk nonsense, things are bad enough, I'm the one who's blind, not you, you cannot imagine what it's like, The doctor will come up with some remedy, you'll see, I shall see.

They left. Below, in the lobby, his wife switched on the light and whispered in his ear. Wait for me here, if any neighbours should appear speak to them naturally, say you're waiting for me, no one looking at you would ever suspect that you cannot see and besides we don't have to tell people all our business, Yes, but don't be long. His wife went rushing off. No neighbour entered or left. The blind man knew from experience that the stairway would only be lit so long as he could hear the mechanism of the automatic switch, therefore he went on pressing the button whenever there was silence. The light, this light, had been transformed into noise for him. He could not understand why his wife was taking so long to return, the street was nearby, some eighty or a hundred metres, If we delay any longer, the doctor will be gone, he thought to himself. He could not avoid a mechanical gesture, raising his left wrist and lowering his eyes to look at his watch. He pursed his lips as if in sudden pain, and felt deeply grateful that there were no neighbours around at that moment, for there and then, were anyone to have spoken to him, he would have burst into tears. A car stopped in the street, At last, he thought, but then realised that it was not the sound of his car engine, This is a diesel engine, it must be a taxi, he said, pressing once more on the button for the light. His wife came back, flustered and upset, that good Samaritan of yours, that good soul, has taken our car, It isn't possible, you can't have looked properly, Of course I looked properly, there's nothing wrong with my eyesight, these last words came out inadvertently, You told me the car was in the next street, she corrected herself, and it isn't, unless they've left it in some other street, No, no, I'm certain it was left in this street, Well then it has disappeared, In that case, what about the keys, He took advantage of your confusion and distress and robbed us, And to think I didn't want him in the flat for fear he might steal something yet if he had kept me company until you arrived home, he could not have stolen our car, Let's go, we have a taxi waiting, I swear to you that I'd give a year of my life to see this rogue go blind as well. Don't speak so loud, And that they rob him of everything he possesses, He might turn up, Ah, so you think he'll knock on the door tomorrow and say he took the car in a moment of distraction, that he is sorry and inquire if you're feeling better.

They remained silent until they reached the doctor's surgery. She tried not to think about the stolen car, squeezed her husband's hand affectionately, while he, his head lowered so that the driver would not see his eyes through the rear-view mirror, could not stop asking himself how it was possible that such a terrible tragedy should have befallen him, Why me. He could hear the noise of the traffic, the odd loud voice whenever the taxi stopped, it often happens, we are still asleep and external sounds are already penetrating the veil of unconsciousness in which we are still wrapped up, as in a white sheet. As in a white sheet. He shook his head, sighing, his wife gently stroked his cheek, her way of saying, Keep calm, I'm here, and he leaned his head on her shoulder, indifferent to what the driver might think, If you were in my situation and unable to drive any more, he thought childishly, and oblivious of the absurdity of that remark, he congratulated himself amidst his despair that he was still capable of formulating a rational thought. On leaving the taxi, discreetly assisted by his wife, he seemed calm, but on entering the surgery where he was about to learn his fate, he asked his wife in a tremulous whisper, What will I be like when I get out of this place, and he shook his head as if he had given up all hope.

His wife informed the receptionist, I'm the person who rang half an hour ago because of my husband, and the receptionist showed them into a small room where other patients were waiting. There was an old man with a black patch over one eye, a young lad who looked cross-eyed, accompanied by a woman who must be his mother, a girl with dark glasses, two other people without any apparent distinguishing features, but no one who was blind, blind people do not consult an ophthalmologist. The woman guided her husband to an empty chair, and since all the other chairs were occupied, she remained standing beside him, We'll have to wait, she whispered in his ear. He realised why, he had heard the voices of those who were in the waiting-room, now he was assailed by another worry, thinking that the longer the doctor took to examine him, the worse his blindness would become to the point of being incurable. He fidgeted in his chair, restless, he was about to confide his worries to his wife, but just then the door opened and the receptionist said, Will you both come this way, and turning to the other patients, Doctor's orders, this man is an urgent case. The mother of the cross-eyed boy protested that her right was her right, and that she was first and had been waiting for more than an hour. The other patients supported her in a low voice, but not one of them, nor the woman herself, thought it wise to carry on complaining, in case the doctor should take offence and repay their impertinence by making them wait even longer, as has occurred. The old man with the patch over one eye was magnanimous, Let the poor man go ahead, he's in a much worse state than we are. The blind man did not hear him, they were already going into the doctor's consulting room, and the wife was saying, Many thanks for being so kind, doctor, it's just that my husband, and that said, she paused, because frankly she did not know what had really happened, she only knew that her husband was blind and that their car had been stolen. The doctor said, Please, be seated, and he himself went to help the patient into the chair, and then, touching him on the hand, he spoke to him directly, Now then, tell me what is wrong. The blind man explained that he was in his car,

waiting for the red light to change when suddenly he could no longer see, that several people had rushed to his assistance, that an elderly woman, judging from her voice, had said that it was probably a case of nerves, and then a man had accompanied him home because he could not manage on his own, I see everything white, doctor. He said nothing about the stolen car.

The doctor asked him, Has anything like this ever happened to you before, or something similar, No, doctor, I don't even use glasses. And you say it came on all of a sudden, Yes, doctor, Like a light going out, More like a light going on, During the last few days have you felt any difference in your eyesight, No, doctor, Is there, or has there ever been any case of blindness in your family, Among the relatives I've known or have heard discussed, no one, Do you suffer from diabetes, No, doctor, From syphilis, No, doctor. From hypertension of the arteries or the brain cells, I'm not sure about the brain cells, but none of these other things, we have regular medical check-ups at work. Have you taken a sharp knock on the head, today or yesterday, No, doctor, How old are you, Thirty-eight, Fine, let's take a look at these eyes. The blind man opened them wide, as if to facilitate the examination, but the doctor took him by the arm and installed him behind a scanner which anyone with imagination might see as a new version of the confessional, eyes replacing words, and the confessor looking directly into the sinner's soul, Rest your chin here, he advised him, keep your eyes open, and don't move. The woman drew close to her husband, put her hand on his shoulder, and said, This will be sorted out, you'll see. The doctor raised and lowered the binocular system at his side, turned finely adjusted knobs, and began his examination. He could find nothing in the cornea, nothing in the sclera, nothing in the iris, nothing in the retina, nothing in the lens of the eye, nothing in the luteous macula, nothing in the optic nerve, nothing elsewhere. He pushed the apparatus aside, rubbed his eyes, then carried out a second examination from the start, without speaking, and when he had finished there was a puzzled expression on his face, I cannot find any lesion, your eyes are perfect. The woman joined her hands in a gesture of happiness and exclaimed, Didn't I tell you, didn't I tell you, this can be resolved. Ignoring her, the blind man asked, May I remove my chin, doctor, Of course, forgive me, If my eyes are perfect as you say, why am I blind, For the moment I cannot say, we shall have to carry out more detailed tests, analyses, an ecography, an encephalogram, Do you think it has anything to do with the brain, It's a possibility, but I doubt it. Yet you say you can find nothing wrong with my eyes, That's right, How strange, What I'm trying to say is that if, in fact, you are blind, your blindness at this moment defies explanation, Do you doubt that I am blind, Not at all, the problem is the unusual nature of your case, personally, in all my years in practice, I've never come across anything like it, and I daresay no such case has ever been known in the entire history of ophthalmology, Do you think there is a cure, In principle, since I cannot find lesions of any kind or any congenital malformations, my reply should be in the affirmative, But apparently it is not in the affirmative, Only out of caution, only because I do not want to build up hopes that may turn out to be unjustified, I understand, That's the situation, And is there any treatment I should follow, some remedy or other, For the moment I prefer not to prescribe anything,

for it would be like prescribing in the dark. There's an apt expression, observed the blind man. The doctor pretended not to hear, got off the revolving stool on which he had been seated to carry out the examination, and, standing up, he wrote out on his prescription pad the tests and analyses he judged to be necessary. He handed the sheet of paper to the wife, Take this and come back with your husband once you have the results, meanwhile if there should be any change in his condition, telephone me, How much do we owe you, doctor, Pay in reception. He accompanied them to the door, murmured words of reassurance, Let's wait and see, let's wait and see, you mustn't despair, and once they had gone he went into the small bathroom adjoining the consulting room and stared at length into the mirror, What can this be, he murmured. Then he returned to the consulting room, called out to the receptionist, Send in the next patient. That night the blind man dreamt that he was blind.

On offering to help the blind man, the man who then stole his car, had not, at that precise moment, had any evil intention, quite the contrary, what he did was nothing more than to obey those feelings of generosity and altruism which, as everyone knows, are the two best traits of human nature and to be found in much more hardened criminals than this one, a simple car-thief without any hope of advancing in his profession, exploited by the real owners of this enterprise, for it is they who take advantage of the needs of the poor. When all is said and done, there is not all that much difference between helping a blind man only to rob him afterwards and looking after some tottering and stammering old person with one eye on the inheritance. It was only when he got close to the blind man's home that the idea came to him quite naturally, precisely, one might say, as if he had decided to buy a lottery ticket on catching sight of a ticket-vendor, he had no hunch, he bought the ticket to see what might come of it, resigned in advance to whatever capricious fortune might bring, something or nothing, others would say that he acted according to a conditioned reflex of his personality. The sceptics, who are many and stubborn, claim that, when it comes to human nature, if it is true that the opportunity does not always make the thief, it is also true that it helps a lot. As for us, we should like to think that if the blind man had accepted the second offer of this false Samaritan, at that final moment generosity might still have prevailed, we refer to his offer to keep the blind man company until his wife should arrive, who knows whether the moral responsibility, resulting from the trust thus bestowed, might not have inhibited the criminal temptation and caused the victory of those shining and noble sentiments which it is always possible to find even in the most depraved souls. To finish on a plebeian note, as the old proverb never tires of teaching us, while trying to cross himself the blind man only succeeded in breaking his own nose.

The moral conscience that so many thoughtless people have offended against and many more have rejected, is something that exists and has always existed, it was not an invention of the philosophers of the Quaternary, when the soul was little more than a muddled proposition. With the passing of time, as well as the social evolution and genetic exchange, we ended up putting our conscience in the colour of blood and in the salt of tears, and, as if that were not enough, we made our eyes into a kind of mirror turned inwards, with the result that they often show without reserve what we are verbally trying to deny. Add to this general observation, the particular circumstance that in simple spirits, the remorse caused by committing some evil act often becomes confused with ancestral fears of every kind, and the result will be that the punishment of the prevaricator ends up being, without mercy or pity, twice what he deserved. In this case it is, therefore, impossible to unravel what proportion of fear and what proportion of the afflicted conscience began to harass the thief the moment he started up the engine of the car and drove off. No doubt he could never feel tranquil sitting in the place of someone who was holding this same steering wheel when he suddenly turned blind, who looked through this windshield and suddenly could no longer see, it does not take much imagination for such thoughts to rouse the foul and insidious monster of fear, there it is already raising its head. But it was also remorse, the aggrieved expression of one's

conscience, as already stated, or, if we prefer to describe it in suggestive terms, a conscience with teeth to bite, that was about to put before his eyes the forlorn image of the blind man as he was closing the door, There's no need, there's no need, the poor fellow had said, and from then on he would not be capable of taking a step without assistance.

The thief concentrated twice as hard on the traffic to prevent such terrifying thoughts from fully occupying his mind, he knew full well that he could not permit himself the smallest error, the tiniest distraction. There were always police around and it would only need one of them to stop him, May I see your identity card and driving licence, back to prison, what a hard life. He was most careful to obey the traffic lights, under no circumstances to go when the light was red, to respect the amber light, to wait patiently for the green light to come on. At a certain point, he realised that he had started to look at the lights in a way that was becoming obsessive. He then started to regulate the speed of the car to ensure that he always had a green light before him, even if, in order to ensure this, he had to increase the speed or, on the contrary, to reduce it to the extent of irritating the drivers behind him. In the end, disoriented as he was, tense beyond endurance, he drove the car into a minor road where he knew there were no traffic lights, and parked almost without looking, he was such a good driver. He felt as if his nerves were about to explode, these were the very words that crossed his mind. My nerves are about to explode. It was stifling inside the car. He lowered the windows on either side, but the air outside, if it was moving, did nothing to freshen the atmosphere inside. What am I going to do, he asked himself. The shed where he had to take the car was far away, in a village outside the city, and in his present frame of mind, he would never get there. Either the police will arrest me or, worse still, I'll have an accident, he muttered. It then occurred to him that it would be best to get out of the car for a bit and try to clear his thoughts, Perhaps the fresh air will blow the cobwebs away, just because that poor wretch turned blind is no reason why the same should happen to me, this is not some cold one catches, I'll take a turn round the block and it will pass. He got out and did not bother to lock the car, he would be back in a minute, and walked off. He had gone no more than thirty paces when he went blind.

In the surgery, the last patient to be seen was the good-natured old man, the one who had spoken so kindly about the poor man who had suddenly turned blind. He was there just to arrange a date for an operation on a cataract that had appeared in his one remaining eye, the black patch was covering a void, and had nothing to do with the matter in hand, These are ailments that come with old age, the doctor had said some time ago, when it matures we shall remove it, then you won't recognise the place you've been living in. When the old man with the black eyepatch left and the nurse said there were no more patients in the waiting-room, the doctor took out the file of the man who had turned up blind, he read it once, twice, reflected for several minutes and finally rang a colleague with whom he held the following conversation: I must tell you, today I dealt with the strangest case, a man who totally lost his sight from one instant to the next, the

examination revealed no perceptible lesion or signs of any malformation from birth, he says he sees everything white, a kind of thick, milky whiteness that clings to his eyes, I'm trying to explain as best I can how he described it, yes, of course it's subjective, no, the man is relatively young, thirty-eight years old, have you ever heard of such a case, or read about it, or heard it mentioned, I thought as much, for the moment I cannot think of any solution, to gain time I've recommended some tests, yes, we could examine him together one of these days, after dinner I shall check some books, take another look at the bibliography, perhaps I'll find some clue, yes, I'm familiar with agnosia, it could be psychic blindness, but then it would be the first case with these characteristics, because there is no doubt that the man is really blind, and as we know, agnosia is the inability to recognise familiar objects, because it also occurred to me that this might be a case of amaurosis, but remember what I started to tell you, this blindness is white, precisely the opposite of amaurosis which is total darkness unless there is some form of white amaurosis, a white darkness, as it were, yes, I know, something unheard of, agreed, I'll call him tomorrow, explain that we should like to examine him together. Having ended his conversation, the doctor leaned back in his chair, remained there for a few minutes, then rose to his feet, removed his white coat with slow, weary movements. He went to the bathroom to wash his hands, but this time he did not ask the mirror, metaphysically, What can this be, he had recovered his scientific outlook, the fact that agnosia and amaurosis are identified and defined with great precision in books and in practice, did not preclude the appearance of variations, mutations, if the word is appropriate, and that day seemed to have arrived. There are a thousand reasons why the brain should close up, just this, and nothing else, like a late visitor arriving to find his own door shut. The ophthalmologist was a man with a taste for literature and a flair for coming up with the right quotation.

That evening, after dinner, he told his wife, A strange case turned up at the surgery today, it might be a variant of psychic blindness or amaurosis, but there appears to be no evidence of any such symptoms ever having been established, What are these illnesses, amaurosis and that other thing, his wife asked him. The doctor gave an explanation within the grasp of a layman and capable of satisfying her curiosity, then he went to the bookcase where he kept his medical books, some dating back to his university years, others more recent and some just published which he still had not had time to study. He checked the indexes and methodically began reading everything he could find about agnosia and amaurosis, with the uncomfortable impression of being an intruder in a field beyond his competence, the mysterious terrain of neurosurgery, about which he only had the vaguest notion. Late that night, he laid aside the books he had been studying, rubbed his weary eyes and leaned back in his chair. At that moment the alternative presented itself as clear as could be. If it were a case of agnosia, the patient would now be seeing what he had always seen, that is to say, there would have been no diminution of his visual powers, his brain would simply have been incapable of recognising a chair wherever there happened to be a chair, in other words, he would continue to react correctly to the luminous stimuli leading to the optic nerve, but, to use simple terms

within the grasp of the layman, he would have lost the capacity to know what he knew and, moreover, to express it. As for amaurosis, here there was no doubt. For this to be effectively the case, the patient would have to see everything black, if you'll excuse the use of the verb to see, when this was a case of total darkness. The blind man had categorically stated that he could see, if you'll excuse that verb again, a thick, uniform white colour as if he had plunged with open eyes into a milky sea. A white amaurosis, apart from being etymologically a contradiction, would also be a neurological impossibility, since the brain, which would be unable to perceive the images, forms and colours of reality, would likewise be incapable, in a manner of speaking, of being covered in white, a continuous white, like a white painting without tonalities, the colours, forms and images that reality itself might present to someone with normal vision, however difficult it may be to speak, with any accuracy, of normal vision. With the clear conscience of having fetched up in a dead end, the doctor shook his head despondently and looked around him. His wife had already gone off to bed, he vaguely remembered her coming up to him for a moment and kissing him on the head, I'm off to bed, she must have told him, the flat was now silent, books scattered on the table, What's this, he thought to himself, and suddenly he felt afraid, as if he himself were about to turn blind any minute now and he already knew it. He held his breath and waited. Nothing happened. It happened a minute later as he was gathering up the books to return them to the bookshelf. First he perceived that he could no longer see his hands, then he knew he was blind.

The ailment of the girl with dark glasses was not serious, she was suffering from a mild form of conjunctivitis which the drops prescribed by the doctor would clear up in no time, You know what to do, for the next few days you should remove your glasses only when you sleep, he had told her. He had been cracking the same joke for years, we might even assume that it had been handed down from one generation of ophthalmologists to another, but it never failed, the doctor was smiling as he spoke, the patient smiled as she listened, and on this occasion it was worthwhile, because the girl had nice teeth and knew how to show them. Out of natural misanthropy or because of too many disappointments in life, any ordinary sceptic, familiar with the details of this woman's life, would insinuate that the prettiness of her smile was no more than a trick of the trade, a wicked and gratuitous assertion, because she had the same smile even as a toddler, a word no longer much in use, when her future was a closed book and the curiosity of opening it had not yet been born. To put it simply, this woman could be classed as a prostitute, but the complexity in the web of social relationships, whether by day or night, vertical or horizontal, of the period here described cautions us to avoid a tendency to make hasty and definitive judgments, a mania which, owing to our exaggerated self-confidence, we shall perhaps never be rid of. Although it may be evident just how much cloud there is in Juno, it is not entirely licit, to insist on confusing with a Greek goddess what is no more than an ordinary concentration of drops of water hovering in the atmosphere. Without any doubt, this woman goes to bed with men in exchange for money, a fact that might allow us to classify her without further consideration as a prostitute, but, since it is also true that she goes with a man only when she feels like it

and with whom she wants to, we cannot dismiss the possibility that such a factual difference, must as a precaution determine her exclusion from the club as a whole. She has, like ordinary people, a profession, and, also like ordinary people, she takes advantage of any free time to indulge her body and satisfy needs, both individual and general. Were we not trying to reduce her to some primary definition, we should finally say of her, in the broad sense, that she lives as she pleases and moreover gets all the pleasure she can from life.

It was already dark when she left the surgery. She did not remove her glasses, the street lighting disturbed her, especially the illuminated ads. She went into a chemist to buy the drops the doctor had prescribed, decided to pay no attention when the man who served her commented how unfair it was that certain eyes should be covered by dark glasses, an observation that besides being impertinent in itself, and coming from a pharmacist's assistant if you please, went against her belief that dark glasses gave her an air of alluring mystery, capable of arousing the interest of men who were passing, to which she might reciprocate, were it not for the fact that today she had someone waiting for her, an encounter she had every reason to expect would lead to something good, as much in terms of material as in terms of other satisfactions. The man she was about to meet was an old acquaintance, he did not mind when she warned him she could not remove her glasses, an order, moreover, the doctor had not as yet given, and the man even found it amusing, something different. On leaving the pharmacy the girl hailed a taxi, gave the name of a hotel. Reclining on the seat, she was already savouring, if the term is appropriate, the various and multiple sensations of sensuous pleasure, from that first, knowing contact of lips, from that first intimate caress, to the successive explosions of an orgasm that would leave her exhausted and happy, as if she were about to be crucified, heaven protect us, in a dazzling and vertiginous firework. So we have every reason to conclude that the girl with dark glasses, if her partner has known how to fulfill his obligation, in terms of perfect timing and technique, always pays in advance and twice as much as she later charges. Lost in these thoughts, no doubt because she had just paid for a consultation, she asked herself whether it would not be a good idea to raise, starting from today, what, with cheerful euphemism, she was wont to describe as her just level of compensation.

She ordered the taxi-driver to stop one block before her destination, mingled with the people who were following in the same direction, as if allowing herself to be carried along by them, anonymous and without any outward sign of guilt or shame. She entered the hotel with a natural air, crossed the vestibule in the direction of the bar. She had arrived a few minutes early, therefore she had to wait, the hour of their meeting had been arranged with precision. She asked for a soft drink, which she drank at her leisure, without looking at anyone for she did not wish to be mistaken for a common whore in pursuit of men. A little later, like a tourist going up to her room to rest after having spent the afternoon in the museums, she headed for the elevator. Virtue, should there be anyone who still ignores the fact, always finds pitfalls on the extremely difficult path of

perfection, but sin and vice are so favoured by fortune that no sooner did she get there than the elevator door opened. Two guests got out, an elderly couple, she stepped inside, pressed the button for the third floor, three hundred and twelve was the number awaiting her, it is here, she discreetly knocked on the door, ten minutes later she was naked, fifteen minutes later she was moaning, eighteen minutes later she was whispering words of love that she no longer needed to feign, after twenty minutes she began to lose her head, after twenty-one minutes she felt that her body was being lacerated with pleasure, after twenty-two minutes she called out, Now, now, and when she regained consciousness she said, exhausted and happy, I can still see everything white.

A policeman took the car-thief home. It would never have occurred to the circumspect and compassionate agent of authority that he was leading a hardened delinquent by the arm, not to prevent him from escaping, as might have happened on another occasion, but simply so that the poor man should not stumble and fall. In recompense, we can easily imagine the fright it gave the thief's wife, when, on opening the door, she came face to face with a policeman in uniform who had in tow, or so it seemed, a forlorn prisoner, to whom, judging from his miserable expression, something more awful must have happened than simply to find himself under arrest. The woman's first thought was that her husband had been caught in the act of stealing and the policeman had come to search the house, this idea, on the other hand, and however paradoxical it may seem, was somewhat reassuring, considering that her husband only stole cars, goods which on account of their size cannot be hidden under the bed. She was not left in doubt for long, the policeman informed her, This man is blind, look after him, and the woman who should have been relieved because the officer, after all, had simply accompanied her husband to his home, perceived the seriousness of the disaster that was to blight their lives when her husband, weeping his heart out, fell into her arms and told her what we already know.

The girl with the dark glasses was also accompanied to her parents' house by a policeman, but the piquancy of the circumstances in which blindness had manifested itself in her case, a naked woman screaming in a hotel and alarming the other guests, while the man who was with her tried to escape, pulling on his trousers in haste, somehow mitigated the obvious drama of the situation. Overcome with embarrassment, a feeling entirely compatible, for all the mutterings of hypocritical prudes and the would-be virtuous, with the mercenary rituals of love to which she dedicated herself, after the piercing shrieks she let out on realising that her loss of vision was not some new and unforeseen consequence of pleasure, the blind girl hardly dared to weep and lament her fate when unceremoniously, without giving her time to dress properly, and almost by force, she was evicted from the hotel. In a tone of voice that would have been sarcastic had it not been simply ill-mannered, the policeman wanted to know, after asking her where she lived, if she had the money for the taxi, in these cases, the State doesn't pay, he warned her, a procedure which, let us note in passing, is not without a certain logic, insofar as these women belong to that considerable number who pay no taxes on their immoral earnings. She gave an affirmative nod, but, being blind, just imagine, she thought the policeman might not have noticed her gesture and she murmured, Yes, I have the money, and then under her breath, added, If only I didn't, words that might strike us as being odd, but which, if we consider the circumvolutions of the human mind, where no short or direct routes exist, these same words end up by being absolutely clear, what she meant to say was that she had been punished because of her disreputable conduct, for her immorality, and this was the outcome. She had told her mother she would not be home for dinner, and in the end she was home early, even before her father.

The ophthalmologist's situation was different, not only because he happened to be at

home when he was struck by blindness, but because, being a doctor, he was not going to surrender helplessly to despair, like those who only take note of their body when it hurts them. Even in the anguish of a situation like this, with a night of anxiety ahead of him, he was still capable of remembering what Homer wrote in the Iliad, the greatest poem about death and suffering ever written, A doctor is worth several men, words we should not accept as a straightforward expression of quantity, but above all, of quality, as we shall soon see. He summoned the courage to go to bed without disturbing his wife, not even when, muttering and half asleep, she stirred in the bed and snuggled up to him. He lay awake for hours on end, the little sleep he managed to snatch was from pure exhaustion. He hoped the night would never end rather than have to announce, he whose profession was to cure ailments in the eyes of others, I'm blind, but, at the same time, he was anxiously waiting for the light of day, and these are the exact words that came into his mind, The light of day, knowing that he would not see it. In fact, a blind ophthalmologist is not much good to anyone, but it was up to him to inform the health authorities, to warn them of this situation which might turn into a national catastrophe, nothing more nor less, of a form of blindness hitherto unknown, with every appearance of being highly contagious, and which, to all appearances, manifested itself without the previous existence of earlier pathological symptoms of an inflammatory, infectious or degenerative nature, as he was able to verify in the blind man who had come to consult him in his surgery, or as had been confirmed in his own case, a touch of myopia, a slight astigmatism, all so mild that he had decided, in the meantime, not to use corrective lenses. Eyes that had stopped seeing, eyes that were totally blind, yet meanwhile were in perfect condition, without any lesions, recent or old, acquired or innate. He recalled the detailed examination he had carried out on the blind man, how the various parts of the eye accessible to the ophthalmoscope appeared to be perfectly healthy, without any trace of morbid changes, a most rare situation in a man who claimed to be thirty-eight years old, and even in anyone younger. That man could not be blind, he thought, momentarily forgetting that he himself was blind, it's extraordinary how selfless some people can be, and this is not something new, let us remember what Homer said, although in apparently different words.

He pretended to be asleep when his wife got up. He felt the kiss she placed on the forehead, so gentle, as if she did not wish to rouse him from what she imagined to be a deep sleep, perhaps she thought, Poor man, he came to bed late after sitting up to study the extraordinary case of that poor blind man. Alone, as if he were about to be slowly garrotted by a thick cloud weighing on his chest and entering his nostrils, blinding him inside, the doctor let out a brief moan, and allowed two tears, They're probably white, he thought, to well up in his eyes and run over his temples, on either side of his face, now he could understand the fears of his patients, when they told him, Doctor, I think I'm losing my sight. Small domestic noises reached the bedroom, his wife would appear any minute now to see if he was still sleeping, it was almost time for them to go to the hospital. He got up cautiously, fumbled for his dressing-gown and slipped it on, then he went into the bathroom to pee. He turned to where he knew a mirror was, and this time

he did not wonder, What's going on, he did not say, There are a thousand reasons why the human brain should close down, he simply stretched out his hands to touch the glass, he knew that his image was there watching him, his image could see him, he could not see his image. He heard his wife enter the bedroom, Ah, you're up already, and he replied, I am. He felt her by his side, Good morning, my love, they still greeted each other with words of affection after all these years of marriage, and then he said, as if both of them were acting in a play and this was his cue, I doubt whether it will be all that good, there's something wrong with my sight. She only took in the last part of the sentence, Let me take a look, she asked, and examined his eyes attentively, I can't see anything, the sentence was obviously borrowed, it was not in her script, he was the one who should have spoken those words, but he simply said, I can't see, and added, I suppose I must have been infected by the patient I saw yesterday.

With time and intimacy, doctors' wives also end up knowing something about medicine, and this one, so close to her husband in everything, had learned enough to know that blindness does not spread through contagion like an epidemic, blindness isn't something that can be caught just by a blind man looking at someone who is not, blindness is a private matter between a person and the eyes with which he or she was born. In any case, a doctor has an obligation to know what he is saying, that is why he is professionally trained at medical school, and if this doctor here, apart from having declared himself blind, openly admits that he has been infected, who is his wife to doubt him, however much she may know about medicine. It is understandable, therefore, that the poor woman, confronted by this irrefutable evidence, should react like any ordinary spouse, two of them we know already, clinging to her husband and showing natural signs of distress, And what are we going to do now, she asked amid tears, Advise the health authorities, the Ministry, that's the first thing to do, if it should turn out to be an epidemic, measures must be taken, But no one has ever heard of an epidemic of blindness, his wife insisted, anxious to hold on to this last shred of hope, Nor has anyone ever come across a blind man without any apparent reasons for his condition, and at this very moment there are at least two of them. No sooner had he uttered this last word than his expression changed. He pushed his wife away almost violently, he himself drew back, Keep away, don't come near me, I might infect you, and then beating on his forehead with clenched fists, What a fool, what a fool, what an idiot of a doctor, why did I not think of it before, we've spent the entire night together, I should have slept in the study with the door shut, and even so, Please, don't say such things, what has to be will be, come, let me get you some breakfast, Leave me, leave me, No, I won't leave you, shouted his wife, what do you want, to go stumbling around bumping into the furniture, searching for the telephone without eyes to find the numbers you need in the telephone directory, while I calmly observe this spectacle, stuck inside a bell-jar to avoid contamination. She took him firmly by the arm and said, Come along, love.

It was still early when the doctor had, we can imagine with what pleasure, finished the cup of coffee and toast his wife had insisted on preparing for him, much too early to

find the people whom he had to inform at their desks. Logic and efficacy demanded that his report about what was happening should be made directly and as soon as possible to someone in authority at the Ministry of Health, but he soon changed his mind when he realised that to present himself simply as a doctor who had some important and urgent information to communicate, was not enough to convince the less exalted civil servant to whom, after much pleading, the telephone operator had agreed to put him through. The man wanted to know more details before passing him on to his immediate superior, and it was clear that a doctor with any sense of responsibility was not going to declare the outbreak of an epidemic of blindness to the first minor functionary who appeared before him, it would cause immediate panic. The functionary at the other end of the line replied, You tell me you're a doctor, if you want me to believe you, then, of course, I believe you, but I have my orders, unless you tell me what you want to discuss I can take this matter no further, It's confidential, Confidential matters are not dealt with over the telephone, you'd better come here in person. I cannot leave the house, Do you mean you're ill, Yes, I'm ill, the blind man said after a pause. In that case you ought to call a doctor, a real doctor, quipped the functionary, and, delighted with his own wit, he hung up.

The man's insolence was like a slap in the face. Only after some minutes had passed, had he regained enough composure to tell his wife how rudely he had been treated. Then, as if he had just discovered something that he should have known a long time ago, he murmured sadly, This is the stuff we're made of, half indifference and half malice. He was about to ask mistrustfully, What now, when he realised that he had been wasting his time, that the only way of getting the information to the right quarters by a safe route would be to speak to the medical director of his own hospital service, doctor to doctor, without any civil servants in the middle, let him assume responsibility for making the bureaucratic system do its work. His wife dialled the number, she knew the hospital number by heart. The doctor identified himself when they replied, then said rapidly, I'm fine, thank you, no doubt the receptionist had inquired, How are you, doctor, that is what we say when we do not wish to play the weakling, we say Fine, even though we may be dying, and this is commonly known as taking one's courage in both hands, a phenomenon that has only been observed in the human species. When the director came to the telephone, Now then, what's all this about, the doctor asked if he was alone, if there was anyone within earshot, no need to worry about the receptionist, she had better things to do than listen in to conversations about ophthalmology, besides she was only interested in gynaecology. The doctor's account was brief but full, with no circumlocutions, no superfluous words, with no redundancies, and expressed with a clinical dryness which, taking into account the situation, caused the director some surprise, But are you really blind, he asked, Totally blind, In any case, it might be a coincidence, there might not really have been, in the strict sense of the word, any contagion whatsoever, Agreed there is no proof of contagion, but this was not just a case of his turning blind and my turning blind, each of us in our own home, without our having seen each other, the man turned up blind at the surgery and I went blind a few hours later, How can we trace this man, I have his name and address on file in the surgery, I'll send someone there immediately, A

doctor, Yes, of course, a colleague, Don't you think we ought to inform the Ministry about what is happening, For the moment that would be premature, think of the public alarm news of this kind would provoke, good grief, blindness isn't catching, Death isn't catching either, yet nevertheless we all die, Well, you stay at home while I deal with the matter, then I'll send someone to fetch you, I want to examine you, Don't forget that the fact that I am now blind is because I examined a blind man, You can't be sure of that, At least there is every indication here of cause and effect, Undoubtedly, yet it is still too early to draw any conclusions, two isolated cases have no statistical relevance, Unless, at this point, there are more than two of us, I can understand your state of mind but we must avoid any gloomy speculations that might turn out to be groundless, Many thanks, You'll be hearing from me soon, Goodbye.

Half an hour later, after he had managed, rather awkwardly, to shave, with some assistance from his wife, the telephone rang. It was the director again, but this time his voice sounded different, We have a boy here who has also suddenly gone blind, he sees everything white, his mother tells me he visited your surgery yesterday, Am I correct in thinking that this child has a divergent squint in the left eye, Yes, Then there's no doubt, it's him, I'm starting to get worried, the situation is becoming really serious, What about informing the Ministry, Yes, of course, I'll get on to the hospital management right away. After about three hours, when the doctor and his wife were having their lunch in silence, he toying with the bits of meat she had cut up for him, the telephone rang again. His wife went to answer, came back at once, You'll have to take the call, it's from the Ministry. She helped him to his feet, guided him into the study and handed him the telephone. The conversation was brief. The Ministry wanted to know the identity of the patients who had been at his surgery the previous day, the doctor replied that the clinical files contained all the relevant details, name, age, marital status, profession, home address, and he ended up offering to accompany the person or persons entrusted with rounding them up. At the other end of the line, the tone was curt, That won't be necessary. The telephone was passed on to someone else, a different voice came through, Good afternoon, this is the Minister speaking, on behalf of the Government I wish to thank you for your zeal, I'm certain that thanks to your prompt action we shall be able to limit and control the situation, meanwhile would you please do us the favour of remaining indoors. The closing words were spoken with courteous formality, but left him in no doubt that he was being given an order. The doctor replied, Yes, Minister, but the person at the other end had already put the phone down.

A few minutes later, the telephone rang yet again. It was the medical director, nervous, jumbling his words, I've just been told that the police have been informed of two cases of sudden blindness, Are they policemen, No, a man and a woman, they found him in the street screaming that he was blind, and the woman was in a hotel when she became blind, it seems she was in bed with someone, We need to check if they, too, are patients of mine, do you know their names, No names were mentioned, They have rung me from the Ministry, they're going to the surgery to collect the files, What a complicated

business, You're telling me. The doctor replaced the receiver, raised his hands to his eyes and kept them there as if trying to defend his eyes from anything worse happening, then he said faintly, I'm so tired, Try to get some sleep, I'll take you to your bed, his wife said, It's pointless, I wouldn't be able to sleep, besides the day isn't over yet, something could still happen.

It was almost six o'clock when the telephone rang for the last time. The doctor, who was sitting beside it, picked up the receiver, Yes, speaking, he said, listened attentively to what he was being told and merely nodded his head slightly before ringing off, Who was that, his wife asked, The Ministry, an ambulance is coming to fetch me within the next half hour, Is that what you expected to happen, Yes, more or less, Where are they taking you, I don't know, presumably to a hospital, I'll pack a suitcase, sort out some clothes, the usual things, I'm not going on a trip, We don't know what it is. She led him gently into the bedroom, made him sit on the bed, You sit here quietly, I'll deal with everything. He could hear her going back and forth, opening and closing drawers and cupboards, removing clothes and then packing them into the suitcase on the floor, but what he could not see was that in addition to his own clothes, she had packed a number of blouses and skirts, a pair of slacks, a dress, some shoes that could only belong to a woman. It vaguely crossed his mind that he would not need so many clothes, but said nothing for this was not the moment to be worrying about such trivialities. He heard the locks click, then his wife said, Done, we're ready for the ambulance now. She carried the suitcase to the door leading to the stairs, refusing her husband's help when he said, Let me help you, that's something I can do, after all, I'm not an invalid. Then they went to sit on the sofa in the sitting-room and waited. They were holding hands, and he said, Who knows how long we shall be separated, and she replied, Don't let it worry you.

They waited for almost an hour. When the door-bell rang, she got up and went to open the door, but there was no one on the landing. She tried the internal telephone, Very well, he'll be right down, she said. She turned to her husband and told him, They're waiting downstairs, they have strict orders not to come up to the flat, It would appear the Ministry is really alarmed. Let's go. They went down in the elevator, she helped her husband to negotiate the last few steps and to get into the ambulance, then went back to the steps to fetch the suitcase, she lifted it up on her own and pushed it inside. At last she climbed in and sat beside her husband. The driver of the ambulance turned round to protest, I can only take him, those are my orders, I must ask you to get down. The woman calmly replied, You'll have to take me as well, I've just gone blind this very minute.

The suggestion had come from the minister himself. It was, whichever way one looked at it, a fortunate not to say perfect idea, both from the point of view of the merely sanitary aspects of the case and from that of the social implications and their political consequences. Until the causes were established, or, to use the appropriate terms, the etiology of the white evil, as, thanks to the inspiration of an imaginative assessor, this unpleasant-sounding blindness came to be called, until such time as treatment and a cure might be found, and perhaps a vaccine that might prevent the appearance of any cases in the future, all the people who had turned blind, as well as those who had been in physical contact or in any way close to these patients, should be rounded up and isolated so as to avoid any further cases of contagion, which, once confirmed, would multiply more or less according to what is mathematically referred to as a compound ratio. Quod erat demonstrandum, concluded the Minister. According to the ancient practice, inherited from the time of cholera and yellow fever, when ships that were contaminated or suspected of carrying infection had to remain out at sea for forty days, and in words within the grasp of the general public, it was a matter of putting all these people into quarantine, until further notice. These very words, Until further notice, apparently deliberate, but, in fact, enigmatic since he could not think of any others, were pronounced by the Minister, who later clarified his thinking, I meant that this could as easily mean forty days as forty weeks, or forty months, or forty years, the important thing is that they should stay in quarantine. Now we have to decide where we are going to put them, Minister, said the President of the Commission of Logistics and Security set up rapidly for the purpose and responsible for the transportation, isolation and supervision of the patients, What immediate facilities are available, the Minister wanted to know, We have a mental hospital standing empty until we decide what to do with it, several military installations which are no longer being used because of the recent restructuring of the army, a building designed for a trade fair that is nearing completion, and there is even, although no one has been able to explain why, a supermarket about to go into liquidation, In your opinion, which of these buildings would best suit our purpose, The barracks offer the greatest security, Naturally, There is, however, one drawback, the size of the place is likely to make it both difficult and costly to keep an eye on those interned, Yes, I can see that, As for the supermarket, we would probably run up against various legal obstacles, legal matters that would have to be taken into account, And what about the building for the trade fair, That's the one site I think we should ignore, Minister, Why, Industry wouldn't like it, millions have been invested in the project, So that leaves the mental hospital, Yes, Minister, the mental hospital, Well then, let's opt for the mental hospital, Besides, to all appearances, it's the place that offers the best facilities because not only does it have a perimeter wall, it also has the advantage of having two separate wings, one to be used for those who are actually blind, the other for those suspected of having the disease, as well as a central area which will serve, as it were, as a no man's land, through which those who turn blind will pass to join those who are already blind, There might be a problem, What is that, Minister, We shall find ourselves obliged to put staff there to supervise the transfers, and I doubt whether we will be able to count on volunteers, I doubt whether that will be necessary, Minister, Why, Should anyone

suspected of infection turn blind, as will naturally happen sooner or later, you may be sure, Minister, that the others who still have their sight, will turn him out at once, You're right, Just as they would not allow in any blind person who suddenly felt like changing places, Good thinking, Thank you, Minister, may I give orders to proceed, Yes, you have carte blanche.

The Commission acted with speed and efficiency. Before nightfall, everyone who was known to be blind had been rounded up, as well as a considerable number of people who were assumed to be affected, at least those whom it had been possible to identify and locate in a rapid search operation carried out above all in the domestic and professional circles of those stricken with loss of vision. The first to be taken to the empty mental hospital were the doctor and his wife. There were soldiers on guard. The main gate was opened just enough to allow them to pass through, and then closed at once. Serving as a handrail, a thick rope stretched from the entrance to the main door of the building, Move a little to the right, there you will find a rope, grab it with your hand and go straight on, straight on until you come to some steps, there are six steps in all, the sergeant warned them. Once inside, the rope divided into two, one strand going to the left, the other to the right, the sergeant shouted, Keep to the right. As she dragged the suitcase along, the woman guided her husband to the ward that was nearest to the entrance. It was a long room, like a ward in an old-fashioned hospital, with two rows of beds that had been painted grey, although the paint had been peeling off for quite some time. The covers, the sheets and the blankets were of the same colour. The woman guided her husband to the far end of the ward, made him sit on one of the beds, and told him, Stay here, I'm going to look around. There were more wards, long and narrow corridors, rooms that must have been the doctors' offices, dingy latrines, a kitchen that still reeked of bad cooking, a vast refectory with zinc-topped tables, three padded cells in which the bottom six feet of the walls had padding and the rest was lined with cork. Behind the building there was an abandoned yard, with neglected trees, their trunks looking as if they had been flayed. There was litter everywhere. The doctor's wife went back inside. In a half-open cupboard she found strait-jackets. When she rejoined her husband, she asked him, Can you imagine where they've brought us, No, she was about to add, To a mental asylum, but he anticipated her, You're not blind, I cannot allow you to stay here, Yes, you're right, I'm not blind, Then I'm going to ask them to take you home, to tell them that you told a lie in order to remain with me, There's no point, they cannot hear you through there, and even if they could, they would pay no attention, But you can see, For the moment, I shall almost certainly turn blind myself one of these days, or any minute now, Please, go home, Don't insist, besides, I'll bet the soldiers would not let me get as far as the stairs, I cannot force you, No, my love, you can't, I'm staying to help you and the others who may come here, but don't tell them I can see, What others, You surely don't think we shall be here on our own, This is madness, What did you expect, we're in a mental asylum.

The other blind people arrived together. One after another, they had been

apprehended at home, first of all the man driving the car, then the man who had stolen it, the girl with dark glasses, the boy with the squint whom they traced to the hospital where his mother had taken him. His mother did not come with him, she lacked the ingenuity of the doctor's wife who declared herself blind when there was nothing wrong with her eyesight, she is a simple soul, incapable of lying, even when it is for her own good. They came stumbling into the ward, clutching at the air, here there was no rope to guide them, they would have to learn from painful experience, the boy was weeping, calling out for his mother, and it was the girl with dark glasses who tried to console him, She's coming, she's coming, she told him, and since she was wearing her dark glasses she could just as well have been blind as not, the others moved their eyes from one side to another, and could see nothing, while because the girl was wearing those glasses, and saying, She's coming, she's coming, it was as if she really could see the boy's desperate mother coming in through the door. The doctor's wife leaned over and whispered into her husband's ear, Four more have arrived, a woman, two men and a boy, What do the men look like, asked the doctor in a low voice, She described them, and he told her, The latter I don't know, the other, from your description, might well be the blind man who came to see me at the surgery. The child has a squint and the girl is wearing dark glasses, she seems attractive, Both of them came to the surgery. Because of the din they were making as they searched for a place where they might feel safe, the new arrivals did not hear this conversation, they must have thought that there was no one else like themselves there, and they had not been without their sight long enough for their sense of hearing to have become keener than normal. At last, as if they had reached the conclusion that it was not worth while exchanging certainty for doubt, each of them sat on the first bed they had stumbled upon, so to speak, the two men ending up beside each other, without their knowing. In a low voice, the girl continued to console the boy, Don't cry, you'll see that your mother won't be long. There was silence, then the doctor's wife said so that she could be heard all the way down the ward as far as the door, There are two of us here, how many are you. The unexpected voice startled the new arrivals, but the two men remained silent, and it was the girl who replied, I think there are four of us, myself and this little boy, Who else, why don't the others speak up, asked the doctor's wife, I'm here, murmured a man's voice, as if he could only pronounce the words with difficulty, And so am I, growled in turn another masculine voice with obvious displeasure. The doctor's wife thought to herself, They're behaving as if they were afraid of getting to know each other. She watched them twitching, tense, their necks craned as if they were sniffing at something, yet curiously, their expressions were all the same, threatening and at the same time afraid, but the fear of one was not the fear of the other, and this was no less true of the threats they offered. What could be going on between them, she wondered.

At that moment, a loud, gruff voice was raised, by someone whose tone suggested he was used to giving orders. It came from a loudspeaker fixed above the door by which they had entered. The word Attention was uttered three times, then the voice began, the Government regrets having been forced to exercise with all urgency what it considers to

be its rightful duty, to protect the population by all possible means in this present crisis, when something with all the appearance of an epidemic of blindness has broken out, provisionally known as the white sickness, and we are relying on the public spirit and cooperation of all citizens to stem any further contagion, assuming that we are dealing with a contagious disease and that we are not simply witnessing a series of as yet inexplicable coincidences. The decision to gather together in one place all those infected, and, in adjacent but separate quarters all those who have had any kind of contact with them, was not taken without careful consideration. The Government is fully aware of its responsibilities and hopes that those to whom this message is directed will, as the upright citizens they doubtless are, also assume their responsibilities, bearing in mind that the isolation in which they now find themselves will represent, above any personal considerations, an act of solidarity with the rest of the nation's community. That said, we ask everyone to listen attentively to the following instructions, first, the lights will be kept on at all times, any attempt to tamper with the switches will be useless, they don't work, second, leaving the building without authorisation will mean instant death, third, in each ward there is a telephone that can be used only to requisition from outside fresh supplies for purposes of hygiene and cleanliness, fourth, the internees will be responsible for washing their own clothes by hand, fifth, it is recommended that ward representatives should be elected, this is a recommendation rather than an order, the internees must organise themselves as they see fit, provided they comply with the aforesaid rules and those we are about to announce, sixth, three times daily containers with food will be deposited at the main door, on the right and on the left, destined respectively for the patients and those suspected of being contaminated, seventh, all the left-overs must be burnt, and this includes not only any food, but also the containers, plates and cutlery which are all made of combustible material, eighth, the burning should be done in the inner courtyards of the building or in the exercise yard, ninth, the internees are responsible for any damage caused by these fires, tenth, in the event of a fire getting out of control, whether accidentally or on purpose, the firemen will not intervene, eleventh, equally, the internees cannot count on any outside intervention should there be any outbreaks of illnesses, nor in the event of any disorder or aggression, twelfth, in the case of death, whatever the cause, the internees will bury the corpse in the yard without any formalities, thirteenth, contact between the wing of the patients and that of the people suspected of being contagious must be made in the central hall of the building by which they entered, fourteenth, should those suspected of being infected suddenly go blind, they will be transferred immediately to the other wing, fifteenth, this communication will be relayed daily at the same time for the benefit of all new arrivals. The Government and Nation expect every man and woman to do their duty. Good night.

In the silence that followed, the boy's voice could be clearly heard, I want my mummy, but the words were articulated without expression, like some automatic and repeater mechanism that had previously left a phrase suspended and was blurting it out now, at the wrong time. The doctor said, The orders we have just been given leave no room for doubt, we're isolated, probably more isolated than anyone has ever been and

without any hope of getting out of this place until a cure is found for this disease, I recognise your voice, said the girl with dark glasses, I'm a doctor, an ophthalmologist, You must be the doctor I consulted yesterday, I recognise your voice, Yes, and who are you, I've been suffering from conjunctivitis and I assume it hasn't cleared up, but now, since I'm completely blind, it's of no importance, And the child who's with you, He's not mine, I have no children, Yesterday I examined a boy with a squint, was that you, the doctor asked, Yes, that was me, the boy's reply came out with the resentful tone of someone who prefers people not to mention his physical defect, and with good reason, for such defects, these as much as any others, are no sooner mentioned than they pass from being barely perceptible to being all too obvious. Is there anyone else here I know, the doctor asked, could the man who came to see me at the surgery yesterday accompanied by his wife be here by any chance, the man who suddenly went blind when out driving his car, That's me, replied the first blind man, Is there anyone else, please speak up, we are obliged to live here together for who knows how long, therefore it is essential that we should get to know each other. The car-thief muttered between his teeth, Yes, yes, he thought this would be sufficient to confirm his presence, but the doctor insisted, The voice is that of someone who is relatively young, you're not the elderly patient with the cataract, No doctor, that's not me, How did you go blind, I was walking along the street, And what else, Nothing else, I was walking along the street and I suddenly went blind. The doctor was about to ask if his blindness was also white, but stopped himself in time, why bother, whatever his reply, no matter whether his blindness was white or black, they would not get out of this place. He stretched out a hesitant hand to his wife and met her hand on the way. She kissed him on the cheek, no one else could see that wrinkled forehead, that tight mouth, those dead eyes, like glass, terrifying because they appeared to see and did not see, My time will come too, she thought, perhaps even at this very instant, not allowing me to finish what I am saying, at any moment, just as happened to them, or perhaps I'll wake up blind, or go blind as I close my eyes to sleep, thinking I've just dozed off.

She looked at the four blind people, they were sitting on their beds, the little luggage they had been able to bring at their feet, the boy with his school satchel, the others with suitcases, small, as if they had packed for the weekend. The girl with dark glasses was conversing in a low voice with the boy, on the row opposite, close to each other, with only an empty bed between them, the first blind man and the car-thief were, without realising it, sitting face to face. The doctor said, We all heard the orders, whatever happens now, one thing we can be sure of, no one will come to our assistance, therefore we ought to start getting organised without delay, because it won't be long before this ward fills up with people, this one and the others, How do you know there are more wards here, asked the girl, We went around the place before deciding on this ward which is closer to the main entrance, explained the doctor's wife, as she squeezed her husband's arm as if warning him to be cautious. The girl said, it would be better, doctor, if you were to take charge of the ward, after all, you are a doctor. What good is a doctor without eyes or medicines, But you have some authority. The doctor's wife smiled, I think

you should accept, if the others are in agreement, of course, I don't think it's such a good idea, Why not, For the moment there are only six of us here, but by tomorrow we shall certainly be more, people will start arriving every day, it would be too much to expect that they should be prepared to accept the authority of someone they have not chosen and who, moreover, would have nothing to offer them in exchange for their respect, always assuming they were willing to accept my authority and my rules, Then it's going to be difficult to live here, We'll be very fortunate if it turns out to be only difficult. The girl with dark glasses said, I meant well, but frankly, doctor, you are right, it will be a case of everyone for himself.

Either because he was moved by these words or because he could no longer contain his fury, one of the men got abruptly to his feet, This fellow is to blame for our misfortune, if I had my eyesight now, I'd do him in, he bellowed, while pointing in the direction where he thought the other man to be. He was not all that far off, but his dramatic gesture was comical because his jabbing, accusing finger was pointing at an innocent bedside table. Keep calm, said the doctor, no one's to blame in an epidemic, everyone's a victim, If I hadn't been the decent fellow I am, if I hadn't helped him to find his way home, I'd still have my precious eyes, Who are you, asked the doctor, but the complainant did not reply and now seemed annoyed that he had said anything. Then the other man spoke, He took me home, it's true, but then took advantage of my condition to steal my car, That's a lie, I didn't steal anything, You most certainly did, If anyone nicked your car, it wasn't me, my reward for carrying out a kind action was to lose my sight, besides, where are the witnesses, that's what I'd like to know. This argument won't solve anything, said the doctor's wife, the car is outside, the two of you are in here, better to make your peace, don't forget we are going to have to live here together, You can count me out, said the first blind man, I'm off to another ward, as far away as possible from this crook who was capable of robbing a blind man, he claims that he turned blind because of me, well let him stay blind, at least it shows there is still some justice in this world. He picked up his suitcase and, shuffling his feet so as not to trip and groping with his free hand, he went along the aisle separating the two rows of beds, Where are the other wards, he asked, but did not hear the reply if there was one, because suddenly he found himself beneath an onslaught of arms and legs, the car-thief was carrying out as best he could his threat to take his revenge on this man who had caused all his misfortunes. One minute on top, the next underneath, they rolled about in the confined space, colliding now and then with the legs of the beds, while, terrified once more, the boy with the squint started crying again and calling out for his mother. The doctor's wife took her husband by the arm, she knew that alone she would never be able to persuade them to stop quarrelling, she led him along the passageway to the spot where the enraged opponents were panting for breath as they struggled on the ground. She guided her husband's hands, she herself took charge of the blind man whom she found more manageable, and with much effort, they managed to separate them. You're behaving foolishly, said the doctor angrily, if your idea is to turn this place into a hell, then you're going about it in the right way, but remember we're on our own here, we can expect no

outside help, do you hear, He stole my car, whimpered the first blind man who had come off worst in the exchange of blows, Forget it, what does it matter, said the doctor's wife, you were no longer in a condition to drive the car when it disappeared, That's all very well, but it was mine, and this villain took it and left it who knows where, Most likely, said the doctor, the car is to be found at the spot where this man turned blind, You're an astute fellow, doctor, yes sir, no doubt about that, piped up the thief. The first blind man made a gesture as if to escape from the hands holding him, but without really trying, as if aware that not even his sense of outrage, however justified, would bring back his car, nor would the car restore his sight. But the thief threatened, If you think you're going to get away with this, then you're very much mistaken, all right, I stole your car, but you stole my eyesight, so who's the bigger thief, That's enough, the doctor protested, we're all blind here and we're not accusing or pointing the finger at anyone, I'm not interested in other people's misfortunes, the thief replied contemptuously, If you want to go to another ward, said the doctor to the first blind man, my wife will guide you there, she knows her way around better than me, No thanks, I've changed my mind, I prefer to stay in this one. The thief mocked him, The little boy is afraid of being on his own in case a certain bogeyman gets him, That's enough, shouted the doctor, losing his patience, Now listen to me, doctor, snarled the thief, we're all equal here and you don't give me any orders, No one is giving orders, I'm simply asking you to leave this poor fellow in peace, Fine, fine, but watch your step when you're dealing with me, I'm not easy to handle when somebody gets up my nose, otherwise I'm as good a friend as you're likely to meet, but the worst enemy you could possibly have. With aggressive movements and gestures, the thief fumbled for the bed where he had been sitting, pushed his suitcase underneath, then announced, I'm going to get some sleep, as if warning them, You'd better look the other way, I'm going to take my clothes off. The girl with dark glasses said to the boy with the squint, And you'd better get into bed as well, stay on this side and if you need anything during the night, call me, I want to do a wee-wee, the boy said. On hearing him, all of them felt a sudden and urgent desire to urinate, and their thoughts were more or less as follows, Now how are we going to cope with this problem, the first blind man groped under the bed to see if there was a chamber pot, yet at the same time hoping he would not find one for he would be embarrassed if he had to urinate in the presence of other people, not that they could see him, of course, but the noise of someone peeing is indiscreet, unmistakable, men at least can use a strategy denied women, in this they are more fortunate. The thief had sat down on the bed and was now saying, Shit, where do you have to go to piss in this place, Watch your language, there's a child here, protested the girl with dark glasses, Certainly, sweetheart, but unless you can find a lavatory, it won't be long before your little boy has pee running down his legs. The doctor's wife intervened, Perhaps I can locate the toilets, I can remember having smelt them, I'll come with you, said the girl with dark glasses, taking the boy by the hand, I think it best that we should all go, the doctor observed, then we shall know the way whenever we need to go, I know what's on your mind, the car-thief thought to himself without daring to say it aloud, what you don't want is that your little wife should have to take me to pee every time I feel the urge. The implication behind that thought gave him a small erection that

surprised him, as if the fact of being blind should have as a consequence, the loss or diminution of sexual desire. Good, he thought, all is not lost, after all, among the dead and the wounded someone will escape, and, drifting away from the conversation, he began to daydream. He didn't get very far, the doctor was already saying, Let's form a line, my wife will lead the way, everyone put their hand on the shoulder of the person in front, then there will be no danger of our getting lost. The first blind man spoke up, I'm not going anywhere with him, obviously referring to the crook who had robbed him.

Whether to look for each other or to avoid each other, they could scarcely move in the narrow aisle, all the more so since the doctor's wife had to proceed as if she were blind. At last, they were all in line, the girl with dark glasses led the boy with the squint by the hand, then the thief in underpants and a vest, the doctor behind him, and last of all, safe for the moment from any physical attack, the first blind man. They advanced very slowly, as if mistrustful of the person guiding them, groping in vain with their free hand, searching for the support of something solid, a wall, a door-frame. Placed behind the girl with dark glasses, the thief, aroused by the perfume she exuded and by the memory of his recent erection, decided to put his hands to better use, the one caressing the nape of her neck beneath her hair, the other, openly and unceremoniously fondling her breast. She wriggled to shake him off, but he was grabbing her firmly. Then the girl gave a backward kick as hard as she could. The heel of her shoe, sharp as a stiletto, pierced the flesh of the thief's bare thigh causing him to give a cry of surprise and pain. What's going on, asked the doctor's wife, looking back, I tripped, the girl with dark glasses replied, I seem to have injured the person behind me. Blood was already seeping out between the thief's fingers who, moaning and cursing, was trying to ascertain the consequences of her aggression, I'm injured, this bitch doesn't look where she's putting her feet, And you don't look where you're putting your hands, the girl replied curtly. The doctor's wife understood what had happened, at first she smiled, but then she saw how nasty the wound looked, blood was trickling down the poor devil's leg, and they had no peroxide, no iodine, no plasters, no bandages, no disinfectant, nothing. The line was now in disarray, the doctor was asking, Where is the wound, Here, Here, where, On my leg, can't you see, this bitch stuck the heel of her shoe in me, I tripped, I couldn't help it, repeated the girl before blurting out in exasperation, The bastard was touching me up, what sort of woman does he think I am. The doctor's wife intervened, This wound should be washed and dressed at once, And where is there any water, asked the thief, In the kitchen, in the kitchen there is water, but we don't all have to go, my husband and I will take him there, you others wait here, we'll be back soon, I want to do weewee, said the boy, Hold it in a bit longer, we'll be right back. The doctor's wife knew that she had to turn once to the right, and once to the left, then follow a narrow corridor that formed a right angle, the kitchen was at the far end. After a few paces she pretended that she was mistaken, stopped, retraced her footsteps, then said, Ah, now I remember, and from there they headed straight for the kitchen, there was no more time to be lost, the wound was bleeding profusely. At first, the water from the tap was dirty, it took some time for it to become clear. It was lukewarm and stale, as if it had been putrefying inside the pipes,

but the wounded man received it with a sigh of relief. The wound looked ugly. And now, how are we going to bandage his leg, asked the doctor's wife. Beneath a table there were some filthy rags which must have been used as floor cloths, but it would be most unwise to use them to make a bandage, There doesn't appear to be anything here, she said, while pretending to keep up the search, But I can't be left like this, doctor, the bleeding won't stop, please help me, and forgive me if I was rude to you a short time ago, moaned the thief, We are trying to help you, otherwise we wouldn't be here, said the doctor and then he ordered him, Take off your vest, there's no other option. The wounded man mumbled that he needed his vest, but took it off. The doctor's wife lost no time in improvising a bandage which she wrapped round his thigh, pulled tight and managed to use the shoulder straps and the tail of the vest to tie a rough knot. These were not movements a blind person could easily execute, but she was in no mood to waste time with any more pretence, it was enough to have pretended that she was lost. The thief sensed that there was something unusual here, logically it was the doctor who, although no more than an ophthalmologist, should have bandaged the wound, but the consolation of knowing that something was being done outweighed the doubts, vague as they were, that had momentarily crossed his mind. With him limping along, they went back to rejoin the others, and once there, the doctor's wife spotted immediately that the boy with the squint had not been able to hold out any longer and had wet his trousers. Neither the first blind man nor the girl with glasses had realised what had happened. At the boy's feet spread a puddle of urine, the hem of his trousers still dripping wet. But as if nothing had happened, the doctor's wife said, Let's go and find these lavatories. The blind stretched out their arms, looking for each other, though not the girl with dark glasses who made it quite clear that she had no intention of walking in front of that shameless creature who had touched her up, at last the line was formed, the thief changing places with the first blind man, with the doctor between them. The thief's limp was getting worse and he was dragging his leg. The tight bandage was bothering him and the wound was throbbing so badly that it was as if his heart had changed position and was lying at the bottom of some hole. The girl with dark glasses was once again leading the boy by the hand, but he kept his distance as much as possible, afraid that someone might discover his accident, such as the doctor, who muttered, There's a smell of urine here, and his wife felt she should confirm his impression, Yes, there is a smell, she could not say that it was coming from the lavatories because they were still some distance away, and, being obliged to behave as if she were blind, she could not reveal that the stench was coming from the boy's wet trousers.

They were agreed, both men and women, when they arrived at the lavatories, that the boy should be the first to relieve himself, but the men ended up going in together, without any distinction of urgency or age, the urinal was communal, it would have to be in a place like this, even the toilets. The women remained at the door, they are said to have more resistance, but there's a limit to everything, and the doctor's wife was soon suggesting, Perhaps there are other lavatories, but the girl with dark glasses said, Speaking for myself, I can wait, So can I, said the other woman, then there was a silence,

then they began to speak, How did you come to lose your sight, Like everyone else, suddenly I could no longer see, Were you at home, No, So it happened when you left my husband's surgery, More or less, What do you mean by more or less, That it didn't happen right away, Did you feel any pain, No, there was no pain but when I opened my eyes I was blind, With me it was different, What do you mean by different, My eyes weren't closed, I went blind the moment my husband got into the ambulance, Fortunate, For whom, Your husband, this way you can be together, In that case I was also fortunate, You were, Are you married, No, no I'm not, and I don't think there will be any more marriages now, But this blindness is so abnormal, so alien to scientific knowledge that it cannot last forever. And suppose we were to stay like this for the rest of our lives, Us, Everyone, That would be horrible, a world full of blind people, It doesn't bear thinking about.

The boy with the squint was the first to emerge from the lavatory, he didn't even need to have gone in there. He had rolled his trousers halfway up his legs and removed his socks. He said, I'm back, whereupon the girl with dark glasses moved in the direction of the voice, did not succeed the first or second time, but at a third attempt found the boy's vacillating hand. Shortly afterwards, the doctor appeared, then the first blind man, one of them asked, Where are the rest of you, the doctor's wife was already holding her husband's arm, his other arm was touched and grabbed by the girl with dark glasses. For several moments the first blind man had no one to protect him, then someone placed a hand on his shoulder. Are we all here, asked the doctor's wife, The fellow with the injured leg has stayed behind to satisfy another need, her husband replied. Then the girl with dark glasses said, Perhaps there are other toilets, I'm getting desperate, forgive me, Let's go and find out, said the doctor's wife, and they went off hand in hand. Within ten minutes they were back, they had found a consulting room which had its own toilet. The thief had already reappeared, complaining about the cold and the pain in his leg. They reformed the line in the same order by which they had come and, with less effort than before and without incident, they returned to the ward. Adroitly, without appearing to do so, the doctor's wife helped each of them to reach the bed they had previously occupied. Before entering the ward, as if it were self-evident to everyone, she suggested that the easiest way for each of them to find their place was to count the beds from the entrance, Ours, she said, are the last ones on the right-hand side, beds nineteen and twenty. The first to proceed down the aisle was the thief. Almost naked, he was shivering from head to foot and anxious to alleviate the pain in his leg, reason enough for him to be given priority. He went from bed to bed, fumbling on the floor in search of his suitcase, and when he recognised it, he said aloud, It's here, then added, Fourteen, On which side, asked the doctor's wife, On the left, he replied, once again vaguely surprised, as if she ought to know it without having to ask. The first blind man went next. He knew his bed was next but one to the thief's and on the same side. He was no longer afraid of sleeping near him, his leg was in such a dreadful state, and judging from his groans and sighs, he would find it hard to move. On arriving there, he said, Sixteen, on the left, and lay down fully dressed. Then the girl with dark glasses pleaded in a low voice, Can we stay close to

you on the other side, we shall feel safer there. The four of them advanced together and lost no time in getting settled. After a few minutes, the boy with the squint said, I'm hungry, and the girl with dark glasses murmured, Tomorrow, tomorrow we'll find something to eat, now go to sleep. Then she opened her handbag, searched for the tiny bottle she had bought in the chemist's. She removed her glasses, threw back her head and, keeping her eyes wide open, guiding one hand with the other, she applied the eye-drops. Not all of the drops went into her eyes, but conjunctivitis, given such careful treatment, soon clears up.

I must open my eyes, thought the doctor's wife. Through closed eyelids, when she woke up at various times during the night, she had perceived the dim light of the lamps that barely illuminated the ward, but now she seemed to notice a difference, another luminous presence, it could be the effect of the first glimmer of dawn, it could be that milky sea already drowning her eyes. She told herself that she would count up to ten and then open her eyelids, she said it twice, counted twice, failed to open them twice. She could hear her husband breathing deeply in the next bed and someone snoring, I wonder how the wound on that fellow's leg is doing, she asked herself, but knew at that moment that she felt no real compassion, what she wanted was to pretend that she was worried about something else, what she wanted was not to have to open her eyes. She opened them the following instant, just like that, not because of any conscious decision. Through the windows that began halfway up the wall and ended up a mere hand's-breadth from the ceiling, entered the dull, bluish light of dawn. I'm not blind, she murmured, and suddenly panicking, she raised herself on the bed, the girl with dark glasses, who was occupying a bed opposite, might have heard her. She was asleep. On the next bed, the one up against the wall, the boy was also sleeping, She did the same as me, the doctor's wife thought, she gave him the safest place, what fragile walls we'd make, a mere stone in the middle of the road without any hope other than to see the enemy trip over it, enemy, what enemy, no one will attack us here, even if we'd stolen and killed outside, no one is likely to come here to arrest us, that man who stole the car has never been so sure of his freedom, we're so remote from the world that any day now, we shall no longer know who we are, or even remember our names, and besides, what use would names be to us, no dog recognises another dog or knows the others by the names they have been given, a dog is identified by its scent and that is how it identifies others, here we are like another breed of dogs, we know each other's bark or speech, as for the rest, features, colour of eyes or hair, they are of no importance, it is as if they did not exist, I can still see but for how long, The light changed a little, it could not be night coming back, it had to be the sky clouding over, delaying the morning. A groan came from the thief's bed, If the wound has become infected, thought the doctor's wife, we have nothing to treat it with, no remedy, in these conditions the tiniest accident can become a tragedy, perhaps that is what they are waiting for, that we perish here, one after the other, when the beast dies, the poison dies with it. The doctor's wife rose from her bed, leaned over her husband, was about to wake him, but did not have the courage to drag him from his sleep and know that he continued to be blind. Barefoot, one step at a time, she went to the thief's bed. His eyes were open and unmoving. How are you feeling, whispered the doctor's wife. The thief turned his head in the direction of the voice and said, Bad, my leg is very painful, she was about to say to him, Let me see, but held back just in time, such imprudence, it was he who did not remember that there were only blind people there, he acted without thinking, as he would have done several hours ago, there outside, if a doctor had said to him, Let's have a look at this wound, and he raised the blanket. Even in the half-light, anyone capable of seeing would have noticed the mattress soaked in blood, the black hole of the wound with its swollen edges. The bandage had come undone. The doctor's wife carefully lowered the blanket, then with a rapid, delicate

gesture, passed her hand over the man's forehead. His skin felt dry and burning hot. The light changed again, the clouds were drifting away. The doctor's wife returned to her bed, but this time did not lie down. She was watching her husband who was murmuring in his sleep, the shadowy forms of the others beneath the grey blankets, the grimy walls, the empty beds waiting to be occupied, and she serenely wished that she, too, could turn blind, penetrate the visible skin of things and pass to their inner side, to their dazzling and irremediable blindness.

Suddenly, from outside the ward, probably from the hallway separating the two wings of the building, came the sound of angry voices, Out, out, Get out, away with you, You cannot stay here, Orders have to be obeyed. The din got louder, then quietened down, a door slammed shut, all that could be heard now was a distressed sobbing, the unmistakable clatter made by someone who had just fallen over. In the ward they were all awake. They turned their heads towards the entrance, they did not need to be able to see to know that these were blind people who were arriving. The doctor's wife got up, how she would have liked to help the new arrivals, to say a kind word, to guide them to their beds, inform them, Take note, this is bed seven on the left-hand side, this is number four on the right, you can't go wrong, yes, there are six of us here, we came yesterday, yes, we were the first, our names, what do names matter, I believe one of the men has stolen a car, then there is the man who was robbed, there's a mysterious girl with dark glasses who puts drops in for her conjunctivitis, how do I know, being blind, that she wears dark glasses, well as it happens, my husband is an ophthalmologist and she went to consult him at his surgery, yes, he's also here, blindness struck all of us, ah, of course, there's also the boy with the squint. She did not move, she simply said to her husband, They're arriving. The doctor got out of bed, his wife helped him into his trousers, it didn't matter, no one could see, just then the blind interneers came into the ward, there were five of them, three men and two women. The doctor said, raising his voice, Keep calm, no need to rush, there are six of us here, how many are you, there's room for everyone. They did not know how many they were, true they had come into contact with each other, sometimes even bumped into each other, as they were pushed from the wing on the left to this one, but they did not know how many they were. And they were carrying no luggage. When they woke up in their ward and found they were blind and started bemoaning their fate, the others put them out without a moment's hesitation, without even giving them time to take their leave of any relatives or friends who might be with them. The doctor's wife remarked, It would be best if they could be counted and each person gave their name. Motionless, the blind interneers hesitated, but someone had to make a start, two of the men spoke at once, it always happens, both then fell silent, and it was the third man who began, Number one, he paused, it seemed he was about to give his name, but what he said was, I'm a policeman, and the doctor's wife thought to herself, He didn't give his name, he too knows that names are of no importance here. Another man was introducing himself, Number two, and he followed the example of the first man, I'm a taxi-driver. The third man said, Number three, I'm a pharmacist's assistant. Then a woman spoke up, Number four, I'm a hotel maid, and the last one of

all, Number five, I work in an office. That's my wife, my wife, where are you, tell me where you are, Here, I'm here, she said bursting into tears and walking unsteadily along the aisle with her eyes wide open, her hands struggling against the milky sea flooding into them. More confident, he advanced towards her, Where are you, where are you, he was now murmuring as if in prayer. One hand found another, the next moment they were embracing, a single body, kisses in search of kisses, at times lost in mid-air for they could not see each other's cheeks, eyes, lips. Sobbing, the doctor's wife clung to her husband, as if she, too, had just been reunited, but what she was saying was, This is terrible, a real disaster. Then the voice of the boy with the squint could be heard asking, Is my mummy here as well. Seated on his bed, the girl with dark glasses murmured, She'll come, don't worry, she'll come.

Here, each person's real home is the place where they sleep, therefore little wonder that the first concern of the new arrivals should be to choose a bed, just as they had done in the other ward, when they still had eyes to see. In the case of the wife of the first blind man there could be no doubt, her rightful and natural place was beside her husband, in bed seventeen, leaving number eighteen in the middle, like an empty space separating her from the girl with dark glasses. Nor is it surprising that they should try as far as possible to stay close together, there are many affinities here, some already known, others that are about to be revealed, for example, it was the pharmacist's assistant who sold eye-drops to the girl with dark glasses, this was the taxi-driver who took the first blind man to the doctor, this fellow who has identified himself as being a policeman found the blind thief weeping like a lost child, and as for the hotel maid, she was the first person to enter the room when the girl with dark glasses had a screaming fit. It is nevertheless certain that not all of these affinities will become explicit and known, either because of a lack of opportunity, or because no one so much as imagined that they could possibly exist, or because of a simple question of sensibility and tact. The hotel maid would never dream that the woman she saw naked is here, we know that the pharmacist's assistant served other customers wearing dark glasses who came to purchase eye-drops, no one would be imprudent enough to denounce to the policeman the presence of someone who stole a car, the taxi-driver would swear that during the last few days he had no blind man as a passenger. Naturally, the first blind man told his wife in a low voice that one of the interneers is the scoundrel who went off with their car, What a coincidence, eh, but, since in the meantime, he knew that the poor devil was badly injured in one leg, he was generous enough to add, He's been punished enough. And she, because of her deep distress at being blind and her great joy on regaining her husband, joy and sorrow can go together, not like oil and water, she no longer remembered what she had said two days before, that she would give a year of her life if this rogue, her word, were to go blind. And if there was some last shadow of resentment still troubling her spirit, it certainly blew over when the wounded man moaned pitifully, Doctor, please help me. Allowing himself to be guided by his wife, the doctor gently probed the edges of his wound, he could do nothing more, nor was there any point in trying to bathe it, the infection might have been caused by the deep penetration of a shoe heel that had been

in contact with the surface of the streets and the floors here in the building, or equally by pathogenic agents in all probability to be found in the contaminated almost stagnant water, coming from antiquated pipes in appalling condition. The girl with dark glasses who had got up on hearing his moan, began approaching slowly, counting the beds. She leaned forward, stretched out her hand, which brushed against the face of the doctor's wife, and then, having reached, who knows how, the wounded man's hand, which was burning hot, she said sadly, Please, forgive me, it was entirely my fault, there was no need for me to do what I did, Forget it, replied the man, these things happen in life, I shouldn't have done what I did either.

Almost covering these last words, the harsh voice from the loudspeaker came booming out, Attention, attention, your food has been left at the entrance as well as supplies for your hygiene and cleanliness, the blind should go first to collect their food, those in the wing for the contaminated will be informed when it's their turn, attention, attention, your food has been left at the entrance, the blind should make their way there first, the blind first. Dazed by fever, the wounded man did not grasp all the words, he thought they were being told to leave, that their detention was over, and he made as if to get up, but the doctor's wife held him back, Where are you going, Didn't you hear, he asked, they said the blind should leave, Yes, but only to go and collect our food. The wounded man gave a despondent sigh, and once more could feel the pain piercing through his flesh. The doctor said, Stay here, I'll go, I'm coming with you, said his wife. Just as they were about to leave the ward, a man who had come from the other wing, inquired, Who is this fellow, the reply came from the first blind man, He's a doctor, an eye-specialist, That's a good one, said the taxi-driver, just our luck to end up with the one doctor who can do nothing for us, We're also landed with a taxi-driver who can't take us anywhere, replied the girl with dark glasses sarcastically.

The container with the food was in the hallway. The doctor asked his wife, Guide me to the main door, Why, I'm going to tell them that there is someone here with a serious infection and that we have no medicines, Remember the warning, Yes, but perhaps when confronted with a concrete case, I doubt it, Me, too, but we ought to try. At the top of the steps leading to the forecourt, the daylight dazzled his wife, and not because it was too intense, there were dark clouds passing across the sky, and it looked as if it might rain, In such a short time I've become unused to bright light, she thought. Just at that moment, a soldier shouted from the gate, Stop, turn back, I have orders to shoot, and then, in the same tone of voice, pointing his gun, Sergeant, there are some people here trying to leave, We have no wish to leave, the doctor protested, In my opinion that is not what they want, said the sergeant as he approached, and, looking through the bars of the main gate, he asked, What's going on, A person who has injured his leg has an infected wound, we urgently need antibiotics and other medicines, My orders are crystal-clear, no one is to be allowed to leave, and the only thing we can allow in is food, If the infection should get worse which looks all too certain, it could soon prove fatal, That isn't my affair, Then contact your superiors, Look here, blind man, let me tell you something, either the two of

you get back to where you came from, or you'll be shot, Let's go, said the wife, there's nothing to be done, they're not to blame, they're terrified and are only obeying orders, I can't believe that this is happening, it's against all the rules of humanity, You'd better believe it, because the truth couldn't be clearer, Are you two still there, I'm going to count up to three and if they're not out of my sight by then, they can be sure they won't get back, ooone, twooo, threee, that's it, he was as good as his word, and turning to the soldiers, Even if it were my own brother, he did not explain to whom he was referring, whether it was to the man who had come to request medicines or to the other fellow with the infected leg. Inside, the wounded man wanted to know if they were going to supply them with medicines, How do you know I went to ask for supplies, asked the doctor, I guessed as much, after all, you are a doctor, I'm very sorry, Does that mean there will be no medicines, Yes, So, that's that.

The food had been carefully calculated for five people. There were bottles of milk and biscuits, but whoever had prepared their rations had forgotten to provide any glasses, nor were there any plates, or cutlery, these would probably come with the lunch. The doctor's wife went to give the wounded man something to drink, but he vomited. The taxi-driver complained that he did not like milk, he asked if he could have coffee. Some, after having eaten, went back to bed, the first blind man took his wife to visit the various places, they were the only two to leave the ward. The pharmacist's assistant asked to be allowed to speak to the doctor, he wanted the doctor to tell him if he had formed any opinion about their illness, I don't believe this can strictly be called an illness, the doctor started to explain, and then with much simplification, he summed up what he had researched in his reference books before becoming blind. Several beds further on, the taxi-driver was listening attentively, and when the doctor had finished his report, he shouted down the ward, I'll bet what happened is that the channels that go from the eyes to the brain got congested, Stupid fool, growled the pharmacist's assistant with indignation, Who knows, the doctor could not resist a smile, in truth the eyes are nothing more than lenses, it is the brain that actually does the seeing, just as an image appears on the film, and if the channels did get blocked up, as that man suggested, it's the same as a carburetor, if the fuel can't reach it, the engine does not work and the car won't go, as simple as that, as you can see, the doctor told the pharmacist's assistant, And how much longer, doctor, do you think we're going to be kept here, asked the hotel maid, At least for as long as we are unable to see, And how long will that be, Frankly, I don't think anyone knows, it's either something that will pass or it might go on for ever, How I'd love to know. The maid sighed and after several moments, I'd also like to know what happened to that girl, What girl, asked the pharmacist's assistant, That girl from the hotel, what a shock she gave me, there in the middle of the room, as naked as the day she was born, wearing nothing but a pair of dark glasses, and screaming that she was blind, she's probably the one who infected me. The doctor's wife looked, saw the girl slowly remove her dark glasses, hiding her movements, then put them under her pillow, while asking the boy with the squint, Would you like another biscuit, For the first time since she had arrived there, the doctor's wife felt as if she were behind a microscope and

observing the behaviour of a number of human beings who did not even suspect her presence, and this suddenly struck her as being contemptible and obscene. I have no right to look if the others cannot see me, she thought to herself. With a shaky hand, the girl applied a few eye-drops. This would always allow her to say that these were not tears running from her eyes.

Hours later, when the loudspeaker announced that they should come and collect their lunch, the first blind man and the taxi-driver offered to go on this mission for which eyes were not essential, it was enough to be able to touch. The containers were some distance from the door that connected the hallway to the corridors, to find them they had to go down on all fours, sweeping the floor ahead with one arm outstretched, while the other served as a third paw, and if they had no difficulty in returning to the ward, it was because the doctor's wife had come up with the idea, which she was at pains to justify from personal experience, of tearing a blanket into strips, and using these to make an improvised rope, one end of which would remain attached to the outside handle of the door of the ward, while the other end would be tied in turn to the ankle of whoever had to go to fetch their food. The two men went off, the plates and cutlery arrived, but the portions were still only for five, in all likelihood the sergeant in charge of the patrol was unaware that there were six more blind people there, since once outside the entrance, even when paying attention to what might be happening behind the main door, in the shadows of the hallway, it was only by chance that anyone could be seen passing from one wing to another. The taxi-driver offered to go and demand the missing portions of food, and he went alone, he had no wish to be accompanied, We're not five, there are eleven of us, he shouted at the soldiers, and the same sergeant replied from the other side, Save your breath, there are many more to come yet, he said it in a tone of voice that must have seemed derisive to the taxi-driver, if we take into account the words spoken by the latter when he returned to the ward, It was as if he were making fun of me. They shared out the food, five portions divided by ten, since the wounded man was still refusing to eat, all he asked for was some water, and he begged them to moisten his lips. His skin was burning hot. And since he could not bear the contact and weight of the blanket on the wound for very long, he uncovered his leg from time to time, but the cold air in the ward soon obliged him to cover up again, and this went on for hours. He would moan at regular intervals with what sounded like a stifled gasp, as if the constant and persistent pain had suddenly got worse before he could get it under control.

In the middle of the afternoon, three more blind people arrived, expelled from the other wing. One was an employee from the surgery, whom the doctor's wife recognised at once, and the others, as destiny had decreed, were the man who had been with the girl with dark glasses in the hotel and the ill-mannered policeman who had taken her home. No sooner had they reached their beds and seated themselves, than the employee from the surgery began weeping in despair, the two men said nothing, as if still unable to grasp what had happened to them. Suddenly, from the street, came the cries of people shouting, orders being given in a booming voice, a rebellious uproar. The blind internees

all turned their heads in the direction of the door and waited. They could not see, but knew what was about to happen within the next few minutes. The doctor's wife, seated on the bed beside her husband, said in a low voice, It had to be, the promised hell is about to begin. He squeezed her hand and murmured, Don't move, from now on there is nothing you can do. The shouting had died down, now a confusion of sounds was coming from the hallway, these were the blind, driven like sheep, bumping into each other, crammed together in the doorways, some lost their sense of direction and ended up in other wards, but the majority, stumbling along, huddled into groups or dispersed one by one, desperately waving their hands in the air like people drowning, burst into the ward in a whirlwind, as if being pushed from the outside by a bulldozer. A number of them fell and were trampled underfoot. Confined in the narrow aisles, the new arrivals gradually began filling the spaces between the beds, and here, like a ship caught in a storm that has finally managed to reach port, they took possession of their berths, in this case their beds, insisting that there was no room for anyone else, and that latecomers should find themselves a place elsewhere. From the far end, the doctor shouted that there were other wards, but the few who remained without a bed were frightened of getting lost in the labyrinth of rooms, corridors, closed doors, stairways they might only discover at the last minute. Finally they realised they could not stay there and, struggling to find the door by which they had entered, they ventured forth into the unknown. As if searching for one last safe refuge, the five blind internees in the second group had managed to occupy the beds, which, between them and those in the first group, had remained empty. Only the wounded man remained isolated, without protection, on bed fourteen on the left-hand side.

A quarter of an hour later, apart from some weeping and wailing, the discreet sounds of people settling down, calm rather than peace of mind was restored in the ward. All the beds were now occupied. The evening was drawing in, the dim lamps seemed to gain strength. Then they heard the abrupt voice of the loudspeaker. As on the first day, instructions were repeated as to how the wards should be maintained and the rules the internees should obey, The Government regrets having to enforce to the letter what it considers its right and duty, to protect the population with all the means at its disposal during this present crisis, etc., etc. When the voice stopped, an indignant chorus of protests broke out, We're locked up here, We're all going to die in here, This isn't right, Where are the doctors we were promised, this was something new, the authorities had promised doctors, medical assistance, perhaps even a complete cure. The doctor did not say that if they were in need of a doctor he was there at their disposal. He would never say that again. His hands alone are not enough for a doctor, a doctor cures with medicines, drugs, chemical compounds and combinations of this and that, and here there is no trace of any such materials, nor any hope of getting them. He did not even have the sight of his eyes to notice any sickly pallor, to observe any reddening of the peripheric circulation, how often, without any need for closer examination, these external signs proved to be as useful as an entire clinical history, or the colouring of mucus and pigmentation, with every probability of coming up with the right diagnosis, You won't

escape this one. Since the nearby beds were all occupied, his wife could no longer keep him informed of what was happening, but he sensed the tense, uneasy atmosphere, bordering on open conflict, that had been created with the arrival of the latest group of internees. The very air in the ward seemed to have become heavier, emitting strong lingering odours, with sudden wafts that were simply nauseating. What will this place be like within a week, he asked himself, and it horrified him to think that in a week's time, they would still be confined here. Assuming there won't be any problems with food supplies, and who can be sure there isn't already a shortage, I doubt, for example, whether those outside have any idea from one minute to the next, how many of us are interned here, the question is how they will solve the matter of hygiene, I'm not referring to how we shall keep ourselves clean, struck blind only a few days ago and without anyone to help us, or whether the showers will work and for how long, I'm referring to the rest, to all the other likely problems, for if the lavatories should get blocked, even one of them, this place would be transformed into a sewer. He rubbed his face with his hands, he could feel the roughness of his beard after three days without shaving, It's preferable like this, I hope they won't have the unfortunate idea of sending us razor blades and scissors. He had everything necessary for shaving in his suitcase, but was conscious of the fact that it would be a mistake to try, And where, where, not here in the ward, among all these people, true my wife could shave me, but it would not be long before the others got wind of it and expressed surprise that there should be someone here capable of offering these services, and there inside, in the showers, such confusion, dear God, how we miss having our sight, to be able to see, to see, even if they were only faint shadows, to stand before the mirror, see a dark diffused patch and be able to say, That's my face, anything that has light does not belong to me.

The complaints subsided little by little, someone from one of the other wards came to ask if there was any food left over and the taxi-driver was quick to reply, Not a crumb, and the pharmacist's assistant to show some good will, mitigated the peremptory refusal, There might be more to come. But nothing would come. Darkness fell. From outside came neither food nor words. Cries could be heard coming from the adjoining ward, then there was silence, if anyone was weeping they did so very quietly, the weeping did not penetrate the walls. The doctor's wife went to see how the injured man was faring, It's me, she said, carefully raising the blanket. His leg presented a terrifying sight, completely swollen from the thigh down, and the wound, a black circle with bloody purplish blotches, had got much larger, as if the flesh had been stretched from inside. It gave off a stench that was both fetid and slightly sweet. How are you feeling, the doctor's wife asked him, Thanks for coming, Tell me how you're feeling, Bad, Are you in pain, Yes and no, What do you mean, It hurts, but it's as if the leg were no longer mine, as if it were separated from my body, I can't explain, it's a strange feeling, as if I were lying here watching my leg hurt me, That's because you're feverish, Probably, Now try to get some sleep. The doctor's wife placed her hand on his forehead, then made to withdraw, but before she could even wish him good-night, the invalid grabbed her by the arm and drew her towards him obliging her to get close to his face, I know you can see, he said in a low

voice. The doctor's wife trembled with surprise and murmured, You're wrong, whatever put such an idea into your head, I see as much as anybody here, Don't try to deceive me, I know very well that you can see, but don't worry, I won't breathe a word to anyone, Sleep, sleep, Don't you trust me, Of course, I do, Don't you trust the word of a thief, I said I trusted you. Then why don't you tell me the truth, We'll talk tomorrow, now go to sleep, Yes, tomorrow, if I get that far, We mustn't think the worst, I do, or perhaps it's the fever thinking for me. The doctor's wife rejoined her husband and whispered in his ear, the wound looks awful, could it be gangrene, It seems unlikely in such a short time, Whatever it is, he's in a bad way, And those of us who are cooped up here, said the doctor in a deliberately loud voice, as if being struck blind were not enough, we might just as well have our hands and feet tied. From bed fourteen, left-hand side, the invalid replied, No one is going to tie me up, doctor.

The hours passed, one by one, the blind internees had fallen asleep. Some had covered their heads with a blanket, as if anxious that a pitch-black darkness, a real one, might extinguish once and for all the dim suns that their eyes had become. The three lamps suspended from the high ceiling, out of arm's reach, cast a dull, yellowish light over the beds, a light incapable of even creating shadows. Forty persons were sleeping or desperately trying to get to sleep, some were sighing and murmuring in their dreams, perhaps in their dream they could see what they were dreaming, perhaps they were saying to themselves, If this is a dream, I don't want to wake up. All their watches had stopped, either they had forgotten to wind them or had decided it was pointless, only that of the doctor's wife was still working. It was after three in the morning. Further along, very slowly, resting on his elbows, the thief raised his body into a sitting position. He had no feeling in his leg, nothing except the pain, the rest had ceased to belong to him. His knee was quite stiff. He rolled his body over on to the side of his healthy leg, which he allowed to hang out of the bed, then with both hands under his thigh, he tried to move his injured leg in the same direction. Like a pack of wolves suddenly roused, the pain went through his entire body, before returning to the dark crater from which it came. Resting on his hands, he gradually dragged his body across the mattress in the direction of the aisle. When he reached the rail at the foot of the bed, he had to rest. He was gasping for breath as if he were suffering from asthma, his head swayed on his shoulders, he could barely keep it upright. After several minutes, his breathing became more regular and he got slowly to his feet, putting his weight on his good leg. He knew that the other one would be no good to him, that he would have to drag it behind him wherever he went. He suddenly felt dizzy, an irrepressible shiver went through his body, the cold and fever made his teeth chatter. Supporting himself on the metal frames of the beds, passing from one to the other as if along a chain, he slowly advanced between the sleeping bodies. He dragged his injured leg like a bag. No one noticed him, no one asked, Where are you going at this hour, had anyone done so, he knew what he would reply, I'm off for a pee, he would say, he didn't want the doctor's wife to call out to him, she was someone he could not deceive or lie to, he would have to tell her what was on his mind, I can't go on rotting away in this hole, I realise that your husband has done everything he

could to help me, but when I had to steal a car I wouldn't go and ask someone else to steal it for me, this is much the same, I'm the one who has to go, when they see me in this state they'll recognise at once that I'm in a bad way, put me in an ambulance and take me to a hospital, there must be hospitals just for the blind, one more won't make any difference, they'll treat my wound, cure me, I've heard that's what they do to those condemned to death, if they've got appendicitis they operate first and execute them afterwards, so that they die healthy, as far as I'm concerned, if they want, they can bring me back here, I don't mind. He advanced further, clenching his teeth to suppress any moaning, but he could not resist an anguished sob when, on reaching the end of the row, he lost his balance. He had miscounted the beds, he thought there was one more and came up against a void. Lying on the floor, he did not stir until he was certain that no one had woken up with the din made by his fall. Then he realised that this position was perfect for a blind person, if he were to advance on all fours he would find the way more easily. He dragged himself along until he reached the hallway, there he paused to consider how he should proceed, whether it would be better to call from the door or go up to the gate, taking advantage of the rope that had served as a handrail and almost certainly was still there. He knew full well that if he were to call for help from there, they would immediately order him to go back, but the alternative of having only a swaying rope as his support, after what he had suffered, notwithstanding the solid support of the beds, made him somewhat hesitant. After some minutes, he thought he had found the solution. I'll go on all fours, he thought, keeping under the rope, and from time to time I'll raise my hand to see whether I'm on the right track, this is just like stealing a car, ways and means can always be found. Suddenly, taking him by surprise, his conscience awoke and censured him bitterly for having allowed himself to steal a car from an unfortunate blind man. The fact that I'm in this situation now, he reasoned, isn't because I stole his car, it's because I accompanied him home, that was my big mistake. His conscience was in no mood for casuistic discussions, his reasons were simple and clear, A blind man is sacred, you don't steal from a blind man. Technically speaking, I didn't rob him, he wasn't carrying the car in his pocket, nor did I hold a gun to his head, the accused protested in his defence, Forget the sophisms, muttered his conscience, and get on your way.

The cold dawn air cooled his face. How well one breathes out here, he thought to himself. He had the impression that his leg was much less painful, but this did not surprise him, sometime before, and more than once, the same thing had happened. He was now outside the main door, he would soon be at the steps, That's going to be the most awkward bit, he thought, going down the steps head first. He raised one arm to check that the rope was there, and continued on. Just as he had foreseen, it was not easy to get from one step to the next, especially because of his leg which was no help to him, and the proof was not long in coming, when, in the middle of the steps, one of his hands having slipped, his body lurched to one side and was dragged along by the dead weight of his wretched leg. The pain came back instantly, as if someone were sawing, drilling, and hammering the wound, and even he was at a loss to explain how he prevented himself from crying out. For several long minutes, he remained prostrate, face down on

the ground. A rapid gust of wind at ground level, left him shivering. He was wearing nothing but a shirt and his underpants. The wound was pressed against the ground, and he thought, It might get infected, a foolish thought, he was forgetting that he had been dragging his leg along the ground all the way from the ward, Well, it doesn't matter, they'll treat it before it turns infectious, he thought afterwards, to put his mind at rest, and he turned sideways to reach the rope more easily. He did not find it right away. He forgot that he had ended up in a vertical position in relation to the rope when he had rolled down the steps, but instinct told him that he should stay put. Then his reasoning guided him as he moved into a sitting position and then slowly back until his haunches made contact with the first step, and with a triumphant sense of victory he clutched the rough cord in his raised hand. Probably it was this same feeling that led him to discover almost immediately, a way of moving without his wound rubbing on the ground, by turning his back towards the main gate and sitting up and using his arms like crutches, as cripples used to do, he eased his seated body along in tiny stages. Backwards, yes, because in this case as in others, pulling was much easier than pushing. In this way, his leg suffered less, besides which the gentle slope of the forecourt going down towards the gate was a great help. As for the rope, he was in no danger of losing it, he was almost touching it with his head. He wondered whether he would have much further to go before reaching the main gate, getting there on foot, better still on two feet was not the same as advancing backwards half a hand's-breadth inch by inch. Forgetting for an instant that he was blind, he turned his head as if to confirm how far he still had to go and found himself confronted by the same impenetrable whiteness. Could it be night, could it be day, he asked himself, well if it were day they would already have spotted me, besides, they had only delivered breakfast and that was many hours ago. He was surprised to discover the speed and accuracy of his reasoning and how logical he could be, he saw himself in a different light, a new man, and were it not for this damn leg he would swear he had never felt so well in his entire life. His lower back came up against the metal plate at the bottom of the main gate. He had arrived. Huddled inside the sentry box to protect himself from the cold, the guard on duty thought he had heard faint noises he could not identify, in any case he did not think they could have come from inside, it must have been a sudden rustling of the trees, a branch the wind had caused to brush against the railings. These were followed by another noise, but this time it was different, a bang, the sound of crashing to be more precise, which could not have been caused by the wind. Nervously the guard came out of his sentry box, his finger on the trigger of his automatic rifle, and looked towards the main gate. He could not see anything. The noise, however, was back, louder, as if someone were scratching their fingernails on a rough surface. The metal plate on the gate, he thought to himself. He was about to head for the field tent where the sergeant was sleeping, but held back at the thought that if he raised a false alarm he would be given an earful, sergeants do not like being disturbed when they are sleeping, even when there is some good reason. He looked back at the main gate and waited in a state of tension. Very slowly, between two vertical iron bars, like a ghost, a white face began to appear. The face of a blind man. Fear made the soldier's blood freeze, and fear drove him to aim his weapon and release a blast of gunfire at close range.

The noise of the blast immediately brought the soldiers, half dressed, from their tents. These were the soldiers from the detachment entrusted with guarding the mental asylum and its inmates. The sergeant was already on the scene, What the hell is going on, A blind man, a blind man, stuttered the soldier, Where, He was there and he pointed at the main gate with the butt of his weapon, I can see nothing there, He was there, I saw him. The soldiers had finished getting into their gear and were waiting in line, their rifles at the ready. Switch on the floodlight, the sergeant ordered. One of the soldiers got up on to the platform of the vehicle. Seconds later the blinding rays lit up the main gate and the front of the building. There's no one there, you fool, said the sergeant, and he was just about to deliver a few more choice insults in the same vein when he saw spreading out from under the gate, in that dazzling glare, a black puddle. You've finished him off, he said. Then, remembering the strict orders they had been given, he yelled, Get back, this is infectious. The soldiers drew back, terrified, but continued to watch the pool of blood that was slowly spreading in the gaps between the small cobblestones in the path. Do you think the man's dead, asked the sergeant, He must be, the shot struck him right in the face, replied the soldier, now pleased with the obvious demonstration of the accuracy of his aim. At that moment, another soldier shouted nervously, Sergeant, sergeant, look over there. Standing at the top of the steps, lit up by the white light coming from the searchlight, a number of blind internees could be seen, more than ten of them, Stay where you are, bellowed the sergeant, if you take another step, I'll blast the lot of you. At the windows of the buildings opposite, several people, woken up by the noise of gunshots, were looking out in terror. Then the sergeant shouted, Four of you come and fetch the body. Because they could neither see nor count, six blind men came forward. I said four, the sergeant bawled hysterically. The blind internees touched each other, then touched again, and two of them stayed behind. Holding on to the rope, the others began moving forward.

We must see if there's a spade or shovel or whatever around, something that can be used to dig, said the doctor. It was morning, with much effort they had brought the corpse into the inner courtyard, placed it on the ground amongst the litter and the dead leaves from the trees. Now they had to bury it. Only the doctor's wife knew the hideous state of the dead man's body, the face and skull blown to smithereens by the gunshots, three holes where bullets had penetrated the neck and the region of the breastbone. She also knew that in the entire building there was nothing that could be used to dig a grave. She had searched the parts of the asylum to which they had been confined and had found nothing apart from an iron bar. It would help but was not enough. And through the closed windows of the corridor that ran the full length of the wing reserved for those suspected of being infected, lower down on this side of the wall, she had seen the terrified faces of the people awaiting their turn, that inevitable moment when they would have to say to the others, I've gone blind, or when, if they were to try to conceal what had happened, some clumsy gesture might betray them, a movement of their head in search of shade, an unjustified stumble into someone sighted. All this the doctor also knew, what he had said was part of the deception they had both concocted, so that now his wife could say, And suppose we were to ask the soldiers to throw a shovel over the wall. A good idea, let's try, and everyone was agreed, only the girl with dark glasses expressed no opinion about this question of finding a spade or shovel, the only sounds coming from her meanwhile were tears and wailing, It was my fault, she sobbed, and it was true, no one could deny it, but it is also true, if this brings her any consolation, that if, before every action, we were to begin by weighing up the consequences, thinking about them in earnest, first the immediate consequences, then the probable, then the possible, then the imaginable ones, we should never move beyond the point where our first thought brought us to a halt. The good and the evil resulting from our words and deeds go on apportioning themselves, one assumes in a reasonably uniform and balanced way, throughout all the days to follow, including those endless days, when we shall not be here to find out, to congratulate ourselves or ask for pardon, indeed there are those who claim that this is the much-talked-of immortality, Possibly, but this man is dead and must be buried. Therefore the doctor and his wife went off to parley, the disconsolate girl with dark glasses said she was coming with them. Pricked by her conscience. No sooner did they appear at the main entrance than a soldier shouted, Halt, and as if afraid that this verbal command, however vigorous, might not be heeded, he fired into the air. Terrified, they retreated into the shadows of the hallway, behind the thick wooden panels of the open door. Then the doctor's wife advanced alone, from where she was standing she could watch the soldier's movements and take refuge in time, if necessary. We have nothing with which to bury the dead man, she said, we need a spade. At the main gate, but on the other side from where the blind man had fallen, another soldier appeared. He was a sergeant, but not the same one as before, What do you want, he shouted, We need a shovel or spade. There is no such thing here, on your way. We must bury the corpse, Don't bother about any burial, leave it there to rot, If we simply leave it lying there, the air will be infected, Then let it be infected and much good may it do you, Air circulates and moves around as much here as there. The relevance of her argument

forced the soldier to reflect. He had come to replace the other sergeant, who had gone blind and been taken without delay to the quarters where the sick belonging to the army were interned. Needless to say, the air force and navy also had their own installations, but less extensive or important, the personnel of both forces being less numerous. The woman is right, reflected the sergeant, in a situation like this there is no doubt that one cannot be careful enough. As a safety measure, two soldiers equipped with gas masks, had already poured two large bottles of ammonia over the pool of blood, and the lingering fumes still brought tears to the soldiers' eyes and a stinging sensation to their throats and nostrils. The sergeant finally declared. I'll see what can be done, And what about our food, asked the doctor's wife, taking advantage of this opportunity to remind him, The food still hasn't arrived, In our wing alone there are more than fifty people, we're hungry, what you're sending us simply isn't enough, Supplying food is not the army's responsibility, Someone ought to be dealing with this problem, the Government undertook to feed us, Get back inside, I don't want to see anyone at this door, What about the spade, the doctor's wife insisted, but the sergeant had already gone. It was mid-morning when a voice came over the loudspeaker in the ward, Attention, attention, the internees brightened up, they thought this was an announcement about their food, but no, it was about the spade, Someone should come and fetch it, but not in a group, one person only should come forward, I'll go, for I've already spoken to them, said the doctor's wife. The moment she went through the main entrance door, she saw the spade. From the position and distance to where it had landed, closer to the gate than the steps, it must have been thrown over the fence, I mustn't forget that I'm supposed to be blind, the doctor's wife thought, Where is it, she asked, Go down the stairs and I'll guide you, replied the sergeant, you're doing fine, now keep going in the same direction, like so, like so, stop, turn slightly to the right, no, to the left, less, less than that, now forward, so long as you keep going, you'll come right up against it, shit, I told you not to change direction, cold, cold, you're getting warmer again, warmer still, right, now take a half turn and I'll guide you from there, I don't want you going round and round in circles and ending up at the gate, Don't you worry, she thought, from here I'll make straight for the door, after all, what does it matter, even if you were to suspect that I'm not blind, what do I care, you won't be coming in here to take me away. She slung the spade over her shoulder like a gravedigger on his way to work, and walked in the direction of the door without faltering for a moment, Did you see that, sergeant, exclaimed one of the soldiers, you would think she could see. The blind learn quickly how to find their way around, the sergeant explained confidently.

It was hard work digging a grave. The soil was hard, trampled down, there were tree roots just below the surface. The taxi-driver, the two policemen and the first blind man took it in turns to dig. Confronted by death, what is expected of nature is that rancour should lose its force and poison, it is true that people say that past hatreds die hard, and of this there is ample proof in literature and life, but the feeling here, deep down, as it were, was not hatred and, in no sense old, for how does the theft of a car compare with the life of the man who stole it, and especially given the miserable state of his corpse, for

one does not need eyes to know that this face has neither nose nor mouth. They were unable to dig any deeper than about three feet. Had the dead man been fat, his belly would have been sticking out above ground level, but the thief was skinny, a real bag of bones, even skinnier after the fasting of recent days, the grave was big enough for two corpses his size. There were no prayers for the dead. We could have put a cross there, the girl with dark glasses reminded them, she spoke from remorse, but as far as anyone there was aware while alive, the deceased had never given a thought to God or religion, best to say nothing, if any other attitude is justified in the face of death, besides, bear in mind that making a cross is much less easy than it may seem, not to mention the little time it would last with all these blind people around who cannot see where they are treading. They returned to the ward. In the busier places, so long as it is not completely open, like the yard, the blind no longer lose their way, with one arm held out in front and several fingers moving like the antennae of insects, they can find their way everywhere, it is even probable that in the more gifted of the blind there soon develops what is referred to as frontal vision. Take the doctor's wife, for example, it is quite extraordinary how she manages to get around and orient herself through this veritable maze of rooms, nooks and corridors, how she knows precisely where to turn the corner, how she can come to a halt before a door and open it without a moment's hesitation, how she has no need to count the beds before reaching her own. At this moment she is seated on her husband's bed, she is talking to him, as usual in a low voice, one can see these are educated people, and they always have something to say to each other, they are not like the other married couple, the first blind man and his wife, after those first emotional moments on being reunited, they have scarcely spoken, in all probability, their present unhappiness outweighs their past love, with time they will get used to this situation. The one person who is forever complaining of feeling hungry is the boy with the squint, despite the fact that the girl with the dark glasses has practically taken the food from her own mouth to give him. Many hours have passed since he last asked about his mummy, but no doubt he will start to miss her again after having eaten, when his body finds itself released from the brute selfishness that stems from the simple, but pressing need to sustain itself. Whether because of what happened early that morning, or for reasons beyond our ken, the sad truth is that no containers were delivered at breakfast time. It is nearly time for lunch, almost one o'clock on the watch the doctor's wife has just furtively consulted, therefore it is not surprising that the impatience of their gastric juices has driven some of the blind internees, both from this wing and from the other, to go and wait in the hallway for the food to arrive, and this for two excellent reasons, the public one, on the part of some, because in this way they would gain time, the private one, on the part of others, because, as everyone knows, first come first served. In all, there were about ten blind internees listening for the noise of the outer gate when it was opened, for the footsteps of the soldiers who would deliver those blessed containers. In their turn, fearful of suddenly being stricken by blindness if they were to come into close contact with the blind waiting in the hallway, the contaminated internees from the left wing dare not leave, but several of them are peering through a gap in the door, anxiously awaiting their turn. Time passed. Tired of waiting, some of the blind internees had sat down on the

ground, later two or three of them returned to their wards. Shortly afterwards, the unmistakable metallic creaking of the gate could be heard. In their excitement, the blind internees, pushing each other, began moving in the direction where, judging from the sounds outside, they imagined the door to be, but suddenly, overcome by a vague sense of disquiet that they would not have time to define or explain, they came to a halt and retreated in confusion, while the footsteps of the soldiers bringing their food and those of the armed escort accompanying them could already be heard quite clearly.

Still suffering from the shock of the tragic episode of the previous night, the soldiers who delivered the containers had agreed that they would not leave them within reach of the doors leading to the wings, as they had more or less done before, they would just dump them in the hallway, and retreat. Let them sort it out for themselves. The dazzle of the strong light from outside and the abrupt transition into the shadows of the hallway prevented them at first from seeing the group of blind internees. But they soon spotted them. Howling in terror, they dropped the containers on the ground and fled like madmen straight out of the door. The two soldiers forming the escort, who were waiting outside, reacted admirably in the face of danger. Mastering, God alone knows how and why, their legitimate fear, they advanced to the threshold of the door and emptied their magazines. The blind internees fell one on top of the other, and, as they fell, their bodies were still being riddled with bullets which was a sheer waste of ammunition, it all happened so incredibly slowly, one body, then another, it seemed they would never stop falling, as you sometimes see in films and on television. If we are still in an age when a soldier has to account for the bullets fired, they will swear on the flag that they acted in legitimate defence, as well as in defence of their unarmed comrades who were on a humanitarian mission and suddenly found themselves threatened and outnumbered by a group of blind internees. In a mad rush they retreated to the gate, covered by the rifles which the soldiers on patrol were pointing unsteadily between the railings as if the blind internees who had survived, were about to make a retaliatory attack. His face drained of colour, one of the soldiers who had fired, said nervously, You won't get me going back in there at any price. From one moment to the next, on this same day, when evening was falling, at the hour of changing guard, he became one more blind man among the other blind men, what saved him was that he belonged to the army, otherwise he would have remained there along with the blind internees, the companions of those whom he had shot dead, and God knows what they might have done to him. The sergeant's only comment was, It would have been better to let them die of hunger, when the beast dies, the poison dies with it. As we know, others had often said and thought the same, happily, some precious remnant of concern for humanity prompted him to add, From now on, we shall leave the containers at the halfway point, let them come and fetch them, we'll keep them under surveillance, and at the slightest suspicious movement, we fire. He headed for the command post, switched on the microphone and, putting the words together as best he could, calling to mind words he remembered hearing on vaguely comparable occasions, he announced, The army regrets having been forced to repress with weapons a seditious movement responsible for creating a situation of imminent risk, for which the army was

neither directly nor indirectly to blame, and you are advised that from now on the internees will collect their food outside the building, and will suffer the consequences should there be any attempt to repeat the disruption that took place now and last night. He paused, uncertain how he should finish, he had forgotten his own words, he certainly had them, but could only repeat, We were not to blame, we were not to blame.

Inside the building, the blast of gunfire deafeningly echoing in the confined space of the hallway, had caused the utmost panic. At first it was thought that the soldiers were about to burst into the wards and shoot everything in sight, that the Government had changed its tactics, had opted for the wholesale liquidation of the internees, some crawled under their beds, others, in sheer terror, did not move, some might have thought it was better so, better no health than too little, if a person has to go, let it be quick. The first to react were the contaminated internees. They had started to flee when the shooting broke out, but then the silence encouraged them to go back, and once again they headed for the door leading into the hallway. They saw the bodies lying in a heap, the blood wending its way sinuously on the tiled floor where it slowly spread, as if it were a living thing, and then the containers with food. Hunger drove them on, there stood that much desired sustenance, true it was intended for the blind, their own food was still on its way, in accordance with the regulations, but who cares about the regulations, no one can see us, the candle that lights the way burns brightest, as the ancients have continuously reminded us throughout the ages, and the ancients know about these things. Their hunger, however, had the strength only to take them three steps forward, reason intervened and warned them that for anybody imprudent enough to advance there was danger lurking in those lifeless bodies, above all, in that blood, who could tell what vapours, what emanations, what poisonous miasmas might not already be oozing forth from the open wounds of the corpses. They're dead, they can't do any harm, someone remarked, the intention was to reassure himself and others, but his words made matters worse, it was true that these blind internees were dead, that they could not move, see, could neither stir nor breathe, but who can say that this white blindness is not some spiritual malaise, and if we assume this to be the case, then the spirits of those blind casualties have never been as free as they are now, released from their bodies, and therefore free to do whatever they like, above all, to do evil, which, as everyone knows, has always been the easiest thing to do. But the containers of food, standing there exposed, immediately attracted their attention, such are the demands of the stomach, they heeded nothing even when it is for their own good. From one of the containers leaked a white liquid which was slowly spreading towards the pool of blood, to all appearances it was milk, the colour unmistakable. More courageous, or simply more fatalistic, the distinction is not always easy to make, two of the contaminated internees stepped forward, and they were just about to lay their greedy hands on the first container when a group of blind internees appeared in the doorway leading to the other wing. The imagination can play such tricks, especially in morbid circumstances such as these, that for these two men who had gone on a foray, it was as if the dead had suddenly risen from the ground, as blind as before, no doubt, but much more dangerous, for almost

certainly filled by a spirit of revenge. They prudently backed away in silence towards the entrance to their wing, perhaps the blind internees were beginning to take care of the corpses as charity and respect decreed, or, if not, they might leave behind without noticing one of the containers, however small, in fact there were not all that many contaminated internees there, perhaps the best solution would be to ask them, Please, take pity on us, at least leave a small container for us, after what has happened it is most likely that no more food will be delivered today. The blind moved as one would expect of the blind, groping their way, stumbling, dragging their feet, yet as if organised, they knew how to distribute tasks efficiently, some of them splashing about in the sticky blood and milk, began at once to withdraw and transport the corpses to the yard, others dealt with the eight containers, one by one, that had been dumped by the soldiers. Among the blind internees there was a woman who gave the impression of being everywhere at the same time, helping to load, acting as if she were guiding the men, something that was obviously impossible for a blind woman, and, whether by chance or intentionally, more than once she turned her head towards the wing where the contaminated were interned, as if she could see them or sense their presence. In a short time the hallway was empty, with no other traces than the huge bloodstain, and another small one alongside, white, from the milk that had spilled, apart from these only criss-crossing footprints in red or simply wet. Resigned, the contaminated internees closed the door and went in search of crumbs, they were so downhearted that one of them was on the point of saying, and this shows just how desperate they were, If we really have to end up blind, if that is our fate, we might as well move over into the other wing now, there at least we'll have something to eat, Perhaps the soldiers will still bring our rations, someone suggested, Have you ever been in the army, another asked him, No, Just as I thought.

Bearing in mind that the dead belonged to the one as much as the other, the occupants of the first and second wards gathered together in order to decide whether they should eat first and then bury the corpses, or the other way round. No one seemed interested in knowing who had died. Five of them had installed themselves in the second ward, difficult to say if they had already known each other, or if they did not, if they had the time and inclination to introduce themselves to each other and unburden their hearts. The doctor's wife could not remember having seen them when they arrived. The remaining four, yes, these she recognised, they had slept with her, in a manner of speaking, under the same roof, although this was all she knew about one of them, and how could she know more, a man with any self-respect does not go around discussing his private affairs with the first person he meets, such as having been in a hotel room where he made love to a girl with dark glasses, who, in her turn, if we mean her, has no idea that he has been interned here and that she is still so close to the man who was the cause of her seeing everything white. The taxi-driver and the two policemen were the other casualties, three robust fellows who could take care of themselves, whose professions meant, in different ways, looking after others, and in the end there they lie, cruelly mowed down in their prime and waiting for others to decide their fate. They will have to wait until those who survived have finished eating, not because of the usual

egoism of the living, but because someone sensibly remembered that to bury nine corpses in that hard soil and with only one spade was a chore that would take until dinner-time at least. And since it would not be admissible that the volunteers endowed with good will should work while the others stuffed their bellies, it was decided to leave the corpses until later. The food arrived in individual portions, therefore easy to share out, that's yours, and yours, until there was no more. But the anxiety of some of the less fair-minded blind internees came to complicate what in normal circumstances would have been so straightforward, and although a serene and impartial judgment cautions us to admit that the excesses that took place had some justification, we need only remember, for example, that no one could know, at the outset, whether there would be enough food for everyone. In fact, it is fairly clear that it is not easy to count blind people or to distribute rations without eyes capable of seeing either the rations or the people. Moreover, some of the inmates from the second ward, with more than reprehensible dishonesty, tried to give the impression that there were more of them than there actually were. As always, this is where the presence of the doctor's wife proved to be useful. A few timely words have always managed to resolve problems that a verbose speech would only make worse. No less ill-intentioned and perverse were those who not only tried, but actually succeeded in receiving double rations. The doctor's wife was aware of this abuse, but thought it wise to say nothing. She could not even bear to think of the consequences that would ensue if it were to be discovered that she was not blind, at the very least she would find herself at the beck and call of everyone, at worst, she might become the slave of some of them. The idea, aired at the outset, that someone should assume responsibility for each ward, might have helped, who knows? to solve these difficulties and others, alas, more serious, on condition however, that the authority of the person in charge, undeniably fragile, undeniably precarious, undeniably called into question at every moment, should be clearly exercised for the benefit of all and as such be acknowledged by the majority. Unless we succeed in this, she thought, we shall end up murdering one another in here. She promised herself that she would discuss these delicate matters with her husband and went on sharing out the rations.

Some out of indolence, others because they had a delicate stomach, had no inclination to go and practise grave-digging just after they had eaten. Because of his profession, the doctor felt more responsible than the others, and when he said without much enthusiasm, Let's go and bury the corpses, there was not a single volunteer. Stretched out on their beds, the blind internees were interested only in being left in peace to digest their food, some fell asleep immediately, hardly surprising, after the frightening experience they had been through, the body, even though poorly nourished, abandoned itself to the slow workings of digestive chemistry. Later, as evening was drawing in, when, because of the progressive waning of natural light, the dim lamps appeared to gain some strength, showing at the same time, weak as they were, the little purpose they served, the doctor, accompanied by his wife, persuaded two men from his ward to accompany them to the compound, even if only to balance out the work that had to be done and separate the corpses that were already stiff, once it had been decided

that each ward would bury its own dead. The advantage enjoyed by these blind men was what might be called the illusion of light. In fact, it made no difference to them whether it was day or night, the first light of dawn or the evening twilight, the silent hours of early morning or the bustling din of noon, these blind people were for ever surrounded by a resplendent whiteness, like the sun shining through mist. For the latter, blindness did not mean being plunged into banal darkness, but living inside a luminous halo. When the doctor let slip that they were going to separate the corpses, the first blind man, who was one of those who had agreed to help him, wanted to know how they would be able to recognise them, a logical question on the part of a blind man which left the doctor in some confusion. This time his wife thought it would be unwise to come to his assistance for fear of giving the game away. The doctor got out of the difficulty gracefully by the radical method of coming clean, that is to say, by acknowledging his mistake. People, he said, in the tone of voice of someone amused at his own expense, get so used to having eyes that they think they can use them when they no longer serve for anything, in fact, all we know is that there are four from our ward here, the taxi-driver, the two policemen, and one other who was with us, therefore the solution is to pick up four of these corpses at random, bury them with due respect, and in this way we fulfill our obligation. The first blind man agreed, his companion likewise, and once again, taking it in turn, they began digging graves. These helpers would never come to know, blind as they were, that, without exception, the corpses buried were precisely those of whom they had been speaking, nor need we mention the work done, seemingly at random, by the doctor, his hand guided by that of his wife, she would grab a leg or arm, and all he had to say was, This one. When they had already buried two corpses, there finally emerged from the ward, three men disposed to help, most likely they would have been less willing had someone told them that it was already the dead of night. Psychologically, even when a man is blind, we must acknowledge that there is a considerable difference between digging graves by the light of day and after the sun has gone down. The moment they were back in the ward, sweating, covered in earth, the sickly smell of decomposed flesh still in their nostrils, the voice over the loudspeaker repeated the usual instructions. There was no reference whatsoever to what had happened, no mention of gunfire or casualties shot at point-blank range. Warnings such as, To abandon the building without any authorisation will mean immediate death, or The internees will bury the corpses in the grounds without any formalities, now, thanks to the harsh experience of life, supreme mistress of all disciplines, these warnings took on real meaning, while the announcement that promised containers of food three times a day seemed grotesquely ironic or, worse, contemptuous. When the voice fell silent, the doctor, on his own, because he was getting to know every nook and cranny in the place, went to the door of the other ward to inform the inmates, We have buried our dead, Well, if you've buried some, you can bury the rest, replied a man's voice from within, The agreement was that each ward would bury its own dead, we counted four and buried them, That's fine, tomorrow we'll deal with those from here, said another masculine voice, and then in a different tone of voice, he asked, Has no more food turned up, No, replied the doctor, But the loudspeaker said three times a day, I doubt whether they are likely always to keep their promise, Then we'll have to

ration the food that might arrive, said a woman's voice, That seems a good idea, if you like, we can talk about it tomorrow, Agreed, said the woman. The doctor was already on the point of leaving when the voice of the first man to speak could be heard, Who's giving the orders here, He paused, expecting to be given an answer, and it came from the same feminine voice, Unless we organise ourselves in earnest, hunger and fear will take over here, it is shameful that we didn't go with the others to bury the dead, Why don't you go and do the burying since you're so clever and sure of yourself, I cannot go alone but I'm prepared to help, There's no point in arguing, intervened another masculine voice, we'll settle this first thing in the morning. The doctor sighed, life together was going to be difficult. He was already heading back to his ward when he felt a pressing need to relieve himself. At the spot where he found himself, he was not sure that he would be able to find the lavatories, but he decided to take a chance. He was hoping that someone would at least have remembered to leave there the toilet paper which had been delivered with the containers of food. He got lost twice on the way and was in some distress because he was beginning to feel desperate and just when he could hold back no longer, he was finally able to take down his trousers and crouch over the open latrine. The stench choked him. He had the impression of having stepped on some soft pulp, the excrement of someone who had missed the hole of the latrine or who had decided to relieve himself without any consideration for others. He tried to imagine what the place must look like, for him it was all white, luminous, resplendent, he had no way of knowing whether the walls and ground were white and he came to the absurd conclusion that the light and whiteness there were giving off the awful stench. We shall go mad with horror, he thought. Then he tried to clean himself but there was no paper. He ran his hand over the wall behind him, where he expected to find the rolls of toilet paper or nails, where in the absence of anything better, any old scraps of paper had been stuck up. Nothing. He felt unhappy, disconsolate, more unfortunate than he could bear, crushed there, protecting his trousers which were brushing against that disgusting floor, blind, blind, blind, and, unable to control himself, he began to weep quietly. Fumbling, he took a few steps and bumped into the opposite wall. He stretched out one arm, then the other, and finally found a door. He could hear the shuffling footsteps of someone who must also have been looking for the lavatories, and who kept tripping, Where the hell are they? the person was muttering in a neutral voice, as if deep down, he was not all that interested in finding out. He passed close to the toilets without realising there was someone there, but no matter, the situation did not degenerate into indecency, if it could be called that, a man caught in an embarrassing situation, his clothes in disarray, at the last minute, moved by a disconcerting sense of shame, the doctor had pulled up his trousers. Then he lowered them, when he thought he was alone, but not in time, he knew he was dirty, dirtier than he could ever remember having been in his life. There are many ways of becoming an animal, he thought, this is just the first of them. However, he could not really complain, he still had someone who did not mind cleaning him.

Lying on their beds, the blind internees waited for sleep to take pity on their misery. Discreetly, as if there was some danger that others might see this distressing sight, the

doctor's wife had helped her husband to clean himself as well as she could. There was now that sorrowful silence one finds in hospitals when the patients are asleep and suffer even as they sleep. Sitting up and alert, the doctor's wife looked at the beds, at the shadowy forms, the fixed pallor of a face, an arm that moved while dreaming. She wondered whether she would ever go blind like them, what inexplicable reasons had saved her from blindness so far. With a weary gesture, she raised her hands to draw back her hair, and thought, We're all going to stink to high heaven. At that moment sighs could be heard, moaning, tiny cries, muffled at first, sounds that seemed to be words, that ought to be words, but whose meaning got lost in the crescendo that transformed them into shouts and grunts and finally heavy, stertorous breathing. Someone protested at the far end of the ward. Pigs, they're like pigs. They were not pigs, only a blind man and a blind woman who probably knew nothing more about each other than this.

An empty belly wakes up early. Some of the blind internees opened their eyes when morning was still some way off, and in their case it was not so much because of hunger, but because their biological clock, or whatever you call it, was no longer working properly, they assumed it was daylight, then thought, I've overslept and soon realised that they were wrong, their fellow-inmates were snoring their heads off, there was no mistaking that. Now as we know from books, and even more so from personal experience, anyone who gets up early by inclination or has been forced to rise early out of necessity finds it intolerable that others should go on sleeping soundly, and with good reason in the case to which we are referring, for there is a marked difference between a blind person who is sleeping and a blind person who has opened his eyes to no purpose. These observations of a psychological nature, whose subtlety has no apparent relevance considering the extraordinary scale of the cataclysm which our narrative is struggling to relate, only serve to explain why all the blind internees were awake so early, some, as was said at the outset, were roused by the churning of their empty stomachs in need of food, others were dragged from their sleep by the nervous impatience of the early risers, who did not hesitate to make more noise than the inevitable and tolerable when people cohabit in barracks and wards. Here there are not only persons of discretion and good manners, but some real vulgarians who relieve themselves each morning by coughing up phlegm and passing wind without regard for anyone who might be present, and if truth be told, they behave just as badly for most of the day, making the atmosphere increasingly heavy, and there is nothing to be done, the only opening is the door, the windows cannot be reached they are so high.

Lying beside her husband, as close as possible given the narrowness of the bed, but also out of choice, how much it had cost them in the middle of the night to maintain some decorum, not to behave like those whom someone had referred to as pigs, the doctor's wife looked at her watch. It was twenty-three minutes past two. She took a closer look, saw that the second hand was not moving. She had forgotten to wind up the wretched watch, or wretched her, wretched me, for not even this simple task had she remembered to carry out after only three days of isolation. Unable to control herself, she burst into convulsive weeping, as if the worst of all disasters had suddenly befallen her. The doctor thought his wife had gone blind, that what he so greatly feared had finally happened, and, beside himself, was on the point of asking, Have you gone blind, when at the last minute he heard her whisper, No, no, it isn't that, it isn't that, and then in a drawn-out whisper, almost inaudible, both their heads under the blanket, How stupid of me, I forgot to wind my watch, and she went on sobbing, inconsolable. Getting up from her bed on the other side of the passageway, the girl with dark glasses moved in the direction of the sobbing with arms outstretched, You're upset, can I get you anything, she asked as she advanced, and touched the two bodies on the bed with her hands. Discretion demanded that she should withdraw immediately, and this certainly was the order that came from her brain, but her hands did not obey, they simply made more subtle contact, gently caressing the thick, warm blanket. Can I get you anything, the girl asked once more, and, by now she had removed her hands, raised them until they

became lost in that sterile whiteness, helpless. Still sobbing, the doctor's wife got out of bed, embraced the girl and said, It's nothing, I just suddenly felt sad, If you who are so strong are becoming disheartened, then there really is no salvation for us, complained the girl. Calmer now, the doctor's wife thought, looking straight at her, The signs of conjunctivitis have almost gone, what a pity I cannot tell her, she would be pleased. Yes, in all probability she would be pleased, although any such satisfaction would be absurd, not so much because the girl was blind, but since all the others there were blind as well, what good would it do her to have beautiful bright eyes such as these if there is no one to see them. The doctor's wife said, We all have our moments of weakness, just as well that we are still capable of weeping, tears are often our salvation, there are times when we would die if we did not weep, There is no salvation for us, the girl with dark glasses repeated, Who can tell, this blindness is not like any other, it might disappear as suddenly as it came, It will come too late for those who have died, We all have to die, But not to be killed and I have killed someone, Don't blame yourself, it was a question of circumstances, here we are all guilty and innocent, much worse was the behaviour of the soldiers who are here to protect us, and even they can invoke the greatest of all excuses, fear, What if the wretched fellow did fondle me, he would be alive right now, and my body would be no different from what it is now, Think no more about it, rest, try to sleep. She accompanied the girl to her bed, Come now, get into bed, You're very kind, said the girl, then lowering her voice, I don't know what to do, it's almost time for my period and I haven't brought any sanitary napkins, Don't worry, I have some. The hands of the girl with dark glasses searched for somewhere to hold on to, but it was the doctor's wife who gently held them in her own hands, Rest, rest. The girl closed her eyes, remained like that for a minute, she might have fallen asleep were it not for the quarrel that suddenly erupted, someone had gone to the lavatory and on his return found his bed occupied, no harm was meant, the other fellow had got up for the same reason, they had passed each other on the way, and obviously it did not occur to either of them to say, Take care not to get into the wrong bed when you come back. Standing there, the doctor's wife watched the two blind men who were arguing, she noticed they made no gestures, that they barely moved their bodies, having quickly learned that only their voice and hearing now served any purpose, true, they had their arms, that they could fight, grapple, come to blows, as the saying goes, but a bed swapped by mistake was not worth so much fuss, if only all life's deceptions were like this one, and all they had to do was to come to some agreement, Number two is mine, yours is number three, let that be understood once and for all, Were it not for the fact that we're blind this mix-up would never have happened, You're right, our problem is that we're blind. The doctor's wife said to her husband, The whole world is right here.

Not quite all of it. The food, for example, was there on the outside and taking ages to arrive. From both wards, some men had gone to station themselves in the hallway, waiting for orders to come over the loudspeaker. They kept shuffling their feet, nervous and impatient. They knew that they would have to go out to the forecourt to fetch the containers which the soldiers, fulfilling their promise, would leave in the area between

the main gate and the steps, and they feared that there might be some ploy or snare, How do we know that they won't start firing, After what they've done already, they're capable of anything, They are not to be trusted, You won't get me going out there, Nor me, Someone has to go if we want to eat, I don't know if it isn't better to die being shot than to die of hunger, I'm going, Me too, We don't all have to go, The soldiers might not like it, Or get worried and think we're trying to escape, that's probably why they shot the man with the injured leg, We've got to make up our minds, We can't be too careful, remember what happened yesterday, nine casualties no more no less, The soldiers were afraid of us, And I'm afraid of them, What I'd like to know is if they too go blind, Who's they, The soldiers, In my opinion they ought to be the first. They were all in agreement, yet without asking themselves why, and there was no one there to give them the one good reason, Because then they would not be able to aim their rifles. The time passed and passed, and the loudspeaker remained silent. Have you already tried to bury your dead, a blind man from the first ward asked for the want of something to say, Not yet, They're beginning to smell and infect everything around, Well let them infect everything and stink to high heaven, as far as I'm concerned, I've no intention of doing anything until I've eaten, as someone once said, first you eat then you wash the pan, That isn't the custom, your maxim is wrong, generally it is after burying their dead that the mourners eat and drink, With me it's the other way round. After a few minutes one of these blind men said, There's one thing that bothers me, What's that, How are we going to distribute the food, As we did before, we know how many we are, the rations are counted, everyone receives his share, it's the simplest and fairest way, But it didn't work, some internees were left without any food, And there were also those who got double rations, The distribution was badly organised, It will always be badly organised unless people show some respect and discipline, If only we had someone here who could see just a little, Well, he'd try coming up with some ruse in order to make sure he got the lion's share, As the saying goes, in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king, Forget about sayings, But this is not the same, Here not even the cross-eyed would be saved, As I see it, the best solution would be to share the food out in equal parts throughout the wards, then each internee can be self-sufficient, Who spoke, It was me, Who's me, Me, which ward are you from, From ward two, Who would have believed such cunning, since ward two has fewer patients such an arrangement would be to their advantage and they would get more to eat than us, since our ward is full, I was only trying to be helpful, the proverb also says that if the one who does the sharing out fails to get the better part, he's either a fool or a dullard, Shit, that's quite enough of proverbs, these sayings get on my nerves, What we should do is to take all the food to the refectory, each ward elects three of its inmates to do the sharing out, so that with six people counting there would be little danger of abuse and deception, And how are we to know that they are telling the truth when the others say how many there are in their ward, We're dealing with honest people, Is that a proverb too, No, that's me saying it, My dear fellow, I don't know about honest but we're certainly hungry.

As if it had been waiting all this time for the code word, some cue, an open sesame,

the voice finally came over the loudspeaker, Attention, attention, the internees may come and collect their food, but be careful, if anyone gets too close to the gate they will receive a preliminary warning, and unless they turn back immediately, the second warning will be a bullet. The blind internees advanced slowly, some, more confident, towards the right where they thought they would find the door, the others, less sure of their ability to get their bearings, preferred to slide along the wall, in this way there was no possibility of mistaking the way, when they reached the corner all they had to do was to follow the wall at a right angle and there they would find the door. The hectoring voice over the loudspeaker impatiently repeated the summons. The change of tone, unmistakable even for those who had no reason to be suspicious, terrified the blind internees. One of them declared, I'm not budging from here, what they want to do is to catch us outside and then kill us all, I'm not moving either, said another, Nor me, chipped in a third. They were frozen to the spot, undecided, some wanted to go, but fear was getting the better of all of them. The voice came again, Unless within the next three minutes someone appears to collect the containers, we shall take them away. This threat failed to overcome their fear, only pushed it into the innermost caverns of their mind, like hunted animals that await an opportunity to attack. Each one trying to hide behind the other, the blind internees moved fearfully out on to the landing at the top of the steps. They could not see that the containers were not alongside the guide rope where they expected to find them, for they were not to know that the soldiers, out of fear of being contaminated, had refused to go anywhere near the rope which the blind internees were holding on to. The food containers were stacked up together, more or less at the spot where the doctor's wife had collected the spade. Come forward, come forward, ordered the sergeant. In some confusion, the blind internees tried to get into a line so as to advance in orderly fashion, but the sergeant bellowed at them, You won't find the containers there, let go of the rope, let go of it, move over to the right, your right, your right, fools, you don't need eyes to know which side you have your right hand. The warning was given just in time, some of the blind internees who were punctilious in these matters, had interpreted the order literally, if it was on the right, logically that would mean on the right of the person speaking, therefore they were trying to pass under the rope to go in search of the containers which were God knows where. In different circumstances, this grotesque spectacle would have caused the most restrained spectator to burst into howls of laughter, it was too funny for words, some of the blind internees advancing on all fours, their faces practically touching the ground as if they were pigs, one arm outstretched in mid-air, while others, perhaps afraid that the white space, without a roof to protect them, would swallow them up, clung desperately to the rope and listened attentively, expecting to hear at any minute that first exclamation of triumph once the containers were discovered. The soldiers would have liked to aim their weapons and, without compunction, shoot down those imbeciles moving before their eyes like lame crabs, waving their unsteady pincers in search of their missing leg. They knew what had been said in the barracks that morning by the regimental commander, that the problem of these blind internees could be resolved only by physically wiping out the lot of them, those already there and those still to come, without any phoney humanitarian

considerations, his very words, just as one amputates a gangrenous limb in order to save the rest of the body, The rabies of a dead dog, he said, to illustrate the point, is cured by nature. For some of the soldiers, less sensitive to the beauties of figurative language, it was difficult to understand what a dog with rabies had to do with the blind, but the word of a regimental commander, once again figuratively speaking, is worth its weight in gold, no man rises to so high a rank in the army without being right in everything he thinks, says and does. A blind man had finally bumped into the containers and called out as he got hold of them, They're here, they're here, if this man were to recover his eyesight one day, he would certainly not announce the wonderful news with greater joy. Within seconds, the others had pounced on the containers, a confusion of arms and legs, each man pulling a container towards his side and claiming priority, I'll carry it, no, I will. Those who were still holding on to the rope began to feel nervous, they now had something else to fear, that they might be excluded on account of their idleness or cowardice, when the food was shared out, Ah, you men refused to get down on the ground with your arse in the air and risk the danger of being shot, so nothing to eat for you, remember the proverb, nothing ventured nothing gained. Persuaded by these sententious words, one of the blind men let go of the rope and went, with arms outstretched, in the direction of the uproar, They're not going to leave me out, but suddenly the voices fell silent and there was only the noise of people crawling on the ground, muffled interjections, a dispersed and confused mass of sounds coming from everywhere and nowhere. He paused, undecided, tried to go back to the security of the rope, but he had lost his sense of direction, there are no stars in his white sky, and what could now be heard was the sergeant's voice as it ordered those arguing over the containers to get back to the steps, for what he was saying could have been meant only for them, to arrive where you want to be, everything depends on where you are. There were no longer any blind internees holding on to the rope, all they had to do was to return the way they had come, and now they were waiting at the top of the steps for the others to arrive. The blind man who had lost his way did not dare to move from where he was. In a state of anguish, he let out a loud cry, Please, help me, unaware that the soldiers had their rifles trained on him as they waited for him to tread on that invisible line dividing life from death. Are you going to stay there all day, you blind bat, asked the sergeant, in a somewhat nervous voice, the truth being that he did not share the opinion of his commander, Who can guarantee that the same fate won't come knocking at the door tomorrow, as for the soldiers it is well known that they need only to be given an order and they kill, to be given another order and they die, You will shoot only when I say so, the sergeant shouted. These words made the blind man realise that his life was in danger. He fell to his knees and beseeched them, Please help me, tell me where I have to go, Keep on walking, blind man, keep on walking this way, a soldier called from beyond in a tone of false camaraderie, the blind man got up, took three paces, then suddenly came to another halt, the tense of the verb aroused his suspicion, keep on walking this way is not the same as keep going, keep on walking this way tells you that this way, this very way, in this direction, you will arrive where you are being summoned, only to come up against the bullet that will replace one form of blindness with another.

This initiative, which we might well describe as criminal, was taken by a soldier of disreputable character, whom the sergeant immediately rebuked with two sharp commands given successively, Halt, Half turn, followed by a severe call to order directed at this disobedient fellow, who to all appearances belonged to that class of people who are not to be trusted with a rifle. Encouraged by the sergeant's kind intervention, the blind internees who had reached the top of the steps suddenly made a tremendous racket which served as a magnetic pole for the blind man who had lost his way. Now more sure of himself, he advanced in a straight line, Keep on shouting, keep on shouting, he beseeched them, while the other blind internees applauded as if they were watching someone complete a long, dynamic but exhausting sprint. He was given a rapturous welcome, the least they could do, in the face of adversity, whether proven or foreseeable, you know who your friends are.

This camaraderie did not last long. Taking advantage of the uproar, some of the blind internees had sneaked off with a number of containers, as many as they could carry, a patently disloyal way of forestalling any hypothetical injustices in the distribution. Those of good faith, who are always to be found no matter what people may say, protested with indignation, that they couldn't live like this, If we cannot trust each other, where are we going to end up? some asked rhetorically, although with full justification, What these rogues are asking for is a good hiding, threatened others, they had not asked for any such thing, but everyone understood what those words meant, an inaccurate expression that can be tolerated only because it is so very apt. Already gathered in the hallway, the blind internees came to an agreement, this being the most practical way of resolving the first part of the difficult situation in which they found themselves, that they would distribute the remaining containers equally between the two wards, fortunately an even number, and set up a committee, also on an equal basis, to carry out an investigation with a view to recovering the missing, that is to say, stolen containers. They wasted some time in debate, as was becoming their habit, the before and the after, that is to say, whether they should eat first and then investigate, or the other way round, the prevailing opinion being that, taking into account all the hours of enforced fasting they had spent, it would be more convenient to start by satisfying their stomachs and then proceeding with their inquiries, And don't forget that you have to bury your dead, said someone from the first ward, We haven't killed them yet and you want us to bury them, replied one witty fellow, amusing himself with this play on words. Everyone laughed. However they were soon to discover that the culprits were not to be found in the wards. At the doors of both wards, waiting for their food to arrive, the blind internees claimed to have heard passing along the corridors people who seemed to be in a great hurry, but no one had entered the wards, much less carrying containers of food, that they could swear to. Someone remembered that the safest way of identifying these fellows would be if they were all to return to their respective beds, obviously those that remained unoccupied must belong to the thieves, so all they had to do was to wait until they returned from wherever they had been hiding and licking their chops and then pounce on them, so that they might learn to respect the sacred principle of collective property. To

proceed with this plan, however opportune and in keeping with a deep seated sense of justice, had one serious disadvantage insofar as it would mean postponing, no one could foresee for how long, that much desired breakfast, already gone cold. Let's eat first, suggested one of the blind men, and the majority agreed that it was better that they should eat first. Alas, only the little that had remained after that infamous theft. At this hour, in some hiding place amongst these old and dilapidated buildings, the thieves must be gorging themselves on double and triple rations that unexpectedly seemed to have improved, consisting of coffee with milk, cold in fact, biscuits and bread with margarine, while decent folk had to content themselves with two or three times less, and not even that. Outside the loudspeaker could be heard summoning the contagious to fetch their food rations, the sound also reached some of the internees in the first wing, as they were sadly chewing on water biscuits. One of the blind men, undoubtedly influenced by the unwholesome atmosphere left by the theft of food, had an idea, If we were to wait in the hallway, they would get the fright of their lives just to see us there, they might even drop the odd container, but the doctor said he did not think this would be right, it would be an injustice to punish those without blame. When they had all finished eating, the doctor's wife and the girl with dark glasses carried the cardboard containers into the yard, the empty flasks of milk and coffee, the paper cups, in a word, everything that could not be eaten. We must burn the rubbish, the doctor's wife then suggested, and get rid of these horrible flies.

Seated on their respective beds, the blind internees settled down to wait for the pack of thieves to return, Thieving dogs, that's what they are, commented a rough voice, unaware that he was responding to a reminiscence of someone who is not to blame for not knowing how to say things in any other manner. But the scoundrels did not appear, they must have suspected something, suspicions no doubt raised by some astute fellow amongst them like the one here who suggested giving them a good hiding. The minutes went by, several of the blind men had stretched out, some were already asleep. For this, my friends, is what it means to eat and sleep. All things considered, things could be worse. So long as they go on supplying us with food, for we cannot live without it, this is like being in a hotel. By contrast, what a torment it would be for a blind man out there in the city, yes, a real torment. Stumbling through the streets, everyone fleeing at the very sight of him, his family in a panic, terrified of approaching him, a mother's love, a child's love, a myth, they would probably treat me just as I am treated in this place, lock me up in a room and, if I was very lucky, leave a plate outside the door. Looking at the situation objectively, without preconceptions or resentments which always cloud our reasoning, it had to be acknowledged that the authorities had shown great vision when they decided to unite the blind with the blind, each with his own, which is a wise rule for those who have to live together, like lepers, and there can be no doubt that the doctor there at the far end of the ward is right when he says that we must organise ourselves, the question, in fact, is one of organisation, first the food, then the organisation, both are indispensable for life, to choose a number of reliable men and women and put them in charge, to establish approved rules for our co-existence here in the ward, simple things, like

sweeping the floor, tidying up and washing, we've nothing to complain about there, they have even provided us with soap and detergent, making sure our beds are always made, the important thing is not to lose our self-respect, to avoid any conflict with the soldiers who are only doing their duty by keeping us under guard, we do not want any more casualties, asking around if there is anyone willing to entertain us in the evening with stories, fables, anecdotes, whatever, just think how fortunate we would be if someone knew the Bible by heart, we could repeat everything since the creation of the world, the important thing is that we should listen to one another, pity we haven't a radio, music has always been a great distraction, and we could follow the news bulletins, for example, if a cure were to be discovered for our illness, how we should rejoice.

Then the inevitable happened. They heard shots being fired in the street, They're coming to kill us, someone shouted, Calm down, said the doctor, we must be logical, if they wanted to kill us, they would come here to shoot us, not outside. The doctor was right, it was the sergeant who had given the order to shoot in the air, not some soldier who had suddenly been struck blind when his finger was on the trigger, clearly there was no other way of controlling and intimidating the new internees as they stumbled from the vans, the Ministry of Health had informed the Ministry of Defence, We're despatching four van-loads, And how many does that make, About two hundred internees, Where are all these people going to be accommodated, the wards reserved for the blind internees are the three in the wing on the right, according to the information we've been given, the total capacity is one hundred and twenty, and there are already some sixty to seventy internees inside, minus a dozen or so whom we were obliged to kill, There is one solution, open up all the wards, That would mean the contaminated coming into direct contact with those who are blind, In all probability, sooner or later, the former will also go blind, besides, the situation being as it is, I suppose we'll all be contaminated, there cannot be a single person who has not been within sight of a blind man, If a blind man cannot see, I ask myself, how can he transmit this disease through his sight, General, this must be the most logical illness in the world, the eye that is blind transmits the blindness to the eye that sees, what could be simpler, We have a colonel here who believes the solution would be to shoot the blind as soon as they appear, Corpses instead of blind men would scarcely improve the situation, To be blind is not the same as being dead, Yes, but to be dead is to be blind, So there are going to be about two hundred of them, Yes, And what shall we do with the taxi-drivers, Put them inside as well. That same day, in the late afternoon, the Ministry of Defence contacted the Ministry of Health, Would you like to hear the latest news, that colonel we mentioned earlier has gone blind, It'll be interesting to see what he thinks of that bright idea of his now, He already thought, he shot himself in the head, Now that's what I call a consistent attitude, The army is always ready to set an example.

The gate had been opened wide. In keeping with barracks routine, the sergeant ordered that a column should be formed five deep, but the blind internees were unable to get the numbers right, sometimes they were more than five, at other times less, and they

all ended up by crowding around the entrance, like the civilians they were, without any sense of order, they did not even remember to send the women and children ahead, as in other shipwrecks. It has to be said before we forget, that not all of the gunshots had been fired in the air, one of the van-drivers had refused to go with the blind internees, he protested that he could see perfectly well, the outcome, three seconds later, was to prove the point made by the Ministry of Health when it decreed that to be dead is to be blind. The sergeant gave the aforementioned orders, Keep going, there's a stairway with six steps, when you get there, go slowly up the steps, if anyone trips, who knows what will happen, the only recommendation overlooked was that they should follow the rope, but clearly if they had used it they would have taken forever to enter, Listen, cautioned the sergeant, his mind at rest because all of them were already inside the gate, there are three wards on the right and three on the left, each ward has forty beds, families should stay together, avoid crowding, wait at the entrance and ask those who are already interned for assistance, everything is going to be all right, settle in and keep calm, keep calm, your food will be delivered later.

It would not be right to imagine that these blind people, in such great numbers, proceed like lambs to the slaughter, bleating as is their wont, somewhat crowded, it is true, yet that is how they had always existed, cheek by jowl, mingling breaths and smells, There are some here who cannot stop crying, others who are shouting in fear or rage, others who are cursing, someone uttered a terrible, futile threat, If I get my hands on you, presumably he was referring to the soldiers, I'll gouge your eyes out. Inevitably, the first internees to reach the stairway had to probe with one foot, the height and depth of the steps, the pressure of those coming from behind knocked two or three of those in front to the ground, fortunately nothing more serious occurred, nothing except a few grazed shins, the sergeant's advice had proved to be a blessing. A number of the new arrivals had already entered the hallway, but two hundred persons cannot be expected to sort themselves out all that easily, moreover blind and without a guide, this painful situation being made even worse by the fact that we are in an old building and badly designed at that, it is not enough for a sergeant who knows only about military affairs to say, there are three wards on each side, you have to know what it's like inside, doorways so narrow that they look more like bottlenecks, corridors as crazy as the other inmates of the asylum, opening for no clear reason and closing who knows where, and no one is ever likely to find out. Instinctively, the vanguard of blind internees had divided into two columns, moving on both sides along the walls in search of a door they might enter, a safe method, undoubtedly, assuming there are no items of furniture blocking the way. Sooner or later, with know-how and patience, the new inmates will settle in, but not before the latest battle has been won between the first lines of the column on the left and the contaminated confined to that side. It was only to be expected. There was an agreement, there was even a regulation drawn up by the Ministry of Health, that this wing would be reserved for the contaminated, and if it was true that it could be foreseen that in all likelihood, every one of them would end up blind, it was also true, in terms of pure logic, that until they became blind there was no guarantee that they were fated to

blindness. There is then a person sitting peacefully at home, confident that at least in his case all will turn out well, when suddenly he sees coming directly towards him a howling mob of the people he most fears. At first, the contaminated thought this was a group of inmates like themselves, only more numerous, but the deception was short-lived, these people were blind all right, You can't come in here, this wing is ours, it isn't for the blind, you belong to the wing on the other side, shouted those on guard at the door. Some of the blind internees tried to do a turnaround and find another entrance, they didn't care if they went left or right, but the mass of those who continued to flock in from outside, jostled them relentlessly. The contaminated defended the door with punches and kicks, the blind retaliated as best they could, they could not see their adversaries, but knew where the blows were coming from. Two hundred people could not get into the hallway, or anything like that number, so it was not long before the door leading to the courtyard, despite being fairly wide, was completely blocked, as if obstructed by a plug, they could go neither backwards nor forwards, those who were inside, crushed and flattened, tried to protect themselves by kicking and elbowing their neighbours, who were suffocating, cries could be heard, blind children were sobbing, blind mothers were fainting, while the vast crowd that had been unable to enter pushed even harder, terrified by the bellowing of the soldiers, who could not understand why those idiots had not gone through. There was one terrible moment of violent backsurge as people struggled to extricate themselves from the confusion, from the imminent danger of being crushed, let us put ourselves in the place of the soldiers, suddenly they see a considerable number of those who had entered come hurtling out, they immediately thought the worst, that the new arrivals were about to turn back, let us remember the precedents, there might well have been a massacre. Fortunately, the sergeant was once more equal to the crisis, he himself fired into the air, simply to attract attention, and shouted over the loudspeaker, Calm down, those on the steps should draw back a little, clear the way, stop pushing and try to help each other. That was asking too much, the struggle inside continued, but the hallway gradually emptied thanks to a much greater number of blind internees moving to the door of the right wing, there they were received by blind inmates who were happy to direct them to the third ward, so far free, or to the beds in the second ward which were still unoccupied. For one moment it looked as if the battle would be resolved in favour of the contaminated, not because they were stronger and had more sight, but because the blind internees, having perceived that the entrance on the other side was less encumbered, broke off all contacts, as the sergeant would say in his discussions about strategy and basic military tactics. However, the triumph of the defenders was of short duration. From the door of the right wing came voices announcing that there was no more room, that all the wards were full, there were even some blind internees still being pushed into the hallway, precisely at that moment when, once the human stopper up until then blocking the main entrance dispersed, once the considerable number of blind internees who were outside, were able to advance and take shelter under the roof where, safe from the threats of the soldiers, they would live. The result of these two displacements, practically simultaneous, was to rekindle the struggle at the entrance of the wing on the left-hand side, once again blows were exchanged, once more there were

shouts, and, as if this were not enough, in their confusion some of the bewildered blind internees, who had found and forced open the hallway door leading directly into the inner courtyard, cried out that there were corpses out there. Imagine their horror. They withdrew as best they could, There are corpses out there, they repeated, as if they would be the next to die, and, within a second, the hallway was once more the raging whirlpool it had been at its worst, then, in a sudden and desperate impulse, the human mass swerved towards the wing on the left, carrying all before it, the resistance of the contaminated broken, many of them no longer merely contaminated, others, running like madmen, were still trying to escape their black destiny. They ran in vain. One after the other they were stricken with blindness, their eyes suddenly drowned in that hideous white tide inundating the corridors, the wards, the entire space. Out there in the hallway, in the yard, the blind internees, helpless, some badly bruised from the blows, others from being trampled, dragged themselves along, most of them were elderly, many women and children, beings with few or no defences, and it was nothing short of a miracle that there were not more corpses in need of burial. Scattered on the ground, apart from some shoes that had lost their feet, lie bags, suitcases, baskets, each individual's bit of wealth, lost for ever, anyone coming across these objects will insist that what he is carrying is his.

An old man with a black patch over one eye, came in from the yard. He, too, had either lost his luggage or had not brought any. He had been the first to stumble over the corpses, but he did not cry out. He remained beside them and waited for peace and silence to be restored. He waited for an hour. Now it is his turn to seek shelter. Slowly, with his arms outstretched, he searched for the way. He found the door of the first ward on the right-hand side, heard voices coming from within, then asked, Any chance of a bed here.

The arrival of so many blind people appeared to have brought at least one advantage, or, rather, two advantages, the first of these being of a psychological nature, as it were, for there is a vast difference between waiting for new inmates to turn up at any minute, and realising that the building is completely full at last, that from now on it will be possible to establish and maintain stable and lasting relations with one's neighbours, without the disturbances there have been up until now, because of the constant interruptions and interventions by the new arrivals which obliged us to be for ever reconstituting the channels of communication. The second advantage, of a practical, direct and substantial nature, was that the authorities outside, both civilian and military, had understood that it was one thing to provide food for two or three dozen people, more or less tolerant, more or less prepared, because of their small number, to resign themselves to occasional mistakes or delays in the delivery of food, and quite another to be faced with the sudden and complex responsibility of feeding two hundred and forty human beings of every type, background and temperament. Two hundred and forty, take note, and that is just a manner of speaking, for there are at least twenty blind internees who have not managed to find a bed and are sleeping on the floor. In any case, it has to be recognised that thirty persons being fed on rations meant for ten is not the same as sharing out to two hundred and sixty, food intended for two hundred and forty. The difference is almost imperceptible. Now then, it was the conscious assumption of this increased responsibility, and perhaps, a hypothesis not to be disregarded, the fear that further disturbances might break out, that determined a change of procedure on the part of the authorities, in the sense of giving orders that the food should be delivered on time and in the right quantity. Obviously, after the struggle, in every respect lamentable, that we had to witness, accommodating so many blind internees was not going to be easy or free of conflict, we need only remember those poor contaminated creatures who before could still see and now see nothing, of the separated couples and their lost children, of the discomfort of those who had been trampled and knocked down, some of them twice or three times, of those who are going around in search of their cherished possessions without finding them, one would have to be completely insensitive to forget, as if it were nothing, the misfortunes of these poor people. However, it cannot be denied that the announcement that lunch was about to be delivered was like a consoling balm for everyone. And if it is undeniable that, given the lack of adequate organisation for this operation or of any authority capable of imposing the necessary discipline, the collection of such large quantities of food and its distribution to feed so many mouths led to further misunderstandings, we must concede that the atmosphere changed considerably for the better, when throughout that ancient asylum there was nothing to be heard except the noise of two hundred and sixty mouths masticating. Who is going to clean up this mess afterwards is a question so far unanswered, only in the late afternoon will the voice on the loudspeaker repeat the rules of orderly conduct that must be observed for the good of all, and then it will become clear with what degree of respect the new arrivals treat these rules. It is no small thing that the inmates of the second ward in the right wing have decided, at long last, to bury their dead, at least we shall be rid of that particular stench, the smell of the living, however fetid, will be easier to get used to.

As for the first ward, perhaps because it was the oldest and therefore most established in the process and pursuit of adaptation to the state of blindness, a quarter of an hour after its inmates had finished eating, there was not so much as a scrap of dirty paper on the floor, a forgotten plate or dripping receptacle. Everything had been gathered up, the smaller objects placed inside the larger ones, the dirtiest of them placed inside those that were less dirty, as any rationalised regulation of hygiene would demand, as attentive to the greatest efficiency possible in gathering up leftovers and litter, as to the economy of effort needed to carry out this task. The state of mind which perforce will have to determine social conduct of this nature cannot be improvised nor does it come about spontaneously. In the case under scrutiny, the pedagogical approach of the blind woman at the far end of the ward seems to have had a decisive influence, that woman married to the ophthalmologist, who has never tired of telling us, If we cannot live entirely like human beings, at least let us do everything in our power not to live entirely like animals, words she repeated so often that the rest of the ward ended up by transforming her advice into a maxim, a dictum, into a doctrine, a rule of life, words which deep down were so simple and elementary, probably it was just that state of mind, propitious to any understanding of needs and circumstances, that contributed, even if only in a minor way to the warm welcome the old man with the black eyepatch found there when he peered through the door and asked those inside, Any chance of a bed here. By a happy coincidence, clearly indicative of future consequences, there was a bed, the only one, and it is anyone's guess how it survived, as it were, the invasion, in that bed the car-thief had suffered unspeakable pain, perhaps that is why it had retained an aura of suffering that kept people at a distance. These are the workings of destiny, arcane mysteries, and this coincidence was not the first, far from it, we need only observe that all the eye-patients who happened to be in the surgery when the first blind man appeared there have ended up in this ward, and even then it was thought that the situation would go no further, In a low voice, as always, so that no one would suspect the secret of her presence there, the doctor's wife whispered into her husband's ear, Perhaps he was also one of your patients, he is an elderly man, bald, with white hair, and he has a black patch over one eye, I remember you telling me about him, Which eye, The left, It must be him. The doctor advanced to the passageway and said, slightly raising his voice, I'd like to touch the person who has just joined us, I would ask him to make his way in this direction and I shall make my way towards him. They bumped into each other midway, fingers touching fingers, like two ants that recognise each other from the manoeuvring of their antennae, but this won't be the case here, the doctor asked his permission, ran his hands over the old man's face, and quickly found the patch. There is no doubt, here is the one person who was missing here, the patient with the black patch, he exclaimed, What do you mean, who are you, asked the old man, I am, or rather I was your ophthalmologist, do you remember, we were agreeing on a date for your cataract operation, How did you recognise me, Above all, by your voice, the voice is the sight of the person who cannot see, Yes, the voice, I'm also beginning to recognise yours, who would have thought it, doctor, now there's no need for an operation, If there is a cure for this, we will both need it, I remember you telling me, doctor, that after my operation I

would no longer recognise the world in which I was living, we now know how right you were, When did you turn blind, Last night, And they've brought you here already, The panic out there is such that it won't be long before they start killing people off the moment they know they have gone blind, Here they have already eliminated ten, said a man's voice, I found them, the old man with the black eyepatch simply said, They were from the other ward, we buried our dead at once, added the same voice, as if concluding a report. The girl with dark glasses had approached, Do you remember me, I was wearing dark glasses, I remember you well, despite my cataract, I remember that you were very pretty, the girl smiled, Thank you, she said, and went back to her place. From there, she called out, The little boy is here too, I want my mummy, the boy's voice could be heard saying, as if worn out from some remote and useless weeping. And I was the first to go blind, said the first blind man, and I'm here with my wife, And I'm the girl from the surgery, said the girl from the surgery. The doctor's wife said, It only remains for me to introduce myself, and she said who she was. Then the old man, as if to repay the welcome, announced, I have a radio, A radio, exclaimed the girl with dark glasses as she clapped her hands, music, how nice, Yes, but it's a small radio, with batteries, and batteries do not last forever, the old man reminded her, Don't tell me we shall be cooped up here forever, said the first blind man, Forever, no, forever is always far too long a time, We'll be able to listen to the news, the doctor observed, And a little music, insisted the girl with dark glasses, Not everyone likes the same music, but we're all certainly interested in knowing what things are like outside, it would be better to save the radio for that, I agree, said the old man with the black eyepatch. He took the tiny radio from his jacket pocket and switched it on. He began searching for the different stations, but his hand was still too unsteady to tune into one wavelength, and to begin with all that could be heard were intermittent noises, fragments of music and words, at last his hand grew steadier, the music became recognisable, Leave it there for a bit, pleaded the girl with dark glasses, the words got clearer, That isn't the news, said the doctor's wife, and then, as if an idea had suddenly struck her, What time is it, she asked, but she knew that no one there could tell her. The tuning knob continued to extract noises from the tiny box, then it settled down, it was a song, a song of no significance, but the blind internees slowly began gathering round, without pushing, they stopped the moment they felt a presence before them and there they remained, listening, their eyes wide open tuned in the direction of the voice that was singing, some were crying, as probably only the blind can cry, the tears simply flowing as from a fountain. The song came to an end, the announcer said, At the third stroke it will be four o'clock. One of the blind women asked, laughing, Four in the afternoon or four in the morning, and it was as if her laughter hurt her. Furtively, the doctor's wife adjusted her watch and wound it up, it was four in the afternoon, although, to tell the truth, a watch is unconcerned, it goes from one to twelve, the rest are just ideas in the human mind. What's that faint sound, asked the girl with dark glasses, it sounded like, It was me, I heard them say on the radio that it was four o'clock and I wound up my watch, it was one of those automatic movements we so often make, anticipated the doctor's wife. Then she thought that it had not been worth putting herself at risk like that, all she had to do was to glance at the wrist-watches of the blind

who had arrived that day, one of them must have a watch in working order. The old man with the black eyepatch had one, as she noticed just that moment, and the time on his watch was correct. Then the doctor asked, Tell us what the situation is like out there. The old man with the black eyepatch said, Of course, but I'd better sit, I'm dead on my feet. Three or four to a bed, keeping each other company on this occasion, the blind internees settled down as best they could, they fell silent, and then the old man with the black eyepatch told them what he knew, what he had seen with his own eyes when he could still see, what he had overheard during the few days that elapsed between the start of the epidemic and his own blindness.

In the first twenty-four hours, he said, if the rumour going round was true, there were hundreds of cases, all alike, all showing the same symptoms, all instantaneous, the disconcerting absence of lesions, the resplendent whiteness of their field of vision, no pain either before or after. On the second day there was talk of some reduction in the number of new cases, it went from hundreds to dozens and this led the Government to announce at once that it was reasonable to suppose that the situation would soon be under control. From this point onwards, apart from a few inevitable comments, the story of the old man with the black eyepatch will no longer be followed to the letter, being replaced by a reorganised version of his discourse, re-evaluated in the light of a correct and more appropriate vocabulary. The reason for this previously unforeseen change is the rather formal controlled language, used by the narrator, which almost disqualifies him as a complementary reporter, however important he may be, because without him we would have no way of knowing what happened in the outside world, as a complementary reporter, as we were saying, of these extraordinary events, when as we know the description of any facts can only gain with the rigour and suitability of the terms used. Returning to the matter in hand, the Government therefore ruled out the originally formulated hypothesis that the country was being swept by an epidemic without precedent, provoked by some morbid as yet unidentified agent that took effect instantaneously and was marked by a complete absence of any previous signs of incubation or latency. Instead, they said, that in accordance with the latest scientific opinion and the consequent and updated administrative interpretation, they were dealing with an accidental and unfortunate temporary concurrence of circumstances, also as yet unverified, in whose pathogenic development it was possible, the Government's communiqué emphasised, starting from the analysis of the available data, to detect the proximity of a clear curve of resolution and signs that it was on the wane. A television commentator came up with an apt metaphor when he compared the epidemic, or whatever it might be, to an arrow shot into the air, which upon reaching its highest point, pauses for a moment as if suspended, and then begins to trace its obligatory descending curve, which, God willing, and with this invocation the commentator returned to the triviality of human discourse and to the so-called epidemic, gravity tending to increase the speed of it, until this terrible nightmare tormenting us finally disappears, these were words that appeared constantly in the media, and always concluded by formulating the pious wish that the unfortunate people who had become blind might soon recover their

sight, promising them meanwhile, the solidarity of society as a whole, both official and private. In some remote past, similar arguments and metaphors had been translated by the intrepid optimism of the common people into sayings such as, Nothing lasts forever, be it good or bad, the excellent maxims of one who has had time to learn from the ups and downs of life and fortune, and which, transported into the land of the blind, should be read as follows, Yesterday we could see, today we can't, tomorrow we shall see again, with a slight interrogatory note on the third and final line of the phrase, as if prudence, at the last moment, had decided, just in case, to add a touch of a doubt to the hopeful conclusion.

Sadly, the futility of such hopes soon became manifest, the Government's expectations and the predictions of the scientific community simply sank without trace. Blindness was spreading, not like a sudden tide flooding everything and carrying all before it, but like an insidious infiltration of a thousand and one turbulent rivulets which, having slowly drenched the earth, suddenly submerge it completely. Faced with this social catastrophe, already on the point of taking the bit between their teeth, the authorities hastily organised medical conferences, especially those bringing together ophthalmologists and neurologists. Because of the time it would inevitably take to organise, a congress that some had called for was never convened, but in compensation there were colloquia, seminars, round-table discussions, some open to the public, others held behind closed doors. The overall effect of the patent futility of the debates and the occurrence of certain cases of sudden blindness during the sessions, with the speaker calling out, I'm blind, I'm blind, prompted almost all the newspapers, the radio and television, to lose interest in such initiatives, apart from the discreet and, in every sense, laudable behaviour of certain organs of communication which, living off sensational stories of every kind, off the fortunes and misfortunes of others, were not prepared to miss an opportunity to report live, with all the drama the situation warranted, the sudden blindness, for example, of a professor of ophthalmology.

The proof of the progressive deterioration of morale in general was provided by the Government itself, its strategy changing twice within the space of some six days. To begin with, the Government was confident that it was possible to circumscribe the disease by confining the blind and the contaminated within specific areas, such as the asylum in which we find ourselves. Then the inexorable rise in the number of cases of blindness led some influential members of the Government, fearful that the official initiative would not suffice for the task in hand, and that it might result in heavy political costs, to defend the idea that it was up to families to keep their blind indoors, never allowing them to go out on the street, so as not to worsen the already difficult traffic situation or to offend the sensibility of persons who still had their eyesight and who, indifferent to more or less reassuring opinions, believed that the white disease was spreading by visual contact, like the evil eye. Indeed, it was not appropriate to expect any other reaction from someone who, preoccupied with his thoughts, be they sad, indifferent, or happy, if such thoughts still exist, suddenly saw the change in expression of

a person heading in his direction, his face revealing all the signs of total horror, and then that inevitable cry, I'm blind, I'm blind. No one's nerves could withstand it. The worst thing is that whole families, especially the smaller ones, rapidly became families of blind people, leaving no one who could guide and look after them, nor protect sighted neighbours from them, and it was clear that these blind people, however caring a father, mother or child they might be, could not take care of each other, otherwise they would meet the same fate as the blind people in the painting, walking together, falling together and dying together.

Faced with this situation, the Government had no alternative but to go rapidly into reverse gear, broadening the criteria it had established about the places and spaces that could be requisitioned, resulting in the immediate and improvised utilisation of abandoned factories, disused churches, sports pavilions and empty warehouses. For the last two days there has been talk of setting up army tents, added the old man with the black eye-patch. At the beginning, the very beginning, several charitable organisations were still offering volunteers to assist the blind, to make their beds, clean out the lavatories, wash their clothes, prepare their food, the minimum of care without which life soon becomes unbearable, even for those who can see. These dear people went blind immediately but at least the generosity of their gesture would go down in history. Did any of them come here, asked the old man with the black eyepatch, No, replied the doctor's wife, no one has come, Perhaps it was a rumour, And what about the city and the traffic, asked the first blind man, remembering his own car and that of the taxi-driver who had driven him to the surgery and had helped him to dig the grave, Traffic is in a state of chaos, replied the old man with the black eyepatch, and gave details of specific cases and accidents. When, for the first time, a bus-driver was suddenly struck by blindness as he was driving his vehicle on a public road, despite the casualties and injuries resulting from the disaster, people did not pay much attention for the same reason, that is to say, out of force of habit, and the director of public relations of the transport company felt able to declare, without further ado, that the disaster had been caused by human error, regrettable no doubt, but, all things considered, as unforeseeable as a heart attack in the case of someone who had never suffered from a heart complaint. Our employees, explained the director, as well as the mechanical and electrical parts of our buses, are periodically subjected to rigorous checks, as can be seen, showing a direct and clear relation of cause and effect, in the extremely low percentage of accidents in which, generally speaking, our company's vehicles have been involved. This laboured explanation appeared in the newspapers, but people had more on their minds than worrying about a simple bus accident, after all, it would have been no worse if its brakes had failed. Moreover, two days later, this was precisely the cause of another accident, but the world being what it is, where the truth often has to masquerade as falsehood to achieve its ends, the rumour went round that the driver had gone blind. There was no way of convincing the public of what had in fact happened, and the outcome was soon evident, from one moment to the next people stopped using buses, they said they would rather go blind themselves than die because others had gone blind. A third accident, soon

afterwards and for the same reason, involving a vehicle that was carrying no passengers, gave rise to comment such as the following, couched in a knowingly popular tone, That could have been me. Nor could they imagine, those who spoke like this, how right they were. When two pilots both went blind at once a commercial plane crashed and burst into flames the moment it hit the ground, killing all the passengers and crew, notwithstanding that in this case, the mechanical and electrical equipment were in perfect working order, as the black box, the only survivor, would later reveal. A tragedy of these dimensions was not the same as an ordinary bus accident, the result being that those who still had any illusions soon lost them, from then on engine noises were no longer heard and no wheel, large or small, fast or slow, was ever to turn again. Those people who were previously in the habit of complaining about the ever-increasing traffic problems, pedestrians who, at first sight, appeared not to know where they were going because the cars, stationary or moving, were constantly impeding their progress, drivers who having gone round the block countless times before finally finding a place to park their car, became pedestrians and started protesting for the same reasons, after having first voiced their own complaints, all of them must now be content, except for the obvious fact that, since there was no one left who dared to drive a vehicle, not even to get from A to B, the cars, trucks, motor-bikes, even the bicycles, were scattered chaotically throughout the entire city, abandoned wherever fear had gained the upper hand over any sense of propriety, as evidenced by the grotesque sight of a tow-away vehicle with a car suspended from the front axle, probably the first man to turn blind had been the truck-driver. The situation was bad for everyone, but for those stricken with blindness it was catastrophic, since, according to the current expression, they could not see where they were putting their feet. It was pitiful to watch them bumping into the abandoned cars, one after the other, bruising their shins, some fell, pleading, Is there anyone who can help me to my feet, but there were also those who, naturally brutish or made so by despair, cursed and fought off any helping hand that came to their assistance, Leave me alone, your turn will come soon enough, then the compassionate person would take fright and make a quick escape, disappear into that dense white mist, suddenly conscious of the risk to which their kindness had exposed them, perhaps to go blind only a few steps further on.

That's how things are out there, the old man with the black eyepatch concluded his account, and I don't know everything, I can only speak of what I was able to see with my own eyes, here he broke off, paused and corrected himself, Not with my eyes, because I only had one, now not even that, well, I still have it but it's no use to me, I've never asked you why you didn't have a glass eye instead of wearing that patch, And why should I have wanted to, tell me that, asked the old man with the black eye-patch, It's normal because it looks better, besides it's much more hygienic, it can be removed, washed and replaced like dentures, Yes sir, but tell me what it would be like today if all those who now find themselves blind had lost, I say physically lost, both their eyes, what good would it do them now to be walking around with two glass eyes, You're right, no good at all, With all of us ending up blind, as appears to be happening, who's interested in aesthetics, and as for hygiene, tell me, doctor, what kind of hygiene could you hope for in

this place, Perhaps only in a world of the blind will things be what they truly are, said the doctor, And what about people, asked the girl with dark glasses, People, too, no one will be there to see them, An idea has just occurred to me, said the old man with the black eye-patch, let's play a game to pass the time, How can we play a game if we cannot see what we are playing, asked the wife of the first blind man, Well, not a game exactly, each of us must say what we saw at the moment we went blind, That could be embarrassing, someone pointed out, Those who do not wish to take part in the game can remain silent, the important thing is that no one should try to invent anything, Give us an example, said the doctor, Certainly, replied the old man with the black eye-patch, I went blind when I was looking at my blind eye, What do you mean, It's very simple, I felt as if the inside of the empty orbit were inflamed and I removed the patch to satisfy my curiosity and just at that moment I went blind, It sounds like an allegory, said an unknown voice, the eye that refuses to acknowledge its own absence, As for me, said the doctor, I was at home consulting some reference books on ophthalmology, precisely because of what is happening, the last thing I saw were my hands resting on a book, My final image was different, said the doctor's wife, the inside of an ambulance as I was helping my husband to get in, I've already explained to the doctor what happened to me, said the first blind man, I had stopped at the lights, the signal was red, there were people crossing the street from one side to the other, at that very moment I turned blind, then that fellow who died the other day took me home, obviously I couldn't see his face, As for me, said the wife of the first blind man, the last thing I can remember seeing was my handkerchief, I was sitting at home and crying my heart out, I raised the handkerchief to my eyes and went blind that very moment, In my case, said the girl from the surgery, I had just gotten into the elevator, I stretched out my hand to press the button and suddenly stopped seeing, you can imagine my distress, trapped in there and all alone, I didn't know whether I would go up or down, and I couldn't find the button to open the door, My situation, said the pharmacist's assistant, was simpler, I heard that people were going blind, then I began to wonder what it would be like if I too were to go blind, I closed my eyes to try it and when I opened them I was blind, Sounds like another allegory, interrupted the unknown voice, if you want to be blind, then blind you will be. They remained silent. The other blind internees had gone back to their beds, no easy task, for while it is true that they knew their respective numbers, only by starting to count from one end of the ward, from one upwards or from twenty downwards, could they be certain of arriving where they wanted to be. When the murmur of their counting, as monotonous as a litany, died away, the girl with dark glasses related what had happened to her, I was in a hotel room with a man lying on top of me, at that point she fell silent, she felt too ashamed to say what she was doing there, that she had seen everything white, but the old man with the black eyepatch asked, And you saw everything white, Yes, she replied, Perhaps your blindness is different from ours, said the old man with the black eyepatch. The only person still to speak was the chambermaid, I was making a bed, a certain person had gone blind there, I held up the white sheet up before me and spread it out, tucked it in at the sides as one does, and as I was smoothing it out with both hands, suddenly I could no longer see, I remember how I was smoothing the sheet out,

very slowly, it was the bottom sheet, she added, as if this had some special significance. Has everyone told their story about the last time they could see, asked the old man with the black eyepatch, I'll tell you mine, if there's no one else, said the unknown voice, If there is, he can speak after you, so fire away, The last thing I saw was a painting, A painting, repeated the old man with the black eyepatch, and where was this painting, I had gone to the museum, it was a picture of a cornfield with crows and cypress trees and a sun that gave the impression of having been made up of the fragments of other suns, Sounds like a Dutch painter, I think it was, but there was a drowning dog in it, already half submerged, poor creature, In that case it must be by a Spanish painter, before him no one had ever painted a dog in that situation, after him no other painter had the courage to try. Probably, and there was a cart laden with hay, drawn by horses and crossing a stream, Was there a house on the left, Yes, Then it was by an English painter, Could be, but I don't think so, because there was a woman as well with a child in her arms, Mothers and children are all too common in paintings, True, I've noticed, What I don't understand is how in one painting there should be so many pictures and by such different painters, And there were some men eating, There have been so many lunches, afternoon snacks and suppers in the history of art, that this detail in itself is not enough to tell us who was eating, There were thirteen men altogether, Ah, then it's easy, go on, There was also a naked woman with fair hair, inside a conch that was floating on the sea, and masses of flowers around her, Obviously Italian, And there was a battle, As in those paintings depicting banquets and mothers with children in their arms, these details are not enough to reveal who painted the picture, There were corpses and wounded men, It's only natural, sooner or later, all children die, and soldiers too, And a horse stricken with terror, With its eyes about to pop out of their sockets, Exactly, Horses are like that, and what other pictures were there in your painting, Alas, I never managed to find out, I went blind just as I was looking at the horse. Fear can cause blindness, said the girl with dark glasses, Never a truer word, that could not be truer, we were already blind the moment we turned blind, fear struck us blind, fear will keep us blind, Who is speaking, asked the doctor, A blind man, replied a voice, just a blind man, for that is all we have here. Then the old man with the black eye-patch asked, How many blind persons are needed to make a blindness, No one could provide the answer. The girl with dark glasses asked him to switch on the radio, there might be some news. They gave the news later, meanwhile they listened to a little music. At a certain point some blind internees appeared in the doorway of the ward, one of them said, What a pity no one thought of bringing a guitar. The news was not very encouraging, a rumour was going round that the formation of a government of unity and national salvation was imminent.

When, at the beginning, the blind internees in this ward could still be counted on ten fingers, when an exchange of two or three words was enough to convert strangers into companions in misfortune, and with another three or four words they could forgive each other all their faults, some of them really quite serious, and if a complete pardon was not forthcoming, it was simply a question of being patient and waiting for a few days, then it became all too clear how many absurd afflictions the poor wretches had to suffer, each time their bodies demanded to be urgently relieved or as we say, to satisfy their needs. Despite this, and although knowing that perfect manners are somewhat rare and that even the most discreet and modest natures have their weak points, it has to be conceded that the first blind people to be brought here under quarantine, were capable, more or less conscientiously, of bearing with dignity the cross imposed by the eminently scatological nature of the human species. Now, with all the beds occupied, all two hundred and forty, not counting the blind inmates who have to sleep on the floor, no imagination, however fertile and creative in making comparisons, images and metaphors, could aptly describe the filth here. It is not just the state to which the lavatories were soon reduced, fetid caverns such as the gutters in hell full of condemned souls must be, but also the lack of respect shown by some of the inmates or the sudden urgency of others that turned the corridors and other passageways into latrines, at first only occasionally but now as a matter of habit. The careless or impatient thought, It doesn't matter, no one can see me, and they went no further. When it became impossible in any sense, to reach the lavatories, the blind internees began using the yard as a place to relieve themselves and clear their bowels. Those who were delicate by nature or upbringing spent the whole day restraining themselves, they put up with it as best they could until nightfall, they presumed it would be night when most people were asleep in the wards, then off they would go, clutching their stomachs or squeezing their legs together, in search of a foot or two of clean ground, if there was any amidst that endless carpet of trampled excrement, and, to make matters worse, in danger of getting lost in the infinite space of the yard, where there were no guiding signs other than the few trees whose trunks had managed to survive the mania for exploration of the former inmates, and also the slight mounds, now almost flattened, that barely covered the dead. Once a day, always in the late afternoon, like an alarm clock set to go off at the same hour, the voice over the loudspeaker would repeat the familiar instructions and prohibitions, insist on the advantages of making regular use of cleansing products, remind the inmates that there was a telephone in each ward in order to request the necessary supplies whenever they ran out, but what was really needed there was a powerful jet from a hose to wash away all that shit, then an army of plumbers to repair the cisterns and get them working again, then water, lots of water, to wash the waste down the pipes where it belongs, then, we beseech you, eyes, a pair of eyes, a hand capable of leading and guiding us, a voice that will say to me, This way. These blind internees, unless we come to their assistance, will soon turn into animals, worse still, into blind animals. This was not spoken by the unknown voice that talked of the paintings and images of this world, the person saying it, though in other words, late at night, is the doctor's wife lying beside her husband, their heads under the same blanket, A solution has to be found for this awful

mess, I can't stand it and I can't go on pretending that I can't see, Think of the consequences, they will almost certainly try to turn you into their slave, a general dogsbody, you will be at the beck and call of everyone, they will expect you to feed them, wash them, put them to bed and get them up in the morning and have you take them from here to there, blow their noses and dry their tears, they will call out for you when you are asleep, insult you if you keep them waiting, How can you of all people expect me to go on looking at these miseries, to have them permanently before my eyes, and not lift a finger to help, You're already doing more than enough, What use am I, when my main concern is that no one should find out that I can see, Some will hate you for seeing, don't think that blindness has made us better people, It hasn't made us any worse, We're on our way though, just look at what happens when it's time to share out the food, Precisely, someone who can see could supervise the distribution of food to all those who are here, share it out with impartiality, with common sense, there would be no more complaints, these constant arguments that are driving me mad would cease, you have no idea what it is like to watch two blind people fighting, Fighting has always been, more or less, a form of blindness, This is different, Do what you think best, but don't forget what we are here, blind, simply blind, blind people with no fine speeches or commiserations, the charitable, picturesque world of the little blind orphans is finished, we are now in the harsh, cruel, implacable kingdom of the blind, If only you could see what I am obliged to see, you would want to be blind, I believe you, but there's no need, because I'm already blind, Forgive me, my love, if you only knew, I know, I know, I've spent my life looking into people's eyes, it is the only part of the body where a soul might still exist and if those eyes are lost, Tomorrow I'm going to tell them I can see, Let's hope you won't live to regret it, Tomorrow I'll tell them, she paused then added, Unless by then I, too, have finally entered their world.

But it was not to be just yet. When she woke up next morning, very early as usual, her eyes could see as clearly as before. All the blind internees in the ward were asleep. She wondered how she should tell them, whether she should gather them all together and announce the news, perhaps it might be preferable to do it in a discreet manner, without ostentation, to say, for example, as if not wishing to treat the matter too seriously, Just imagine, who would have thought that I would keep my sight amongst so many who have turned blind, or whether, perhaps more wisely, pretend that she really had been blind and had suddenly regained her sight, it might even be a way of giving the others some hope. If she can see again, they would say to each other, perhaps we will, too, on the other hand, they might tell her, If that's the case, then get out, be off with you, whereupon she would reply that she could not leave the place without her husband, and since the army would not release any blind person from quarantine, there was nothing for it but to allow her to stay. Some of the blind internees were stirring in their beds and, as every morning, they were relieving themselves of wind, but this did not make the atmosphere any more nauseating, saturation point must already have been reached. It was not just the fetid smell that came from the lavatories in gusts that made you want to throw up, it was also the accumulated body odour of two hundred and fifty

people, whose bodies were steeped in their own sweat, who were neither able nor knew how to wash themselves, who wore clothes that got filthier by the day, who slept in beds where they had frequently defecated. What use would soaps, bleach, detergents be, abandoned somewhere around the place, if many of the showers were blocked or had become detached from the pipes, if the drains overflowed with the dirty water that spread outside the wash-rooms, soaking the floorboards in the corridors, infiltrating the cracks in the flagstones. What madness is this to think of interfering, the doctor's wife began to reflect, even if they were not to demand that I should be at their service, and nothing is less certain, I myself would not be able to stand it without setting about washing and cleaning for as long as I had the strength, this is not a job for one person. Her courage which before had seemed so resolute, began to crumble, to gradually desert her when confronted with the abject reality that invaded her nostrils and offended her eyes, now that the moment had come to pass from words to actions. I'm a coward, she murmured in exasperation, it would have been better to be blind than go around like some fainthearted missionary. Three blind interneers had got up, one of them was the pharmacist's assistant, they were about to take up their positions in the hallway to collect the allocation of food intended for the first ward. It could not be claimed, given their lack of eyesight, that the distribution was made by eye, one container more, one container less, on the contrary, it was pitiful to see how they got muddled over the counting and had to start all over again, someone with a more suspicious nature wanted to know exactly what the others were carrying, arguments always broke out in the end, the odd shove, a slap for the blind women, as was inevitable. In the ward everyone was now awake, ready to receive their ration, with experience they had devised a fairly easy system of distribution, they began by carrying all the food to the far end of the ward, where the doctor and his wife had their beds as well as the girl with dark glasses and the boy who was calling for his mummy, and that is where the inmates went to fetch their food, two at a time, starting from the beds nearest the entrance, number one on the right, number one on the left, number two on the right, number two on the left, and so on and so forth, without any ill-tempered exchanges or jostling, it took longer, it is true, but keeping the peace made the waiting worthwhile. The first, that is to say, those who had the food right there within arm's reach, were the last to serve themselves, except for the boy with the squint, of course, who always finished eating before the girl with dark glasses received her portion, so that part of what should have been hers invariably finished up in the boy's stomach. All the blind interneers had their heads turned towards the door, hoping to hear the footsteps of their fellow-inmates, the faltering, unmistakable sound of someone carrying something, but this was not the noise that could suddenly be heard but rather that of people running swiftly, were such a feat possible for people who could not see where they were putting their feet. Yet how else could you describe it when they appeared panting for breath at the door. What could have happened out there to send them running in here, and there were the three of them trying to get through the door at the same time to give the unexpected news, They wouldn't allow us to bring the food, said one of them, and the other two repeated his words, They wouldn't allow us, Who, the soldiers, asked some voice or other, No, the blind interneers, What blind

internees, we're all blind here, We don't know who they are, said the pharmacist's assistant, but I think they must belong to the group that all arrived together, the last group to arrive, And what's this about not allowing you to bring the food, asked the doctor, so far there has never been any problem, They say all that's over, from now on anyone who wants to eat will have to pay. Protests came from all sides of the ward, It cannot be, They've taken away our food, The thieves, A disgrace, the blind against the blind, I never thought I'd live to see anything like this, Let's go and complain to the sergeant. Someone more resolute proposed that they should all go together to demand what was rightfully theirs, It won't be easy, said the pharmacist's assistant, there are lots of them, I had the clear impression they form a large group, and the worst is that they are armed, What do you mean by armed, At the very least they have cudgels, this arm of mine still hurts from the blow I received, said one of the others, Let's try and settle this peacefully, said the doctor, I'll go with you to speak to these people, there must be some misunderstanding, Of course, doctor, you have my support, said the pharmacist's assistant, but from the way they're behaving, I very much doubt that you will be able to persuade them, Be that as it may, we have to go there, we cannot leave things like this, I'm coming with you, said the doctor's wife. The tiny group left the ward except for the one who was complaining about his arm, he felt that he had done his duty and stayed behind to relate to the others his hazardous adventure, their food rations two paces away, and a human wall to defend them, With cudgels, he insisted.

Advancing together, like a platoon, they forced their way through the blind inmates from the other wards. When they reached the hallway, the doctor's wife realised at once that no diplomatic conversation would be possible, and probably never likely to be. In the middle of the hallway, surrounding the containers of food, a circle of blind inmates armed with sticks and metal rods from the beds, pointing outwards like bayonets or lances, confronted the desperation of the blind inmates who were surrounding them and making awkward attempts to force their way through the line of defence, some with the hope of finding an opening, a gap someone had been careless enough not to close properly, they warded off the blows with raised arms, others crawled along on all fours until they bumped into the legs of their adversaries who repelled them with a blow to their backs or a vigorous kick. Hitting out blindly, as the saying goes. These scenes were accompanied by indignant protests, furious cries, We demand our food, We have a right to eat, Rogues, This is outrageous, Incredible though it may seem, there was one ingenuous or distracted soul who said, Call the police, perhaps there were some policemen amongst them, blindness, as everyone knows, has no regard for professions or occupations, but a policeman struck blind is not the same as a blind policeman, and as for the two we knew, they are dead and, after a great deal of effort, buried. Driven by the foolish hope that some authority would restore to the mental asylum its former tranquillity, impose justice, bring back some peace of mind, a blind woman made her way as best she could to the main entrance and called out for all to hear, Help us, these rogues are trying to steal our food. The soldiers pretended not to hear, the orders the sergeant had received from a captain who had passed through on an official visit could not have been clearer, If they

end up killing each other, so much the better, there will be fewer of them. The blind woman ranted and raved as mad women did in bygone days, she herself almost demented, but from sheer desperation. In the end, realising that her pleas were futile, she fell silent, went back inside to sob her heart out and, oblivious of where she was going, she received a blow on the head that sent her to the floor. The doctor's wife wanted to run and help her up, but there was such confusion that she could not move as much as two paces. The blind internees who had come to demand their food were already beginning to withdraw in disarray, their sense of direction completely lost, they tripped over one another, fell, got up, fell again, some did not even make any attempt, gave up, remained lying prostrate on the ground, exhausted, miserable, racked with pain, their faces pressed against the tiled floor. Then the doctor's wife, terrified, saw one of the blind hoodlums take a gun from his pocket and raise it brusquely into the air. The blast caused a large piece of stucco to come crashing down from the ceiling on to their unprotected heads, increasing the panic. The hoodlum shouted, Be quiet everyone and keep your mouths shut, if anyone dares to raise their voice, I'll shoot straight out, no matter who gets hit, then there will be no more complaints. The blind internees did not move. The fellow with the gun continued, Let it be known and there is no turning back, that from today onwards we shall take charge of the food, you've all been warned, and let no one take it into their head to go out there to look for it, we shall put guards at the entrance, and anyone who tries to go against these orders will suffer the consequences, the food will now be sold, anyone who wants to eat must pay. How are we to pay, asked the doctor's wife, I said no one was to speak, bellowed the armed hoodlum, waving his weapon before him. Someone has to speak, we must know how we're to proceed, where are we going to fetch the food, do we all go together, or one at a time, This woman is up to something, commented one of the group, if you were to shoot her, there would be one mouth less to feed, If I could see her, she'd already have a bullet in her belly. Then addressing everyone, Go back to your wards immediately, this very minute, once we've carried the food inside, we'll decide what is to be done, And what about payment, rejoined the doctor's wife, how much shall we be expected to pay for a coffee with milk and a biscuit, She's really asking for it, that one, said the same voice, Leave her to me, said the other fellow, and changing tone, Each ward will nominate two people to be in charge of collecting people's valuables, all their valuables of whatever kind, money, jewels, rings, bracelets, earrings, watches, everything they possess, and they will take the lot to the third ward on the left, where we are accommodated, and if you want some friendly advice, don't get any ideas about trying to cheat us, we know that there are those amongst you who will hide some of your valuables, but I warn you to think again, unless we feel that you have handed in enough, you will simply not get any food and be left to chew your banknotes and munch on your diamonds. A blind man from the second ward on the right asked, And what are we to do, do we hand over everything at once, or do we pay according to what we eat, It would seem I haven't explained things clearly enough, said the fellow with the gun, laughing, first you pay, then you eat and, as for the rest, to pay according to what you've eaten would make keeping accounts extremely complicated, best to hand over everything at one go and then we shall see how much

food you deserve, but let me warn you again, don't try to conceal anything for it will cost you dear, and lest anyone accuses us of not proceeding honestly, note that after handing over whatever you possess we shall carry out an inspection, woe betide you if we find so much as a penny, and now I want everybody out of here as quickly as possible. He raised his arm and fired another shot. Some more stucco crashed to the ground. And as for you, said the hoodlum with the gun, I won't forget your voice, Nor I your face, replied the doctor's wife.

No one appeared to notice the absurdity of a blind woman saying that she won't forget a face she could not see. The blind internees had already withdrawn as quickly as they could, in search of the doors, and those from the first ward were soon informing their fellow-inmates of the situation, From what we've heard, I don't believe that for the moment we can do anything other than obey, said the doctor, there must be quite a number of them, and worst of all, they have weapons. We can arm ourselves too, said the pharmacist's assistant, Yes, some sticks cut from the trees if there are any branches left within arm's reach, some metal rods removed from our beds that we shall scarcely have the strength to wield, while they have at least one firearm at their disposal, I refuse to hand over my belongings to these sons of a blind bitch, someone remarked, Nor I, joined in another, That's it, either we all hand over everything, or nobody gives anything, said the doctor, We have no alternative, said his wife, besides, the régime in here, must be the same as the one they imposed outside, anyone who doesn't want to pay can suit himself, that's his privilege, but he'll get nothing to eat and he cannot expect to be fed at the expense of the rest of us, We shall all give up what we've got and hand over everything, said the doctor, And what about those who have nothing to give, asked the pharmacist's assistant, They will eat whatever the others decide to give them, as the saying rightly goes, from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs. There was a pause, and the old man with the black eyepatch asked, Well then, who are we going to ask to be in charge, I suggest the doctor, said the girl with the dark glasses. It was not necessary to proceed to a vote, the entire ward was in agreement. There have to be two of us, the doctor reminded them, is anyone willing to offer, he asked, I'm willing, if no one else comes forward, said the first blind man, Very well, let us start collecting, we need a sack, a bag, a small suitcase, any of these things will do, I can get rid of this, said the doctor's wife, and began at once to empty a bag in which she had gathered cosmetics and other odds and ends at a time when she could never have imagined the conditions in which she was now obliged to live. Amongst the bottles, boxes and tubes from another world, there was a pair of long, finely pointed scissors. She could not remember having put them there, but there they were. The doctor's wife raised her head. The blind internees were waiting, her husband had gone up to the bed of the first blind man, he was talking to him, the girl with the dark glasses was saying to the boy with the squint that the food would be arriving soon, on the floor, tucked behind the bedside table, was a bloodstained sanitary napkin, as if the girl with dark glasses were anxious, with maidenly and pointless modesty, to hide it from the eyes of those who could not see. The doctor's wife looked at the scissors, she tried to think why she should

be staring at them in this way, in what way, like this, but she could think of no reason, frankly what reason could she hope to find in a simple pair of long scissors, lying in her open hands, with its two nickel-plated blades, the tips sharp and gleaming, Do you have it there, her husband asked her, Yes, here it is, she replied, and held out the arm holding the empty bag while she put the other arm behind her back to conceal the scissors, What's the matter, asked the doctor, Nothing, replied his wife, who could just as easily have answered, Nothing you can see, my voice must have sounded strange, that's all, nothing else. Accompanied by the first blind man, the doctor moved towards her, took the bag in his hesitant hands and said, Start getting your things ready, we're about to begin collecting. His wife unclasped her watch, did the same for her husband, removed her earrings, a tiny ring set with rubies, the gold chain she wore round her neck, her wedding ring, that of her husband, both of them easy to remove, Our fingers have got thinner, she thought, she began putting everything into the bag, then the money they had brought from home, a fair amount of notes varying in value, some coins, That's everything, she said, Are you sure, said the doctor, take a careful look, That's everything we have of any value. The girl with dark glasses had already gathered together her belongings, they were not so very different, she had two bracelets instead of one, but no wedding ring. The doctor's wife waited until her husband and the first blind man had turned their backs and for the girl with dark glasses to bend down to the boy with the squint, Think of me as your mummy, she was saying, I'll pay for us both, and then she withdrew to the wall at the far end. There, as all along the other walls, there were large nails sticking out that must have been used by the mad to hang treasures and other baubles. She chose the highest nail she could reach, and hung the scissors there. Then she sat down on her bed. Slowly, her husband and the first blind man were heading in the direction of the door, they would stop to collect possessions on both sides from those who had something to offer, some protested that they were being robbed shamefully, and that was the honest truth, others divested themselves of their possessions with a kind of indifference, as if thinking that, all things considered, there is nothing in this world that belongs to us in an absolute sense, another all too transparent truth. When they reached the door of the ward, having finished their collection, the doctor asked, Have we handed over everything, a number of resigned voices answered yes, some chose to say nothing and in the fullness of time we shall know whether this was in order to avoid telling a lie. The doctor's wife looked up at the scissors. She was surprised to find them so far up, hanging from one of the nails, as if she herself had not put them there, then she reflected that it had been an excellent idea to bring them, now she could trim her husband's beard, make him look more presentable, since, as we know, living in these conditions, it is impossible for a man to shave as normal. When she looked again in the direction of the door, the two men had already disappeared into the shadows of the corridor and were making their way to the third ward on the left, where they had been instructed to go and pay for their food. Today's food, tomorrow's as well, and perhaps for the rest of the week, And then, the question had no answer, everything we possessed will have gone in payment.

Surprisingly enough, the corridors were not congested as usual, because normally as

the internees left their wards they inevitably tripped, collided and fell, those assaulted swore, hurled obscenities, their assailants retaliated with further insults, but no one paid any attention, a person has to give vent to his feelings somehow, especially if he is blind. Ahead there was the sound of footsteps and voices, they must be the emissaries from the other wards who were complying with the same orders, What a situation we're in, doctor, said the first blind man, as if our blindness were not enough, we've fallen into the clutches of blind thieves, that seems to be my fate, first there was the car-thief, now this rabble who are stealing our food at gunpoint, That's the difference, they're armed, But cartridges don't last for ever, Nothing lasts for ever, but in this case it might be preferable if it did, Why, If the cartridges were to run out, then that would mean that someone had used them up, and we already have too many corpses, We're in an impossible situation, It has been impossible ever since we came into this place, yet we go on putting up with it, You're an optimist, doctor, No, I'm not an optimist, but I cannot imagine anything worse than our present existence, Well, I'm not entirely convinced that there are limits to misfortune and evil, You may be right, said the doctor, and then, as if he were talking to himself, Something has to happen here, a conclusion that contains a certain contradiction, either there is something worse than this, after all, or, from now on, things are going to get better, although all the indications suggest otherwise. Having steadily made their way and having turned several corners, they were approaching the third ward. Neither the doctor nor the first blind man had ever ventured here, but the construction of the two wings, logically enough, had strictly adhered to a symmetrical pattern, anyone familiar with the wing on the right would have no difficulty in getting their bearings in the wing on the left, and vice-versa, you had only to turn to the left on the one side while on the other you had to turn right. They could hear voices, they must be of those ahead of them, We'll have to wait, said the doctor in a low voice, Why, Those inside will want to know precisely what these inmates are carrying, for them it is not all that important, since they have already eaten they're in no hurry, It must be almost time for lunch, Even if they could see, it would do this group no good to know it, they no longer even have watches. A quarter of an hour later, give or take a minute, the barter was over. Two men passed in front of the doctor and the first blind man, from their conversation it was apparent that they were carrying food, Careful, don't drop anything, said one of them, and the other was muttering, What I don't know is whether there will be enough for everyone. We'll have to tighten our belts. Sliding his hand along the wall, with the first blind man right behind him, the doctor advanced until his hands came into contact with the door jamb, We're from the first ward on the right, he shouted. He made as if to take a step forward, but his leg came up against an obstacle. He realised it was a bed standing crosswise, placed there to serve as a trading counter, They're organised, he thought to himself, this has not suddenly been improvised, he heard voices, footsteps, How many of them are there, his wife had mentioned ten, but it was not inconceivable that there might be many more, certainly not all of them were there when they went to get the food. The fellow with the gun was their leader, it was his jeering voice that was saying, Now, let's see what riches the first ward on the right has brought us, and then, in a much lower tone, addressing someone who must have been standing nearby, Take

note. The doctor remained puzzled, what could this mean, the fellow had said, Take note, so there must be someone here who can write, someone who is not blind, so that makes two, We must be careful, he thought, tomorrow this rascal might be standing right next to us and we wouldn't even know it, this thought of the doctor's was scarcely any different from what the first blind man was thinking, With a gun and a spy, we're sunk, we shall never be able to raise our heads again. The blind man inside, the leader of the thieves, had already opened the bag, with practised hands he was lifting out, stroking and identifying the objects and money, clearly he could make out by touch what was gold and what was not, by touch he could also tell the value of the notes and coins, easy when one is experienced, it was only after some minutes that the doctor began to hear the unmistakable sound of punching paper, which he immediately identified, there nearby was someone writing in the braille alphabet, also known as anaglyptography, the sound could be heard, at once quiet and clear, of the pointer as it punched the thick paper and hit the metallic plate underneath. So there was a normal blind person amongst these blind delinquents, a blind person just like all those people who were once referred to as being blind, the poor fellow had obviously been roped in with all the rest, but this was not the moment to pry and start asking, are you one of the recent blind men or have you been blind for some years, tell us how you came to lose your sight. They were certainly lucky, not only had they won a clerk in the raffle, they could also use him as a guide, a blind person with experience as a blind person is something else, he's worth his weight in gold. The inventory went on, now and then the thug with the gun consulted the accountant, What do you think of this, and he would interrupt his bookkeeping to give an opinion, A cheap imitation, he would say, in which case the fellow with the gun would comment, If there is a lot of this, they won't get any food, or Good stuff, and then the commentary would be, There's nothing like dealing with honest people. In the end, three containers of food were lifted on to the bed, Take this, said the armed leader. The doctor counted them, Three are not enough, we used to receive four when the food was only for us, at that same moment he felt the cold barrel of the gun against his neck, for a blind man his aim was not bad, I'll have a container removed every time you complain, now beat it, take these and thank the Lord that you've still got something to eat. The doctor murmured, Very well, grabbed two of the containers while the first blind man took charge of the third one and, much slower now, because they were laden, they re traced the route that had brought them to the ward. When they arrived in the hallway, where there did not appear to be anyone around, the doctor said, I'll never again have such an opportunity, What do you mean, asked the first blind man, He put his gun to my neck, I could have grabbed it from him, That would be risky, Not as risky as it seems, I knew where the gun was resting, he had no way of knowing where my hands were, even so, at that moment I'm convinced that he was the blinder of the two of us, what a pity I didn't think of it, or did think of it but lacked the courage, And then what, asked the first blind man, What do you mean, Let's assume you had managed to grab his weapon, I don't believe you would have been capable of using it, If I were certain it would resolve the situation, yes I would, But you're not certain, No, in fact I'm not, Then better that they should keep their arms, at least so long as they do not use them against us. To threaten

someone with a gun is the same as attacking them, If you had taken his gun, the real war would have started, and in all likelihood we would never have got out of that place alive, You're right, said the doctor, I'll pretend I had thought all that through, You mustn't forget, doctor, what you told me a little while ago, What did I say, That something has to happen, It has happened and I didn't make the most of it, It has to be something else, not that.

When they entered the ward and had to present the meagre amount of food they had brought to put on the table, some thought they were to blame for not having protested and demanded more, that's why they had been nominated as the representatives of the group. Then the doctor explained what had happened, he told them about the blind clerk, about the insulting behaviour of the blind man with the gun, also about the gun itself. The malcontents lowered their voices, ended up by agreeing that undoubtedly the ward's interests were in the right hands. The food was finally distributed, there were those who could not resist reminding the impatient that little is better than nothing, besides, by now it must be almost time for lunch, The worst thing would be if we got to be like that famous horse that died when it had already got out of the habit of eating, someone remarked. The others gave a wan smile and one said, It wouldn't be so bad if it's true that when the horse dies, it doesn't know it's going to die.

The old man with the black eyepatch had understood that the portable radio, as much for the fragility of its structure as for the information known about the length of its useful life, was to be excluded from the list of valuables they had to hand over in payment for their food, in consideration of the fact that the usefulness of the set depended in the first place on whether there were or were not batteries inside and, in the second place, on how long they would last. Judging by the rather husky voices still coming from the tiny box, it was obvious that little more could be expected of it. Therefore the old man with the black eyepatch decided not to have any more general broadcasts, additionally because the blind internees in the third ward on the left might turn up and take a different view, not owing to the material value of the set, which is virtually negligible in the short term, as we have seen, but owing to its immediate utility, which is undoubtedly considerable, not to mention the feasible hypothesis that where there is at least one gun there might also be batteries. So the old man with the black eyepatch said that, from now on, he would listen to the news under the blanket, with his head completely covered, and that if there were any interesting news-item, he would alert the others at once. The girl with dark glasses asked him to allow her to listen to a little music from time to time, so as not to forget, she argued, but he was inflexible, insisted that the important thing was to know what was going on outside, anyone who wanted music could listen to it in their own head, after all our memory ought to be put to some good use. The old man with the black eyepatch was right, the music on the radio was already as grating as only a painful memory can be, so for this reason he kept the volume as low as possible, waiting for the news to come on. Then he turned the sound up a little and listened attentively so as not to lose a single syllable. Then he summarised the news-items in his own words, and transmitted them to his immediate neighbours. And so from bed to bed, the news slowly circulated round the ward, increasingly distorted as it was passed on from one inmate to the next, in this way diminishing or exaggerating the details, according to the personal optimism or pessimism of those relaying the information. Until that moment when the words dried up and the old man with the black eyepatch found he had nothing more to say. And it was not because the radio had broken down or the batteries were used up, experience of life and lives has convincingly shown that no one can govern time, it was unlikely that this tiny set would last long, but finally someone fell silent before it went dead. Throughout this first day spent in the clutches of those blind thugs, the old man with the black eyepatch had been listening to the radio and passing on the news, rejecting the patent falseness of the optimistic prophecies being officially communicated and now, well into the night, with his head out of the blanket at last, he was listening carefully to the wheeze into which the waning power of the radio had transformed the announcer's voice, when suddenly he heard him call out, I'm blind, then the noise of something striking the microphone, a hasty sequence of confused sounds, exclamations, then sudden silence. The only radio station he had been able to get on the set had gone silent. For some time to come, the old man with the black eyepatch kept his ear to the box that was now inert, as if waiting for the announcer's voice to return and for the news to continue. However, he sensed, or rather knew, that it would return no more. The white sickness had not only blinded the announcer. Like a line of gunpowder, it had quickly and

successively reached all those who happened to be in the studio. Then the old man with the black eyepatch dropped the radio on the floor. The blind thugs, if they were to come sniffing out hidden jewels, would find justification, had such a thought crossed their mind, for the omission of portable radios from their list of valuables. The old man with the black eyepatch pulled the blanket up over his head so that he could weep freely.

Little by little, under the murky yellowish light of the dim lamps, the ward descended into a deep slumber, bodies comforted by the three meals consumed that day, as had rarely happened before. If things continue like this, we'll end up once more reaching the conclusion that even in the worst misfortunes it is possible to find enough good to be able to bear the aforesaid misfortunes with patience, which, applied to the present situation, means that contrary to the first disquieting predictions, the concentration of food supplies into a single entity for apportioning and distribution, had its positive aspects, after all, however much certain idealists might protest that they would have preferred to go on struggling for life by their own means, even if their stubbornness meant going hungry. Unconcerned about tomorrow, forgetful that he who pays in advance always ends up being badly served, the majority of the blind internees, in all the wards, slept soundly. The others, tired of searching in vain for an honourable way out of the vexations suffered, also fell asleep one by one, dreaming of better days than these, days of greater freedom if not of greater abundance. In the first ward on the right, only the doctor's wife was still awake. Lying on her bed, she was thinking about what her husband had told her, when for a moment he suspected that amongst the blind thieves there was someone who could see, someone whom they might use as a spy. It was curious that they had not touched on the subject again, as if it had not occurred to the doctor, accustomed as he was to the fact, that his own wife could still see. It crossed her mind, but she said nothing, she had no desire to utter the obvious words, What he is unable to do after all, I can do. What is that, the doctor would ask, pretending not to understand. Now, with her eyes fixed on the scissors hanging on the wall, the doctor's wife was asking herself, What use is my eyesight, It had exposed her to greater horror than she could ever have imagined, it had convinced her that she would rather be blind, nothing else. Moving cautiously, she sat up in bed. Opposite her, the girl with the dark glasses and the boy with the squint were asleep. She noticed that the two beds were very close together, the girl had pushed hers over, almost certainly to be closer to the boy should he need to be comforted or have someone to dry his tears in the absence of his mother. Why did I not think of it before, I could have pushed our beds together and we could have slept together, without this constant worry that he might fall out of bed. She looked at her husband, who was fast asleep, in a deep sleep from sheer exhaustion. She had not got round to telling him that she had brought the scissors, that one of these days she would have to trim his beard, a task that even a blind man is capable of carrying out so long as he does not bring the blades too close to his skin. She has found a good excuse for not mentioning the scissors, Afterwards all the men here would be pestering me and I'd find myself doing nothing except trimming beards. She swung her body outwards, rested her feet on the floor and searched for her shoes. As she was about to slip them on, she held back, stared at them

closely, then shook her head and, without making a noise, put them back. She passed along the aisle between the beds and slowly made her way towards the door of the ward. Her bare feet came into contact with the slimy excrement on the floor, but she knew that out there in the corridors it would be much worse. She kept looking from one side to the other, to see if any of the blind internees were awake, although whether several of them might be keeping vigil, or the entire ward, was of no importance so long as she did not make a noise, and even if she did, we know how pressing our bodily needs can be, they do not choose their hour, in a word, what she did not want was that her husband should wake up and sense her absence in time to ask her, Where are you going, which is probably the question husbands most frequently put to their wives, the other being Where have you been, One of the blind women was sitting up in bed, her shoulders resting against the low head-rest, her empty gaze fixed on the wall opposite, but she could not see it. The doctor's wife paused for a moment, as if not sure whether to touch that invisible thread that hovered in the air, as if the slightest contact would irrevocably destroy it. The blind woman raised her arm, she must have perceived some gentle vibration in the atmosphere, then she let it drop, no longer interested, it was enough not to be able to sleep because of her neighbours' snoring. The doctor's wife continued walking in ever greater haste as she approached the door. Before heading for the hallway, she looked along the corridor that led to the other wards on this side, further ahead, to the lavatories, and ultimately to the kitchen and refectory. There were blind inmates lying up against the walls, those who on arrival had been unsuccessful in finding a bed, either because in the assault they had lagged behind, or because they lacked the strength to contest a bed and win their battle. Ten metres away, a blind man was lying on top of a blind woman, the man caught between her legs, they were being as discreet as they could, they were the discreet kind, but you would not have needed very sharp hearing to know what they were up to, especially when first one and then the other could no longer repress their sighs and groans, some inarticulate word, which are the signs that all that is about to end. The doctor's wife stopped in her tracks to watch them, not out of envy, she had her husband and the satisfaction he gave her, but because of an impression of another order, for which she could find no name, perhaps a feeling of sympathy, as if she were thinking of saying to them, Don't mind my being here, I also know what this means, continue, perhaps a feeling of compassion, Even if this instant of supreme pleasure should last you a lifetime, you will never become united as one. The blind man and the blind woman were now resting, apart, the one lying beside the other, but they were still holding hands, they were young, perhaps even lovers who had gone to the cinema and turned blind there, or perhaps some miraculous coincidence brought them together in this place, and, this being the case, how did they recognise each other, good heavens, by their voices, of course, it is not only the voice of blood that needs no eyes, love, which people say is blind, also has a voice of its own. In all probability, though, they were taken at the same time, in which case those clasped hands are not something recent, they have been clasped since the beginning.

The doctor's wife sighed, raised her hands to her eyes, she had to because she could

barely see, but she was not alarmed, she knew they were only tears. Then she continued on her way. On reaching the hallway, she went up to the door leading to the courtyard. She looked outside. Behind the gate there was a light which outlined the black silhouette of a soldier. On the other side of the street, the buildings were all in darkness. She went out on to the top of the steps. There was no danger. Even if the soldier were to become aware of her shadow, he would only shoot if she, having descended the stairs, were to get nearer, after being warned, from that other invisible line which represented for him the frontier of his safety. Accustomed now to the constant noises in the ward, the doctor's wife found the silence strange, a silence that seemed to occupy the space of an absence, as if humanity, the whole of humanity, had disappeared, leaving only a light and a soldier keeping watch over it. She sat on the ground, her back resting against the door jamb, in the same position in which she had seen the blind woman in the ward, and stared ahead like her. The night was cold, the wind blew along the front of the building, it seemed impossible that there should still be wind in this world, that the night should be black, she wasn't thinking of herself, she was thinking of the blind for whom the day was endless. Above the light, another silhouette appeared, it was probably the guard's relief, Nothing to report, the soldier would be saying before going off to his tent to get some sleep, neither of them had any idea what was happening behind that door, probably the noise of the shots had not even been heard out here, an ordinary gun does not make much noise. A pair of scissors even less, thought the doctor's wife. She did not waste time asking herself where such a thought had come from, she was only surprised at its slowness, at how the first word had been so slow in appearing, the slowness of those to follow, and how she found that the thought was already there before, somewhere or other, and only the words were missing, like a body searching in the bed for the hollow that had been prepared for it by the mere idea of lying down. The soldier approached the gate, although he is standing against the light, it is clear that he is looking in this direction, he must have noticed the motionless shadow, although, for the moment, there is not enough light to see that it is only a woman seated on the ground, her arms cradling her legs and her chin resting on her knees, the soldier points the beam of a torch at her, now there can be no doubt, it is a woman who is about to get up with a movement as slow as her previous thought had been, but the soldier is not to know this, all he knows is that he is afraid of that figure of a woman who seems to be taking ages to get to her feet, in a flash he asks himself whether he should raise the alarm, the next moment he decides against it, after all, it is only a woman and she is some way away, in any case, as a precaution he points his weapon in her direction, but this means putting the torch aside and, with that movement, the luminous beam shone directly into his eyes, like a sudden burning, an impression of being dazzled remained in his retina. When he recovered his vision, the woman had disappeared, now this guard will be unable to say to the person who comes to relieve him, Nothing to report.

The doctor's wife is already in the left wing, in the corridor that will take her to the third ward. Here too there are blind inmates sleeping on the floor, more of them than in the right wing. She walks noiselessly, slowly, she can feel the slime on the ground

sticking to her feet. She looks inside the first two wards, and sees what she expected to see, bodies lying under blankets, there is a blind man who is also unable to sleep and says so in a desperate voice, she can hear the staccato snoring of almost everyone else. As for the smell that all this gives off, it does not surprise her, there is no other smell in the entire building, it is the smell of her own body, of the clothes she is wearing. On turning the corner into the corridor giving access to the third ward, she came to a halt. There is a man at the door, another guard. He has a stick in his hand, he is wielding it in slow motion, to one side then the next, as if blocking the passage of anyone who might try to approach. Here there are no blind inmates sleeping on the ground and the corridor is clear. The blind man at the door continues his uniform toing-and-froing, he seems never to tire, but it is not so, after several minutes he takes his staff in the other hand and starts all over again. The doctor's wife advanced keeping close to the wall on the other side, taking care not to rub against it. The curve made by the stick does not even reach halfway across the wide corridor, one is tempted to say that this guard is on duty with an unloaded weapon. The doctor's wife is now directly opposite the blind man, she can see the ward behind him. Not all the beds are occupied. How many are there, she wondered. She advanced a little further, almost to the point where his stick could reach, and there she came to a halt, the blind man had turned his head to the side where she was standing, as if he had sensed something unusual, a sigh, a tremor in the air. He was a tall man, with large hands. First he stretched out before him the hand holding the stick and with rapid gestures swept the emptiness before him, then took a short step, for one second, the doctor's wife feared that he might be able to see her, that he was only looking for the best place to attack her, Those eyes are not blind, she thought with alarm. Yes, of course they were blind, as blind as those of all the inmates living under this roof, between these walls, all of them, all of them except her. In a low voice, almost in a whisper, the man asked, Who's there, he did not shout like a real guard, Who goes there, friend or foe, the appropriate reply would be, Friend, whereupon he would say, Pass, but keep your distance, however, things did not turn out this way, he merely shook his head as if he were saying to himself, What nonsense, how could anyone be there, at this hour everyone is asleep. Fumbling with his free hand, he retreated back towards the door, and, calmed by his own words, he let his arms hang. He felt sleepy, he had been waiting for ages for one of his comrades to come and relieve him, but for this to happen it was necessary that the other, on hearing the inner voice of duty, should wake up by himself, for there were no alarm clocks around nor any means of using them. Cautiously, the doctor's wife reached the other side of the door and looked inside. The ward was not full. She made a rapid calculation, decided there must be some nineteen or twenty occupants. At the far end, she saw a number of food containers piled up, others were lying on the empty beds. As was only to be expected, they don't distribute all the food they receive, she thought. The blind man seemed to be getting worried again, but made no attempt to investigate. The minutes passed. The sound of someone coughing loudly, obviously a heavy smoker, could be heard coming from inside. The blind man turned his head apprehensively, at last he would get some sleep. None of those lying in bed got up. Then the blind man, slowly, as if afraid that they might surprise him in the act of abandoning

his post or infringing at one go all the rules guards are obliged to observe, sat down on the edge of the bed blocking the entrance. For a few moments, he nodded, then he succumbed to the river of sleep, and in all certainty as he went under he must have thought, It doesn't matter, no one can see me. The doctor's wife counted once more those who were asleep inside, Including him there are twenty of them, at least she had gathered some real information, her nocturnal excursion had not been in vain, But was this my only reason for coming here, she asked herself, and she preferred not to pursue the answer. The blind man was sleeping, his head resting against the doorjamb, his stick had slipped silently to the floor, there was a defenceless blind man and with no columns to bring crashing down around him. The doctor's wife consciously wanted to think that this man had stolen the food, had stolen what rightfully belonged to others, that he took food from the mouths of children, but despite these thoughts, she did not feel any contempt, not even the slightest irritation, nothing other than a strange compassion for that drooping body before her, the head lolling backwards, the long neck covered in swollen veins. For the first time since she had left the ward she felt a cold shiver run through her, it was as if the flagstones were turning her feet to ice, as if they were being scorched. Let's hope it isn't fever, she thought. It couldn't be, more likely some infinite weariness, a longing to curl up inside herself, her eyes, especially her eyes, turned inwards, more, more, more, until they could reach and observe inside her own brain, there where the difference between seeing and not seeing is invisible to the naked eye. Slowly, ever more slowly, dragging her body, she retraced her footsteps to the place where she belonged, she passed by blind interneers who seemed like sleepwalkers, as she must have seemed to them, she did not even have to pretend that she was blind. The blind lovers were no longer holding hands, they were asleep and lying huddled beside each other, she in the curve made by his body to keep warm, and taking a closer look, they were holding hands, after all, his arm over her body, their fingers clasped. There inside the ward, the blind woman who had been unable to sleep was still sitting up in bed, waiting until she became so tired that her body would finally overcome the obstinate resistance of her mind. All the others appeared to be sleeping, some with their heads covered, as if they were still searching for some impossible darkness. On the bedside table of the girl with dark glasses stood the bottle of eye-drops. Her eyes were already better, but she was not to know.

If, because of a sudden illumination that might quell his suspicions, the blind man entrusted with keeping an account of the ill-gotten gains of the miscreants had decided to come over to this side with his writing board, his thick paper and puncher, he would now almost certainly be occupied in drafting the instructive and lamentable chronicle of the inadequate diet and the many other privations of these new fellow-inmates who have been well and truly fleeced. He would begin by saying that from where he had come, the usurpers had not only expelled the respectable blind inmates from the ward in order to take possession of the entire space, but, furthermore, had forbidden the inmates of the other two wards on the left-hand side any access or use of the respective sanitary installations, as they are called. He would remark that the immediate outcome of this infamous tyranny was that all those poor people would flock to the lavatories on this side, with consequences easy to imagine for anyone who still remembers the earlier state of the place. He would point out that it is impossible to walk through the inner courtyard without tripping over blind inmates getting rid of their diarrhoea or in contortions from ineffectual straining that had promised much and in the end resolved nothing, and, being an observant soul, he would not fail, deliberately, to register the patent contradiction between the small amount the inmates consumed and the vast quantity they excreted, perhaps thus showing that the famous relationship between cause and effect, so often cited, is not, at least from a quantitative point of view, always to be trusted. He would also say that while at this hour the ward of this thieving rabble must be crammed with containers of food, here it will not be long before the poor wretches are reduced to gathering up crumbs from the filthy floors. Nor would the blind accountant forget to condemn, in his dual role as participant in the process and its chronicler, the criminal conduct of these blind oppressors, who prefer to allow the food to go bad rather than give it to those who are in such great need, for while it is true that some of this foodstuff can last for weeks without going off, the rest, especially the cooked food, unless eaten immediately, soon turns sour or becomes covered in mould, and is therefore no longer fit for human consumption, if this sorry lot can still be thought of as human beings. Changing the subject but not the theme, the chronicler would write, with much sorrow in his heart, that the illnesses here are not solely those of the digestive tract, whether from lack of food or because of poor digestion of what was eaten, most of the people arriving here, though blind, were not only healthy, but some to all appearances were positively bursting with health, now they are like the others, unable to raise themselves from their miserable beds, stricken by influenza that spread who knows how. And not a single aspirin is there to be found anywhere in these five wards to lower their temperatures and relieve the pain of their headaches, what little was left was soon gone, after one had rummaged even through the lining of the women's handbags. Out of discretion, the chronicler would abandon any idea of making a detailed report of all the other ills that are afflicting most of the nearly three hundred inmates being kept in this inhumane quarantine, but he could not fail to mention at least two cases of fairly advanced cancer, for the authorities had no humanitarian scruples when rounding up the blind and confining them here, they even stated that the law once made is the same for everyone and that democracy is incompatible with preferential treatment. As cruel fate would have it, amongst all these

inmates there is only one doctor, and an ophthalmologist at that, the last thing we needed. Arriving at this point, the blind accountant, tired of describing so much misery and sorrow, would let his metal punch fall to the table, he would search with a trembling hand for the piece of stale bread he had put to one side while he fulfilled his obligations as chronicler of the end of time, but he would not find it, because another blind man, whose sense of smell had become very keen out of dire necessity, had filched it. Then, renouncing his fraternal gesture, the altruistic impulse that had brought him rushing to this side, the blind accountant would decide that the best course of action, if he was still in time, was to return to the third ward on the left, there, at least, however much the injustices of those hoodlums stirred up in him feelings of honest indignation, he would not go hungry.

This is really the crux of the matter. Each time those sent to fetch the food return to their ward with the meagre rations they have been given there is an outburst of angry protest. There is always someone who proposes collective action, a mass demonstration, using the forceful argument about the cumulative strength of their numbers, confirmed time and time again and sublimated in the dialectic affirmation that determined wills, in general merely capable of being added one to the other, are also very capable in certain circumstances of multiplying among themselves ad infinitum. However, it was not long before the inmates calmed down, it was enough that someone more prudent, with the simple and objective intention of pondering the advantages and risks of the action proposed, should remind the enthusiasts of the fatal effects handguns tend to have, Those who went ahead, they would say, would know what awaits them there, and as for those behind, best not to think of what might happen in the likely event that we should take fright at the first shot, more of us would be crushed to death than shot down. As an intermediate decision, it was decided in one of the wards, and word of this decision was passed on to the others, that, for the collection of food, they would not send the usual emissaries who had been subjected to derision but a sizable group, some ten or twelve persons to be more precise, who would try to express as one voice, the general discontent. Volunteers were asked to come forward, but, perhaps because of the aforementioned warnings of the more cautious, few came forward for this mission in any of the wards. Fortunately, this patent show of moral weakness ceased to have any importance, and even to be a cause for shame, when, proving prudence to be the correct response, the outcome of the expedition organised by the ward that had thought up the idea became known. The eight courageous souls who had been so bold were immediately chased away with cudgels, and while it is true that only one bullet was fired, it is also true that it was not aimed as high as the first shots, the proof being that the protesters claimed they had heard it whistle right past their heads. Whether there had been any intent to kill we shall perhaps discover later, for the present we shall give the marksman the benefit of the doubt, that is to say, either that the shot was no more than a warning, although a more serious one, or the leader of these rogues underestimated the height of the demonstrators whom he imagined to be shorter, or, a disconcerting thought, his mistake was to imagine them taller than they really were, in which case an intent to kill

would inevitably have to be considered. Leaving aside these trifling questions for the moment and turning to issues of general concern, which are those that matter, it was truly providential, even if merely a coincidence, that the protesters should have declared themselves the representatives of such and such a ward. In this way, only that ward had to fast for three days as a punishment, and fortunately for them, for they could have had their provisions cut off for ever, as is only just when someone dares to bite the hand that feeds him. So, during these three days, there was no other solution for those from the rebellious ward than to go from door to door and beg a crust of bread, for pity's sake, if possible with a bit of meat or cheese, they did not die of hunger, to be sure, but they had to take an earful. With ideas like that, what do you expect, If we had listened to you, where would we be now, but worst of all was to be told, Be patient, be patient, there are no crueller words, better to be insulted. And when the three days of punishment were over and it was thought that a new day was about to dawn, it became clear that the punishment of that unhappy ward where the forty rebellious inmates were quartered, was not yet over after all, for the rations which up until now had barely been enough for twenty, were now reduced to the point where they would not satisfy the hunger of ten. You can imagine, therefore, their outrage and indignation, and also, let it hurt whom it may, facts are facts, the fear of the remaining wards, who already saw themselves being besieged by the needy, their reactions divided between the classic duties of human solidarity and the observance of the ancient and no less time-honoured precept that charity begins at home.

Things were at this stage when an order came from the hoodlums that more money and valuables should be handed over inasmuch as they considered that the food supplies had exceeded the value of the initial payment, which moreover, according to them, had generously been calculated to be on the high side. The wards replied in despair that not so much as a coin was left in their pockets, that all the valuables collected had been scrupulously handed in, and that, a truly shameful argument, no decision could be altogether equitable if it were to ignore the difference in value of the various contributions, that is to say, in simple language, it was not fair that the upright man should pay for the sinner, and therefore that they should not cut off the provisions from someone, who in all probability, still had a balance to their credit. Obviously, none of the wards knew the value of what had been handed over by the others, but each ward thought it had every right to go on eating when the rest had already used up their credit. Fortunately, thanks to the fact that these latent conflicts were nipped in the bud, the hoodlums were adamant, their order had to be obeyed by everyone, if there had been any differences in the evaluation these were known only to the blind accountant. In the wards the exchanges were heated and bitter, sometimes becoming violent. Some suspected that certain selfish and dishonest inmates had withheld some of their valuables when the collection took place, and therefore had been given food at the expense of those who had given away everything to benefit the community. Others alleged, adopting what up until that moment had been a collective argument, that what they had handed over, should in itself be enough for them to go on being fed for many days to come,

instead of being forced to feed parasites. The threat made by the blind thugs at the outset, that they would carry out an inspection of the wards and punish those who had disobeyed their orders, ended up by being carried out inside each of the wards, the honest at loggerheads with the dishonest, and even the malicious. No great fortunes were discovered, but some watches and rings came to light, mostly belonging to men rather than women. As for the punishments exacted by internal justice, these were nothing more than a few random slaps, a few half-hearted and badly aimed punches, most of the exchanges were verbal insults, some accusing expression culled from the rhetoric of the past, for example, You'd steal from your own mother, just imagine, as if a similar ignominy, and others of even greater consideration would only be committed the day that everyone went blind, and, having lost the light of their eyes, even lost the guiding spirit of respect. The blind thugs received the payment with threats of harsh reprisals, which fortunately they did not carry out, the assumption being that they had forgotten, when the truth is that they already had another idea, as would soon be revealed. If they were to carry out their threats and further injustices, they would aggravate the situation, perhaps with immediate dramatic consequences, insofar as two of the wards, in order to conceal their crime of holding back valuables, presented themselves in the name of others, burdening the innocent wards with transgressions they had not committed, one of them so honest, in fact, that it had handed over everything on the first day. Fortunately, in order to spare himself more work, the blind accountant had decided to keep note of the various contributions that had just been made on a single and separate sheet of paper, and this was to everyone's advantage, both the innocent and the guilty, for the fiscal irregularity would almost certainly have caught his attention if he had entered them against the respective accounts.

After a week, the blind hoodlums sent a message saying that they wanted women. Just like that, Bring us women. This unexpected demand, although not altogether unusual, caused an outcry as one might have expected, the bewildered emissaries who had come with the order returned at once to communicate that the wards, the three on the right and the two on the left, not excepting the blind men and women who were sleeping on the floor, had decided unanimously to ignore this degrading imposition, arguing that human dignity, in this instance feminine, could not be debased to this extent, and that if the third ward on the left-hand side had no women, the responsibility, if any, could not be laid at their door. The reply was curt and intransigent, Unless you bring us women, you don't eat. Humiliated, the emissaries returned to the wards with this order, Either you go there or they will give us nothing to eat. The women on their own, those without any partner, or at least any fixed partner, protested at once, they were not prepared to pay for the food for other women's menfolk with what they had between their legs, one of them was even so bold as to say, forgetting the respect she owed her own sex, I'll go there if I want to, but whatever I may earn is for me, and if I so please, I'll move in with them, then I'll have a bed and my keep assured. These were the unequivocal words she uttered, but she did not put them into action, she remembered in time the horrors she would experience if she had to cope on her own with the erotic

frenzy of twenty desperate men whose urgency gave the impression they were blinded by lust. However, this declaration made so lightly in the second ward on the right-hand side, did not fall on stony ground, one of the emissaries, with a particular sense of occasion, supported her by proposing that women volunteers should come forward for this service, taking into account that what one does on one's own initiative is generally less arduous than if one has to do something under duress. Only one last scruple, one last reminder of the need for caution, prevented him from ending his appeal by quoting the well-known proverb, When the spirit is willing, your feet are light. Even so, no sooner had he stopped speaking than the protests erupted, anger broke out on all sides, without pity or compassion, the men were morally defeated, they were accused of being yobs, pimps, parasites, vampires, exploiters, panderers, according to the culture, social background and personal disposition of the women who were rightly indignant. Some of them declared their remorse at having given in, out of sheer generosity and compassion, to the sexual overtures of their companions in misfortune who were now showing their ingratitude by trying to push them into the worst of fates. The men tried to justify themselves, that it was not quite like that, that they should not dramatise, what the hell, by talking things over, people can come to some understanding, it was only because custom demands that volunteers should be asked to come forward in difficult and dangerous situations, as this one undoubtedly is, We are all at risk of dying of hunger, both you and us. Some of the women calmed down by this reasoning, but one of the others, suddenly inspired, threw another log on the fire when she asked ironically, And what would you do if these rascals instead of asking for women had asked for men, what would you do then, speak up so that everyone can hear. The women were jubilant, Tell us, tell us, they chorused, delighted at having backed the men up against the wall, caught in the snares of their own reasoning from which there was no escape, now they wanted to see how far that much lauded masculine logic would go, There are no pansies here, one man dared to protest, And no whores either, retorted the woman who had asked the provocative question, and even if there were, they might not be prepared to prostitute themselves for you. Put out, the men shrugged their shoulders, aware that there was only one answer capable of satisfying these vindictive women. If they were to ask for men, we would go, but not one of them had the courage to utter these brief, explicit and uninhibited words, and they were so dismayed that they forgot that there was no great harm in saying this, since those sons of bitches were not interested in relieving themselves with men but with women.

Now what did not occur to any of the men appeared to have occurred to the women, there could be no other explanation for the silence that gradually descended on the ward where these confrontations took place, as if they had understood that for them, victory in a verbal battle of wits was no different from the defeat that would inevitably follow, perhaps in the other wards the debate had been much the same, since we know that human reason and unreason are the same everywhere. Here, the person who passed the final judgment was a woman already in her fifties who had her old mother with her and no other means of providing her with food, I'll go, she said, without knowing that these

words echoed those spoken by the doctor's wife in the first ward on the right-hand side, I'll go, there are few women in this ward, perhaps for that reason the protests were fewer or less vehement, there was the girl with dark glasses, there was the wife of the first blind man, there was the girl from the surgery, there was the chambermaid, there was one woman nobody knew anything about, there was the woman who could not sleep, but she was so unhappy and wretched that it would be best to leave her in peace, for there was no reason why only the men should benefit from the women's solidarity. The first blind man had begun by declaring that his wife would not be subjected to the shame of giving her body to strangers in exchange for whatever, she had no desire to do so nor would he permit it, for dignity has no price, that when someone starts making small concessions, in the end life loses all meaning. The doctor then asked him what meaning he saw in the situation in which all of them there found themselves, starving, covered in filth up to their ears, ridden with lice, eaten by bedbugs, bitten by fleas, I, too, would prefer my wife not to go, but what I want serves no purpose, she has said she is prepared to go, that was her decision, I know that my manly pride, this thing we call male pride, if after so many humiliations we still preserve something worthy of that name, I know that it will suffer, it already is, I cannot avoid it, but it is probably the only solution, if we want to live, Each person proceeds according to whatever morals they have, that's how I see it and I have no intention of changing my ideas, the first blind man retorted aggressively. Then the girl with dark glasses said, The others don't know how many women are here, therefore you can keep yours for your exclusive use, we shall feed both you and her, I'd be interested to see how you feel then about your dignity, how the bread we bring you will taste, That's not the point, the first blind man started to reply, the point is, but his words tailed off, were left hanging in the air, in reality he did not know what the point was, everything he had said earlier had been no more than certain vague opinions, nothing more than opinions belonging to another world, not to this one, what he ought to do, no doubt about it, was to raise his hands to heaven thanking fortune that his shame might remain, as it were, at home, rather than bear the vexation of knowing that he was being kept alive by the wives of others. By the doctor's wife, to be absolutely precise, because as for the rest, apart from the girl with dark glasses, unmarried and free, about whose dissipated life-style we have more than enough information, if they had husbands they were not to be seen. The silence that followed the interrupted phrase seemed to be waiting for someone to clarify the situation once and for all, for this reason it was not long before the person who had to speak spoke up, this was the wife of the first blind man, who said without so much as a tremor in her voice, I'm no different from the others, I'll do whatever they do, You'll do as I say, interrupted her husband, Stop giving orders, they won't do much good here, you're as blind as I am, It's indecent, It's up to you not to be indecent, from now on you don't eat, this was her cruel reply, unexpected in someone who until today had been so docile and respectful towards her husband. There was a short burst of laughter, it came from the hotel maid, Ah, eat, eat, what is he to do, poor fellow, suddenly her laughter turned to weeping, her words changed, What are we to do, she said, it was almost a question, an almost resigned question to which there was no answer, like a despondent shaking of the head, so much so that the girl from the surgery

did nothing but repeat, What are we to do. The doctor's wife looked up at the scissors hanging on the wall, from the expression in her eyes you would say she was asking herself the same question, unless what she was looking for was an answer to the question she threw back at them, What do you want from me.

However, to everything its proper season, just because you rise early does not mean that you will die sooner. The blind inmates in the third ward on the left-hand side are well organised, they had already decided that they would begin with those closest, with the women from the wards in their wing. The application of this method of rotation, a more than apt expression, has all the advantages and no drawbacks, in the first place, because it will allow them to know, at any given moment, what has been done and what remains to be done, like looking at a clock and saying of the day that is passing, I've lived from here to here, I've so much or so little left, in the second place, because when the round of the wards has been completed, the return to the beginning will bring with it an undeniable air of renovation, especially for those with a very short sensory memory. So let the women in the wards in the right wing enjoy themselves, I can cope with the misfortunes of my neighbours, words that none of the women spoke but which they all thought, in truth, the human being to lack that second skin we call egoism has not yet been born, it lasts much longer than the other one, that bleeds so readily. It also has to be said that these women are enjoying themselves on two counts, such are the mysteries of the human soul, for the inescapable impending threat of the humiliation to which they are to be subjected, aroused and exacerbated in each ward sensual appetites that increasing familiarity had jaded, it was as if the men were desperately putting their mark on the women before they were taken off, it was as if the women wanted to fill their memory with sensations experienced voluntarily in order to be able better to defend themselves from the aggression of those sensations which, if they could, they would reject. It is inevitable that we should ask, taking as an example the first ward on the right-hand side, how the question of the difference between the number of men and women was resolved, even discounting the impotent of the males in the group, as in the case of the old man with the black eyepatch as well as others, unidentified, both old and young, who for one reason or another, neither said nor did anything worth bringing into our narrative. As has already been mentioned, there are seven women in this ward, including the blind woman who suffers from insomnia and whom nobody knows, and the so-called normal couples, are no more than two, which would leave an unbalanced number of men, because the boy with the squint does not yet count. Perhaps in the other wards there are more women than men, but an unwritten law, that soon gained acceptance here and subsequently became statutory decrees that all matters have to be resolved in the wards in which they have surfaced in accordance with the precepts of the ancients, whose wisdom we shall never tire of praising, if you would be well served, serve yourself. Therefore the women from the first ward on the right-hand side will give relief to the men who live under the same roof, with the exception of the doctor's wife, who, for some reason or other, no one dared to solicit either with words or an extended hand. Already the wife of the first blind man, after having made the first move with that abrupt

reply she had given her husband, did, albeit discreetly, what the other women had done, as she herself had announced. There are, however, certain resistances against which neither reason nor sentiment can do anything, such as is the case of the girl with dark glasses, whom the pharmacist's assistant, however many arguments he offered, however many pleas he made, was unable to win over, thus paying for his lack of respect at the outset. This same girl, there's no understanding women, who is the prettiest of all the women here, the one with the shapeliest figure, the most attractive, the one whom all the men craved when the word about her exceptional looks got around, finally got into bed one night of her own free will with the old man with the black eyepatch, who received her like summer rain and satisfied her as best he could, pretty well given his age, thus proving once more, that appearances are deceptive, that it is not from someone's face and the liveness of their body that we can judge their strength of heart. Everyone in the ward thought that it was nothing more than an act of charity that the girl with dark glasses should have offered herself to the old man with the black eyepatch, but there were men there, sensitive and dreamers, who having already enjoyed her favours, began to allow their thoughts to wander, to think there could be no greater prize in this world than for a man to find himself stretched out on his bed, all alone, thinking the impossible, only to realise that a woman is gently lifting the covers and slipping under them, slowly rubbing her body against his body, and then lying still, waiting for the heat of their blood to calm the sudden tremor of their startled skin. And all this for no good reason, just because she wanted to. These are fortunes that do not go to waste, sometimes a man has to be old and wear a black eyepatch covering an eye-socket that is definitively blind. And then there are certain things that are best left unexplained, it's best just to say what happened, not to probe people's inner thoughts and feelings, as on that occasion when the doctor's wife had got out of bed to go and cover up the boy with the squint whose blanket had slipped off. She did not go back to bed at once. Leaning against the wall at the far end of the ward, in the narrow space between the two rows of beds, she was looking in desperation at the door at the other end, that door through which they had entered on a day that seemed so remote and that now led nowhere. She was standing there when she saw her husband get up, and, staring straight ahead as if he were sleepwalking, make his way to the bed of the girl with dark glasses. She made no attempt to stop him. Standing motionless, she saw him lift the covers and then lie down, whereupon the girl woke up and received him without protest, she saw how those two mouths searched until they found each other, and then the inevitable happened, the pleasure of the one, the pleasure of the other, the pleasure of both of them, the muffled cries, she said, Oh, doctor, and these words could have sounded so ridiculous but did not, he said, Forgive me, I don't know what came over me, in fact, we were right, how could we, who hardly see, know what even he does not know, Lying on the narrow bed, they could not have imagined that they were being watched, the doctor certainly could not, he was suddenly worried, would his wife be asleep, he asked himself, or was she wandering the corridors as she did every night, he made to go back to his own bed, but a voice said, Don't get up, and a hand rested on his chest with the lightness of a bird, he was about to speak, perhaps about to repeat that he did not know what had got into him, but the voice

said, If you say nothing it will be easier for me to understand. The girl with dark glasses began to weep, What an unhappy lot we are, she murmured, and then, I wanted it too, I wanted it too, you are not to blame, Be quiet the doctor's wife said gently, let's all keep quiet, there are times when words serve no purpose, if only I, too, could weep, say everything with tears, not have to speak in order to be understood. She sat on the edge of the bed, stretched her arm over the two bodies, as if gathering them in the same embrace, and, bending over the girl with dark glasses, she whispered in her ear, I can see. The girl remained still, serene, simply puzzled that she should feel no surprise, it was as if she had known from the very first day but had not wanted to say so aloud since this was a secret that did not belong to her. She turned her head ever so slightly and responded by whispering into the ear of the doctor's wife, I knew, at least, I'm not entirely sure, but I think I knew, It's a secret, you mustn't tell a soul, don't worry, I trust you, And so you should, I'd rather die than betray you, You must call me "tu," Oh, no, I couldn't, I simply couldn't do it. They went on whispering to each other, first one, then the other, touching each other's hair, the lobe of the ear, with their lips, it was an insignificant dialogue, it was a profoundly serious dialogue, if this contradiction can be reconciled, a brief conspiratorial conversation that appeared to ignore the man lying between the two of them, but involved him in a logic outside the world of commonplace ideas and realities. Then the doctor's wife said to her husband, Lie there for a little longer, if you wish, No, I'm going back to our bed, Then I'll help you. She sat up to give him greater freedom of movement, contemplated for an instant the two blind heads resting side by side on the soiled pillow, their faces dirty, their hair tangled, only their eyes shining to no purpose. He got up slowly, looking for support, then remained motionless at the side of the bed, undecided, as if he had suddenly lost all notion of the place where he found himself, then she, as she had always done, took him by one arm, but the gesture now had another meaning, never had he so badly needed someone to guide him as at this moment, although he would never know to what extent, only the two women really knew, when the doctor's wife stroked the girl's cheek with her other hand and the girl impulsively took it and raised it to her lips. The doctor thought he could hear sobbing, an almost inaudible sound that could have come only from tears trickling slowly down to the corners of the mouth where they disappear to recommence the eternal cycle of inexplicable human joys and sorrows. The girl with dark glasses was about to remain alone, she was the one who ought to be consoled, for this reason the doctor's wife was slow to remove her hand.

Next day, at dinner-time, if a few miserable pieces of stale bread and mouldy meat deserved such a name, there appeared in the doorway of the ward three blind men from the other side. How many women have you got in here, one of them asked, Six, replied the doctor's wife, with the good intention of leaving out the blind woman who suffered from insomnia, but she corrected her in a subdued voice, There are seven of us. The blind thugs laughed, Too bad, said one of them, you'll just have to work all the harder tonight, and another suggested, Perhaps we'd better go and look for reinforcements in the next ward, It isn't worth it, said the third blind man who knew his sums, it works out at three

men for each woman, they can stand it. This brought another burst of laughter, and the fellow who had asked how many women there were, gave the order, When you've finished, come over to us, and added, That's if you want to eat tomorrow and suckle your menfolk. They said these words in all the wards, and still laughed at the joke with as much gusto as on the day they had invented it. They doubled up with laughter, stamped their feet, beat their thick cudgels on the ground, until one of them suddenly cautioned, Listen here, if any of you has got the curse, we don't want you, we'll leave it until the next time, No one's got the curse, the doctor's wife calmly informed him, Then prepare yourselves and don't be long, we're waiting for you. They turned and disappeared. The ward remained in silence. A minute later, the wife of the first blind man said, I cannot eat any more, she had precious little in her hand, and she could not bear to eat it. Nor me, said the blind woman who suffered from insomnia, Nor me, said the woman whom nobody seems to know, I've already finished, said the hotel maid, Me too, said the girl from the surgery, I'll throw up in the face of the first man who comes near me, said the girl with dark glasses. They were all on their feet, shaking and resolute. Then the doctor's wife said, I'll go in front. The first blind man covered his head with the blanket as if this might serve some purpose, since he was already blind, the doctor drew his wife towards him and, without saying anything, gave her a quick kiss on the forehead, what more could he do, it wouldn't make much difference to the other men, they had neither the rights nor the obligations of a husband as far as any of these women were concerned, therefore no one could come up to them and say, A consenting cuckold is a cuckold twice over. The girl with dark glasses got in behind the doctor's wife, then came the hotel maid, the girl from the surgery, the wife of the first blind man, the woman no one knows and, finally, the blind woman suffering from insomnia, a grotesque line-up of foul-smelling women, their clothes filthy and in tatters, it seems impossible that the animal drive for sex should be so powerful, to the point of blinding a man's sense of smell, the most delicate of the senses, there are even some theologians who affirm, although not in these exact words, that the worst thing about trying to live a reasonable life in hell is getting used to the dreadful stench down there. Slowly, guided by the doctor's wife, each of them with her hand on the shoulder of the one in front, the women started walking. They were all barefoot because they did not want to lose their shoes amidst the trials and tribulations they were about to endure. When they arrived in the hallway of the main entrance, the doctor's wife headed for the outer door, no doubt anxious to know if the world still existed. When she felt the fresh air, the hotel maid remembered, frightened, We can't go out, the soldiers are out there, and the blind woman suffering from insomnia said, All the better for us, in less than a minute we'd be dead, that is how we ought to be, all dead, You mean us, asked the girl from the surgery, No, all of us, all the women in here, at least then we'd have the best of reasons for being blind. She had never had so much to say for herself since she'd been brought here. The doctor's wife said, Let's go, only those who have to die will die, death doesn't give any warning when it singles you out. They passed through the door that gave access to the left wing, they made their way down the long corridors, the women from the first two wards could, if they had wished, tell them what awaited them, but they were curled up in their beds like animals that had

been given a good thrashing, the men did not dare to touch them, nor did they make any attempt to get close, because the women immediately started screaming.

In the last corridor, at the far end, the doctor's wife saw a blind man who was keeping a lookout, as usual. He must have heard their shuffling footsteps, and informed the others, They're coming, they're coming. From within came cries, whinnying, guffaws of laughter. Four blind men lost no time in removing the bed that was blocking the entrance, Quickly, girls, come in, come in, we're all here like studs in heat, you're going to get your bellies filled, said one of them. The blind thugs surrounded them, tried to fondle them, but fell back in disarray, when their leader, the one who had the gun, shouted, The first choice is mine as you well know. The eyes of all those men anxiously sought out the women, some extended avid hands, if in passing they happened to touch one of them they finally knew where to look. In the middle of the aisle, between the beds, the women stood like soldiers on parade waiting to be inspected. The leader of the blind hoodlums, gun in hand, came up to them, as agile and frisky as if he were able to see them. He placed his free hand on the woman suffering from insomnia, who was first in line, fondled her back and front, her hips, her breasts, between her legs. The blind woman began to scream and he pushed her away, You're a worthless whore. He passed on to the next one, who happened to be the woman that no one knew, now he was fondling her with both hands, having put his gun into his trouser pocket, I say, this one isn't at all bad, and then he moved on to the wife of the first blind man, then the employee from the surgery, then the hotel maid, and exclaimed, Listen, men, these fillies are pretty good. The blind hoodlums whinnied, stamped their feet on the ground, Let's get on with it, it's getting late, some yelled, Take it easy, said the thug with the gun, let me first take a look at the others. He fondled the girl with dark glasses and gave a whistle, Now then, here's a stroke of luck, no filly quite like this one has turned up before. Excited, as he went on fondling the girl, he passed on to the doctor's wife, gave another whistle, This one is on the mature side, but could turn out to be quite a woman. He drew the two women towards him, and almost drooled as he said, I'll keep these two, when I've finished with them, I'll pass them on to the rest of you. He dragged them to the end of the ward, where the containers of food, packets, tins had been piled up, enough supplies to feed a regiment. The women, all of them, were already screaming their heads off, blows, slaps, orders could be heard, Shut up, you whores, these bitches are all the same, they always have to start yelling, Give it to her good and hard and she'll soon be quiet, Just wait until it's my turn and you'll see how they'll be asking for more, Hurry up there, I can't wait another minute. The blind woman suffering from insomnia wailed in desperation beneath an enormous fellow, the other four were surrounded by men with their trousers down who were jostling each other like hyenas around a carcass. The doctor's wife found herself beside the bed where she had been taken, she was standing, her trembling hands gripping the railings of the bed, she watched how the blind leader with the gun tugged and tore the skirt of the girl with dark glasses, how he took down his trousers and, guiding himself with his fingers, pointed his member at the girl's sex, how he pushed and forced, she could hear the grunts, the obscenities, the girl with dark glasses said nothing,

she only opened her mouth to vomit, her head to one side, her eyes turned towards the other woman, he did not even notice what was happening, the smell of vomit is only noticed when the atmosphere and all the rest does not smell the same, at last the man shuddered from head to foot, gave three violent jolts as if he were riveting three girders, panted like a suffocating pig, he had finished. The girl with dark glasses wept in silence. The blind man with the gun withdrew his penis, still dripping and said in a hesitant voice, as he stretched out his arm to the doctor's wife, Don't get jealous, I'll be dealing with you next, and then raising his voice, I say, boys, you can come and get this one, but treat her nicely for I may need her again. Half a dozen blind men advanced unsteadily along the passageway, grabbed the girl with dark glasses and almost dragged her away. I'm first, I'm first, said all of them. The blind man with the gun had sat down on the bed, his flaccid penis was resting on the edge of the mattress, his trousers rolled down round his ankles. Kneel down here between my legs, he said. The doctor's wife got on to her knees. Suck me, he said, No, she replied, Either you suck me, or I'll give you a good thrashing, and you won't get any food, he told her, Aren't you afraid I might bite off your penis, she asked him, You can try, I have my hands on your neck, I'd strangle you first if you tried to draw blood, he replied menacingly. Then he said, I seem to recognise your voice, And I recognise your face, You're blind and cannot see me, No, I cannot see you, Then why do you say that you recognise my face, Because that voice can have only one face, Suck me, and forget the chitchat, No, Either you suck me, or your ward won't see another crumb of bread, go back there and tell them that if they have nothing to eat it's because you refused to suck me, and then come back to tell me what happened. The doctor's wife leaned forward, with the tips of two fingers on her right hand she held and raised the man's sticky penis, her left hand resting on the floor, touched his trousers, groped, felt the cold metallic hardness of the gun, I can kill him, she thought. She could not. With his trousers round his ankles, it was impossible to reach the pocket where he had put his weapon. I cannot kill him now, she thought. She moved her head forward, opened her mouth, closed it, closed her eyes in order not to see and began sucking.

Day was breaking when the blind hoodlums allowed the women to go. The blind woman suffering from insomnia had to be carried away in the arms of her companions, who could scarcely drag themselves along. For hours they had passed from one man to another, from humiliation to humiliation, from outrage to outrage, exposed to everything that can be done to a woman while leaving her still alive. As you know, payment is in kind, tell those pathetic men of yours that they have to come and fetch the grub, the blind man with the gun said mockingly as they left. And he added derisively, See you again, girls, so prepare yourselves for the next session. The other blind hoodlums repeated more or less in chorus, See you again, some called them fillies, others whores, but their waning libido was obvious from the lack of conviction in their voices. Deaf, blind, silent, tottering on their feet, with barely enough will-power not to let go of the hand of the woman in front, the hand, not the shoulder, as when they had come, certainly not one of them would have known what to reply if they had been asked, Why are you holding hands as you go, it simply came about, there are gestures for which we cannot

always find an easy explanation, sometimes not even a difficult one can be found. As they crossed the hallway, the doctor's wife looked outside, the soldiers were there as well as a truck that was almost certainly being used to distribute the food to those in quarantine. Just at that moment, the blind woman suffering from insomnia lost the power of her legs, literally, as if they had been cut off with a single blow, her heart also gave up, it did not even finish the rhythmic contraction it had started, at last we know why this blind woman could not sleep, now she will sleep, let us not wake her. She's dead, said the doctor's wife, and her voice was expressionless, if it were possible for such a voice, as dead as the word it had spoken, to have come from a living mouth. She raised the suddenly dislocated body, the legs covered in blood, her abdomen bruised, her poor breasts uncovered, brutally scarred, teeth marks on her shoulder where she had been bitten. This is the image of my body, she thought, the image of the body of all the women here, between these outrages and our sorrows there is only one difference, we, for the present, are still alive. Where shall we take her, asked the girl with dark glasses, For the moment to the ward, later we shall bury her, said the doctor's wife.

The men were waiting at the door, only the first blind man was missing, he had covered his head with his blanket once more when he realised the women were coming back, and the boy with the squint, who was asleep. Without hesitation, without having to count the beds, the doctor's wife laid the blind woman who suffered from insomnia on the bed she had occupied. She was unconcerned that the others might find it strange, after all, everyone there knew that she was the blind woman who was most familiar with every nook and cranny in the place. She's dead, she repeated, What happened, asked the doctor, but his wife made no attempt to answer him, his question might be simply what it appeared to mean, How did she die, but it could also imply What did they do to you in there, now, neither for the one nor for the other of these questions could there be an answer, she simply died, from what scarcely matters, it is foolish for anyone to ask what someone died from, in time the cause will be forgotten, only two words remain, She died, and we are no longer the same women as when we left here, the words they would have spoken we can no longer speak, and as for the others, the unnameable exists, that is its name, nothing else. Go and fetch the food, said the doctor's wife. Chance, fate, fortune, destiny, or whatever is the precise term for that which has so many names, is made of pure irony, how else could we understand why it was precisely the husbands of two of the women who were chosen to represent the ward and collect their food, when no one could imagine that the price would be what had just been paid. It could have been other men, unmarried, free, with no conjugal honour to defend, but then it had to be these two, who certainly will not now wish to bear the shame of extending a hand to beg from these degenerate rogues who have violated their wives. The first blind man said it, with all the emphasis of a firm decision, Whoever wishes can go, but I'm not going, I'll go, said the doctor, I'll go with you, said the old man with the black eyepatch. There won't be much food, but I warn you it's quite a weight, I still have the strength to carry the bread I eat, What always weighs more is the bread of the others, I have no right to complain, the weight carried by the others will buy me my food. Let us try to imagine, not the dialogue

for that is over and done with, but the men who took part in it, they are there, face to face, as if they could see each other, which in this case is impossible, it is enough that the memory of each of them should bring out from the dazzling whiteness of the world the mouth that is articulating the words, and then, like a slow irradiation coming from this centre, the rest of the faces will start to appear, one an old man, the other not so old, and anyone who can still see in this way cannot really be called blind. When they moved off to go and collect the wages of shame, as the first blind man protested with rhetorical indignation, the doctor's wife said to the other women, Stay here, I'll be right back. She knew what she wanted, she did not know if she would find it. She needed a bucket or something that would serve the purpose, she wanted to fill it with water, even if fetid, even if polluted, she wanted to wash the corpse of the woman who had suffered from insomnia, to wipe away her own blood and the sperm of others, to deliver her purified to the earth, if it still makes sense to speak of the purity of the body in this asylum where we are living, for purity of the soul, as we know, is beyond everyone's reach.

Blind men lay stretched out on the long tables in the refectory. From a dripping tap over a sink full of garbage, trickled a thread of water. The doctor's wife looked around her in search of a bucket or basin but could see nothing that might serve her purpose. One of the blind men was disturbed by this presence and asked, Who's there, She did not reply, she knew that she would not be welcome, that no one would say, You need water, then take it, and if it's to wash the corpse of a dead woman, take all the water you want. Scattered on the floor were plastic bags, those used for the food, some of them large. She thought they must be torn, then reflected that by using two or three, one inside the other, not much water would be lost. She acted quickly, the blind men were already getting down from the tables and asking, Who's there, even more alarmed when they heard the sound of running water, they headed in that direction, the doctor's wife got out of the way and pushed a table across their path so that they could not come near, she then retrieved her bag, the water was running slowly, in desperation she forced the tap, then, as if it had been released from some prison, the water spurted out, splashed all over the place and soaked her from head to foot. The blind men took fright and drew back, they thought a pipe must have burst, and they had all the more reason to think so when the flood reached their feet, they were not to know that it had been spilled by the stranger who had entered, as it happened the woman had realised that she would not be able to carry so much weight. She tied a knot in the bag, threw it over her shoulder, and, as best she could, fled.

When the doctor and the old man with the black eyepatch entered the ward with the food, they did not see, could not see, seven naked women and the corpse of the woman who suffered from insomnia stretched out on her bed, cleaner than she had ever been in all her life, while another woman was washing her companions, one by one, and then herself.

On the fourth day, the thugs reappeared. They had come to exact payment from the women in the second ward, but they paused for a moment at the door of the first ward to ask if the women there had yet recovered from the sexual orgy of the other night, A great night, yes sir, exclaimed one of them licking his chops and another confirmed, Those seven were worth fourteen, it's true that one of them was no great shakes, but in the middle of all that uproar who noticed, their men are lucky sods, if they're man enough for them. It would be better if they weren't, then they'd be more eager. From the far end of the ward, the doctor's wife said, There are no longer seven of us, Has one of you vamoosed, someone in the group asked, laughing, She didn't vamoose, she died, Oh, hell, then you lot will have to work all the harder next time, It wasn't much of a loss, she was no great shakes, said the doctor's wife. Disconcerted, the messengers did not know how to respond, what they had just heard struck them as indecent, some of them even came round to thinking that when all is said and done all women are bitches, such a lack of respect, to refer to a woman like that, just because her tits weren't in the right place and she had no arse to speak of. The doctor's wife was looking at them, as they hovered there in the doorway, undecided, moving their bodies like mechanical dolls. She recognised them, she had been raped by all three of them. At last, one of them tapped his stick on the ground, Let's go, he said. Their tapping and their warning cries, Keep back, keep back, it's us, died away as they made their way along the corridor, then there was silence, vague sounds, the women from the second ward were receiving the order to present themselves after dinner. Once more the tapping of sticks could be heard, Keep back, keep back, the shadows of the three blind men passed through the doorway and they were gone.

The doctor's wife who had been telling the boy with the squint a story, raised her arm and, without a sound, took the scissors from the nail. She said to the boy, Later I'll tell you the rest of the story. No one in the ward had asked her why she had spoken with such disdain of the blind woman who had suffered from insomnia. After a while, she removed her shoes and went to reassure her husband, I won't be long, I'm coming straight back. She headed for the door. There she paused and remained waiting. Ten minutes later the women from the second ward appeared in the corridor. There were fifteen of them. Some were crying. They were not in line, but in groups, tied to each other with strips of cloth that had clearly been torn from their bedclothes. When they had passed, the doctor's wife followed them. Not one of them perceived that they had company. They knew what awaited them, the news of the abuses they would suffer was no secret, nor were these abuses anything really new, for in all certainty this is how the world began. What terrified them was not so much the rape, but the orgy, the shame, the anticipation of the terrible night ahead, fifteen women sprawled on the beds and on the floor, the men going from one to the other, snorting like pigs, The worst thing of all is that I might feel some pleasure, one of the women thought to herself. When they entered the corridor giving access to the ward they were heading for, the blind man on the lookout alerted the others, I can hear them, they'll be here any minute. The bed being used as a gateway was quickly removed, one by one the women entered, Wow, so many of

them, exclaimed the blind accountant, as he counted them enthusiastically, Eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, fifteen, there are fifteen of them. He went after the last one, put his eager hands up her skirt, This one is game, she's mine, he was saying. They had finished sizing up the women and making a preliminary assessment of their physical attributes. In fact, if all of them were condemned to endure the same fate, there was no point in wasting time and cooling their desire as they made their choice according to height and the measurement of busts and hips. They were soon taking them off to bed, already stripping them by force, and it was not long before the usual weeping and pleas for mercy could be heard, but the replies when they came, were always the same, If you want to eat, open your legs. And they opened their legs, some were ordered to use their mouth like the one who was crouched down between the knees of the leader of these ruffians and this one was saying nothing. The doctor's wife entered the ward, slipped slowly between the beds, but she need not even have taken these precautions, no one would have heard her had she been wearing clogs, and if, in the middle of the fracas, some blind man were to touch her and become aware that it was a woman, the worst that could happen to her would be having to join the others, not that anyone would notice, in a situation like this it is not easy to tell the difference between fifteen and sixteen.

The leader of these hoodlums still had his bed at the far end of the ward where the containers of food were stacked. The beds near his had been removed, the fellow liked to move at will without having to keep bumping into his neighbours. Killing him was going to be simple. As she slowly advanced along the narrow aisle, the doctor's wife studied the movements of the man she was about to kill, how he threw his head back as he took his pleasure, as if he were offering her his neck. Slowly, the doctor's wife approached, circled the bed and positioned herself behind him. The blind woman went on doing what was expected of her. The doctor's wife slowly raised the scissors, the blades slightly apart so that they might penetrate like two daggers. Just then, at the last minute, the blind man seemed to be aware of someone's presence, but his orgasm had transported him from the world of normal sensations, had deprived him of any reflexes, You won't have time to come, the doctor's wife reflected as she brought her arm down with tremendous force. The scissors dug deep into the blind man's throat, turning on themselves they struggled with the cartilage and the membranous tissues, then furiously went deeper until they came up against the cervical vertebrae. His cry was barely audible, it might have been the grunting of an animal about to ejaculate, as was happening to some of the other men, and perhaps it was, and at the same time as a spurt of blood splashed on to her face, the blind woman received the discharge of semen in her mouth. It was her cry that startled the blind men, they were more than used to hearing cries, but this was quite unlike the others. The blind woman was screaming, where had this blood come from, probably, without knowing how, she had done what it had crossed her mind to do and bitten off his penis. The blind men left the women, approached groping their way, What's going on, what's all this screaming, they asked, but the blind woman now had a hand over her mouth, someone had whispered in her ear, Be quiet, and then gently pulled her

back, Say nothing, it was a woman's voice, and this calmed her, if that is possible in such distressing circumstances. The blind accountant arrived ahead of the others, he was the first to touch the body which had toppled across the bed, the first to run his hands over it, He's dead, he exclaimed almost immediately. The head was hanging down on the other side of the bed, the blood was still spurting out, They've killed him, he said. The blind men stopped in their tracks, they could not believe their ears, How could they have killed him, who killed him, They've made an enormous slit in his throat, it must have been that whore who was with him, we've got to get her. The blind men stirred once more, more slowly this time, as if they were afraid of coming up against the blade that had killed their leader. They could not see that the blind accountant was hastily rummaging through the dead man's pockets, that he was removing his gun and a small plastic bag with about ten cartridges. Everyone was suddenly distracted by an outcry from the women, already on their feet, in panic, anxious to get away from that place, but some had lost any notion of where the ward door was located, they went in the wrong direction and ran into the blind men who thought the women were about to attack them, whereupon the confusion of bodies reached new heights of delirium. At the far end of the ward, the doctor's wife quietly awaited the right moment to make her escape. She had a firm grip on the blind woman, in her other hand she held the scissors ready to land the first blow if any man should come near her. For the moment, the free space was in her favour, but she knew that she could not linger there. A number of women had finally found the door, others were struggling to free themselves from the hands holding them back, there was even the odd one still trying to throttle the enemy and deliver another corpse. The blind accountant called out with authority to his men, Keep calm, don't lose your nerve, we'll get to the bottom of this matter, and anxious to make his order all the more convincing he fired a shot into the air. The outcome was exactly the opposite of what he expected. Surprised to discover that the gun was already in other hands and that they were about to have a new leader, the blind hoodlums stopped struggling with the women, gave up trying to dominate them, one of the men having given up the struggle altogether because he had been strangled. It was at this point that the doctor's wife decided to move. Striking blows left and right, she opened a path. Now it was the blind thugs who were calling out, who were being knocked over and climbing all over each other, anyone there with eyes to see, would perceive that, compared with this, the previous upheaval had been a joke. The doctor's wife had no desire to kill, all she wanted was to get out as quickly as possible and, above all, not to leave a single blind woman behind. This one probably won't survive, she thought as she dug the scissors into a man's chest. Another shot was heard, Let's go, let's go, said the doctor's wife, pushing any blind women whom she encountered ahead of her. She helped them to their feet, repeated, Quickly, quickly, and now it was the blind accountant who was shouting from the far end of the ward, Grab them, don't let them escape, but it was too late, the women were already out in the corridor, they fled, stumbling as they went, half dressed, holding on to their rags as best they could. Standing still at the entrance to the ward, the doctor's wife called out in a rage, Remember what I said the other day, that I'd never forget his face, and from now on think about what I am telling you, for I won't forget your faces either, You'll pay dearly

for this outrage, threatened the blind accountant, you and your companions and those so-called men of yours, You neither know who I am nor where I've come from, You're from the first ward on the other side, volunteered one of the men who had gone to summon the women, and the blind accountant added, Your voice is unmistakable, you need only utter one word in my presence and you're dead, The other fellow said the same thing and now he's a corpse, But I'm not a blind man like him or you, when you lot turned blind, I already knew everything about this world, You know nothing about my blindness. You're not blind, you can't fool me, Perhaps I'm the blindest of all, I've already killed and I'll kill again if I have to, You'll die first of hunger, from today onwards there will be no more food, even if you were all to come offering on a tray the three holes you were born with. For each day that we're deprived of food because of you, one of the men here will die the moment he steps outside this door, You won't get away with this, Oh, yes we will, from now on we shall be collecting the food, and you can eat what you've hoarded there, Bitch, Bitches are neither men nor women, they're bitches, and you know now what they're worth. Enraged, the blind accountant fired in the direction of the door. The bullet whizzed past the heads of the blind men without hitting anyone and lodged itself in the corridor wall. You didn't get me, said the doctor's wife, and take care, if your ammunition runs out, there are others here who would like to be leader too.

She moved away, took a few steps, still firm, then advanced along the wall of the corridor, almost fainting, suddenly her legs gave way, and she fell to the ground. Her eyes clouded over, I'm going blind, she thought, but then realised it would not be just yet, these were only tears blurring her vision, tears such as she had never shed in all her life, I've killed a man, she said in a low voice, I wanted to kill him and I have. She turned her head in the direction of the ward door, if the blind men were to come now, she would be unable to defend herself. The corridor was deserted. The woman had disappeared, the blind men, still startled by the gunfire and even more by the corpses of their own men, did not dare come out. Little by little she regained her strength. Her tears continued to flow, slower and more serene, as if confronted by something irremediable. She struggled to her feet. She had blood on her hands and clothes, and suddenly her exhausted body told her that she was old, Old and a murderess, she thought, but she knew that if it were necessary, she would kill again, And when is it necessary to kill, she asked herself as she headed in the direction of the hallway, and she herself answered the question, When what is still alive is already dead. She shook her head and thought, And what does that mean, words, nothing but words. She walked on alone. She approached the door leading to the forecourt. Between the railings of the gate she could just make out the shadow of a soldier who was keeping guard. There are still people out there, people who can see. The sound of footsteps behind her caused her to tremble, It's them, she thought and turned round rapidly with her scissors at the ready. It was her husband. As they went past, the women from the second ward had been shouting out what had happened on the other side, that a woman had stabbed and killed the leader of the thugs, that there had been shooting, the doctor did not ask them to identify the woman, it could only be his wife, she had told the boy with the squint that she would tell him the rest of the story

later, and what would have become of her now, probably dead as well, I'm here, she said, and went up to him and embraced him, not noticing that she was smearing him with blood, or noticing but unconcerned, for until now they had shared everything. What happened, the doctor asked, they said a man was killed, Yes, I killed him, Why, Someone had to do it, and there was no one else, And now, Now we're free, they know what awaits them if they ever try to abuse us again, There's likely to be a battle, a war, The blind are always at war, always have been at war, Will you kill again, If I have to, I shall never be free from this blindness, And what about the food, We shall fetch it, I doubt whether they'll dare to come here, at least for the next few days they'll be afraid the same might happen to them, that a pair of scissors will slit their throat, We failed to put up resistance as we should have done when they first came making demands, Of course, we were afraid and fear isn't always a wise counsellor, let's get back, for our greater safety we ought to barricade the door of the wards by putting beds on top of beds, as they do, if some of us have to sleep on the floor, too bad, better that than to die of hunger.

In the days that followed, they asked themselves if that was not what was about to happen to them. At first they were not surprised, from the outset they had become used to it, there had always been delays in the delivery of food, the blind thugs were right when they said the soldiers were sometimes late, but then they perverted this reasoning when, in a playful tone of voice, they affirmed that for this reason they had no choice but to impose rationing, these are the painful obligations of those who have to govern. On the third day when there was no longer as much as a crumb, the doctor's wife with some companions, went out into the forecourt and asked, Hey, why the delay, whatever happened to our food, we haven't eaten for the last two days. Another sergeant, not the one from the time before, came up to the railing to declare that the army was not responsible, that no one there was trying to take the bread from their mouths, that military honour would never allow it, if there was no food it was because there was no food, and all of you stay where you are, the first one to advance knows the fate that waits for him, the orders have not changed. This warning was enough to send them back inside, and they conferred amongst themselves, And now what do we do if they won't bring us any food, They might bring some tomorrow, Or the day after tomorrow, Or when we no longer have the strength to move, We ought to go out, We wouldn't even get as far as the gate, If only we had our sight, If we had our sight we wouldn't have landed in this hell, I wonder what life is like out there, Perhaps those bastards might give us something to eat if we went there to ask, after all if there's a shortage for us, they must be running short too, That's why they're unlikely to give us anything they've got, And before their food runs out we will have died of starvation, What are we to do then, They were seated on the floor, under the yellowish light of the only lamp in the hallway, more or less in a circle, the doctor and the doctor's wife, the old man with the black eyepatch, amongst the other men and women, one or two from each ward, from the wing on the left as well as from the one on the right, and then, this world of the blind being what it is, there occurred what always occurs, one of the men said, All I know is that we would

never have found ourselves in this situation if their leader hadn't been killed, what did it matter if the women had to go there twice a month to give these men what nature gave them to give, I ask myself. Some found this amusing, some forced a smile, those inclined to protest were deterred by an empty stomach, and the same man insisted, What I'd like to know is who did the stabbing, The women who were there at the time swear it was none of them, What we ought to do is to take the law into our own hands and bring the culprit to justice, If we knew who was responsible, we'd say this is the person you're looking for, now give us the food, If we knew who was responsible. The doctor's wife lowered her head and thought, He's right, if anyone here should die of hunger it will be my fault, but then, giving voice to the rage she could feel welling up inside her contradicting any acceptance of responsibility, But let these men be the first to die so that my guilt may pay for their guilt. Then she thought, raising her eyes, And if I were now to tell them that it was I who killed him, they would hand me over, knowing that they would be delivering me to certain death. Whether it was the effect of hunger or because the thought suddenly seduced her like some abyss, her head spun as if she were in a daze, her body moved despite herself, her mouth opened to speak, but just at that moment someone grabbed and squeezed her arm, she looked, it was the old man with the black eyepatch, who said, Anyone who gave himself up, I'd kill him with my own hands, Why, people in the circle asked, Because if shame still has any meaning in this hell where we're expected to live and which we've turned into the hell of hells, it is thanks to that person who had the courage to go and kill the hyena in its lair, Agreed, but shame won't fill our plates, Whoever you may be, you're right in what you say, there have always been those who have filled their bellies because they had no sense of shame, but we, who have nothing, apart from this last shred of undeserved dignity, let us at least show that we are still capable of fighting for what is rightfully ours, What are you trying to say, That having started off by sending in the women and eaten at their expense like low-life pimps, the time has now come for sending in the men, if there are any, Explain yourself, but first tell us where you are from, I'm from the first ward on the right-hand side, Go on then, It's very simple, let's go and collect the food with our own hands, Those men are armed, As far as we know, they have only one gun and the ammunition will run out sooner or later, They have enough to make sure that some of us will die, Others have died for less, I'm not prepared to lose my life so that the rest can enjoy themselves. Would you also be prepared to starve, if someone should lose his life so that you might have food, the old man with the black eyepatch asked sarcastically, and the other man gave no reply.

In the entrance of the door leading to the wards in the right-hand wing, appeared a woman who had been listening out of sight. She was the one who had received the spurt of blood in her face, the one into whose mouth the dead man had ejaculated, the one in whose ear the doctor's wife had whispered, Be quiet, and now the doctor's wife is thinking, From here where I'm sitting in the midst of others, I cannot tell you to be quiet, don't give me away, but no doubt you recognise my voice, it's impossible that you could have forgotten it, my hand covered your mouth, your body against mine, and I said, Be

quiet, and the moment has come to know whom I really saved, to know who you are, that is why I am about to speak, that is why I am about to say in a loud, clear voice so that you might accuse me, if this is your destiny and mine, I am now saying, Not only the men will go, but also the women, we shall return to that place where they humiliated us so that none of that humiliation may remain, so that we might rid ourselves of it in the same way that we spat out what they ejaculated into our mouths. She uttered these words and waited, until the woman replied, Wherever you go, I shall go, that was what she said. The old man with the black eyepatch smiled, it seemed a happy smile, and perhaps it was, this is not the moment to ask him, it is much more interesting to observe the expression of surprise on the faces of the other blind men, as if something had passed over their heads, a bird, a cloud, a first hesitant glimmer of light. The doctor took his wife's hand, then asked, Are there still people here intent on discovering who killed that fellow, or are we agreed that the hand that stabbed him was the hand of all of us, or to be more precise, the hand of each one of us. No one replied. The doctor's wife said, Let's give them a little longer, if, by tomorrow, the soldiers have not brought our food, then we advance. They got up, went their separate ways, some to the right, others to the left, imprudently they had not reflected that some blind man from the ward of the thugs might have been listening, fortunately the devil is not always behind the door, a saying that could not have been more appropriate. Somewhat less appropriate was the blast that came from the loudspeaker, recently it had spoken on certain days, on others not at all, but always at the same time, as had been promised, clearly there was a timer in the transmitter which at the precise moment started up the recorded tape, the reason why it should have broken down from time to time we are never likely to know, these are matters for the outside world, it is in any case serious enough, insofar as it muddled up the calendar, the so-called counting of the days, which some blind men, natural obsessives, or lovers of order, which is a moderate form of obsession, had tried scrupulously to follow by making little knots in a piece of string, this was done by those who did not trust their memory, as if they were writing a diary. Now it was the time that was out of phase, the mechanism must have broken down, a twisted relay, some loose soldering, let's hope the recording will not keep going back for ever to the beginning, that was all we needed as well as being blind and mad. Along the corridors, through the wards, like some final and futile warning, boomed an authoritarian voice, the Government regrets having been forced to exercise with all urgency what it considers to be its rightful duty, to protect the population by all possible means in this present crisis, when something with all the appearance of an epidemic of blindness has broken out, provisionally known as the white sickness, and we are relying on the civic spirit and cooperation of all citizens to stem any further contagious, assuming that we are dealing with a contagious disease and that we are not simply witnessing a series of as yet inexplicable coincidences. The decision to gather together in one place all those infected, and, in adjacent but separate quarters all those who have had any kind of contact with them, was not taken without careful consideration. The Government is fully aware of its responsibilities and hopes that those to whom this message is directed will, as the upright citizens they doubtless are, also assume their responsibilities, bearing in mind

that the isolation in which they now find themselves will represent, above any personal considerations, an act of solidarity with the rest of the nation's community. That said, we ask everyone to listen attentively to the following instructions, first, the lights will be kept on at all times, any attempt to tamper with the switches will be useless, they don't work, second, leaving the building without authorisation will mean instant death, third, in each ward there is a telephone that can be used only to requisition from outside fresh supplies for purposes of hygiene and cleanliness, fourth, the internees will be responsible for washing their own clothes by hand, fifth, it is recommended that ward representatives should be elected, this is a recommendation rather than an order, the internees must organise themselves as they see fit, provided they comply with the aforesaid rules and those we are about to announce, sixth, three times daily containers with food will be deposited at the main door, on the right and on the left, destined respectively for the patients and those suspected of being contaminated, seventh, all the left-overs must be burnt, and this includes not only any food, but also the containers, plates and cutlery which are all made of combustible material, eighth, the burning should be done in the inner courtyards of the building or in the exercise yard, ninth, the internees are responsible for any damage caused by these fires, tenth, in the event of a fire getting out of control, whether accidentally or on purpose, the firemen will not intervene, eleventh, equally, the internees cannot count on any outside intervention should there be any outbreaks of illnesses, nor in the event of any disorder or aggression, twelfth, in the case of death, whatever the cause, the internees will bury the corpse in the yard without any formalities, thirteenth, contact between the wing of the patients and that of the people suspected of being contagious must be made in the central hall of the building by which they entered, fourteenth, should those suspected of being infected suddenly go blind, they will be transferred immediately to the other wing, fifteenth, this communication will be relayed daily at the same time for the benefit of all new arrivals. The Government, but at that very moment the lights went out and the loudspeaker fell silent. Unconcerned, a blind man tied a knot in the piece of string he was holding in his hands, then he tried to count them, the knots, the days, but he gave up, there were knots overlapping, blind knots in a manner of speaking. The doctor's wife said to her husband, The lights have gone out, Some lamp that had fused, and little wonder when they have been switched on for all this time, They've all gone out, the problem must have been outside, Now you're as blind as the rest of us, I'll wait until the sun comes up. She went out of the ward, crossed the hallway, looked outside. This part of the city was in darkness, the army's searchlight was not working, it must have been connected to the general network, and now, to all appearances, the power was off.

The following day, some earlier, others later, because the sun does not rise at the same time for all those who are blind, it often depends on the keenness of hearing of each of them, men and women from the various wards began gathering on the outer steps of the building with the exception, needless to say, of the ward occupied by the hoodlums, who at this hour must be having their breakfast. They were waiting for the thud of the gate being opened, the loud screeching of hinges that needed to be greased,

the sounds that announced the arrival of their food, then the voice of the sergeant on duty, Don't move from where you are, let no one approach, the dragging of soldiers' feet, the dull sound of the containers being dumped on the ground, the hasty retreat, once more the creaking of the gate, and finally the authorisation, Now you can come out. They waited until it was almost midday and midday became the afternoon. No one, not even the doctor's wife, wanted to ask about the food. So long as they did not ask the question they would not hear the dreaded no, and so long as it was not spoken they would go on hoping to hear words like these, It's coming, it's coming, be patient, put up with your hunger for just a little longer. Some, however much they wanted, could not stand it any longer, they fainted there and then as if they had suddenly fallen asleep, fortunately the doctor's wife was there to come to the rescue, it was incredible how this woman managed to notice everything that was happening, she must be endowed with a sixth sense, some sort of a vision without eyes, thanks to which those miserable wretches did not remain there to broil in the sun, they were carried indoors at once, and with time, water and gentle slaps on the face, all of them eventually came round. But there was no point in counting on the latter for the war, they would not even be able to grab a she-cat by the tail, an old-fashioned expression which never explained for what extraordinary reason a she-cat should be easier to deal with than a tom-cat. Finally the old man with the black eyepatch said, The food hasn't come, the food won't come, let's go and get our food. They got up, God knows how, and went to assemble in the ward furthest away from the stronghold of the hoodlums, rather than have any repetition of the imprudence of the other day. From there they sent spies to the other wing, blind inmates who lived there and were more familiar with the surroundings, At the first suspicious movement, come and warn us. The doctor's wife went with them and came back with some disheartening information, They have barricaded the entrance with four beds stacked one on top of the other, How did you know there were four, someone asked, That wasn't difficult, I felt them, Did no one realise you were there, I don't think so, What are we going to do, Let's go, the old man with the black eyepatch suggested once more, let's stick to what was decided, it's either that or we're condemned to a slow death. Some will die sooner if we go there, said the first blind man, Anyone who is going to die is already dead and does not know it, That we're going to die is something we know from the moment we are born, That's why, in some ways, it's as if we were born dead, That's enough of your foolish talk, said the girl with the dark glasses, I cannot go there alone, but if we are now going to go back on what was agreed, then I'm simply going to lie on my bed and allow myself to die, Only those whose days are numbered will die, no one else, said the doctor, and raising his voice, he asked, Those who are determined to go, raise their hand, this is what happens to those who do not think twice before opening their mouth to speak, what was the point in asking them to raise their hands if there was no one there to count them, or so it was generally believed, and then say, Thirteen, in which case a new discussion would almost certainly start up to establish what, in the light of logic, would be more correct, whether to ask for another volunteer to avoid that unlucky number, or to avoid it by default, drawing lots to decide who should drop out. Some had raised their hand with little conviction, with a gesture that betrayed hesitation and doubt, whether

because aware of the danger to which they were about to expose themselves, or because they realised the absurdity of the order. The doctor laughed, How ridiculous, to ask you to put up your hands, let's proceed in another manner, let those who cannot or do not wish to go withdraw, the rest stay behind to agree upon the action to be taken. There were stirrings, footsteps, murmurs, sighs, little by little, the weak and nervous dropped out, the doctor's idea had been as excellent as it was generous, in this way it will be less easy to know who had remained and who was no longer there. The doctor's wife counted those who had remained, they were seventeen, counting herself and her husband. From the first ward on the right hand side, there was the old man with the black eye-patch, the pharmacist's assistant, the girl with dark glasses, and all the volunteers from the other wards were men with the exception of that woman who had said, Wherever you go, I shall go, she is here too. They lined up along the passageway, the doctor counted them, Seventeen, we're seventeen, That's not very many, remarked the pharmacist's assistant, we'll never manage. The front line of attack, if I may use a rather military term, will have to be a narrow one, said the old man with the black eye-patch, we have to be able to fit through a door, I'm convinced it would only complicate matters if there were more of us, They'd shoot the lot of us, agreed another, and everyone seemed pleased that in the end they were few.

Their arms we are already familiar with, bars taken from the beds, which might serve just as well as a crowbar or a lance, according to whether the sappers or assault troops were going into battle. The old man with the black eyepatch, who had clearly learned something about tactics in his youth, suggested that everyone should stay together, facing in the same direction, since this was the only way to avoid attacking each other, and that they should advance in absolute silence, so that the attack might benefit from the element of surprise, Let's take off our shoes, he suggested. Then it's going to be difficult for each of us to find our own shoes, someone said, and another commented, Any shoes left over will truly be dead men's shoes, with the difference that in this case, at least, there will always be someone to step into them, What is all this talk about dead men's shoes, It's a saying, to wait for dead men's shoes means to wait for nothing at all, Why, Because the shoes the dead were buried in were made of cardboard, they served their purpose, souls have no feet, as far as we know, And there's another point, interrupted the old man with the black eyepatch, when we get there, six of us, the six who are feeling bravest, will shove the beds inside as hard as they can, so that all of us may enter, In that case, we'll have to lay down our arms, I don't think that will be necessary, they might even help, if used upright. He paused, then said, with a sombre note in his voice, Above all, we must not split up, if we do we're as good as dead, And what about the women, said the girl with dark glasses, don't forget the women, Are you going as well, asked the old man with the black eyepatch, I'd rather you didn't, And why not, I'd like to know, You're very young, In this place, age is of no account, nor sex, therefore don't forget the women, No, I won't forget, the voice in which the old man with the black eyepatch spoke these words appeared to come from another dialogue, those that follow were already in their place, On the contrary, if only one of you women could

see what we cannot see, take us along the right path, with the tip of our metal bars at the throats of these ruffians, as accurately as that other woman did, That would be asking too much, we can't easily repeat what we've done once already, besides, who's to say that she didn't die there and then, there has been no news of her, the doctor's wife reminded them, Women are born again in one another, the respectable are reborn as whores, whores are reborn as respectable women, said the girl with dark glasses. This was followed by a long silence, for the women everything had been said, the men would have to find the words, and they knew already that they would be incapable of doing so.

They filed out, the six braver ones in front as had been agreed, amongst them was the doctor and the pharmacist's assistant, then came the others, each armed with a metal rod from his bed, a brigade of squalid, ragged lancers, as they crossed the hallway one of them dropped his weapon, which made a deafening sound on the tiled floor like a blast of gunfire, if the hoodlums were to hear the noise and get wind of what we're up to, then we're lost. Without telling anyone, not even her husband, the doctor's wife ran ahead, looked along the corridor, then very slowly, keeping close to the wall, she gradually drew nearer to the entrance of the ward, there she listened attentively, the voices within did not sound alarmed. She brought back this information without delay and the advance recommenced. Apart from the slowness and the silence with which the army moved, the occupants of the two wards that were located before the stronghold of the hoodlums, aware of what was about to happen, gathered at the doors so as not to miss the imminent clamour of battle, and some of those more on edge, excited by the smell of gunpowder about to be lit, decided at the last minute to accompany the group, a few went back to arm themselves, they were no longer seventeen, they had at least doubled in number, the reinforcements would certainly displease the old man with the black eyepatch, but he was never to know that he was commanding two regiments instead of one. Through the few windows that looked on to the inner courtyard entered the last glimmer of light, grey, moribund, as it rapidly faded, already slipping away into the deep black well of the night ahead. Apart from the inconsolable sadness caused by the blindness from which they inexplicably continued to suffer, the blind internees, this at least was in their favour, were spared any fits of depression produced by these and other similar atmospheric changes, proven to be the cause of innumerable acts of despair in the remote past when people had eyes to see. When they reached the door of that cursed ward, it was already so dark that the doctor's wife failed to notice that there were not four but eight beds forming a barrier, doubled in number in the meantime like the assailants, however with more serious immediate consequences for the latter, as will soon be confirmed. The voice of the old man with the black eyepatch let out a cry, it was the order, he did not remember the usual expression, Charge, or perhaps he did, but it would have struck him as ridiculous to treat with such military consideration, a barrier of filthy beds, full of fleas and bugs, their mattresses rotted from sweat and urine, the blankets like rags, no longer grey, but all the colours that disgust might wear, this the doctor's wife already knew, not that she could see it now, since she had not even noticed the reinforced barricade. The blind inmates advanced like archangels surrounded by their

own splendour, they thudded into the obstacle with their weapons upright as they had been instructed, but the beds did not move, no doubt the strength of this brave vanguard was not much greater than that of the weaklings who came behind and by now could scarcely hold their lances, like someone who carried a cross on his back and now has to wait to be raised up on it. The silence had disappeared, those outside were shouting, those inside started shouting, probably no one has noticed to this day how absolutely terrible are the cries of the blind, they appear to be shouting for no good reason, we want to tell them to be quiet and then end up shouting ourselves, all that's wanting is for us to be blind too, but that day will come. This then was the situation, some shouting as they attacked, others shouting as they defended themselves, while those on the outside, desperate at not having been able to move the beds, flung down their weapons willy-nilly and, all of them at once, at least those who managed to squeeze into the space in the doorway, and those who couldn't fit in pressed behind those in front, they started pushing and pushing and it looked as if they might succeed, the beds had even moved a little, when suddenly, without prior warning or threat, three shots rang out, it was the blind accountant aiming low. Two of the assailants fell, wounded, the others quickly retreated in disarray, they tripped on the metal rods and fell, as if demented the walls of the corridor multiplied their shouts, shouting was coming from the other wards too. It was now almost pitch-black, it was impossible to know who had been hit by the bullets, obviously one could ask from afar, Who are you, but it did not seem appropriate, the wounded must be treated with respect and consideration, we must approach them gently, place our hand on their forehead, unless that is where the bullet unfortunately happened to strike, then we must ask them in a low voice how they are feeling, assure them it is not serious, the stretcher-bearers are already on the way, and finally give them some water, but only if they are not wounded in the stomach, as is expressly recommended in the first-aid handbook. What shall we do now, asked the doctor's wife, there are two casualties lying there on the ground. No one asked her how she knew there were two of them, after all, there had been three shots, without reckoning with the effect of the ricochets, if there had been any. We must go and look for them, said the doctor, The risk is great, observed the old man with the black eyepatch despondently, who had seen that his assault tactics had resulted in disaster, if they suspect there are people here they'll start firing again, he paused and added sighing, But we must go there, speaking for myself, I'm ready, I'm going too, said the doctor's wife, there will be less danger if we crawl, the important thing is to find them quickly, before those inside there have time to react, I'm going too, said the woman who had declared the other day, Wherever you go, I go, of the many that were there no one thought to say that it was very easy to check who was wounded, correction, wounded or dead, for the moment no one yet knows, it was enough that they should all start saying, I'm going, I'm not going, those who remained silent were the latter.

And so the four volunteers began crawling, the two women in the middle, a man on either side as it happened, they were not acting out of male courtesy or some gentlemanly instinct so that the women should be protected, the truth is that everything

will depend on the angle of the shot, if the blind accountant should fire again. After all, perhaps nothing will happen, the old man with the black eyepatch had come up with an idea before they went, possibly better than the earlier ones, that these companions here should start to talk at the top of their voices, even to shout, besides they had every reason to do so, so that they might drown the inevitable noise of their comings and goings, and also whatever might happen in the meantime, God knows what. In a few minutes, the rescuers reached their destination, they knew it before even coming into contact with the bodies, the blood over which they were crawling was like a messenger come to tell them, I was life, behind me there is nothing, My God, thought the doctor's wife, all this blood, and it was true, a thick pool, their hands and clothing stuck to the ground as if the floorboards and floor tiles were covered in glue. The doctor's wife raised herself on her elbows and continued to advance, the others had done the same. Stretching out their arms, they finally reached the corpses. Their companions back there continued to make as much noise as they could, and now sounded like professional mourners in a trance. The hands of the doctor's wife and of the old man with the black eyepatch grabbed the ankles of one of the casualties, in their turn the doctor and the other woman had grabbed an arm and leg of the other wounded man, now they were trying to drag them away out of the firing line. It was not easy, to achieve this they had to raise themselves up a little, to go on all fours, it was the only way of putting to good use the little strength they still possessed. The shot rang out, but this time did not hit anyone. The overwhelming terror did not make them flee, on the contrary, it helped them to summon that last ounce of energy that was needed. An instant later they were already out of danger, they got as close as they could to the wall on the side where the ward door was situated, only a stray bullet could possibly reach them, but it was doubtful that the blind accountant was skilled in ballistics, even elementary ones such as these. They tried to lift the bodies but gave up. Because of their weight they could only drag them, and with them, half congealed, trailed the blood already spilled as if spread by a roller, and the remaining blood, still fresh, that continued to flow from the wounds. Who are they, asked those who were waiting, How are we to know if we cannot see, said the old man with the black eyepatch, We can't stay here, said someone, if they decide to launch an attack we'll have more than two casualties, remarked another, Or corpses, said the doctor, at least I cannot feel their pulse. Like an army in retreat, they carried the corpses along the corridor, on reaching the hallway they came to a halt, and one would have said they had decided to camp there, but the truth of the matter was different, what had happened was that they were drained of all energy, I'm staying right here, I can't go any further. It is time to acknowledge that it must seem surprising that the blind hoodlums, previously so overbearing and aggressive, revelling in their own easy cruelty, now only defend themselves, raise barricades and fire from inside there at will, as if they were afraid to go out and fight in open territory, face to face, eye to eye. Like everything else in this life, this too, has its explanation, which is that after the tragic death of their first leader, all spirit of discipline or sense of obedience had gone in the ward, the serious error on the part of the blind accountant was to have thought that it was enough to take possession of the gun in order to usurp power, but the result was exactly the opposite,

each time he fires, the shot backfires, in other words, with each shot fired, he loses a little more authority, so let's see what happens when he runs out of ammunition. Just as the habit does not make the monk, the sceptre does not make the king, this is a fact we should never forget, and if it is true that the royal sceptre is now held by the blind accountant, one is tempted to say that the king, although dead, although buried in his own ward, and badly, barely three feet under the ground, continues to be remembered, at least he makes his powerful presence felt by the stench. Meanwhile, the moon appeared. Through the door of the hallway that looks out on to the outer yard enters a diffused light that gradually becomes brighter, the bodies that are on the ground, two of them dead, the others still alive, slowly begin gaining volume, shape, characteristics, features, all the weight of a horror without a name, then the doctor's wife understood that there was no sense, if there ever had been any, in going on pretending to be blind, it is clear that here no one can be saved, blindness is also this, to live in a world where all hope is gone. She could tell in the meantime who was dead, this is the pharmacist's assistant, this is the fellow who said the blind hoodlums would shoot at random, they were both right after a fashion, and don't bother asking me how I know who they are, the answer is simple, I can see. Some of those who were present already knew as much and had remained silent, others had been suspicious for some time and now saw their suspicions confirmed, the surprise of the others was unexpected, and yet, on reflection, perhaps we should not be surprised, at another time the revelation would have caused much consternation, uncontrolled excitement, how fortunate for you, how did you manage to escape this universal disaster, what is the name of the drops you put in your eyes, give me your doctor's address, help me to get out of this prison, by now it came to the same thing, in death, blindness is the same for all. What they could not do was to remain there, defenceless, even the metal bars from their beds had been left behind, their fists would serve for nothing. Guided by the doctor's wife, they dragged the corpses out on to the forecourt, and there they left them in the moonlight, under the planet's milky whiteness, white on the outside, black at last on the inside. Let's return to the wards, said the old man with the black eyepatch, we'll see later on what can be organised. This is what he said, and they were mad words that no one heeded. They did not divide up according to where they had come from, they met up and recognised each other on the way, some heading for the wing on the left, others for the wing on the right, the doctor's wife had been accompanied this far by that woman who had said, Wherever you go, I go, this was not the idea she now carried in her head, quite the contrary, but she did not want to discuss it, vows are not always fulfilled, sometimes out of weakness, at other times because of some superior force with which we had not reckoned.

An hour passed, the moon came up, hunger and terror hold sleep at bay, in the wards everyone is awake. But these are not the only reasons. Whether because of the excitement of the recent battle, even though so disastrously lost, or because of something indefinable in the air, the blind internees are restless. No one dares go out into the corridors, but the interior of each ward is like a beehive inhabited by drones, buzzing insects, as everyone knows, little given to order and method, there is no

evidence that they have ever done anything in their lives or preoccupied themselves in the slightest with the future, even though in the case of the blind, unhappy creatures, it would be unjust to accuse them of being exploiters and parasites, exploiters of what crumb, parasites of what refreshment, one has to be careful with comparisons, in case they should turn out to be frivolous. However, there is no rule without an exception, and this was not lacking here, in the person of a woman who entered the ward, the second one on the right-hand side, and at once began rummaging through her rags until she found a tiny object which she pressed in the palm of her hand, as if anxious to conceal it from the prying eyes of others, old habits die hard, even when that moment comes when we thought they were lost for ever. Here, where it ought to have been one for all and all for one, we witnessed how the strong cruelly took the bread from the mouths of the weak, and now this woman, remembering that she had brought a cigarette lighter in her hand-luggage, unless she had lost it in all the upheaval, searched for it anxiously and is now furtively hiding it, as if her survival depended on it, she does not think that perhaps one of these companions in misfortune might have one last cigarette on them, and cannot smoke it because they do not have that tiny essential flame. Nor would there be time now to ask for a light. The woman has gone out without saying a word, no farewell, no goodbye, she makes her way along the deserted corridor, passes right by the door of the first ward, no one inside there noticed her pass, she crosses the hallway, the descending moon traced and painted a vat of milk on the floor tiles, now the woman is in the other wing, once more a corridor, her destination lies at the far end, in a straight line, she cannot go wrong. Besides, she can hear voices summoning her, figuratively speaking, what she can hear is the rumpus being made by the hoodlums in the last ward, they are celebrating their victory, eating and drinking to their heart's content, ignore the deliberate exaggeration, let us not forget that everything is relative in life, they eat and drink simply what is to hand, and long may it last, how the others would love to partake of the feast, but they cannot, between them and the plate there is a barricade of eight beds and a loaded gun. The woman is on her knees at the entrance to the ward, right up against the beds, she slowly pulls the covers off, then gets to her feet, she does the same with the bed on top, then with the third one, her arm cannot reach the fourth, no matter, the fuses are ready, now it is only a question of setting them alight. She can still remember how to regulate the lighter in order to produce a long flame, she got it, a tiny dagger of light, as bright as the sharp point of a pair of scissors. She starts with the bed on top, the flame laboriously licks the filthy bedclothes, then it finally catches fire, now the bed in the middle, now the bed below, the woman caught the smell of her own singed hair, she must be careful, she is the one who has to set the pyre alight, not the one who must die, she can hear the cries of the hoodlums within, at that moment it suddenly occurred to her, Suppose they have water and manage to put out the flames, in desperation she got under the first bed, ran the lighter along the mattress, here, there, then suddenly the flames multiplied, transformed themselves into one great curtain of fire, a spurt of water passed through them, splashed on to the woman, but in vain, her own body was already feeding the bonfire. What is it like in there, no one can risk entering, but our imagination must serve for something, the fire quickly spreads from

bed to bed, as if wanting to set all of them alight at the same time, and it succeeds, the hoodlums wasted indiscriminately and to no avail the little water they still had, now they are trying to reach the windows, unsteadily they climb on to the headrests of the beds which the fire has still not reached, but suddenly the fire is there, they slip, fall, with the intensity of the heat the window-panes begin to crack, to shatter, the fresh air comes whistling in and fans the flames, ah, yes, they are not forgotten, the cries of rage and fear, the howls of pain and agony, there they have been mentioned, note, in any case, that they will gradually die away, the woman with the cigarette lighter, for example, has been silent for some time.

By this time the other blind inmates are fleeing in terror towards the smoke-filled corridors, Fire, fire, they are shouting, and here we may observe in the flesh how badly planned and organised these human communities in orphanages, hospitals and mental asylums have been, note how each bed, in itself, with its framework of pointed metal bars, can be transformed into a lethal trap, look at the terrible consequences of having only one door to wards occupied by forty people, not counting those asleep on the floor, if the fire gets there first and blocks their exit, no one will escape. Fortunately, as human history has shown, it is not unusual for good to come of evil, less is said about the evil that can come out of good, such are the contradictions of this world of ours, some warrant more consideration than others, in this instance the good was precisely the fact that the wards have only one door, thanks to this factor, the fire that burnt the hoodlums tarried there for quite a while, if the confusion does not get any worse, perhaps we will not have to lament the loss of other lives. Obviously, many of these blind inmates are being trampled under foot, pushed, jostled, this is the effect of panic, a natural effect, you could say that animal nature is like this, plant life would behave in exactly the same way, too, if it did not have all those roots to hold it in the ground, and how nice it would be to see the trees of the forest fleeing the flames. The protection afforded by the inner part of the yard was fully exploited by the blind inmates who had the idea of opening the existing windows in the corridors looking on to it. They jumped, stumbled, fell, they weep and cry out, but for now they are safe, let us hope that once the fire causes the roof to cave in and launches a whirlwind of flames and burning embers into the sky and the wind, it will forget to spread to the tree tops. In the other wing the panic is much the same, a blind man only has to smell smoke to imagine at once that the flames are right by him, which does not happen to be true, soon the corridor was crammed with people, unless someone imposes some order here, the situation will be disastrous. At a certain point, someone remembers that the doctor's wife still has her eyesight, where is she, people ask, she can tell us what is happening, where we should go, where is she, I'm here, I've only just managed to get out of the ward, the boy with the squint was to blame because no one knew where he had got to, now he's here with me and I'm holding him firmly by the hand, they would have to pull off my arm before I'd let go of him, with my other hand I'm holding my husband's hand, and then comes the girl with dark glasses, and then the old man with the black eyepatch, where there is the one there is the other, and then the first blind man, and then his wife, all together, as compressed as a pine-

cone, which, I very much hope, will not open even in this heat. Meanwhile, a number of blind inmates from here had followed the example of those in the other wing, they jumped into the inner yard, they cannot see that the greater part of the building on the other side is already one great bonfire, but they can feel on their faces and hands the blast of heat coming from there, for the moment the roof is still holding up, the leaves on the trees are slowly curling. Then someone shouted, What are we doing here, why don't we get out, the reply, coming from amidst this sea of heads, needed only four words, The soldiers are there, but the old man with the black eyepatch said, Better to be shot than burnt to death, it sounded like the voice of experience, therefore perhaps he was not really the person speaking, perhaps through his mouth the woman with the cigarette lighter had spoken, she who had not had the good fortune to be struck by the last bullet fired by the blind accountant. Then the doctor's wife said, Let me pass, I'll speak to the soldiers, they cannot leave us to die like this, soldiers too have feelings. Thanks to the hope that the soldiers might indeed have feelings, a narrow gap opened up, through which the doctor's wife advanced with considerable effort, taking her group with her. The smoke clouded her vision, soon she would be as blind as the others. It was almost impossible to enter the hallway. The doors opening on to the yard had been broken down, the blind inmates who had taken refuge there quickly realised the place was unsafe, they wanted to get out, pushed with all their might, but those on the other side resisted, held out as best they could, for the moment their greater fear was that the soldiers might suddenly appear, but as their strength gave out and the fire spread nearer, the old man with the black eyepatch was proved to be right, it would be preferable to die by a bullet. There was not long to wait, the doctor's wife had finally managed to get out on to the porch, she was practically half naked and with both her hands occupied she could scarcely fight off those who wanted to join her small group as it advanced, to catch, in a manner of speaking, the moving train, the soldiers would be goggle-eyed when they saw her appear before them with her breasts half exposed. It was no longer the moonlight that was illuminating the wide empty space that extended as far as the gate, but the harsh glare of the blaze. The doctor's wife shouted, Please, for your own peace of mind, let us out, do not shoot. No reply came from over there. The searchlight was still extinguished, nothing could be seen to move. Nervously, the doctor's wife went down two steps, What's going on, asked her husband, but she did not reply, could not believe her eyes. She descended the remaining steps, walked in the direction of the gate, still dragging behind her the boy with the squint, her husband and company, there was no doubt about it, the soldiers had gone, or been taken away, they too stricken by blindness, everyone finally blind.

Then, to simplify matters, everything happened at once, the doctor's wife announced in a loud voice that they were free, the roof of the right wing collapsed with a terrifying crash, sending out flames on all sides, the blind inmates rushed into the yard, shouting at the top of their voices, some did not make it, they remained inside, crushed against the walls, others were trampled under foot and transformed into a formless, bloody mass, the fire that has suddenly spread will soon reduce all of this to ashes. The gate is wide open,

the madmen escape.

Say to a blind man, you're free, open the door that was separating him from the world, Go, you are free, we tell him once more, and he does not go, he has remained motionless there in the middle of the road, he and the others, they are terrified, they do not know where to go, the fact is that there is no comparison between living in a rational labyrinth, which is, by definition, a mental asylum and venturing forth, without a guiding hand or a dog-leash, into the demented labyrinth of the city, where memory will serve no purpose, for it will merely be able to recall the images of places but not the paths whereby we might get there. Standing in front of the building which is already ablaze from end to end, the blind inmates can feel the living waves of heat from the fire on their faces, they receive them as something which in a way protects them, just as the walls did before, prison and refuge at once. They stay together, pressed up against each other, like a flock, no one there wants to be the lost sheep, for they know that no shepherd will come looking for them. The fire gradually begins to die down, the moon casts its light once more, the blind inmates begin to feel uneasy, they cannot remain there, For all eternity, as one of them said. Someone asked if it was day or night, the reason for this incongruous curiosity soon became apparent, Who knows, they might bring us some food, perhaps there has been some confusion, some delay, it has happened before, But the soldiers are no longer here. That doesn't mean a thing, they might have gone away because they're no longer needed, I don't understand, For example, because there is no longer any danger of infection, Or because a cure has been found for our illness, That would be good, it really would, What are we going to do, I'm staying here until daybreak, And how will you know it is daybreak, By the sun, by the heat of the sun, And what if the sky is overcast, There is only a limited number of hours and then it must be day at some point. Exhausted, many of the blind had sat down on the ground, others, weaker still, simply collapsed into a heap, some had fainted, it is possible that the cool night air will restore consciousness, but we can be certain that when it is time to break camp, some of these unfortunates will not get up, they have resisted until now, they are like that marathon runner who dropped dead three metres from the finish line, when all is said and done, what is clear is that all lives end before their time. Also seated or stretched out on the ground were those blind inmates who are still awaiting the soldiers, or others instead of them, the Red Cross is one hypothesis, they might bring them food and the other basic comforts, for these people disenchantment will come a little later, that is the only difference. And if anyone here believed that a cure had been discovered for our blindness, this does not appear to have made him any more contented.

For other reasons, the doctor's wife thought that it would be better to wait until night was over, as she told her group, The most urgent thing right now is to find some food and in the dark this would not be easy. Have you any idea where we are, her husband asked, More or less, Far from home, Quite a distance. The others also wanted to know how far they were from their homes, they told her their addresses, and the doctor's wife did her best to explain, the boy with the squint cannot remember, and little wonder, he has not asked for his mother for quite some time. If they were to go from house to house, from the one that is closest to the one furthest away, the first house will be that of the girl

with dark glasses, the second one that of the old man with the black eyepatch, then that of the doctor's wife, and finally the house of the first blind man. They will undoubtedly follow this itinerary because the girl with dark glasses has already asked that she should be taken to her home as soon as possible, I can't imagine what state my parents will be in, she said, this sincere preoccupation shows how groundless are the preconceived ideas of those who deny the possibility of the existence of deep feelings, including filial ones, in the, alas, abundant cases of irregular conduct, especially in matters of public morality. The night turned cool, there is not much left for the fire to burn, the heat still coming from the embers is not enough to warm the blind inmates, numb with cold, who find themselves farthest away from the asylum gate, as is the case of the doctor's wife and her group. They are seated in a huddle, the three women and the boy in the middle, the three men around them, anyone seeing them there would say that they had been born like that, it is true that they give the impression of being but one body, one breath and one hunger. One after the other, they eventually fell asleep, a light sleep from which they were roused several times because blind inmates, emerging from their own torpor, got up and stumbled drowsily over this human obstacle, one of them actually stayed behind, there was no difference between sleeping there or in some other place. When day dawned, only a few thin columns of smoke rose from the embers, but not even these lasted for long, for it soon began to rain, a fine drizzle, a mere mist, it is true, but nevertheless persistent, to begin with it did not even touch the scorched earth, but transformed itself at once into vapour, but, as it continued to fall, as everybody knows, a soft water eats away hard stone, let someone else make it rhyme. It is not only the eyes of some of these inmates that are blind, their understanding is also clouded, for there can be no other explanation for the tortuous reasoning that led them to conclude that the much desired food would not arrive in this rain. There was no way of convincing them that the premise was wrong and that, therefore, the conclusion, too, had to be wrong, they simply would not be told that it was still too early for breakfast, in despair, they threw themselves to the ground in floods of tears. It won't come, it's raining, it won't come, they repeated, if that lamentable ruin were still fit for even the most primitive habitation, it would go back to being the madhouse it once was.

The blind man who, after tripping, had stayed behind that night, could not get to his feet. Curled up, as if anxious to protect the last of the heat in his belly, he did not stir despite the rain, which had started to get heavier. He's dead, said the doctor's wife, and the rest of us had better get away from here while we still have some strength. They struggled to their feet, tottering and dizzy, holding on to each other, then they got into line, in front the woman with eyes that can see, then those who though they have eyes cannot see, the girl with dark glasses, the old man with the black eyepatch, the boy with the squint, the wife of the first blind man, her husband, and the doctor last of all. The route they have taken leads to the city centre, but this is not the intention of the doctor's wife, what she wants is to find a place as soon as possible where she can leave those following behind in safety and then go in search of food on her own. The streets are deserted, either because it is still early, or because of the rain that is becoming

increasingly heavy. There is litter everywhere, some shops have their doors open, but most of them are closed, with no sign of life inside, nor any light. The doctor's wife thought that it would be a good idea to leave her companions in one of these shops, taking care to make a mental note of the name of the street and the number on the door just in case she should lose them on the way back. She paused, said to the girl with dark glasses, Wait for me here, don't move, she went to peer through the glass-panelled door of a pharmacy, thought she could see the shadowy forms of people lying on the ground, she tapped on the glass, one of the shadows stirred, she knocked again, other human forms slowly began moving, one person got up turning his head in the direction where the noise had come from, They are all blind, the doctor's wife thought, but she could not fathom how they came to be here, perhaps they were members of the pharmacist's family, but if this was the case, why were they not in their own home, with greater comfort than a hard floor, unless they were guarding the premises, against whom, and for what purpose, this merchandise being what it is, can cure and kill equally well. She moved away, a little further ahead she looked inside another shop, saw more people lying down, women, men, children, some appeared to be preparing to leave, one of them came right up to the door, put his arm outside and said, It's raining, Is it raining much, was the question from inside, Yes, we'll have to wait until it eases off, the man, it was a man, was two paces from the doctor's wife, he had not noticed her presence, and was therefore startled when he heard her say, Good-day, he had lost the habit of saying Good-day, not only because the days of the blind, strictly speaking are never likely to be good, but also because no one could be entirely sure whether it was afternoon or night, and if now, in apparent contradiction to what has just been explained, these people are waking up more or less at the same time as morning, that is because some of them only went blind a few days ago and still have not entirely lost their sense of the succession of days and nights, of sleep and wakefulness. The man said, It's raining, and then asked, Who are you, I'm not from here, Are you out searching for food, Yes, we haven't eaten for four days, And how do you know it is four days, That's what I reckon, Are you alone, I'm with my husband and some companions, How many of them are there, Seven altogether, If you're thinking of staying here with us, forget it, there are far too many of us already, We're only passing through, Where have you come from, We've been interned ever since this epidemic of blindness began, Ah, yes, the quarantine, it didn't do any good, Why do you say that, They allowed you to leave, There was a fire and, at that moment, we realised that the soldiers who were guarding us had disappeared, And you left, Yes, Your soldiers must have been amongst the last to go blind, everyone is blind, the whole city, the entire country, if anyone can still see, they say nothing, keep it to themselves, Why don't you live in your own house, Because I no longer know where it is, You don't know where it is, And what about you, do you know where your house is, Me, the doctor's wife was about to reply that that was precisely where she was heading with her husband and companions, all they needed was a quick bite to eat to recover their strength, but at that very moment she saw the situation quite clearly, somebody who was blind and had left their home would only manage to find it again by some miracle, it was not the same as before, when blind people could always count on the assistance of some passerby,

whether to cross the street, or to get back on to the right path in the case of having inadvertently strayed from the usual route, All I know is that it is far from here, she said, But you'll never be able to get there, No, Now there you have it, it's the same with me, it's the same with everyone, those of you who have been in quarantine have a lot to learn, you don't know how easy it is to find yourself without a home, I don't understand, Those who go around in groups as we do, as most people do, when we have to look for food, we are obliged to go together, it's the only way of not losing each other, and since we all go, since no one stays behind to guard the house, assuming that we ever manage to find it again, the likelihood is that it will already be occupied by another group also unable to find their house, we're a kind of merry-go-round, at the outset there was some conflict, but we soon became aware that we, the blind, in a manner of speaking, have practically nothing we may call our own, except for what we are wearing, The solution would be to live in a shop selling food, at least so long as supplies lasted there would be no need to go out, Anyone who did that, the least that might happen to them would be never to have another moment's peace, I say the least, because I've heard of the case of some who tried, shut themselves away, bolted the door, but what they could not do was get rid of the smell of food, those who wanted to eat gathered outside, and since those inside refused to open the doors, the shop was set alight, it was a blessed remedy, I didn't see it myself, others told me, in any case it was a blessed remedy, and as far as I know no one else dared to do the same, And do people no longer live in houses and flats, Yes, they do, but it comes to the same thing, countless people must have passed through my house, who knows if I'll ever find it again, besides, in this situation, it's much more practical to sleep in the shops at ground level, in warehouses, it saves us having to go up and down stairs, It's stopped raining, said the doctor's wife, It's stopped raining, repeated the man to those inside. On hearing these words, those who were still stretched out got to their feet, gathered up their belongings, haversacks, hand-luggage, bags made out of cloth and plastic, as if they were setting off on an expedition, and it was true, they were off in pursuit of food, one by one they began emerging from the shop, the doctor's wife noticed that they were well wrapped up even if the colours of their clothing scarcely harmonised, their trousers either so short that they exposed their shins, or so long that the bottoms had to be turned up, but the cold would not get to this lot, some of the men wore a raincoat or an overcoat, two of the women wore long fur coats, not an umbrella to be seen, probably because they are so awkward to carry, and the spokes are always in danger of poking someone's eye out. The group, some fifteen people, moved off. Along the road, other groups appeared, as well as people on their own, up against the walls men were satisfying the urgent need felt each morning by their bladder, the women preferred the privacy of abandoned cars. Softened by the rain, the excrement, here and there, was spread all over the pavement.

The doctor's wife went back to her group, huddled together out of instinct under the awning of a cake-shop that gave off a smell of soured cream and other rancid products. Let's go, she said, I've found a refuge, and she led them to the shop the others had just left. The stock in the shop was intact, there was nothing amongst the merchandise that

could be eaten or worn, there were fridges, washing-machines for both clothes and dishes, ordinary stoves as well as microwave ovens, food mixers, juicers, vacuum cleaners, the thousand and one electro-domestic inventions destined to make life easier. The atmosphere was charged with unpleasant odours, making the invariable whiteness of the objects absurd. Rest here, said the doctor's wife, I'm going to look for some food, I have no idea where I'll find it, nearby, far away, I cannot say, wait patiently, there are groups out there, if anyone tries to come in, tell them the place is occupied, that ought to be enough to send them away, that's the custom now, I'm coming with you, said her husband, No, it's best I should go alone, we must find out how people are surviving now, from what I've heard everyone must have gone blind, In that case, quipped the old man with the black eyepatch, it's just as if we were still in the mental asylum, There's no comparison, we can move about freely, and there must be a solution to the food problem, we won't die of hunger, I must also try to get some clothes, we're reduced to rags, she herself was in the greatest need, practically naked from the waist upwards. She kissed her husband, at that moment she felt something akin to a pain in her heart. Please, whatever happens, even if someone should try to come in, do not leave this place, and if you should be turned out, although I don't believe this will happen, but just to warn you of all the possibilities, stay together near the door until I arrive. She looked at them, her eyes filled with tears, there they were, as dependent on her as little children on their mother. If I should let them down—she thought. It did not occur to her that all around her the people were blind yet managed to live, she herself would also have to turn blind in order to understand that people get used to anything, especially if they have ceased to be people, and even if they have not quite reached that point, take the boy with the squint there, for example, who no longer even asks for his mother. She went out to the street, looked and made a mental note of the door number, the name of the shop, now she had to check out the name of the street on that corner, she had no idea where this search for food might take her, or what food, it might be only three doors away or three hundred, she could not afford to get lost, there would be no one from whom to ask the way, those who could see before were blind, and she, who could see, would not know where she was. The sun had broken through, it shone on the pools of water that had formed amidst the litter and it was easier to see the weeds that were sprouting up between the paving stones. There were more people outside. How do they find their way around, the doctor's wife asked herself. They did not find their way around, they kept very close to the buildings with their arms stretched out before them, they were constantly bumping into each other like ants on the trail, but when this happened no one protested, nor did they have to say anything, one of the families moved away from the wall, advanced along the wall opposite in the other direction, and thus they proceeded and carried on until the next encounter. Now and then they stopped, sniffed in the doorways of the shops in the hope of catching the smell of food, whatever it might be, then continued on their way, they turned a corner, disappeared from sight, soon another group turned up, they did not seem to have found what they were looking for. The doctor's wife could move with greater speed, she did not waste any time entering the shops to find out if there were any edible goods, but it soon became clear that it would

not be easy to stock up in any quantity, the few grocers' shops she found seemed to have been devoured from inside and were like empty shells.

She had already travelled far from where she had left her husband and companions, crossing and re-crossing streets, avenues, squares, when she found herself in front of a supermarket. Inside it was no different, empty shelves, overturned displays, in the middle wandered the blind, most of them on all fours, sweeping up the filth on the floor with their hands, hoping to find something they might be able to use, a can of preserves that had withstood the pounding of those who had desperately tried to open it, some packet or other, whatever the contents, a potato, even if trampled, a crust of bread, even if as hard as stone. The doctor's wife thought, Despite everything, there must be something, the place is vast. A blind man got to his feet and complained that a bit of glass had got lodged in his knee, the blood was already trickling down one leg. The blind persons in the group gathered round him, What happened, what's the matter, and he told them, A glass splinter in my knee, Which one, The left one, one of the blind women crouched down. Take care, there might be other pieces of glass around, she probed and fumbled to distinguish one leg from the other, Here it is, she said, and it's still pricking in the flesh, one of the blind men started laughing, Well if it's pricking, make the most of it, and the others, both men and women, joined in the laughter. Bringing her thumb and forefinger together, a natural gesture that requires no training, the blind woman removed the piece of glass, then bandaged the knee with a rag she found in the bag over her shoulder, finally she cracked her own little joke to the amusement of all, Nothing to be done, no more pricking, everyone laughed, and the wounded man retorted, Whenever you feel the urge, we can have a go and find out what pricks most, there certainly are no married men and women in this group, since no one appeared to be shocked, they must all be people with lax morals who enter into casual relationships, unless the latter happen to be indeed husband and wife, hence the liberties they take with each other, but they really do not give that impression, and no married couple would say these things in public. The doctor's wife looked around her, whatever was still usable was being disputed amidst punches that nearly always missed and much jostling that made no distinction between friend and foe, and it sometimes happened that the object provoking the struggle escaped from their hands and ended up on the ground, waiting for someone to trip over it, Hell, I'll never get out of here, she thought, using an expression that formed no part of her usual vocabulary, once more showing that the force and nature of circumstances have considerable influence over language, remember that soldier who said shit when ordered to surrender, thereby absolving future expletives from the crime of bad manners in less dangerous situations. Hell, I'll never get out of here, she thought again, and just as she was preparing to leave, another thought came to her like a happy inspiration, In an establishment like this there must be a storeroom, not necessarily a large deposit, for that would be located elsewhere, probably some distance away, but back-up supplies of certain products in constant demand. Excited at the idea, she began looking for a closed door that might lead her to the cave of treasures, but they were all open, and there inside, she found the same devastation, the same blind people rummaging through the

same litter. Finally, in a dark corridor, where the light of day scarcely penetrated, she saw what looked like a cargo lift. The metal doors were closed and at the side there was another door, smooth, of the kind that slide on a track, The basement, she thought, the blind people who got this far found their path impeded, they must have realised there was an elevator, but it didn't occur to anyone that it was also normal for there to be a staircase in the event of there being a power cut, for example, as was now the case. She pushed the sliding door and received, almost simultaneously, two overwhelming impressions, first, that of the total darkness she would have to penetrate in order to reach the basement, and then the unmistakable smell of food, even when stored in jars and containers we call sealed, the fact is that hunger has always had a keen sense of smell, the kind that penetrates through all barriers, just as dogs do. She quickly turned back to rescue from the litter the plastic bags she would need to transport the food, at the same time asking herself, Without light, how am I to know what to take, she shrugged her shoulders, what a stupid thing to worry about, her concern now, given the state of weakness in which she found herself, ought to be whether she would have the strength to carry the bags once they were full, retrace her steps back from where she had come, at that moment, she was gripped by the most awful fear, that of not being able to return to the spot where her husband was waiting for her, she knew the name of the street, this she had not forgotten, but she had taken so many turnings, despair paralysed her, then slowly, as if her arrested brain had finally started to move, she saw herself bent over a map of the city, searching with the tip of her finger for the shortest route, as if she had two sets of eyes, one set watching her consult the map, another perusing the map and working out the route. The corridor remained deserted, a stroke of luck, given her nervous state because of the discovery she had made, she had forgotten to close the door. She now closed it carefully behind her only to find herself plunged into total darkness, as sightless as those blind people out there, the only difference was in the colour, if black and white can, strictly speaking, be thought of as colours. Keeping close to the wall, she began to descend the stairs, if this place should turn out not to be a secret, after all, and someone were to rise from the depths, they would have to proceed as she had seen on the street, one of them would have to abandon the safety of having somewhere to lean against, brushing against the vague presence of the other, perhaps for an instant foolishly fearing that the wall did not continue on the other side, I'm going mad, she thought, and with good reason, making this descent into a dark pit, without light or any hope of seeing any, how far would it be, these underground stores are usually never very deep, first flight of steps, Now I know what it means to be blind, second flight of steps, I'm going to scream, I'm going to scream, third set of steps, the darkness is like a thick paste that sticks to her face, her eyes transformed into balls of pitch, What is this before me, and then another thought, even more terrifying, And how shall I find the stairs again, a sudden unsteadiness obliged her to crouch down in order to avoid simply falling over, almost fainting, she stammered, It's clean, she was referring to the floor, it seemed remarkable to her, a clean floor. Little by little she recovered her senses, she felt dull pains in her stomach, not that this was anything new, but at this moment it was as if there were no other living organ in her body, there had to be others, but they gave no

sign of being there, her heart, yes, her heart was pounding like a great drum, for ever working blindly in the dark, from the first of all darknesses, the womb in which it was formed, to the last where it would cease. She was still clutching the plastic bags, she had not let go of them, now all she had to do was to fill them, calmly, a storeroom is not a place for ghosts and dragons, here there is nothing but darkness, and darkness neither bites nor offends, as for the stairway I'm bound to find it, even if it means walking all the way round this awful place. Her mind made up, she was about to get to her feet, but then remembered she was as blind as all the others, better to do as they did, to advance on all fours until she came across something, shelves laden with food, whatever it might be, so long as it can be eaten as it is, without having to be cooked or specially prepared, since there is no time for fancy cooking.

Her fear crept surreptitiously back, she had scarcely gone a few metres, perhaps she was mistaken, perhaps right there before her, invisible, a dragon was waiting for her with its mouth open. Or a ghost with outstretched hand, to carry her off to the dreadful world of the dead who never cease to die, because someone always comes to resuscitate them. Then, prosaically, with an infinite, resigned sadness, it occurred to her that the place where she found herself was not a store for food, but a garage, she actually thought she could smell the gasoline, the mind suffers delusions when it succumbs to the monsters it has itself created. Then her hand touched something, not the ghost's viscous fingers, not the fiery tongue and fangs of the dragon, what she felt was the contact of cold metal, a smooth vertical surface, she guessed, without knowing what it was called, that this was the upright of a set of shelves, She calculated there must be others just like this, standing parallel to this one, as was the custom, it was now a question of finding out where the food products were, not here, for this smell is unmistakable, it is the smell of detergent. Without giving another thought to the difficulties she would have in finding the stairs, she began investigating the shelves, groping, sniffing, shaking. There were cardboard containers, glass and plastic bottles, jars of all sizes, tins that were probably preserves, various cartons, packets, bags, tubes. She filled one of the bags at random, Could all this be for eating, she thought to herself with some disquiet. The doctor's wife passed on to the next set of shelves, and the unexpected happened, her blind hand that could not see where it was going, came up against and knocked over some tiny boxes. The noise they made on hitting the floor almost made her heart stop beating, Matches, she thought. Trembling with excitement, she stooped down, ran her hand over the ground, found what she was looking for, this is a smell one never confuses with any other, and the noise of the little match-sticks when we shake the box, the sliding of the lid, the roughness of the sand-paper on the outside, which is where the phosphorus is, the scraping of the match-head, finally the sparking of the tiny flame, the surrounding space a diffuse sphere as luminous as a star glimmering through the mist, dear God, light exists and I have eyes to see, praised be light. From now on, the harvest would be easy. She began with the boxes of matches, and almost filled a bag. No need to take all of them, the voice of common sense told her, then the flickering flames of the matches lit up the shelves, over here, then over there, soon the bags were full, the first had to be emptied because it contained

nothing useful, the others already held enough riches to buy the city, nor need we be surprised at this difference of values, we need only recall that there was once a king who wanted to exchange his kingdom for a horse, what would he not give were he dying of hunger and was tempted by these plastic bags full of food. The stairway is there, the way out to the right. But first, the doctor's wife sits on the ground, opens a packet of chorizo sausage, another with slices of black bread, a bottle of water, and, without remorse, starts eating. If she were not to eat now she would not have the strength to carry the provisions where they were needed, she being the provider. When she had finished, she slipped the bags over her arms, three on each side, and with her hands raised before her, she went on striking matches until she reached the stairs, then she climbed them with some effort, she still had not digested her food, which needs time to pass from the stomach to the muscles and nerves, and, in her case, to what had shown the greatest resistance, her head. The door slid noiselessly open, And what if there is someone in the corridor, thought the doctor's wife, what shall I do. There was no one, but she started asking herself again, What shall I do. When she reached the exit, she could turn round and shout inside, There is food at the end of the corridor, stairs lead to the store in the cellar, make the most of it, I have left the door open. She could have done it, but decided not to. Using her shoulder, she closed the door, she told herself that it was better to say nothing, just imagine what would happen, the blind inmates running all over the place like madmen, a repetition of what happened in the mental asylum when fire broke out, they would roll down the stairs, be trampled and crushed by those coming behind, who would also stumble and fall, it is not the same thing to put one's foot on a firm step as to put it on a slippery body. And when the food is finished, I shall be able to come back for more, she thought. She now gripped the bags with her hands, took a deep breath, and proceeded along the corridor. They would not be able to see her, but there was the smell of what she had eaten, The sausage, what a fool I was, it would be like a living trail. She gritted her teeth, clutched the bags with all her strength, I must run, she said. She remembered the blind man whose knee had been cut by a splinter of glass, If the same thing happens to me, if I don't look out and step on broken glass, we may have forgotten that this woman is wearing no shoes, she still has not had time to go to a shoeshop like blind people in the city, who despite being unfortunates without sight, can at least choose footwear by touch. She had to run, and she did. At first, she had tried to slip through the groups of blind people, trying not to touch them, but this obliged her to go slowly, to stop several times in order to ascertain the way, enough to give off the smell of food, for auras are not only perfumed and ethereal ones, in no time a blind man was shouting, Who's eating sausage around here, no sooner were those words spoken than the doctor's wife threw caution to the wind and broke into reckless flight, colliding, jostling, knocking people over, with a devil-may-care attitude that was wholly reprehensible, for this is not the way to treat blind people who have more than enough reasons to be unhappy.

When she reached the street, it was raining buckets, All the better, she thought, panting for breath, her legs shaking, in this rain the smell will be less noticeable. Someone had grabbed the last rag that had barely covered her from the waist up, she

was now going around with her breasts exposed and glistening, a refined expression, with the water from heaven, this was not liberty leading the people, the bags, fortunately full, are too heavy for her to carry them aloft like a flag. This is somewhat inconvenient, since these tantalising odours are travelling at a height that brings dogs on the scent, of course without masters to look after them and feed them, there is virtually a pack of them following the doctor's wife, let's hope none of these hounds remembers to take a bite to test the resistance of the plastic. In a downpour like this, which is almost becoming a deluge, you would expect people to be taking shelter, waiting for the weather to improve. But this is not the case, there are blind people everywhere gaping up at the heavens, slaking their thirst, storing up water in every nook and cranny of their bodies, and others, who are somewhat more far-sighted, and above all sensible, hold up buckets, bowls and pans, and raise them to the generous sky, clearly God provides the cloud according to the thirst. The possibility had not occurred to the doctor's wife that not so much as a drop of the precious liquid was coming from the taps in the houses, this is the drawback of civilisation, we are so used to the convenience of piped water brought into our homes, and forget that for this to happen there have to be people to open and close distribution valves, water towers and pumps that require electrical energy, computers to regulate the deficits and administer the reserves, and all of these operations require the use of one's eyes. Eyes are also needed to see this picture, a woman laden with plastic bags, going along a rain-drenched street, amidst rotting litter and human and animal excrement, cars and trucks abandoned any old way, blocking the main thoroughfare, some of the vehicles with their tyres already surrounded by grass, and the blind, the blind, open-mouthed and staring up at the white sky, it seems incredible that rain should fall from such a sky. The doctor's wife reads the street signs as she goes along, she remembers some of them, others not at all, and there comes a moment when she realises that she has lost her way. There is no doubt, she is lost. She took a turning, then another, she no longer remembers the streets or their names, then in her distress, she sat down on the filthy ground, thick with black mud, and, drained of any strength, of all strength, she burst into tears. The dogs gathered round her, sniffed at the bags, but without much conviction, as if their hour for eating had passed, one of them licks her face, perhaps it had been used to drying tears ever since it was a puppy. The woman strokes its head, runs her hand down its drenched back, and she weeps the rest of her tears embracing the dog. When she finally raised her eyes, the god of crossroads be praised a thousand times, she saw a great map before her, of the kind that town councils set up throughout city centres, especially for the benefit and reassurance of visitors, who are just as anxious to say where they have been as to know precisely where they are. Now that everyone is blind, you might be tempted to think that the money has been ill-spent, but it is a question of being patient, of letting time take its course, we should have learnt this once and for all, that destiny has to make many turnings before arriving anywhere, destiny alone knows what it has cost to bring this map here in order to let this woman know where she is. She was not as far away as she thought, she had simply made a detour in the other direction, all you have to do is to follow this street until you come to the square, there you count two streets to the left, then you take the first

street on the right, that is the one you are looking for, the number you have not forgotten. The dogs gradually left her, something distracted them on the way, or they are familiar with the district and are reluctant to stray too far, only the dog that has dried her tears accompanied the person who had wept them, probably this encounter of the woman and the map, so well prepared by destiny, included the dog as well. The fact is that they entered the shop together, the dog of tears was not surprised to see people lying on the ground, so still that they might have been dead, the dog was used to this, sometimes they let him sleep amongst them, and when it was time to get up, they were nearly always alive. Wake up, if you're asleep, I've brought food, said the doctor's wife, but first she had closed the door, in case anyone passing in the street should hear her. The boy with the squint was the first to raise his head, weakness prevented him from doing any more, the others took a little longer, they were dreaming they were stones, and we all know how deeply stones sleep, a simple stroll in the countryside shows it to be so, there they lie sleeping, half buried, awaiting who knows what awakening. The word food, however, has magic powers, especially when hunger is pressing, even the dog of tears, who knows no language, began wagging its tail, this instinctive movement reminded it that it still had not done what is expected of wet dogs, to shake themselves vigorously, splashing everything around, for them it is easy, they wear their pelt as if it were a coat. Holy water of the most efficacious variety, descended directly from heaven, the splashes helped the stones to transform themselves into persons, while the doctor's wife participated in this process of metamorphosis by opening the plastic bags one after the other. Not everything smelled of what it contained, but the aroma of a chunk of stale bread would be as good, speaking in exalted terms, as the essence of life itself. They are all awake at last, their hands are shaking, their faces anxious, it is then that the doctor, as had happened before to the dog of tears, remembers who he is, Careful, it's not a good idea to eat too much, it could be harmful, What's doing us harm is hunger, said the first blind man, Take heed of what the doctor is saying, his wife rebuked him, and her husband fell silent, thinking with faint resentment, He doesn't even know anything about eyes, unjust words these, especially if we take into account that the doctor is no less blind than the others, the proof being that he was unaware that his wife was naked from the waist up, it was she who asked him for his jacket to cover herself, the other blind inmates looked in her direction, but it was much too late, if only they had looked before.

As they were eating, the woman told them of her adventures, of everything that had happened to her and everything that she had done, without mentioning that she had left the door to the storeroom closed, she was not entirely sure of the humanitarian motives she had given to herself, to compensate she told them about the blind man who got a piece of glass stuck in his knee, they all laughed heartily, well, not all of them, the old man with the black eyepatch only reacted with a weary smile, and the boy with the squint had ears only for the noise he made as he chewed his food. The dog of tears received his share, which he quickly repaid by barking furiously when anyone outside shook the door hard. Whoever it was, they did not persist, there was talk of mad dogs going around, not knowing where I'm putting my feet makes me quite mad enough. Calm

was restored, and it was then, when everyone's initial hunger had been assuaged, that the doctor's wife related the conversation she had had with the man who had come out of this same shop to see if it was raining. Then she concluded, If what he told me is true, we cannot be certain of finding our homes as we left them, we don't even know whether we shall be able to get into them, I'm speaking of those who forgot to take the keys when they left, or lost them, we, for example, do not have them, they disappeared in the fire, it would be impossible to find them now amongst the ashes, she uttered that word and it was as if she were seeing the flames devouring her scissors, first burning the congealed blood that remained on them, then licking at the edges the sharp points, blunting them, and gradually making them dull, pliable, soft, formless, no one would believe that this instrument could have perforated someone's throat, once the fire has done its work it will be impossible in this unified mass of molten metal, to distinguish which are the scissors and which the keys, I've got the keys, said the doctor, and awkwardly introducing three fingers into a small pocket near the waistband of his tattered trousers, he brought out a tiny ring with three keys, How do you happen to have them when I had put them in my handbag which got left behind, I removed them, I was afraid they might get lost, I felt they were safer if they were always with me, and it was also a way of convincing myself that one day we would go back home, It's a relief to have the keys, but we might find the house with the door smashed in, They may not even have tried. For some moments, they had forgotten the others, but now it was important to know, from all of them, what had happened to their keys, the first to speak was the girl with dark glasses, My parents remained at home when the ambulance came to fetch me, I don't know what became of them afterwards, then the old man with the black eyepatch spoke up, I was at home when I went blind, they knocked at the door, the owner of the house came to tell me there were some male nurses looking for me, it wasn't the moment to be thinking about keys, that left only the wife of the first blind man, but she said, I cannot say, I've forgotten, she knew and remembered, but what she did not wish to confess is that when she suddenly saw that she was blind, an absurd expression, but so deeply rooted in the language that we've been unable to avoid it, she had run from the house screaming, calling out to her neighbours, those who were still in the building thought twice about going to her assistance, and she, who had shown herself so steadfast and capable when her husband had been struck by this misfortune, now went to pieces, abandoning her home with the door wide open, it did not even occur to her to ask that they should allow her to turn back, just for a minute, the time to close the door and say I'll be right back. No one asked the boy with the squint about the key to his house, since he cannot even remember where he lives. Then the doctor's wife gently touched the hand of the girl with dark glasses, Let's start with your house which is nearest, but first we must find some clothes and shoes, we can't go around like this, unwashed and in rags. She started to get up, but noticed that the boy with the squint, consoled by now and his hunger satisfied, had gone back to sleep. She said, let's rest then, let's sleep a little, then later we can go and see what awaits us. She took off her drenched skirt, then, to find some warmth, she snuggled up to her husband, and the first blind man and his wife did the same. Is that you, he had asked, she remembered their home and it pained

her, she did not say, Console me, but it was as if she had thought it, what we do not know is what feeling could have led the girl with dark glasses to put her arm round the shoulder of the old man with the black eyepatch, but there is no doubt that she did so, and there they remained, she sleeping, but not him. The dog went to lie down at the door, blocking the entrance, he is a gruff, ill-tempered animal when he does not have to dry someone's tears.

They dressed and put their shoes on, what they still had not solved was some way of washing themselves, but they already looked quite different from the other blind people, the colours of their clothes, notwithstanding the relative scarcity of the range on offer, for, as people often say, the fruit is hand-picked, go well with each other, that is the advantage of having someone on the spot to advise us, You wear this, it goes better with those trousers, the stripes don't clash with the spots, details like that, to the men, of course, these matters do not make a blind bit of difference, but both the girl with dark glasses and the wife of the first blind man insisted on knowing what colours and styles they were wearing, so that, with the help of their imaginations they have some idea of how they look. As for footwear, everyone agreed that comfort should come before beauty, no fancy lacing and high heels, no calf or patent leather, given the state of the roads such refinements would be absurd, what they want here are rubber boots, completely waterproof and coming halfway up the leg, easy to slip into and out of, there is nothing better for walking through mud. Unfortunately, boots of this kind could not be found for everyone, there were no boots to fit the boy with the squint, for example, the larger sizes were like boats on him, so he had to settle for a pair of sports shoes with no clearly defined purpose, What a coincidence, his mother would say, wherever she might be, when someone told her what had happened, those are exactly the shoes my son would have chosen had he been able to see. The old man with the black eyepatch, whose feet were on the large side, solved the problem by wearing basketball shoes, specially made for players six foot tall and with extremities to match. It is true that he looks somewhat comical, as if he were wearing white slippers, but he will look ridiculous only for a while, within ten minutes the shoes will be filthy, just like everything else in life, let time take its course and it will find a solution.

It has stopped raining, there are no blind people standing about gaping. They go around not knowing what to do, they wander through the streets, but never for very long, walking or standing still is all the same to them, they have no other objective than the search for food, the music has stopped, never has there been so much silence in the world, the cinemas and theatres are only frequented by the homeless who have given up searching, some theatres, the larger ones, had been used to keep the blind in quarantine when the Government, or the few survivors, still believed that the white sickness could be remedied with devices and certain strategies that had been so ineffectual in the past against yellow fever and other infectious plagues, but this came to an end, not even a fire was needed here. As for the museums, it is truly heart-breaking, all those people, and I do mean people, all those paintings, all those sculptures, without a single visitor standing before them. What are the blind in this city waiting for, who knows, they might be awaiting a cure if they still believed in it, but they lost that hope when it became public knowledge that the epidemic of blindness had spared no one, that not a single person had been left with the eyesight to look through the lens of a microscope, that the laboratories had been abandoned, where there was no other solution for the bacteria but to feed on each other if they hoped to survive. In the beginning, many of the blind, accompanied by relatives who so far had maintained some sense of family solidarity, still

rushed to the hospitals, but there they found only blind doctors feeling the pulse of patients they could not see, listening to them back and front, this was all they could do, since they still had their hearing. Then, feeling the pangs of hunger, those patients who could still walk began to flee the hospitals, they ended up dying unprotected on the streets, their families, if they still had them, could be anywhere, and then, so that they might be buried, it was not enough for someone to trip over them accidentally, their corpses had to start to smell, and even then, only if they had died in some main thoroughfare. Little wonder that there are so many dogs, some of them already resemble hyenas, the spots on their pelt are like those of putrefaction, they run around with their hind quarters drawn in, as if afraid that the dead and devoured might come back to life in order to make them pay for the shame of biting those who could not defend themselves. What's the world like these days, the old man with the black eyepatch had asked, and the doctor's wife replied, There's no difference between inside and outside, between here and there, between the many and the few, between what we're living through and what we shall have to live through, And the people, how are they coping, asked the girl with dark glasses, They go around like ghosts, this must be what it means to be a ghost, being certain that life exists, because your four senses say so, and yet unable to see it, Are there lots of cars out there, asked the first blind man, who was unable to forget that his had been stolen, It's like a cemetery. Neither the doctor nor the wife of the first blind man asked any questions, what was the point, when the replies were such as these. As for the little boy with the squint, he has the satisfaction of wearing the shoes he had always dreamt of having and he is not even saddened by the fact that he cannot see them. This is probably the reason why he does not look like a ghost. And the dog of tears, who trails after the doctor's wife, would scarcely deserve to be called a hyena, he does not follow the scent of dead meat, he accompanies a pair of eyes that he knows are alive and well.

The home of the girl with dark glasses is not far away, but after being starved for a week, it is only now that the members of this group begin to recover their strength, that is why they walk so slowly, in order to rest they have no option but to sit on the ground, it had not been worthwhile taking so much trouble to choose colours and styles, when in such a short time their clothes are filthy. The street where the girl with dark glasses lives is not only short but narrow which explains why there are no cars to be seen here, they could pass in one direction only, but there was no place to park, it was prohibited. That there were also no people was not surprising, in streets like these there are many moments throughout the day when there is not a living soul to be seen, What's the number of your house, asked the doctor's wife, number seven, I live on the second floor in the flat on the left. One of the windows was open, at any other time that would be a sign that there was almost certainly someone at home, now everything was uncertain. The doctor's wife said, No need for all of us to go up, we two shall go on our own, the rest of you wait below. She realised the front door leading on to the street had been forced, the mortice lock was clearly twisted, a long splinter of wood had almost come away from the doorpost. The doctor's wife mentioned none of this. She let the girl go

ahead since she knew the way, she did not mind the shadows into which the stairway was plunged. In her nervous haste, the girl with dark glasses stumbled twice, but laughed it off, Just imagine, stairs that I used to be able to go up and down with my eyes closed, clichés are like that, they are insensitive to the thousand subtleties of meaning, this one, for example, does not know the difference between closing one's eyes and being blind. On the landing of the second floor, the door they were looking for was closed. The girl with dark glasses ran her hand over the moulding until she found the bell, There's no light, the doctor's wife reminded her, and the girl received these four words that only repeated what everyone knew like a message bringing bad news. She knocked at the door, once, twice, three times, the third time loudly, using her fists and calling out, Mummy, daddy, and no one came to open, these terms of endearment did not affect the reality, no one came to say to her, Dearest daughter, you've come at last, we had given up hope of ever seeing you again, come in, come in, and let this lady who is your friend come in too, the house is a little untidy, pay no attention, the door remained closed. There is no one here, said the girl with dark glasses, and burst into tears leaning against the door, her head on her crossed forearms, as if with her whole body she were desperately imploring pity, if we did not have enough experience of how complicated the human spirit can be we would be surprised that she should be so fond of her parents as to indulge in these demonstrations of sorrow, a girl so free in her behaviour, but not far away is someone who has already affirmed that there does not exist nor ever has existed any contradiction between the one and the other. The doctor's wife tried to console her, but had little to say, it is well known that it is practically impossible for people to remain for a long time in their houses, We could ask the neighbours, she suggested, if there are any, Yes, let's go and ask, said the girl with dark glasses, but there was no hope in her voice. They began by knocking on the door on the other side of the landing, where once again no one replied. On the floor above the two doors were open. The flats had been ransacked, the wardrobes were empty, in the cupboards where food had been stored there was nothing to be found. There were signs that someone had been here recently, no doubt a group of vagrants, as they were all more or less by now, wandering from house to house, from absence to absence.

They went down to the first floor, the doctor's wife rapped on the nearest door, there was an expectant silence, then a gruff voice asked suspiciously, Who's there, the girl with dark glasses stepped forward, It's me, your upstairs neighbour, I'm looking for my parents, do you know where I can find them, what happened to them, she asked. They could hear shuffling footsteps, the door opened and a gaunt old woman appeared, nothing but skin and bone, emaciated, her long white hair dishevelled. A nauseating smell of mustiness and an indefinable putrefaction caused the two women to step back. The old woman opened her eyes wide, they were almost white, I know nothing about your parents, they came to fetch them the day after they took you away, at that time I could still see, Is there anyone else in the building, Now and then I can hear people climbing up or going down the stairs, but they are from outside and only come here to sleep, And what about my parents, I've already told you I know nothing about them, And

what about your husband, your son and daughter-in-law, They took them away too, But left you behind, why, Because I was hiding, Where, Just imagine, in your flat, How did you manage to get in, Through the back and up the fire escape, I smashed a window-pane and opened the door from inside, the key was in the lock, And how have you managed since then to live all alone in your flat, asked the doctor's wife, Who else is here, asked the startled old woman turning her head, She's a friend of mine, she's with my group, the girl with dark glasses reassured her, And it's not just a question of being alone, what about food, how have you managed to get food during all this time, insisted the doctor's wife, The fact is that I'm no fool and I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself, If you'd rather not say, don't, I'm simply curious, Then I'll tell you, the first thing I did was to go round all the flats and gather up any food I could find, whatever might go bad I ate at once, the rest I kept, Do you still have some left, asked the girl with dark glasses, No, it's finished, replied the old woman with a sudden expression of mistrust in her sightless eyes, a way of speaking that is always used in similar situations, but it has no basis in fact, because the eyes, the eyes strictly speaking, have no expression, not even when they have been plucked out, they are two round objects that remain inert, it is the eyelids, the eyelashes and the eyebrows, that have to take on board the different visual eloquences and rhetorics, notwithstanding that this is normally attributed to the eyes, So what are you living on now, asked the doctor's wife, Death stalks the streets, but in the back gardens life goes on, the old woman said mysteriously, What do you mean, The back gardens have cabbages, rabbits, hens, they also have flowers, but they're not for eating, And how do you cope, It depends, sometimes I pick some cabbages, at other times I kill a rabbit or chicken, And eat them raw, At first I used to light a fire, then I got used to raw meat, and the stalks of the cabbages are sweet, don't you worry yourselves, my mother's daughter will not die of hunger. She stepped back two paces, almost disappeared into the darkness of the house, only her white eyes shone, and she said from within, If you want to go into your flat, go ahead, I won't stop you. The girl with dark glasses was about to say no, many thanks, it isn't worth it, to what purpose, if my parents aren't there, but suddenly she felt the desire to see her room, to see my room, how foolish, if I'm blind, at least to touch the walls, the bedcover, the pillow where I used to rest my crazy head, over the furniture, perhaps on the chest of drawers there might still be the flowers in the vase she remembered, unless the old woman had thrown them on the floor, annoyed that they could not be eaten. She said, Well, if you don't mind, I'll accept your offer, it's very kind of you, Come in, come in, but don't expect to find any food, what I have is barely enough for me, besides it would be no good to you unless you like raw meat, Don't worry, we have food, Ah, so you have food, in that case you can repay the favour and leave me some, We'll give you some food, don't worry, said the doctor's wife. They had already walked down the corridor, the stench had become unbearable. In the kitchen, dimly lit by the waning light outside, there were rabbit skins on the floor, chicken feathers, bones, and on the table, in a dirty plate covered in dried blood, unrecognisable pieces of meat, as if they had been chewed over and over again, And the rabbits and hens, what do they eat, asked the doctor's wife, Cabbages, weeds, any scraps left over, said the old woman, Don't tell us the hens and

rabbits eat meat, The rabbits don't yet, but the hens love it, animals are like people, they get used to everything in the end. The old woman moved steadily, without tottering, she moved a chair out of the way as if she could see, then pointed to the door that led on to the emergency stairs, Through here, be careful not to slip, the handrail is not very secure. And what about the door, asked the girl with dark glasses, You only have to push the door, I have the key, it's somewhere around, It's mine, the girl was about to say, but at that same instant reflected that this key would be no good to her if her parents, or someone acting on their behalf, had taken away the others, the ones for the front door, she could not ask this neighbour to allow her to pass every time she wanted to come in or go out. She felt her heart contract slightly, probably because she was about to enter her own home and discover that her parents were not there, or for whatever reason.

The kitchen was clean and tidy, the dust on the furniture was not excessive, another advantage of this rainy weather, as well as having made the cabbages and greens grow, in fact, the back gardens, seen from above, had struck the doctor's wife as being jungles in miniature, Could the rabbits be running around freely, she asked herself, most unlikely, they would still be housed in the rabbit-hutches waiting for that blind hand to bring them cabbage leaves then grab them by the ears and pull them out kicking, while the other hand prepares the blind blow that will break the vertebrae near the skull. The memory of the girl with dark glasses had guided her into the flat, just as the old woman on the floor below neither tripped nor faltered, her parents' bed was unmade, they must have come to detain them in the early hours of morning, she sat down there and wept, the doctor's wife came to sit beside her, and told her, Don't cry, what else could she say, what meaning do tears have when the world has lost all meaning, In the girl's room on the chest of drawers stood the glass vase with the withered flowers, the water had evaporated, it was there that her blind hands directed themselves, her fingers brushed against the dead petals, how fragile life is when it is abandoned. The doctor's wife opened the window, she looked down into the street, there they all were, seated on the ground, patiently waiting, the dog of tears was the only creature to raise his head, alerted by his keen hearing. The sky, once more overcast, began to darken, night was approaching. She thought that today they would not need to go and search for some refuge where they might sleep, they would stay here. The old woman is not going to be at all pleased if everyone starts tramping through her house, she murmured. Just at that moment, the girl with dark glasses touched her on the shoulder, saying, The keys were in the lock, they did not take them. The problem, if there was one, was therefore resolved, they would not have to put up with the ill-humour of the old woman on the first floor, I'm going down to call them, it will soon be night, how good, at least today we shall be able to sleep in a proper home with a roof over our heads, said the doctor's wife, You and your husband can sleep in my parents' bed, We'll see about that later, I'm the one who gives the orders here, I'm in my own home, You're right, just as you wish, the doctor's wife embraced the girl, then went down to look for the others. Climbing the stairs, chattering with excitement, now and then tripping on the stairs despite having been told by their guide, There are ten steps to each flight, it was as if they had come on a visit. The dog of

tears followed them quietly, as if this were an everyday occurrence. From the landing, the girl with dark glasses looked down, it is the custom when someone is coming up, whether it be to find out who it is, if the person is a stranger, or to greet someone with words of welcome if they are friends, in this case no eyes were needed to know who was arriving. Come in, come in, make yourselves comfortable. The old woman on the first floor had come to her door to pry, she thought this lot was one of those mobs who turned up to sleep, in this she was not wrong, she asked, Who's there, and the girl with dark glasses replied from above, It's my group, the old woman was puzzled, how had she been able to reach the landing, then it dawned on her and she was annoyed with herself for having forgotten to retrieve the keys from the front door, it was as if she were losing her proprietorial rights over this building in which she had been the sole occupant for many months. She could find no better way of compensating for her sudden frustration than to say, opening the door, Remember you said you'd give me some food, don't go forgetting your promise. And since neither the doctor's wife nor the girl with dark glasses, the one busy guiding those who were arriving, the other in receiving them, made any reply, she shouted hysterically, Did you hear me, a mistake on her part, because the dog of tears, who at that precise moment was passing her, leapt at her and started barking furiously, the entire stairway echoed with the uproar, it was perfect, the old woman shrieked in terror and rushed back into her flat, slamming the door behind her, Who is that witch, asked the old man with the black eyepatch, these are things we say when we do not know how to take a good look at ourselves, had he lived as she had lived, we should like to see how long his civilised ways would last.

There was no food apart from what they had brought in the bags, they had to be sparing with it down to the very last drop, and, as for lighting, they had been most fortunate to find two candles in the kitchen cupboard, kept there to be used whenever there happened to be a power cut and which the doctor's wife lit for her own benefit, the others did not need them, they already had a light inside their heads, so strong it had blinded them. Though meagre rations were all this little group had, yet it ended up as a family feast, one of those rare feasts where what belongs to one, belongs to everybody. Before seating themselves at the table, the girl with dark glasses and the doctor's wife went down to the floor below, they went to fulfill their promise, were it not more exact to say that they went to satisfy a demand, payment with food for their passage through that customs house. The old woman received them, whining and surly, that cursed dog that only by some miracle did not devour her, You must have a lot of food to be able to feed such a beast, she insinuated, as if expecting, by means of this accusing observation, to arouse in the two emissaries what we call remorse, what they were really saying to each other, it would be inhumane to leave a poor old woman to die of starvation while a dumb animal gorges itself on scraps. The two women did not turn back to get more food, what they were carrying was already a generous ration, if we take into account the difficult circumstances of life at present, and this strangely enough, was how the old lady on the floor below appraised the situation, when all is said and done, less mean-hearted than she seemed, and she went back inside to find the keys for the back door, saying to the

girl with dark glasses, Take it, this key is yours, and, as if this were not enough, she was still muttering as she closed her door, Many thanks. Amazed, the two women returned upstairs, so the old witch had feelings after all, She was not a bad person, living all that time alone must have unhinged her, commented the girl with dark glasses without appearing to think what she was saying. The doctor's wife did not reply, she decided to keep any conversation for later, and once all the others were in bed, some of them asleep, and the two women were sitting in the kitchen like mother and daughter trying to gather strength for the other chores to be done around the house, the doctor's wife asked, And you, what are you going to do now, Nothing, I'll wait here until my parents return, Alone and blind, I've got used to being blind, And what about solitude, I'll have to accept it, the old woman below also lives alone, You don't want to become like her, feeding on cabbages and raw meat, while they last, in these buildings around here there appears to be no one else living, you would be two women hating each other for fear that the food might come to an end, each stalk you gathered would be like taking it from the other's mouth, you didn't see that poor woman, you only caught the stench coming from her flat, I can assure you that not even where we were living before were things so repugnant, Sooner or later, we shall all be like her, and then it will all be over, there will be no more life, Meanwhile, we're still alive, Listen, you know much more than I do, compared with you I'm simply an ignorant girl, but in my opinion we're already dead, we're blind because we're dead, or if you would prefer me to put it another way, we're dead because we're blind, it comes to the same thing, I can still see, Lucky for you, lucky for your husband, for me, for the others, but you don't know how long you will go on seeing, should you become blind you will be like the rest of us, we'll all end up like the neighbour below, Today is today, tomorrow will bring what tomorrow brings, today is my responsibility, not tomorrow if I should turn blind, What do you mean by responsibility, The responsibility of having my eyesight when others have lost theirs, You cannot hope to guide or provide food for all the blind people in this world, I ought to, But you cannot, I shall do whatever I can to help, Of course you will, had it not been for you I might not be alive today, And I don't want you to die now, I must stay, it's my duty, I want my parents to find me if they should return, If they should return, you yourself said it, and we have no way of knowing whether they will still be your parents, I don't understand, You said that the neighbour below was a good person at heart, Poor woman, Your poor parents, poor you, when you meet up, blind in eyes and blind in feelings, because the feelings with which we have lived and which allowed us to live as we were, depended on our having the eyes we were born with, without eyes feelings become something different, we do not know how, we do not know what, you say we're dead because we're blind, there you have it, Do you love your husband, Yes, as I love myself, but should I turn blind, if after turning blind I should no longer be the person I was, how would I then be able to go on loving him, and with what love, Before, when we could still see, there were also blind people, Few in comparison, the feelings in use were those of someone who could see, therefore blind people felt with the feelings of others, not as the blind people they were, now, certainly, what is emerging are the real feelings of the blind, and we're still only at the beginning, for the moment we still live on the memory of what we felt,

you don't need eyes to know what life has become today, if anyone were to tell me that one day I should kill, I'd take it as an insult, and yet I've killed, What then would you have me do, Come with me, come to our house, And what about the others, The same goes for them, but it's you I most care about, Why, I ask myself that question, perhaps because you have become almost like a sister, perhaps because my husband slept with you, Forgive me, It's not a crime that calls for pardon, We would suck your blood and be like parasites, There were plenty of them when we could see, and as for blood, it has to serve some purpose besides sustaining the body that carries it, and now let's try to get some sleep for tomorrow is another day.

Another day, or the same one. When he woke up, the boy with the squint wanted to go to the lavatory, he had diarrhoea, something that had disagreed with him in his weak condition, but it soon became obvious that it was impossible to go in there, the old woman on the floor below had clearly taken advantage of all the lavatories in the building until they could no longer be used, only by some extraordinary stroke of luck none of the seven, before going to bed last night, had needed to satisfy the urge to relieve their bowels, otherwise they would already know just how disgusting those lavatories were. Now they all felt the need to relieve themselves, especially the poor boy who could not hold it in any longer, in fact, however reluctant we might be to admit it, these distasteful realities of life also have to be considered, when the bowels function normally, anyone can have ideas, debate, for example, whether there exists a direct relationship between the eyes and feelings, or whether the sense of responsibility is the natural consequence of clear vision, but when we are in great distress and plagued by pain and anguish that is when the animal side of our nature becomes most apparent. The garden, exclaimed the doctor's wife, and she was right, were it not so early, we would find the neighbour from the flat below already there, it's time we stopped calling her the old woman, as we have disrespectfully done so far, she would already be there, as we were saying, crouched down, surrounded by hens, because the person who might ask the question almost certainly does not know what hens are like. Clutching his belly, protected by the doctor's wife, the boy with the squint went down the stairs in agony, worse still, by the time he reached the last steps, his sphincter had given up trying to resist the internal pressure, so you can imagine the consequences. Meanwhile, the other five were making their way as best they could down the emergency stairs, a most suitable name, if they have any inhibitions left since the time they lived in quarantine, this was the moment to lose them. Scattered throughout the back garden, groaning with the effort, suffering whatever remained of futile shame, they did what had to be done, even the doctor's wife who wept as she looked at them, she wept for all of them, which they seemed no longer to be able to do, her own husband, the first blind man and his wife, the girl with dark glasses, the old man with the black eyepatch, the boy, she saw them squatting on the weeds, between the knotty cabbage stalks, with the hens watching, the dog of tears had also come down to make one more. They cleaned themselves as best they could, superficially and in haste, with some handfuls of grass or broken bits of brick, wherever the arm could reach, in somecases the attempt to tidy up only made matters worse. They went back up

the emergency stairs in silence, the neighbour on the first floor did not appear to ask them who they were, where they had come from, where they were going, she must still be sleeping off her supper, and when they got into the flat, first they did not know what to say, then the girl with dark glasses pointed out that they could not remain in that state, it is true that there was no water with which to wash themselves, pity there was no torrential rain like that of yesterday, they would go out once more into the garden, but now naked and without shame, they would receive on their head and shoulders the generous water from the sky above, they would feel it running down their back and chest, down their legs, they could gather it in their hands, clean at last and in this cup offer it to someone to quench their thirst, no matter who, perhaps their lips would gently touch their skin before finding the water, and desperately thirsty as they were, they would eagerly gather the last drops from that shell, thus arousing, who knows, another thirst. What leads the girl with dark glasses astray, as we have seen on other occasions, is her imagination, what would she have to remember in a situation like this, tragic, grotesque, desperate as it was. Despite everything, she is not without some sense of the practical, the proof being that she went to open the wardrobe in her room, then that of her parents, where she gathered up sheets and towels, Let's clean ourselves up with these, she said, it's better than nothing, and there is no doubt that it was a good idea, when they sat down to eat they felt quite different.

It was at the table that the doctor's wife told them what was on her mind. The time has come to decide what we want to do, I'm convinced the entire population is blind, at least that is my impression from observing the behaviour of the people I have seen so far, there is no water, there is no electricity, there are no supplies of any kind, this must be what chaos is, this is what is really meant by chaos. There must be a government, said the first blind man, I'm not so sure, but if there is, it will be a government of the blind trying to rule the blind, that is to say, nothingness trying to organise nothingness, Then there is no future, said the old man with the black eyepatch, I cannot say whether there will be a future, what matters for the moment is to see how we can live in the present, Without a future, the present serves no purpose, it's as if it did not exist, Perhaps humanity will manage to live without eyes, but then it will cease to be humanity, the result is obvious, which of us think of ourselves as being as human as we believed ourselves to be before, I, for example, killed a man, You killed a man, asked the first blind man in alarm, Yes, the one who gave orders on the other side, I stabbed him in the throat with a pair of scissors, You killed him to avenge us, only a woman could avenge the women, said the girl with dark glasses, and revenge, being just, is something human, if the victim has no rights over the wrong-doer then there can be no justice, Nor humanity, added the wife of the first blind man, Let's get back to the matter we were discussing, said the doctor's wife, if we stay together we might manage to survive, if we separate we shall be swallowed up by the masses and destroyed, You mentioned that there are organised groups of blind people, observed the doctor, this means that new ways of living are being invented and there is no reason why we should finish up by being destroyed, as you predict, I don't know to what extent they are really organised, I only

see them going around in search of food and somewhere to sleep, nothing more, We're going back to being primitive hordes, said the old man with the black eyepatch, with the difference that we are not a few thousand men and women in an immense, unspoiled nature, but thousands of millions in an uprooted, exhausted world, And blind, added the doctor's wife, When it starts to become difficult to find water and food, these groups will almost certainly disband, each person will think they have a better chance of surviving on their own, they will not have to share anything with others, whatever they can grab belongs to them and to no one else, The groups going around must have leaders, someone who gives orders and organises things, the first blind man reminded them, Perhaps, but in this case those who give the orders are just as blind as those who receive them, You're not blind, said the girl with dark glasses, that's why you were the obvious person to give orders and organise the rest of us, I don't give orders, I organise things as best I can, I am simply the eyes that the rest of you no longer possess, A kind of natural leader, a king with eyes in the land of the blind, said the old man with the black eyepatch, If this is so, then allow yourselves to be guided by my eyes so long as they last, therefore what I propose is that instead of dispersing, her in her house, you in yours, let us continue to live together, We can stay here, said the girl with dark glasses, Our house is bigger, Assuming it has not been occupied, the wife of the first blind man pointed out, When we get there we'll find out, and if it should be occupied we can come back here, or go and take a look at your house, or yours, she added, addressing the old man with the black eye-patch, and he replied, I have no home of my own, I lived alone in a room, Have you no family, asked the girl with dark glasses, No family whatsoever, Not even a wife, children, brothers and sisters, No one, Unless my parents turn up, I shall be alone just like you. I'll stay with you, said the boy with the squint, but did not add, Unless my mother turns up, he did not lay down this condition, strange behaviour, or perhaps not so strange, the young quickly adapt, they have their whole life before them. What do you think, asked the doctor's wife, I'm going with you, said the girl with dark glasses, all I ask is that you should bring me here once a week just in case my parents should happen to return, Will you leave the keys with the neighbour below, There's no alternative, she cannot take more than she has taken already, She might destroy things, Now that I've been here, perhaps not, We're coming with you too, said the first blind man, although we should like, as soon as possible, to pass by our home and find out what has happened, Of course, No point in passing by my house, I've already told you it was just a room. But you'll come with us, Yes, on one condition, at first sight it must seem scandalous for someone to lay down conditions when he is being done a favour, but some old people are like that, they make up in pride for the little time remaining to them, What condition is that, asked the doctor, When I start becoming an impossible burden, you must tell me, and if, out of friendship or pity, you should decide to say nothing, I hope I'll still have enough judgment to do the necessary, And what might that be, I'd like to know, asked the girl with dark glasses, Withdraw, take myself off, disappear, as elephants used to do, I've heard it said that recently things have been different, none of these animals reach old age, You're not exactly an elephant, Nor am I exactly a man, Especially if you start giving childish replies, retorted the girl with dark glasses, and the conversation went no

further.

The plastic bags are now much lighter than when they were brought here, not surprisingly, the neighbour on the first floor also ate from them, she ate twice, first last night, and today they left her some more food when they asked her to take the keys and look after them until the rightful owners turned up, a question of keeping the old girl sweet, because as for her character we have learned more than enough, and the dog of tears also had to be fed, only a heart of stone would have been capable of feigning indifference before those pleading eyes, and while we are on the subject, where has the dog disappeared to, he is not in the flat, he did not go out the door, he can only be in the back garden, the doctor's wife went off to take a good look, and this was, in fact, where he was, the dog of tears was devouring a hen, the attack had been so quick that there was not even time to raise the alarm, but if the old woman on the first floor had eyes and kept a count on her hens, who can tell, out of anger, what fate might befall the keys, Between the awareness of having committed a crime and the perception that the human being whom he was protecting was going away, the dog of tears hesitated only for an instant, then began at once to scratch the soft earth, and before the old woman on the first floor appeared on the landing of the fire escape to sniff out the sounds that were coming into her flat, the hen's carcass was buried, the crime covered up, remorse reserved for some other occasion. The dog of tears sidled upstairs, brushed like a breath of air past the skirts of the old woman, who had no idea of the danger she had just faced, and went to settle beside the doctor's wife, where he announced to the heavens the feat he had just achieved. The old woman on the first floor, hearing him bark so ferociously, feared, but as we know all too late, for the safety of her larder, and, craning her neck upwards, called, This dog must be kept under control before he kills one of my hens, Don't worry, replied the doctor's wife, the dog isn't hungry, he has already eaten, and we're leaving right away, Right away, repeated the old woman, and there was a break in her voice as if of pain, as if she wanted to be understood in a quite different way, for example, You're going to leave me here all alone, but she did not utter another word, only that Right away which asked for no reply, the hard of heart also have their sorrows, this woman's heart was such that later she refused to open her door to bid farewell to these ingrates to whom she had given free access to her house. She heard them go downstairs, they were talking amongst themselves, saying, Watch you don't stumble, Put your hand on my shoulder, Hold on to the bannister, the usual words, but now much more common in this world of blind people, what did surprise her was to hear one of the women say, It's so dark in this place that I can't see a thing, that this woman's blindness should not be white was already surprising in itself, but that she could not see because it was so dark, what could this mean, She wanted to think, tried hard, but her weak head did not help, soon she was saying to herself, I must have misheard, whatever it was. In the street, the doctor's wife remembered what she had said, she must watch what she was saying, she could move like someone who has eyes, But my words must be those of a blind person, she thought.

Assembled on the pavement, she arranged her companions in two rows of three, in the first one she placed her husband and the girl with dark glasses, with the boy with the squint in the middle, in the second row the old man with the black eye-patch and the first blind man, one on either side of the other woman. She wanted to keep all of them close to her, not in the usual fragile Indian file, which can be broken at any moment, they only needed to encounter a more numerous or more aggressive group, and it would be like a steamer at sea cutting in two a sailboat that happened to cross its path, we know the consequences of such accidents, shipwrecks, disasters, people drowned, futile cries for help in that vast expanse of water, the steamer already sailing on ahead, not even aware of the collision, this is what would happen to this group, a blind person here, another there, lost in the disordered currents of the other blind people, like the waves of the sea that never stop and do not know where they are going, and the doctor's wife, too, not knowing to whose assistance she should hasten first, placing her hand on her husband's arm, perhaps on that of the boy with the squint, but losing the girl with dark glasses, the other two, the old man with the black eyepatch, far away, heading for the elephants' graveyard. What she is doing now is to pass around herself and all the others a cord made from strips of cloth knotted together while the rest were asleep, Don't hold on to me, she said, but hold on to the rope with all your strength, do not let go under any circumstances, whatever may happen. They were careful not to walk too closely to avoid tripping each other, but they needed to feel the proximity of their neighbours, a direct contact if possible, only one of them did not have to worry himself with these new questions of overland tactics, this was the boy with the squint who walked in the middle, protected on all sides. None of our blind friends thought to ask how the other groups navigate, if they too are advancing tied to each other by this or other processes, but the reply should be easy from what we have been able to observe, groups in general, except in the case of a more cohesive group for good reasons unknown to us, gradually gain and lose adherents throughout the day, there is always one blind man who strays and is lost, another who was caught by the force of gravity and tags along, he might be accepted, he might be expelled, depending on what he is carrying with him. The old woman on the first floor slowly opened the window, she does not want anyone to know that she has this sentimental weakness, but no noise can be heard coming from the street, they have already gone, they have left this place where almost no one ever passes, the old woman ought to be pleased, in this way she will not have to share her hens and rabbits with the others, she should be pleased but is not, in her blind eyes appear two tears, for the first time she asked herself if she had some good reason for wanting to go on living. She could find no reply, replies do not always come when needed, and it often happens that the only possible reply is to wait for them.

Along the route they were taking they would pass two blocks away from the house where the old man with the black eye-patch had his bachelor room, but they had already decided that they would travel on, there was no food to be found there, clothing they do not need, books they cannot read. The streets are full of blind people out searching for food. They go in and out of shops, enter empty-handed and nearly always come out

empty-handed, then they debate among themselves the need or advantage of leaving this district and going to forage elsewhere in the city, the big problem is that, things being as they are, without running water, the gas cylinders empty, as well as the danger of lighting fires inside the houses, no cooking can be done, assuming that we would know where to look for the salt, the oil and seasoning, were we to try and prepare a few dishes with some hint of the flavours from the past, if there were some greens, simply having them boiled would leave us satisfied, the same being true of meat, apart from the usual rabbits and hens, dogs and cats could be cooked if they could be caught, but since experience is truly the mistress of life, even these animals, previously domesticated, learned to mistrust caresses, they now hunt in packs and in packs they defend themselves from being hunted down, and since, thanks be to God, they still have eyes, they are better equipped to avoid danger, and to attack if necessary. All these circumstances and reasons have led us to conclude that the best food for humans is what is preserved in cans and jars, not only because it is often already cooked, ready to be eaten, but also because it is so much easier to transport and handy for immediate use. It is true that on all these cans, jars and different packets in which these products are sold there is a date beyond which it could be risky to consume them and even dangerous in certain cases, but popular wisdom was quick to put into circulation a saying to which in a sense there is no answer, symmetrical with another saying no longer much used, what the eyes do not see the heart does not grieve over, people would now often say, eyes that do not see have a cast-iron stomach, which explains why they eat so much rubbish. Heading the group, the doctor's wife makes a mental calculation of the food she still has in reserve, there will be enough, if that, for one meal, without counting the dog, but let him sort himself out with the means at his disposal, the same means that served him so well to grab the hen by the neck and cut off its voice and life. She will have at home, as you may remember, and provided that no one has broken in, a reasonable quantity of preserves, enough for a couple, but there are seven persons here who have to be fed, her reserves will not last long, even if she were to enforce strict rationing. Tomorrow, or within the next few days, she will have to return to the underground storeroom of the supermarket, she will have to decide whether to go alone or to ask her husband to accompany her, or the first blind man who is younger and more agile, the choice is between the possibility of carrying a larger quantity of food and acting speedily, without forgetting the conditions of the retreat. The rubbish on the streets, which appears to be twice as much since yesterday, the human excrement, that from before semi-liquified by the torrential downpour of rain, mushy or runny, the excrement being evacuated at this very minute by these men and women as we pass, fills the air with the most awful stench, like a dense mist through which it is only possible to advance with enormous effort. In a square surrounded by trees, with a statue in the middle, a pack of dogs is devouring a man's corpse. He must have died a short while ago, his limbs are not rigid, as can be seen when the dogs shake them to tear from the bone the flesh caught between their teeth. A crow hops around in search of an opening to get close to the feast. The doctor's wife averted her eyes, but it was too late, the vomit rising from her entrails was irresistible, twice, three times, as if her own still-living body were being

shaken by other dogs, the pack of absolute despair, this is as far as I go, I want to die here. Her husband asked, What's the matter, the others bound together by the cord, drew closer, suddenly alarmed, What happened, Did the food upset you, Something that was off, I don't feel a thing, Nor me, All the better for them, all they could hear was the uproar from the dogs, the sudden and unexpected cawing of a crow, in the upheaval one of the dogs had bitten its wing in passing, quite unintentionally, then the doctor's wife said, I couldn't stop myself, forgive me, but some of the dogs here are eating another dog. Are they eating our dog, asked the boy with the squint, No, our dog as you call him, is alive, and prowling around them but he keeps his distance. After eating that hen, he can't be very hungry, said the first blind man. Are you feeling better, asked the doctor, Yes, let's be on our way, The dog isn't ours, it simply latched on to us, it will probably stay behind now with these other dogs, it may have stayed with them before, but it has refound its friends, I want to do a poo, Here, I've got stomachache, it hurts, complained the boy. He relieved himself on the spot as best he could, the doctor's wife vomited once more, but for other reasons. Then they crossed the vast square and when they reached the shade of the trees, the doctor's wife looked back. More dogs had appeared and they were already contesting what remained of the corpse. The dog of tears arrived with its snout touching the ground as if it were following some trail, a question of habit, for this time a simple glance was enough to find the woman he was looking for.

The march continued, the house of the old man with the black eyepatch was already some way behind them, now they are making their way along a broad avenue with tall imposing buildings on either side. The cars here are expensive, capacious and comfortable, which explains why so many blind people are to be seen sleeping in them, and from all appearances, an enormous limousine has actually been transformed into a permanent home, probably because it was much easier to return to a car than to a house, the occupants of this one must do what was done back there in quarantine to find their bed, groping their way along and counting the cars from the corner, twenty-seven, right-hand side, I'm back home. The building at whose door the limousine is parked is a bank. The car had brought the chairman of the board to the weekly plenary meeting, the first to be held since the epidemic of white sickness had been declared, and there had been no time to park it in the underground garage until the meeting was over. The driver went blind just as the chairman was about to enter the building by the main entrance as usual, he let out a cry, we are referring to the driver, but he, meaning the chairman, did not hear it. Moreover, attendance at the plenary board meeting would not be as complete as its designation suggested, for during the last few days some of the directors had gone blind. The chairman did not get round to opening the session, the agenda of which had provided for a discussion of measures to be taken in the event that all the directors and their deputies went blind, and he was not even able to enter the board-room for when the elevator was taking him up to the fifteenth floor, between the ninth and the tenth floors to be exact, the electric power was cut off, never to be restored. And since disasters never come singly, at that same moment the electricians went blind who were responsible for maintaining the internal power supply and consequently that also of the

generator, an old model, not automatic, that had long been awaiting replacement, this resulted, as we said before, in the elevator coming to a halt between the ninth and tenth floors. The chairman saw the attendant who was accompanying him go blind, he himself lost his sight an hour later, and since the power did not come back and the cases of blindness inside the bank multiplied that day, in all probability the two are still there, dead, needless to say, shut up in a coffin of steel, and therefore happily safe from voracious dogs.

There being no witnesses, and if there were there is no evidence that they were summoned to the post-mortems to tell us what happened, it is understandable that someone should ask how it was possible to know that these things happened so and not in some other manner, the reply to be given is that all stories are like those about the creation of the universe, no one was there, no one witnessed anything, yet everyone knows what happened. The doctor's wife had asked, What will have happened to the banks, not that she was much concerned, despite having entrusted her savings to one of them, she raised the question out of simple curiosity, simply because she thought of it, nothing more, nor did she expect anyone to make a reply such as, for example, In the beginning, God created heaven and earth, the earth was without form and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, instead of this what really happened was that the old man with the black eyepatch said as they were proceeding down the avenue, As far as I could judge when I still had an eye to see, at first, it was pandemonium, the people, afraid of ending up blind and unprovided for, raced to the banks to withdraw their money, feeling that they ought to safeguard their future, and this is understandable, if someone knows they will no longer be able to work, the only remedy, for as long as they might last, is to have recourse to the savings made in times of prosperity when long-term provisions were made, assuming in fact that the people were prudent enough to build up their savings little by little, the outcome of this precipitous run on the banks was that within twenty-four hours some of the main banks were facing ruin, the Government intervened to plead for calm and to appeal to the civic conscience of citizens, ending the proclamation with the solemn declaration that it would assume all the responsibilities and duties resulting from this public calamity they were facing, but this calming measure did not succeed in alleviating the crisis, not only because people continued to go blind but also because those who could still see were interested only in saving their precious money, in the end, it was inevitable, the banks, bankrupt or otherwise, closed their doors and sought police protection, it did them no good, between the noisy crowds that gathered in front of the banks there were also policemen in plain clothes who demanded what they had saved with so much effort, and some, in order to demonstrate at will, had even advised their command that they were blind and were therefore dismissed, and the others, still in uniform and on active service, their weapons trained on the dissatisfied masses, suddenly lost sight of their target, the latter, if they had money in the bank, lost all hope and, as if that were not enough, they were accused of having entered into a pact with the established authority, but there was worse to come when the banks found themselves

attacked by furious hordes of whom some were blind and others not, but all of them desperate, here it was no longer a question of calmly handing in a cheque to be cashed at the counter and saying to the teller, I wish to withdraw my savings, but to lay hands on everything possible, on the cash in the till, whatever had been left in some drawer or other, in some safe-deposit box carelessly left open, in some old-fashioned money-bag as used by the grandparents of an older generation, you cannot imagine what it was like, the vast and sumptuous halls of the head office, the smaller branch offices in various districts witnessed truly terrifying scenes, nor should we forget the automatic tills, forced open and stripped of the very last note, on the screen of some of them appeared an enigmatic message of thanks for having chosen this bank. Machines are really very stupid, it might be more precise to say that these machines had betrayed their owners, in a word, the whole banking system collapsed, blown over like a house of cards, and not because the possession of money had ceased to be appreciated, the proof being that anyone who has it does not want to let go of it, the latter allege that no one can foresee what will happen tomorrow, this no doubt also being in the thoughts of the blind people who installed themselves in the vaults of the banks, where the strong-boxes are kept, waiting for some miracle to open wide those heavy metal doors that separate them from this wealth, they leave the place only to go in search of food and water or to satisfy the body's other needs, and then return to their post, they have passwords and hand signs so that no stranger may penetrate their stronghold, needless to say they live in total darkness, not that it matters, in this particular blindness everything is white. The old man with the black eyepatch related these tremendous happenings about banks and finance as they slowly crossed the city, with the odd stop so that the boy with the squint might pacify the unbearable turmoil in his intestines, and, despite the persuasive tone he gave to this impassioned description, it is logical to suspect that there was some exaggeration in his account, the story about the blind people who live in the bank vaults, for example, how could he have known if he does not know the password or the hand signal, in any case it was enough to give us some idea.

The light was fading when they finally arrived in the street where the doctor and his wife live. It is no different from the others, there is squalor everywhere, groups of blind people wandering aimlessly about, and, for the first time, but it was mere chance that they had not encountered them before, two huge rats, even the cats avoid them as they go on the prowl, for they are almost as big as they are and in all certainty much more ferocious. The dog of tears looked at both the rats and the cats with the indifference of someone who lives in another sphere of emotions, this we might say, were it not for the fact that the dog continues to be the dog that he is, an animal of the human type. At the sight of familiar places, the doctor's wife did not make the usual melancholy reflection, that consists in saying, How time passes, only the other day we were happy here, what shocked her was the disappointment, she had unwittingly believed that, being hers, she would find the street clean, swept, tidy, that her neighbours would be blind in their eyes, but not in their understanding, How stupid of me, she said aloud, Why, what is wrong, asked her husband, Nothing, daydreams, How time passes, what will the flat be like, he

wondered, We'll soon find out. They did not have much strength, and so climbed the stairs very slowly, pausing for breath on each landing, It's on the fifth floor, the doctor's wife had said. They went up as best they could, each under his or her own steam, the dog of tears now in front, now behind, as if it had been born to guide a flock, under orders not to lose a single sheep. There were open doors, voices within, the usual foul odour wafting out, twice blind people appeared on the threshold and looked with vacant eyes, Who's there, they asked, the doctor's wife recognised one of the voices, the other voice was not that of someone who lived in the building. We used to live here, was all she said. A flicker of recognition also showed on her neighbour's face, but she did not ask, Are you the doctor's wife, perhaps she might say once back inside, The people from the fifth floor are back. On reaching the last flight of stairs, even before setting foot on the landing, the doctor's wife was already announcing, The door is locked. There were signs of an attempt at a forced entry but the door had withstood the assault. The doctor put his hand into the inside pocket of his new jacket and brought out the keys. He held them in mid-air, waiting, but his wife gently guided his hand towards the keyhole.

Leaving aside the household dust that takes advantage of a family's absence to leave a subtle film on the surface of the furniture, it may be stated in this connection that these are the only occasions the dust has to rest, without being disturbed by a duster or vacuum cleaner, without children running back and forth unleashing an atmospheric whirlwind as they pass, the flat was clean, any untidiness was only what might be expected when one leaves in a hurry. Even so, while on that day they were expecting a summons from the Ministry and the hospital, the doctor's wife with the kind of foresight that leads sensible people to settle their affairs while alive, so that after their death, the tiresome need for a frantic putting of things in order does not arise, washed the dishes, made the bed, tidied the bathroom, the result was not exactly perfect, but truly it would have been cruel to ask any more of her with those trembling hands and tear-filled eyes. It was nevertheless a kind of paradise that the seven pilgrims had reached and this impression was so overwhelming, with no great disrespect for the strict meaning of the term, we could call it transcendental, that they stopped in their tracks in the entrance as if paralysed by the unexpected smell in the flat and it was simply that of a flat in need of a good airing, at any other time we would have rushed to open all the windows, To air the place, we would say, today the best thing to do would be to have them sealed up so that the putrefaction outside would be unable to come in. The wife of the first blind man said, We're going to dirty the whole place, and she was right, if they were to come in with these shoes covered in mud and excrement, paradise would in a flash become hell, the latter being the second place, according to the competent authorities where the putrid, fetid, nauseating, pestilential stench is the worst thing condemned souls have to bear, not the burning tongs, the cauldrons of boiling pitch and other artefacts of the foundry and the kitchen. From time immemorial it has been the custom of housewives to say, Come in, come in, really, it doesn't matter, I can clean up any dirt later, but this one, like her guests, knows where they have come from, she knows that in the world she lives in what is dirty will get dirtier still, therefore she asks them if they would be so kind as to remove their shoes on the landing, it is true that their feet are not clean either, but there is no comparison, the towels and sheets of the girl with dark glasses had some effect, they've got rid of most of the muck. So they went in without their shoes, the doctor's wife searched for and found a large plastic bag into which she put all the shoes intent upon giving them a good scrub, she had no idea when or how, then she carried them out on to the balcony, the air outside would not get any worse on this account. The sky began to darken, there were heavy clouds, If only it would rain, she thought. With a clear idea of what had to be done, she returned to her companions. They were in the sitting-room, silent, on their feet, for, despite their exhaustion, they had not dared to find themselves a chair, only the doctor vaguely ran his hands over the furniture leaving marks on the surface, the first dusting was under way, some of this dust is already stuck to his fingertips. The doctor's wife said, Take your clothes off, we can't remain in this state, our clothes are almost as dirty as our shoes, Take off our clothes, asked the first blind man, here, in front of each other, I don't think it's right, If you wish, I can put each of you in a different part of the flat, the doctor's wife replied ironically, then there will be no need to feel embarrassed, I'll take off my clothes right here, said the wife of the first blind man,

only you can see me, and even were that not the case, I haven't forgotten that you have seen me worse than being naked, it's my husband who has the poor memory, I can't see what possible interest there can be in recalling disagreeable matters long since forgotten, muttered the first blind man, If you were a woman and had been where we have been, you would change your tune, said the girl with dark glasses, starting to undress the boy with the squint. The doctor and the old man with the black eyepatch were already naked from the waist up, now they were removing their trousers, the old man with the black eyepatch said to the doctor who was at his side, Let me lean on you while I get out of these trousers. They looked so ridiculous the poor fellows as they jumped about, it almost made you want to weep. The doctor lost his balance, dragged the old man with the black eyepatch with him as he fell, fortunately they both found the situation amusing, and it was pitiful to watch them, their bodies covered with every kind of filth imaginable, their private parts all besmeared, white hairs, black hairs, this was what the respectability of old age and a worthy profession had come to. The doctor's wife went to help them get to their feet, shortly there would be darkness all around and no one will have any cause to feel embarrassed, Are there any candles in the house, she wondered, the answer was that she recalled having seen two ancient lamps, an old oil lamp, with three nozzles, and an old paraffin lamp of the kind with a glass funnel, for the present, the oil lamp will be good enough, I have oil, a wick can be improvised, tomorrow I'll go in search of some paraffin in one of those stores, it will be much easier to find than a can of food, Especially if I don't look for it in the grocer's, she thought, surprising herself that she was still capable of joking even in this situation. The girl with the dark glasses was slowly undressing, in a way that gave the impression that there would always be something more no matter how many clothes she removed, one last article of clothing to cover her nakedness, she cannot explain this sudden modesty, but had the doctor's wife been closer, she would have seen the girl blushing, even though her face was so dirty, let those who can, try to understand women, one of them suddenly assailed by shame after having gone around sleeping with men she scarcely knew, the other perfectly capable of whispering in her ear perfectly calmly, Don't be embarrassed, he cannot see you, she would be referring to her own husband, of course, for we must not forget how the shameless girl tempted him into bed, well, as everyone knows, with women it is always a case of buyer beware. Perhaps, in the meantime, the reason is something else, there are two other naked men here, and one of them has slept with her.

The doctor's wife gathered up the clothes lying scattered on the floor, trousers, shirts, a jacket, petticoats and blouses, some soiled underwear, the latter would take at least a month's soaking before she got them clean again, she bundled them up into an armload, Stay here, she told them, I'm coming straight back, She took the clothes out on to the balcony, as she had done with the shoes, there she in turn undressed, looking at the black city under the heavy sky. Not so much as a pale light in the windows, nor a waning reflection on the house fronts, what was there was not a city, it was a great mass of pitch which, on cooling, had hardened in the shape of buildings, rooftops, chimneys, all dead, all faded. The dog of tears appeared on the balcony, it was restless, but now there

were no tears to lick up, the despair was all inside her, eyes were dry. The doctor's wife felt cold, she remembered the others, standing naked in the middle of the room, waiting for who knows what. She entered. They had turned into simple, sexless forms, vague shapes, shadows losing themselves in the half-light, But this does not affect them, she thought, they fade into the surrounding light, and it is the light which does not allow them to see. I'm going to put a light on, she said, At the moment I'm almost as blind as the rest of you, Has the electricity come back on, asked the boy with the squint, No, I'm going to light an oil lamp, What's that, the boy asked again, I'll show you later. She rummaged for a box of matches in one of the plastic bags, went to the kitchen, she knew where she had stored the oil, she did not need much, she tore a strip from a dish towel in order to make wicks, then returned to the room where the lamp stood, it was going to be useful for the first time since it was manufactured, at first this did not appear to be its destiny, but none of us, lamps, dogs or humans, knows at the outset, why we have come into this world. One after the other, over the nozzles of the lamp, three tiny almonds of light lit up, from time to time they flicker until they give the impression that the upper part of the flames is lost in mid-air, then they settle down again as if they were becoming dense, solid, tiny pebbles of light. The doctor's wife said, Now that I can see, I'm going to get clean clothes, But we're dirty, the girl with the dark glasses said. Both she and the wife of the first blind man were covering their breasts and their sex with their hands, This is not for my sake, the doctor's wife thought, but because the light of the lamp is looking at them. Then she said, It is better to have clean clothes on a dirty body, than to have dirty clothes on a clean body. She took the lamp and went to search in the drawers of the chest, in the wardrobe, after a few minutes she returned, she brought pyjamas, dressing-gowns, skirts, blouses, dresses, trousers, underwear, everything necessary for dressing seven people decently, it is true that the people were not all the same size, but in their gauntness they were like so many twins. The doctor's wife helped them to dress, the boy with the squint finished up with a pair of the doctor's trousers, the kind you wear to the beach or in the countryside, and which turn us all into children. Now we can sit down, sighed the wife of the first blind man, Please guide us, we do not know where to put ourselves.

The room is like all sitting-rooms, it has a low table in the middle, all around there are sofas that can accommodate everyone, on this one here sit the doctor and his wife along with the old man with the black eyepatch, on the other the first blind man and his wife. They are exhausted. The boy fell asleep at once, with his head on the lap of the girl with dark glasses, having forgotten all about the lamp. An hour passed, this was akin to happiness, under the softest of lights their grimy faces looked washed, the eyes of those who were not asleep shone, the first blind man reached out for his wife's hand and pressed it, from this gesture we can see how a rested body can contribute to the harmony of the mind. Then the doctor's wife said, Shortly we'll have something to eat, but first we should decide how we are going to live here, don't worry, I am not about to repeat the speech that came over the loudspeaker, there's enough room to accommodate everyone, we have two bedrooms that can be used by the couples, the others can sleep

in this room, each on his own sofa, tomorrow I must go in search of some food, our supplies are running out, it would be helpful if one of you were to come with me to help me carry the food, but also so that you can start to learn the way home, to recognise the street corners, one of these days I might fall ill, or go blind, I am always waiting for it to happen, in which case I'll have to learn from you, on another matter, there will be a bucket on the balcony for our physical needs, I know that it is not pleasant to go out there, what with all the rain we've had and the cold, but it is, in any case, better than having the house smelling to high heaven, let us not forget that that was our life during the time when we were interned, we went down all the steps of indignity, all of them, until we reached total degradation, the same might happen here albeit in a different way, there we still had the excuse that the degradation belonged to someone else, not now, now we are all equal regarding good and evil, please, don't ask me what good and what evil are, we knew what it was each time we had to act when blindness was an exception, what is right and what is wrong are simply different ways of understanding our relationships with the others, not that which we have with ourselves, one should not trust the latter, forgive this moralising speech, you do not know, you cannot know, what it means to have eyes in a world in which everyone else is blind, I am not a queen, no, I am simply the one who was born to see this horror, you can feel it, I both feel and see it, and that's enough of this dissertation, Let's go and eat. No one asked any questions, the doctor simply said, If I ever regain my sight, I shall look carefully at the eyes of others, as if I were looking into their souls, Their souls, asked the old man with the eyepatch, Or their minds, the name does not matter, it was then that, surprisingly, if we consider that we are dealing with a person without much education, the girl with the dark glasses said, Inside us there is something that has no name, that something is what we are.

The doctor's wife had already put on the table some of the little food that was left over, then she helped them to sit down and said, Chew slowly, that helps to deceive your stomach. The dog of tears did not come to beg for food, it was used to fasting, moreover it must have thought that, after the banquet that morning, it had no right to take even a little food from the mouth of the woman who had wept, the others appeared not to interest him. In the middle of the table, the lamp with three flames was waiting for the doctor's wife to give the promised explanation, it finally happened after they had eaten, Give me your hands, she said to the boy with the squint, then guided his fingers slowly, saying, This is the base, round as you can see, and this the column that sustains the upper part with the oil container, here, watch you don't burn yourself, these are the nozzles, one, two, three, from these emerge twisted strips of material that suck up the oil from inside, a match is put to them and they start burning until the oil is finished, they give off a weak light but it's good enough to see each other, I can't see, One day you will see and on that day I'll give you the lamp as a present. What colour is it, Have you ever seen anything made of brass, I don't know, I don't remember, what is brass, Brass is yellow, Ah. The boy with the squint pondered for a moment, Now he is going to ask for his mother, thought the doctor's wife, but she was wrong, the boy simply said that he wanted water, that he was very thirsty, You will have to wait till tomorrow, we have no

water in the house, at this very moment she remembered that there was water, some five litres or more of precious water, the whole contents of the toilet cistern, it could not be worse than what they had been drinking during the quarantine. Blind in the darkness, she went to the bathroom, feeling her way along, she raised the lid of the cistern, she really could not see if there was water, there was, her fingers told her, she searched for a glass, plunged it in with great care and filled it, civilisation had returned to the primitive sources of slime. When she entered the room everyone remained seated where they were. The lamp lit up their faces which turned towards her, it was as if she had said, I am back, as you can see, take advantage, remember this light won't last for ever. The doctor's wife brought the glass to the boy with the squint's lips and said, Here is your water, drink slowly, slowly, and savour it, a glass of water is a marvellous thing, she was not talking to him, she was not talking to anyone, simply communicating to the world what a marvellous thing a glass of water is. Where did you get it, is it rain water, asked the husband, No, it's from the cistern. Didn't we have a large bottle of water when we left this place, he asked again, the wife said, Of course, why didn't I think of it, a half-full bottle and another that had not even been started, what luck, don't drink, don't drink anymore, she said to the boy, we are all going to drink fresh water, I'll put our best glasses on the table and we are going to drink fresh water. This time she took the lamp and went to the kitchen, she returned with the bottle, the light shone through it, it made the treasure inside sparkle. She put it on the table, went to fetch the glasses, the best they had, of finest crystal, then, slowly, as if she were performing a rite, she filled them. At last, she said, Let's drink. The blind hands groped and found the glasses, they raised them trembling. Let's drink, the doctor's wife said again. In the middle of the table, the lamp was like a sun surrounded by shining stars. When they had put the glasses back on the table, the girl with the dark glasses and the old man with the eyepatch were crying.

It was a restless night. Vague in the beginning, and imprecise, the dreams went from sleeper to sleeper, they lingered here, they lingered there, they brought with them new memories, new secrets, new desires, that is why the sleepers sighed and murmured, This dream is not mine, they said, but the dream replied, You do not yet know your dreams, in this way the girl with the dark glasses came to find out who the old man with the black eyepatch was, lying there asleep two paces away, in this way he thought he knew who she was, he merely thought he did, it is not enough for dreams to be reciprocal in order to be the same. As dawn broke it began to rain. The wind beating fiercely against the windows sounded like the cracking of a thousand whiplashes. The doctor's wife woke up, opened her eyes and murmured, Listen to that rain, then she closed them again, in the room it was still black night, now she could sleep. She barely managed a minute, she woke abruptly with the idea that she had something to do, but without yet understanding what it might be, the rain was saying to her, Get up, what did the rain want, Slowly, so as not to disturb her husband, she left the bedroom, crossed the sitting-room, paused for an instant to make sure they were all sleeping on the sofas, then she proceeded along the corridor as far as the kitchen, it was over this part of the building that the rain fell with the greatest force, driven by the wind. With the sleeve of her dressing-gown she cleaned

the steamed-up glass panel of the door and looked outside. The entire sky was one great cloud, the rain poured down in torrents. Piled up on the balcony-floor were the dirty clothes they had taken off, there was the plastic bag with the shoes waiting to be washed. Wash. The last veil of sleep was suddenly torn, this was what she had to do. She opened the door, took one step, immediately the rain drenched her from head to foot, as if she were beneath a waterfall. I must take advantage of this water, she thought. She went back into the kitchen and, making as little noise as possible, began gathering together bowls, pots and pans, anything in which she could collect some of the rain that was falling from heaven in sheets, harried about by the wind, sweeping over the roofs of the city like a large and noisy broom. She took them outside, arranged them along the balcony up against the railing, now there would be water to wash the dirty clothes and filthy shoes, Don't let it stop, she murmured as she searched in the kitchen for soap and detergents, scrubbing brushes, anything that might be used to clean a little, at least a little, of this unbearable filth of the soul. Of the body, she said, as if to correct this metaphysical thought, then she added, It's all the same. Then, as if this had to be the inevitable conclusion, the harmonious conciliation between what she had said and what she thought, she quickly took off her drenched dressing-gown, and, now, receiving on her body, sometimes a caress, sometimes the whiplash of the rain, she began to wash the clothes and herself at the same time. The sound of water that surrounded her prevented her from noticing right away that she was no longer alone. At the door to the balcony stood the girl with dark glasses and the wife of the first blind man, we cannot tell what presentiments, what intuition, what inner voices might have roused them, nor do we know how they found their way here, there is no point searching for explanations for the moment, conjectures are free. Help me, said the doctor's wife when she saw them, How, since we cannot see, asked the wife of the first blind man. Take off your clothes, the less we have to dry afterwards, the better, But we can't see, the wife of the first blind man repeated, It does not matter, said the girl with the dark glasses, We shall do what we can, And I shall finish off later, said the doctor's wife, I shall clean whatever is still dirty, and now to work, let's go, we are the only woman in the world with two eyes and six hands. Perhaps in the building opposite, behind those closed windows some blind people, men, women, roused by the noise of the constant beating of the rain, with their head pressed against the cold window-panes covering with their breath on the glass the dullness of the night, remember the time when, like now, they last saw rain falling from the sky. They cannot imagine that there are moreover three naked women out there, as naked as when they came into the world, they seem to be mad, they must be mad, people in their right mind do not start washing on a balcony exposed to the view of the neighbourhood, even less looking like that, what does it matter that we are all blind, these are things one must not do, my God, how the rain is pouring down on them, how it trickles between their breasts, how it lingers and disappears into the darkness of the pubis, how it finally drenches and flows over the thighs, perhaps we have judged them wrongly, or perhaps we are unable to see this the most beautiful and glorious thing that has happened in the history of the city, a sheet of foam flows from the floor of the balcony, if only I could go with it, falling interminably, clean, purified, naked. Only God

sees us, said the wife of the first blind man, who, despite disappointments and setbacks, clings to the belief that God is not blind, to which the doctor's wife replies, Not even he, the sky is clouded over, Only I can see you, Am I ugly, asked the girl with the dark glasses, You are skinny and dirty, you will never be ugly, And I, asked the wife of the first blind man, You are dirty and skinny like her, not as pretty, but more than I, You are beautiful, said the girl with the dark glasses, How do you know, since you have never seen me, I have dreamt of you twice, When, The second time was last night, You were dreaming about the house because you felt safe and calm, it's only natural after all we've been through, in your dream I was the home, and in order to see me you needed a face, so you invented it, I too see you as beautiful, and I never dreamt of you, said the wife of the first blind man, Which only goes to show that blindness is the good fortune of the ugly, You are not ugly, No, as a matter of fact I am not, but at my age, How old are you, asked the girl with the dark glasses, Getting on for fifty, Like my mother, And her, Her, what, Is she still beautiful, She was more beautiful once, that's what happens to all of us, we were all more beautiful once, You were never more beautiful, said the wife of the first blind man. Words are like that, they deceive, they pile up, it seems they do not know where to go, and, suddenly, because of two or three or four that suddenly come out, simple in themselves, a personal pronoun, an adverb, a verb, an adjective, we have the excitement of seeing them coming irresistibly to the surface through the skin and the eyes and upsetting the composure of our feelings, sometimes the nerves that cannot bear it any longer, they put up with a great deal, they put up with everything, it was as if they were wearing armour, we might say. The doctor's wife has nerves of steel, and yet the doctor's wife is reduced to tears because of a personal pronoun, an adverb, a verb, an adjective, mere grammatical categories, mere labels, just like the two women, the others, indefinite pronouns, they too are crying, they embrace the woman of the whole sentence, three graces beneath the falling rain. These are moments that cannot last for ever, these women have been here for more than an hour, it is time they felt cold, I'm cold, said the girl with the dark glasses. We cannot do anything more with the clothes, the shoes are spick and span, now it is time for these women to wash themselves, they soak their hair and wash each other's backs and they laugh as only little girls laugh when they play blind man's buff in the garden before becoming blind. Day broke, the first rays of sun peered over the shoulder of the world before hiding once more behind the clouds. It continues to rain but with less force. The washerwomen went back to the kitchen, they dried themselves and rubbed themselves with the towels the doctor's wife had gone to fetch from the bathroom cupboard, their skins smell strongly of detergent, but such is life, if you haven't got a dog to hunt with use a cat, the soap disappeared in a twinkling of the eye, even though this house seems to have everything or is it just that they know how to make the best use of what they have got, at last, they covered themselves, paradise was out there, the dressing-gown of the doctor's wife is soaking wet, but she put on a flowered dress that she had not worn for years and which made her the prettiest of the three.

When they entered the sitting-room, the doctor's wife saw that the old man with the

black eyepatch was sitting up on the sofa where he had slept. He held his head between his hands, his fingers plunged into the thatch of white hair which still grew from his forehead to the back of his neck, and he was calm, tense, as if he wanted to hold on to his thoughts, or, on the contrary, to stop them altogether. He heard them come in, he knew where they came from, and what they had been doing, that they had been naked, and if he knew all this it was not because he had suddenly regained his sight and, like the other old men, crept up to spy on not one Susanna in her bath, but on three, he was blind, he stayed blind, he had only got to the kitchen door from where he heard what they were saying on the balcony, the laughter, the noise of the rain and the beating of the water, he breathed in the smell of the soap, then he returned to the sofa, thinking that there was still life in this world, to ask whether there was still any part of it left for him. The doctor's wife said, The women have already washed, Now it is the men's turn, and the old man with the black eyepatch asked, Is it still raining, Yes, it is raining and there is water in the basins on the balcony, Then I prefer to wash in the bathroom, in the tub, he pronounced the word as if he were showing his birth certificate, as if he were explaining, I am of the generation in which people did not speak of baths but of tubs, and added, If you don't mind, of course, I do not want to dirty the house, I promise that I shall not spill any water on the floor, at least, I shall do my best, In that case I shall bring you some water into the bathroom, I'll help, I can manage on my own, I have to be of some use, I am not an invalid, Come, then. On the balcony, the doctor's wife pulled an almost full basin of water inside. Take a hold here, she said to the old man with the black eyepatch, guiding his hands, Now, they lifted the basin at one go. Just as well that you came to help me, I could not have managed alone, Do you know the saying, What saying, Old people cannot do much but their work is not to be despised, That's not the way it goes, All right, instead of old people, it should be children, and instead of despise, it should be disdain, but if sayings are to retain any meaning and to continue to be used they have to adapt to the times. You are a philosopher, What an idea, I am just an old man. They emptied the basin into the bath, then the doctor's wife opened a drawer, she remembered that she still had one new bar of soap. She put it into the hand of the old man with the black eyepatch, You are going to smell nice, better than us, use it all, do not worry, there may not be any food, but there is bound to be soap in these supermarkets, Thank you, Watch you don't slip, if you want I'll call my husband to help you, Thanks, I prefer to wash by myself, As you like, and here, wait, give me your hand, there's a razor and a brush, if you want to shave off that beard, Thanks. The doctor's wife left. The old man with the eyepatch took off the pyjamas which had been allotted to him in the distribution of clothes, then, carefully, he got into the bath. The water was cold and there was little of it, less than a foot, how different is this sad puddle from receiving it in buckets from heaven as the three women had. He knelt on the bottom of the bath, took a deep breath, with both hands together he suddenly splashed water against his chest which almost took his breath away. He rapidly splashed water all over himself so as not to have time to shiver, then, step by step, systematically, he started to soap himself, to rub heavily starting from the shoulders, arms, chest and stomach, his groin, his penis, between his legs, I am worse than an animal, he thought, then the thin thighs down to

the layer of grime that covered his feet. He made lather so that the cleaning process should be extended, he said, I have to wash my hair and moved his hands back to untie the eye-patch, You too need a bath, he loosened it and dropped it into the water, now he felt warm, he wet and soaped his hair, he was a man of foam, white in the middle of an immense white blindness where nobody could find him, if that was what he thought, he was deceiving himself, at that moment he felt hands touching his back, gathering the foam from his arms, and from his chest and spreading it over his back, slowly, as if, being unable to see what they were doing, they had to pay closer attention to the job. He wanted to ask, Who are you, but he couldn't speak, now he was shivering, not from the cold, the hands continued to wash him gently, the woman did not say, I am the doctor's wife, I am the wife of the first blind man, I am the girl with dark glasses, the hands finished their task, withdrew, in the silence one could hear the gentle noise of the bathroom door closing, the old man with the eyepatch was alone, kneeling in the bath as if imploring a favour from heaven, trembling, trembling, Who could it have been, he asked himself, his reason told him that it could only have been the doctor's wife, she is the one who can see, she is the one who has protected us, cared for us and fed us, it would not be surprising that she should have given me this discreet attention, it is what his reason told him, but he did not believe in reason. He continued to shiver, he did not know whether it was from excitement or from cold. He found the eyepatch at the bottom of the bath, rubbed it hard, wrung it dry and put it back, with it he felt less naked. When he entered the sitting-room, dry, perfumed, the doctor's wife said, We already have one man who is clean and shaven, and then, in the tone of voice of someone who has just remembered something that should have been done and was not, You had no one to wash your back, what a pity. The old man with the black eye-patch did not reply, he merely thought that he had been right not to believe in reason.

They gave what little food there was to the boy with the squint, the others would have to wait for fresh supplies. In the larder there were some jars of preserves, some dried fruit, sugar, some left-over biscuits, some dry toast, but they would use these reserves and others added to them only in case of extreme necessity, the food from day to day would have to be earned, just in case by some misfortune the expedition returned empty-handed, meanwhile two biscuits per person with a spoonful of jam, There is strawberry and peach, which do you prefer, three walnut halves, a glass of water, a luxury while it lasts. The wife of the first blind man said that she too wanted to look for food, three would not go amiss, even being blind, two of them could help to carry the food and besides, were it possible, bearing in mind that they were not that far away, she would like to go and see what state her home was in, if it had been occupied, if the people were known to her, for example neighbours from the building whose family had grown because some relatives from the provinces had arrived with the idea of saving themselves from the epidemic of blindness that had attacked their village, the city always enjoys better resources. Therefore the three of them left, dressed in what dry clothes they could find in the house, the others, those that have been washed, have to wait for better weather. The sky remained overcast but there was no threat of rain. Swept along

by the water, especially in the steeper streets, the rubbish had piled up in small heaps leaving wide stretches of pavement clean. If only the rain would last, in this situation sunshine would be the worst that could happen to us, said the doctor's wife, we've got enough filth and bad smells already, We notice it more because we are washed, said the wife of the first blind man and her husband agreed, although he suspected that the cold bath had given him a cold. There were crowds of blind people in the streets, they took advantage of the break in the weather to search for food and to satisfy there and then their need to defecate which they still had despite the little food and drink they took in. Dogs sniffed everywhere, they scrabbled in the rubbish, the odd one carried a drowned rat in its mouth, a very rare occurrence that could only be explained by the extraordinary abundance of the recent downpours, the flood caught him in the wrong place, being a good swimmer was of no use to him. The dog of tears did not mix with his former companions in the pack and the hunt, his choice is made, but he does not wait to be fed, he is already chewing heaven knows what, these mountains of rubbish hide unimaginable treasures, it is all a matter of searching, scratch ing and finding. The blind man and his wife will also have to search and scratch in their memory when the occasion arises, now they had memorised the four corners, not of the house where they live, which has many more, but of their street, the four street corners which will serve them as cardinal points, the blind are not interested where east and west lie, or north or south, all they want is that their groping hands tell them that they are on the right road, formerly, when they were still few, they used to carry white sticks, the sound of the continuous taps on the ground and the walls was a sort of code which allowed them to identify and recognise their route, but today, since everybody is blind, a white stick, in the middle of the general clamour, is less than helpful, quite apart from the fact that, immersed in his own whiteness, the blind man may come to doubt whether he is actually carrying anything in his hand. Dogs, as everyone knows, have, in addition to what we call instinct, other means of orientation, it is certain that because of their shortsightedness they do not rely much on their sight, however, since their nose is well ahead of their eyes, they always get to where they want, in this case, just to be sure, the dog of tears lifted its leg to the four corners of the wind, the breeze will take on the task of guiding it home if it were to get lost one day. As they went along the doctor's wife looked up and down the streets in search of food shops where she could build up their much reduced larder. The looting had not been complete because in old-fashioned groceries there were still some beans or some chick peas in the storerooms, they are dried pulses which take a long time to cook, one thing is water, another thing is fuel, therefore they are not much appreciated these days. The doctor's wife was not particularly keen on the tendency of proverbs to preach, nevertheless something of this ancient lore must have remained in her memory, the proof being that she filled two of the bags they had brought with beans and chick peas, Keep what is of no use at the moment, and later you will find what you need, one of her grandmothers had told her, the water in which you soak them will also serve to cook them, and whatever remains from the cooking will cease to be water, but will have become broth. It is not only in nature that from time to time not everything is lost and something is gained.

Why they were loaded with bags of beans and peas and anything else they happened to pick up when they were still some distance away from the street where the first blind man and his wife lived, for that is where they are going, is a question that could only occur to someone who has never in his life suffered shortages. Take it home, even if it's a stone, that same grandmother had said, but she forgot to add, Even if you have to go around the earth, this was the feat they were now embarked upon, they were going home by the longest route. Where are we, the first blind man asked, he addressed the doctor's wife, that is what she had eyes for, and he said, This is where I went blind, on this corner with the traffic lights, Right here, on this corner, Precisely on this spot. I do not want to remember what happened, trapped in the car without being able to see, people shouting outside, and me shouting desperately that I was blind, until that man turned up and took me home, Poor man, the wife of the first blind man said, he will never steal a car again, We are so afraid of the idea of having to die, said the doctor's wife, that we always try to find excuses for the dead, as if we were asking beforehand to be excused when it is our turn, All this still seems like a dream, the wife of the first blind man said, it is as if I were dreaming that I am blind, When I was at home, waiting for you, I also thought so, said her husband. They had left the square where it had happened, now they climbed some narrow labyrinthine streets, the doctor's wife hardly knows these places but the first blind man does not get lost, he knows the way, she says the names of the streets and he says, Let's turn to the left, Let's turn to the right, finally he says, This is our street, the building is on the left-hand side, roughly in the middle, What is the number, asked the doctor's wife, he can't remember, Now then, it's not that I cannot remember, it's gone from my head, he said, that was a bad omen, if we do not even know where we live, if the dream has replaced our memory, where will that road take us, All right, this time it is not serious, it was lucky that the first blind man's wife had the idea of coming on the excursion, there we already have her saying the house number, this helped her to avoid having to have recourse to the first blind man, who was priding himself on the fact that he can recognise the door by the magic of touch, as if he were carrying a magic wand, one touch, metal, one touch, wood, with three or four more he would arrive at the full pattern, I'm sure it is this one. They entered, the doctor's wife first, What floor is it, she asked, The third, answered the first blind man, his memory was not as bad as had appeared, some things we forget, that's life, others we remember, for example, to remember when, already blind, he had entered this door, On what floor do you live, asked the man who had not yet stolen the car, Third, he replied, the difference being that this time they are not going up in the elevator, they walk up the invisible staircase which is at once dark and luminous, how people who are not blind miss electric light, or sunlight, or the light of a candle, now the doctor's wife has got used to the semi-darkness, halfway up they run into two blind women from the upper floors coming down, perhaps from the third, nobody asked, it is true the neighbours are not, in fact, the same.

The door was closed. What are we going to do, asked the doctor's wife, Leave it to me, said the first blind man. They knocked once, twice, three times. There's nobody in, one of them said at exactly the moment when the door opened, the delay was not

surprising, a blind person at the back of the flat cannot come running to answer the door. Who is it, what do you want, asked the man who opened the door, he had a serious look on his face, he was polite, he must be someone we can talk to. The first blind man said, I used to live in this flat, Ah, the other replied, Is there anybody with you, My wife, and also a friend of ours, How can I be sure that this was your flat, That's easy, the wife of the first blind man said, I can tell you everything there is inside. The other man paused a few seconds, then he said, Come in. The doctor's wife went in last, here nobody needed a guide. The blind man said, I am alone, my family went to look for food, perhaps I should have said the women, but I do not think it would be proper, he paused and then added, Yet you may think that I should know, What do you mean, asked the doctor's wife, The women I referred to are my wife and my two daughters, and I should know when it is proper to use the expression "women." I am a writer, we are supposed to know such things. The first blind man felt flattered, imagine, a writer living in my flat, then a doubt rose in him, was it good manners to ask him his name, he might even have heard of his name, it was even possible that he had read him, he was still hesitating between curiosity and discretion, when his wife put the question directly, What is your name, Blind people do not need a name, I am my voice, nothing else matters, But you wrote books and those books carry your name, said the doctor's wife, Now nobody can read them, it is as if they did not exist. The first blind man felt that the conversation was moving too far from the topic which he was most interested in, And how do you come to be in my flat, he asked, Like many others who no longer live where they used to live, I found my house occupied by people who did not want to listen to reason, one might say that we were kicked down the stairs, Is your house far away, No, Did you try to get it back, asked the doctor's wife, it is now quite common for people to move from house to house, I have already tried twice, And are they still there, Yes. And what are you going to do now that you know that this is our flat, the first blind man wanted to know, are you going to throw us out as they did to you, No, I have neither the age nor the strength for that, and even if I did, I do not believe that I would be capable of such a speedy procedure, a writer manages to acquire in life the patience he needs to write. You will leave us the flat, though, Yes, if we cannot find another solution, I cannot see what other solution could be found. The doctor's wife had already guessed what the writer's reply would be, You and your wife, like the friend who is with you, live in a flat, I imagine, Yes, in her flat in fact, Is it far away, Not really, Then, if you'll permit me, I have a proposal to make, Go on, That we carry on as we are, at this moment we both have a place where we can live, I shall continue to keep a watchful eye on what is happening to mine, if one day I find it free, I shall move in immediately, you will do the same, Come here at regular intervals and when you find it empty, move in, I am not sure I like the idea, I didn't expect you to like it but I doubt whether you would prefer the only remaining alternative, What is that, For you to recover this flat which is yours, But, in that case, Precisely, in that case we shall have to find somewhere else to live, No, don't even think about it, intervened the wife of the first blind man, Let's leave things as they are, and see what happens, It occurred to me that there is another solution, said the writer, And what might that be, asked the first blind man, We shall live here as your guests, the flat is big enough for all

of us, No, said the wife of the first blind man, We shall carry on as before, living with our friend, there is no need to ask if you agree, she added, addressing the doctor's wife, And there is no need for me to reply, I am obliged to all of you, said the writer, all this time I have been waiting for someone to reclaim the flat, To accept what one has is the most natural thing when one is blind, said the doctor's wife, How have you managed since the outbreak of the epidemic, We came out of internment only three days ago, Ah, you were in quarantine, Yes, Was it hard, Worse than that, How horrible, You are a writer, you have, as you said a moment ago, an obligation to know words, therefore you know that adjectives are of no use to us, if a person kills another, for example, it would be better to state this fact openly, directly, and to trust that the horror of the act, in itself, is so shocking that there is no need for us to say it was horrible, Do you mean that we have more words than we need, I mean that we have too few feelings, Or that we have them but have ceased to use the words they express, And so we lose them, I'd like you to tell me how you lived during quarantine, Why, I am a writer, You would have to have been there, A writer is just like anyone else, he cannot know everything, nor can he experience everything, he must ask and imagine, One day I may tell you what it was like, then you can write a book, Yes, I am writing it, How, if you are blind, The blind too can write, You mean that you had time to learn the braille alphabet, I do not know braille, How can you write, then, asked the first blind man, Let me show you. He got up from his chair, left the room and after a minute returned, he was holding a sheet of paper in his hand and a ball-point pen, this is the last complete page I have written, We cannot see it, said the wife of the first blind man, Nor I, said the writer, Then how can you write, asked the doctor's wife, looking at the sheet of paper where in the half-light of the room she could make out tightly compressed lines, occasionally superimposed, By touch, the writer answered smiling, it is easy, you place the sheet over a soft surface, for example some sheets of paper, then it's just a question of writing, But if you cannot see anything, said the first blind man, A ball-point pen is an excellent tool for blind writers, it does not permit them to read what they have written, but it tells them where they have written, they only have to follow with their fingers the impression left by the last written line, then you write as far as the edge of the paper, and calculating the distance to the next line is very easy, I notice that some lines overlap, said the doctor's wife, gently taking the sheet out of his hand, How do you know, I can see, You can see, have you recovered your sight, how, when, the writer asked excitedly, I suppose I am the only person who has never lost it, And why, what is the explanation for this, I have no explanation, there may not be one, That means that you saw everything that has happened, I saw what I saw, I had no option, How many people were in the quarantine, Nearly three hundred, From when, From the beginning, we only came out three days ago, as I said, I believe that I was the first person to go blind, said the first blind man, That must have been horrible, That word again, said the doctor's wife, Forgive me, suddenly everything I have been writing about since we turned blind, my family and I, strikes me as being ridiculous, About what, About what we suffered, about our life, Everyone has to speak of what they know, and what they do not know they should ask, That's why I ask you, And I will answer, I don't know when, some day. The doctor's wife brushed the writer's hand with the paper. Would you

mind showing me where you work and what you are writing, Not at all, come with me, Can we come too, asked the wife of the first blind man, The flat is yours, said the writer, I am only passing through. In the bedroom there was a tiny table with an unlit lamp. The dim light entering through the window, allowed one to see to the left some blank sheets, others on the right-hand side had been written on, in the middle there was one half written. There were two new ball-point pens next to the lamp. Here it is, said the writer. The doctor's wife asked, May I? without waiting for a reply she picked up the written pages, there must have been about twenty, she passed her eye over the tiny handwriting, over the lines which went up and down, over the words inscribed on the whiteness of the page, recorded in blindness, I am only passing through, the writer had said, and these were the signs he had left in passing. The doctor's wife placed her hand on his shoulder, and with both hands he reached out for it and raised it slowly to his lips, Don't lose yourself, don't let yourself be lost, he said, and these were unexpected, enigmatic words that did not seem to fit the occasion.

When they returned home, carrying enough food for three days, the doctor's wife, interrupted by the excited interjections from the first blind man and his wife, told what had happened. And that night, as was only right, she read to all of them a few pages from a book she had gone to fetch from the study. The boy with the squint was not interested in the story, and after a little while he fell asleep with his head on the lap of the girl with the dark glasses and his feet resting on the legs of the old man with the eyepatch.

Two days later the doctor said, I'd like to know what has happened to the surgery, at this stage we are no use for anything, neither it nor I, but perhaps one day people will recover their sight, the instruments must still be there waiting, We can go whenever you want, said his wife, Right now, And we could take advantage of this walk to pass by my home, if you don't mind, said the girl with the dark glasses, Not that I believe that my parents have returned, it's only to ease my conscience, We can go to your house too, said the doctor's wife. Nobody else wanted to join this reconnoitre of homes, not the first blind man and his wife, for they already knew what they could count on, the old man with the black eyepatch also knew, but not for the same reasons, and the boy with the squint because he still could not remember the name of the street where he had lived. The weather was bright, it seemed that the rain had stopped and the sun, though pale, could already be felt on their skin, I don't know how we can continue to live if the heat gets any worse, said the doctor, all this rubbish rotting all over the place, the dead animals, perhaps even people, there must be dead people inside the houses, the worst thing is that we are not organised, there should be an organisation in each building, in each street, in each district, A government, said the wife, An organisation, the human body is also an organised system, it lives as long as it keeps organised, and death is only the effect of a disorganisation, And how can a society of blind people organise itself in order to survive, By organising itself, to organise oneself is, in a way, to begin to have eyes, Perhaps you're right, but the experience of this blindness has brought us only death and misery, my eyes, just like your surgery, were useless, Thanks to your eyes we are still alive, said the girl with the dark glasses, We would also be alive if I were blind as well, the world is full of blind people, I think we are all going to die, it's just a matter of time, Dying has always been a matter of time, said the doctor, But to die just because you're blind, there can be no worse way of dying, We die of illnesses, accidents, chance events, And now we shall also die of blindness, I mean, we shall die of blindness and cancer, of blindness and tuberculosis, of blindness and AIDS, of blindness and heart attacks, illnesses may differ from one person to another but what is really killing us now is blindness, We are not immortal, we cannot escape death, but at least we should not be blind, said the doctor's wife, How, if this blindness is concrete and real, said the doctor, I am not sure, said the wife, Nor I, said the girl with the dark glasses.

They did not have to force the door, it opened normally, the key was on the doctor's key ring which had remained in the house when they had been taken off for quarantine. This is the waiting-room, said the doctor's wife, The room I was in, said the girl with the dark glasses, the dream continues, but I don't know what dream it is, whether it is the dream of dreaming which I experienced that day when I dreamt that I was going blind, or the dream of always having been blind and coming, still dreaming, to the surgery in order to be cured of an inflammation of the eyes in which there was no danger of becoming blind, The quarantine was no dream, said the doctor's wife, Certainly not, nor was it a dream that we were raped, Nor that I stabbed a man, Take me to my office, I can get there on my own but you take me, said the doctor. The door was open. The doctor's wife said, The place has been turned upside down, papers on the floor, the drawers of the file

cabinet have been taken, It must have been the people from the Ministry, not to waste time looking, Probably, And the instruments, At first sight, they seem to be in good order, That, at least, is something, said the doctor, he advanced alone with his arms outstretched, he touched the box with the lenses, his ophthalmoscope, the desk, then, addressing the girl with the dark glasses, he said, I know what you are trying to say, when you say that you are living a dream. He sat down at the desk, placed his hands on the dusty top, then with a sad, ironic smile, as if he were talking to someone sitting opposite him, he said, No, my dear doctor, I am very sorry, but your condition has no known cure, if you want me to give you one last piece of advice, cling to the old saying, they were right when they said that patience is good for the eyes. Don't make us suffer, said the woman, Forgive me, both of you, we are in the place where miracles used to be performed, now I don't even have the evidence of my magic powers, they have taken it all away, The only miracle we can perform is to go on living, said the woman, to preserve the fragility of life from day to day, as if it were blind and did not know where to go, and perhaps it is like that, perhaps it really does not know, it placed itself in our hands, after giving us intelligence, and this is what we have made of it, You speak as if you too were blind, said the girl with the dark glasses, In a way I am, I am blind with your blindness, perhaps I might be able to see better if there were more of us who could see, I am afraid you are like the witness in search of a court to which he has been summoned by who knows who, in order to make a statement about who knows what, said the doctor, Time is coming to an end, putrescence is spreading, diseases find the doors open, water is running out, food has become poison, that would be my first statement, said the doctor's wife, And the second, asked the girl with dark glasses, Let's open our eyes, We can't, we are blind, said the doctor, It is a great truth that says that the worst blind person was the one who did not want to see, But I do want to see, said the girl with dark glasses, That won't be the reason you will see, the only difference would be that you would no longer be the worst blind person, and now, let's go, there is nothing more to be seen here, the doctor said.

On their way to the home of the girl with dark glasses, they crossed a large square with groups of blind people who were listening to speeches from other blind people, at first sight, neither one nor the other group seemed blind, the speakers turned their heads excitedly towards their listeners, the listeners turned their heads attentively to the speakers. They were proclaiming the end of the world, redemption through penitence, the visions of the seventh day, the advent of the angel, cosmic collisions, the death of the sun, the tribal spirit, the sap of the mandrake, tiger ointment, the virtue of the sign, the discipline of the wind, the perfume of the moon, the revindication of darkness, the power of exorcism, the sign of the heel, the crucifixion of the rose, the purity of the lymph, the blood of the black cat, the sleep of the shadow, the rising of the seas, the logic of anthropophagy, painless castration, divine tattoos, voluntary blindness, convex thoughts, or concave, or horizontal or vertical, or sloping, or concentrated, or dispersed, or fleeting, the weakening of the vocal cords, the death of the word, Here nobody is speaking of organisation, said the doctor's wife, Perhaps organisation is in another square, he replied.

They continued on their way. A bit further on, the doctor's wife said, There are more dead in the road than usual, Our resistance is reaching its end, time is running out, the water is running out, disease is on the increase, food is becoming poison, you said so before, the doctor reminded her, Who knows whether my parents are not among these dead, said the girl with dark glasses, and here, I am passing by without seeing them, It's a time-honoured custom to pass by the dead without seeing them, said the doctor's wife.

The street where the girl with dark glasses lived, seemed even more deserted than usual. At the door to the building there was the body of a woman. Dead, half devoured by stray animals, luckily the dog of tears had not wanted to come today, it would have been necessary to keep him from digging his teeth into this corpse. It is the neighbour from the first floor, said the doctor's wife, Who, where, asked her husband, Right here, the first-floor neighbour, you can smell her, Poor woman, said the girl with dark glasses, why did she have to go out into the street, she never went out, Perhaps she felt that her death was near, perhaps she could not stand the idea of staying alone in the flat to rot, said the doctor. And now we can't go in, I don't have the keys, Perhaps your parents have returned and are inside waiting for you, said the doctor, I don't believe it, You are right not to believe it, said the doctor's wife, here are the keys. In the palm of the dead woman's half-open hand resting on the ground there was a set of keys, shining, sparkling. Perhaps they are hers, said the girl with dark glasses, I don't think so, she had no reason to bring her keys to where she was thinking of dying, But being blind, I would not be able to see them, if she thought of bringing them down so that I would be able to get into the flat, We don't know what she was thinking of when she decided to take the keys, perhaps she thought that you would regain your eyesight, perhaps she suspected that there was something unnatural, too easy, about the way we moved around when we were here, perhaps she heard me say that the stair was dark, that I could barely see, or perhaps it was none of that, delirium, dementia, as if, having lost her mind, she had got it into her head to give you the keys, the only thing we know is that her life ended when she set foot outside the door. The doctor's wife picked up the keys, handed them to the girl with dark glasses and then asked, And now, what do we do, are we going to leave her here, We cannot bury her in the street, we have no tools to lift the stones, said the doctor, There is the garden in the back, In that case we'll have to take her up to the second floor and then down by the emergency stairs, That's the only way, Do we have enough strength for this task, asked the girl with dark glasses, The question is not whether we have enough strength, the question is whether we can allow ourselves to leave this woman here, Certainly not, said the doctor, Then the strength must be found. They did manage, but it was hard work dragging the body upstairs, not because of what it weighed, little enough, and less still since the cats and dogs had been at it, but because the body was rigid, stiff, they had trouble turning the corners of the narrow staircase, during the short climb they had to rest four times. Neither the noise, nor the voices, nor the smell of putrefaction brought any other of the inhabitants of the building on to the landings, Just as I thought, my parents are not here, said the girl with dark glasses. When they finally got to the door they were exhausted and they still had to cross to the back of

the building and go down the emergency stairs, but there with the help of the saints, they get down the stairs, the burden is lighter, the bends easier to manoeuvre because the stairs were out in the open, one only had to be careful not to let the poor creature's body slip from one's hands, a tumble would leave it beyond repair, not to mention the pain which, after death, is worse.

The garden was like an unexplored jungle, the recent rains had caused the grass and the weeds carried on the wind to grow in abundance, there would be no lack of fresh food for the rabbits which jumped about, and chickens manage even in hard times. They were sitting on the ground, panting, the effort had exhausted them, by their side the corpse rested like them, guarded by the doctor's wife who chased off the hens and rabbits, the rabbits only curious, their noses twitching, the chickens with their beaks like bayonets, ready for anything. The doctor's wife said, Before leaving, she remembered to open the doors of the rabbit hutches, she did not want the rabbits to die of hunger, The difficult thing isn't living with other people, it's understanding them, said the doctor. The girl with dark glasses cleaned her dirty hands on a clump of grass that she had pulled up, it was her own fault, she had grasped the corpse where she should not have, that's what happens when you're blind. The doctor said, What we need is a spade or a shovel, here one can see that the true eternal return is that of words, which now return, spoken for the same reasons, first for the man who stole the car, now for the old woman who returned the keys, once buried nobody will know the difference, unless somebody remembers them. The doctor's wife had gone up to the flat of the girl with dark glasses in order to find a clean sheet, she had to choose the least dirty of them, when she came down the hens were at it, the rabbits were merely chewing the fresh grass. Having covered and wrapped the body, the wife went in search of a spade or shovel. She found both in a garden shed along with other tools. I'll deal with this, she said, the ground is damp, it is easy to dig, you take a rest. She chose a spot where there were no roots of the type that have to be cut with an axe, and don't imagine that this is an easy job, roots have their own little ways, they know how to take advantage of the softness of the soil in order to avoid the blow and weaken the deadly effect of the guillotine. Neither the doctor's wife nor her husband nor the girl with dark glasses, the former because she was digging, the latter two because their eyes were of no use to them, noticed the appearance of blind people on the surrounding balconies, not many, not on all of them, they must have been attracted by the noise of the digging, even in soft soil there is noise, not forgetting that there is always some hidden stone that responds loudly to the blow. There were men and women who appeared as fluid as ghosts, they could have been ghosts attending a burial out of curiosity, merely to recall how it had been when they were buried. The doctor's wife finally saw them when she had finished digging the grave, she straightened her aching back and raised her arm to her forehead to wipe away the sweat. Then, carried away by an irresistible impulse, without thinking, she called out to those blind people and to all the blind of this world, She will rise again, note that she did not say She will live again, the matter was not quite that important, although the dictionary is there to confirm, reassure or suggest that we are dealing with complete and

absolute synonyms. The blind people took fright and went back inside their flats, they could not understand why such words had been said, besides they could not have been prepared for such a revelation, it was clear that they did not go to the square where the magic utterances were made, in respect of which all that was needed to complete the picture was the addition of the head of the praying mantis and the suicide of the scorpion. The doctor said, Why did you say she will rise again, to whom were you talking, To a few blind people who appeared on the balconies, I was startled and I must have frightened them, And why those words rather than any others, I don't know, they came into my head and I said them, The next we know you'll be preaching in the square we passed along the way, Yes, a sermon about the rabbit's tooth and the hen's beak, come and help me now, over here, that's right, take her by the feet, I'll raise her from this end, careful, don't slip into the grave, that's it, just so, lower her slowly, more, more, I made the grave a little deeper because of the hens, once they start scratching, you never know where they'll finish up, that's it. She used the shovel to fill the grave, stamped the earth firmly down, made the little mound that always remains of the earth that is returned to the earth, as if she had never done anything else in her life. Finally, she picked a branch from a rosebush growing in the corner of the yard and planted it at the head of the grave. Will she rise again, asked the girl with the dark glasses, Not her, no, replied the doctor's wife, those who are still alive have a greater need to rise again by themselves and they don't, We are already half dead, said the doctor, We are still half alive too, answered his wife. She put the shovel and the spade back in the shed, took a good look around the yard to check that everything was in order, What order, she asked herself and provided her own answer, The order that wants the dead where they should be among the dead, and the living among the living, while the hens and rabbits feed some and feed off others, I'd like to leave a small sign for my parents, said the girl with dark glasses, just to let them know that I am alive, I don't want to destroy your hopes, said the doctor, but first they would have to find the house and that is most unlikely. Just remember that we wouldn't have got there without someone to guide us, You're right, and I don't even know if they are still alive, but unless I leave them some sign, anything, I shall feel as if I had abandoned them. What's it to be then, asked the doctor's wife, Something they might recognise by touch, said the girl with the dark glasses, the sad thing is that I no longer have anything on me from the old days. The doctor's wife looked at her, she was sitting on the first step of the emergency stairs, with her hands limp on her knees, her lovely face anguished, her hair spread over her shoulders, I know what sign you can leave them, she said. She went rapidly up the stairs, back into the house and returned with a pair of scissors and a piece of string, What are you thinking of, asked the girl with dark glasses, worried when she heard the snipping of the scissors cutting off her hair, If your parents were to return, they would find hanging from the door handle a lock of hair, who else could it possibly belong to but their daughter, asked the doctor's wife, You make me want to weep, said the girl with the dark glasses, and she had no sooner said it, than she lowered her head over the folded arms on her knees and gave in to her sorrows, her sadness, to the emotions aroused by the suggestion made by the doctor's wife, then she noticed, without knowing by what emotional route she had arrived there, that she was

also crying for the old woman on the first floor, the eater of raw meat, the horrible witch, who with her dead hand had restored to her the keys to the flat. And then the doctor's wife said, What times we live in, we find the order of things inverted, a symbol that nearly always signified death has become a sign of life, There are hands capable of these and greater wonders, said the doctor, Necessity is a powerful weapon, my dear, said the woman, and now that's enough of philosophy and witchcraft, let's hold hands and get on with life. It was the girl with dark glasses herself who tied the lock of hair to the door handle, Do you think my parents will notice it, she asked, The door handle is like the outstretched hand of a house, said the doctor's wife, and with this commonplace expression, as one might say, they concluded the visit.

That night once again they had a reading, there was no other way of distracting themselves, what a pity, the doctor was not, for example, an amateur violinist, what sweet serenades might otherwise be heard on this fifth floor, their envious neighbours would say, Either they are doing very well or else they are completely irresponsible and think they can escape misery by laughing at the misery of others. Now there is no music other than that of words, and these, especially those in books, are discreet, and even if curiosity should bring someone from the building to listen at the door, they would hear only a solitary murmur, that long thread of sound that can last into infinity, because the books of this world, all together, are, as they say the universe is, infinite. When the reading ended, late that night, the old man with the eyepatch said, That's what we have come to, listening to someone reading, I'm not complaining, I could stay here for ever, said the girl with dark glasses, I am not complaining either, I only mean that this is all we are good for, listening to someone reading us the story of a human mankind that existed before us, let's be glad of our good fortune at still having a pair of seeing eyes with us here, the last pair left, if they are extinguished one day, I don't even want to think about it, then the thread which links us to that human mankind would be broken, it will be as if we were to separate from each other in space, for ever, all equally blind, As long as I can, the girl with dark glasses said, I'll keep on hoping, hoping to find my parents, hoping the boy's mother will turn up, You forgot to speak of the hope we all have, What's that, Regaining our sight, It's mad to cling to such hopes, Well, I can tell you, without such hopes I would already have given up, Give me an example, Being able to see again, We've already had that one, give me another, I won't, Why, You wouldn't be interested, And how do you know that I wouldn't, what do you think you know about me that you can by yourself decide what interests me and what doesn't, Don't get angry, I didn't mean to hurt you, Men are all the same, they think because they came out of the belly of a woman they know all there is to know about women, I know very little about women, and about you I know nothing, as for men, in my opinion, by modern criteria I am now an old man and one-eyed as well as being blind, Have you nothing else to say against yourself, A lot more, you can't imagine how the list of self-recriminations grows with advancing age, I am young and have my fair share already, You haven't done anything really bad yet, How do you know, if you've never lived with me, You're right, I have never lived with you, Why do you repeat my words in that tone of voice, What tone of voice, That one, All

I said was that I have never lived with you, Come on, come on, don't pretend that you don't understand, Don't insist, I beg you, I do insist, I want to know, Let's return to hopes, All right, The other example of hope which I refused to give was this, What, The last self-accusation on my list, Please, explain yourself, I never understand riddles, The monstrous wish of never regaining our sight, Why, So that we can go on living as we are, Do you mean all together, or just you and me, Don't make me answer, If you were only a man you could avoid answering, like all others, but you yourself said that you are an old man, and old men, if longevity has any sense at all, should not avert their face from the truth, answer me, With you, And why do you want to live with me, Do you want me to tell in front of everybody, We have done the dirtiest, ugliest, most repulsive things together, what you can tell me cannot possibly be worse, All right, if you insist, let it be, because the man I still am loves the woman you are, Was it so very difficult to make a declaration of love, At my age, people fear ridicule, You were not ridiculous, Let's forget it, please, I have no intention of forgetting it or of letting you forget it either, It's nonsense, you forced it out of me and now, And now it's my turn, Don't say anything you may regret later, remember the black list, If I'm sincere today, what does it matter if I regret it tomorrow, Please stop, You want to live with me and I want to live with you, You are mad, We'll start living together here, like a couple, and we shall continue living together if we have to separate from our friends, two blind people must be able to see more than one, It's madness, you don't love me, What's this about loving, I never loved anyone, I just went to bed with men. So you agree with me then, Not really, You spoke of sincerity, tell me then if it's true that you really love me, I love you enough to want to be with you, and that is the first time I've ever said that to anyone, You would not have said it to me either if you had met me somewhere before, an elderly man, half bald with white hair, with a patch over one eye and a cataract in the other, The woman I was then wouldn't have said it, I agree, the person who said it was the woman I am today, Let's see then what the woman you will be tomorrow will have to say, Are you testing me, What an idea, who am I to put you to the test, it's life that decides these things, It's already made one decision.

They had this conversation facing each other, blind eyes staring into blind eyes, their faces flushed and impassioned and when, because one of them had said it and because both of them wanted it, they agreed that life had decided that they should live together, the girl with dark glasses held out her hands, simply to give them, not in order to know where she was going, she touched the hands of the old man with the eyepatch, who gently pulled her towards him, and so they remained sitting side by side, it was not the first time, obviously, but now the words of engagement had been spoken. None of the others said anything, nobody congratulated them, nobody expressed wishes of eternal happiness, to tell the truth these are not the times for festivities and hopes, and when the decisions are so serious as these seem to have been, it is not even surprising that someone might think that one would have to be blind to behave in this way, silence is the best applause. What the doctor's wife did, however, was to put some sofa cushions out in the hallway, enough to make a comfortable bed, then she led the boy with the squint

there and told him, From today you will sleep here. As to what happened in the living-room, there is every reason to believe that on that first night it finally became clear whose was the mysterious hand that washed the back of the old man with the black eyepatch on that morning when there was such an abundance of water, all of it purifying.

The next day, while still in bed, the doctor's wife said to her husband, We have little food left, we'll have to go out again, I thought that today I would go back to the underground food store at the supermarket, the one I went to on the first day, if nobody else has found it, we can get supplies for a week or two, I'm coming with you and we'll ask one or two of the others to come along as well, I'd rather go with you alone, it's easier, and there is less danger of getting lost, How long will you be able to carry the burden of six helpless people, I'll manage as long as I can, but you are quite right, I'm beginning to get exhausted, sometimes I even wish I were blind as well, to be the same as the others, to have no more obligations than they have, We've got used to depending on you, If you weren't there, it would be like being struck with a second blindness, thanks to your eyes we are a little less blind, I'll carry on as long as I can, I can't promise you more than that, One day, when we realise that we can no longer do anything good and useful we ought to have the courage simply to leave this world, as he said, Who said that, The fortunate man we met yesterday, I am sure that he wouldn't say that today, there is nothing like real hope to change one's opinions, He has that all right, long may it last, In your voice there is a tone which makes me think you are upset, Upset, why, As if something had been taken away from you, Are you referring to what happened to the girl when we were at that terrible place, Yes, Remember, it was she who wanted to have sex with me, Memory is deceiving you, you wanted her, Are you sure, I was not blind, Well, I would have sworn that, You would only perjure yourself, Strange how memory can deceive us, In this case it is easy to see, something that is offered to us is more ours than something we had to conquer, But she didn't ever approach me again, and I never approached her, If you wanted to, you could find each other's memories, that's what memory is for, You are jealous, No, I'm not jealous, I was not even jealous on that occasion, I felt sorry for her and for you, and also for myself because I could not help you, How are we fixed for water, Badly. After the extremely frugal breakfast, lightened by some discrete, smiling hints at the events of the previous night, the words appropriately veiled out of consideration for the presence of a minor, an odd precaution if we remember the terrible scenes that he witnessed during the quarantine, the doctor's wife and her husband set off, accompanied this time only by the dog of tears, who did not want to stay at home.

The state of the streets got worse with every passing hour. The rubbish seemed to increase during the hours of darkness, it was as if from the outside, from some unknown country where there was still a normal life, they were coming in the night to empty their trash cans, if we were not in the land of the blind we would see through the middle of this white darkness phantom carts and trucks loaded with refuse, debris, rubble, chemical waste, ashes, burnt oil, bones, bottles, offal, flat batteries, plastic bags, mountains of paper, what they don't bring is leftover food, not even bits of fruit peel with which we might be able to allay our hunger, while waiting for those better days that are always just around the corner. It is still early in the morning but the heat is already oppressive. The stench rises from the enormous refuse pile like a cloud of toxic gas, It won't be long before we have outbreaks of epidemics, said the doctor again, nobody will escape, we have no defences left, If it's not raining, it's blowing gales, said the woman, Not even

that, the rain would at least quench our thirst, and the wind would blow away some of this stench. The dog of tears sniffs around restlessly, stops to investigate a particular heap of rubbish, perhaps there was a rare delicacy hidden underneath which it can no longer find, if it were alone it would not move an inch from this spot, but the woman who wept has already walked on, and it is his duty to follow her, one never knows when one might have to dry more tears. Walking is difficult, in some streets, especially the steep ones, the heavy rainwater, transformed into torrents, had thrown cars against other cars or against buildings, knocking down doors, smashing shop windows, the ground is covered with thick pieces of broken glass. Wedged in between two cars the body of a man is rotting away. The doctor's wife averts her eyes. The dog of tears moves closer, but death frightens it, it still takes two steps forward, suddenly its fur stands on end, a piercing howl escapes from its throat, the trouble with this dog is that it has grown too close to human beings, it will suffer as they do. They crossed a square where groups of blind people entertained themselves by listening to speeches from other blind people, at first sight neither group seemed to be blind, the speakers turned their heads excitedly towards the listeners and the listeners turned their heads attentively to the speakers. They were extolling the virtues of the fundamental principles of the great organised systems, private property, a free currency market, the market economy, the stock exchange, taxation, interest, expropriation and appropriation, production, distribution, consumption, supply and demand, poverty and wealth, communication, repression and delinquency, lotteries, prisons, the penal code, the civil code, the highway code, dictionaries, the telephone directory, networks of prostitution, armaments factories, the armed forces, cemeteries, the police, smuggling, drugs, permitted illegal traffic, pharmaceutical research, gambling, the price of priests and funerals, justice, borrowing, political parties, elections, parliaments, governments, convex, concave, horizontal, vertical, slanted, concentrated, diffuse, fleeting thoughts, the fraying of the vocal cords, the death of the word. Here they are talking about organisation, said the doctor's wife to her husband, I noticed, he answered, and said no more. They continued walking, the doctor's wife went to consult a street plan on a street corner, like an old roadside cross pointing the way. We are very close to the supermarket, around here she had broken down and wept the day that she had got lost, grotesquely weighed down by the plastic bags which luckily were full to the brim, in her confusion and anguish she had to depend on a dog to console her, the same dog who is here snarling at the packs of other dogs who are coming too close, as if it were telling them, You don't fool me, keep away from here. A street to the left, another to the right and there is the entrance to the supermarket. Only the door, that's it, there is the door, there is the whole building, but what cannot be seen are people going in and coming out, that ant-heap of people which we find at all hours in these shops that live on the comings and goings of vast crowds. The doctor's wife feared the worst and said to her husband, We have arrived too late, there won't be a crumb left in there, Why do you say that, I don't see anybody going in or coming out, Perhaps they have not yet discovered the basement storeroom, That's what I am hoping for. They were standing on the pavement opposite the supermarket when they spoke these words. Beside them, as if they were waiting for the traffic lights to turn

green, there were three blind people. The doctor's wife did not notice the expression on their faces, which was of puzzled surprise, a kind of confused fear, she did not see that one of them opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again, she did not notice the sudden shrug of shoulders, You'll find out, we assume the blind man was thinking. As they were crossing the middle of the road, the doctor's wife and her husband were unable to hear the comment of the second blind person, Why did she say that she did not see, that she did not see anybody going in or coming out, and the third blind person answered, It's just a manner of speaking, a moment ago, when I stumbled you told me to watch where I was putting my feet, it's the same thing, we still haven't lost the habit of seeing, Oh God, how many times have I heard that before, exclaimed the first blind man.

The daylight illuminated the whole of the wide hall of the supermarket. Almost all the shelves were overturned, there was nothing but refuse, broken glass, empty wrappers, It is strange, said the doctor's wife, even if there is no food here, I don't understand why there is nobody around. The doctor said, You are right, it does not seem normal. The dog of tears whimpered softly. Its hair was standing on end again. The doctor's wife said to her husband, There is a bad smell in here, There's a bad smell everywhere, said the husband, It's not that, it's another smell, of rotting, There must be a dead body somewhere, I don't see anything, In which case you must be imagining it. The dog began to whine. What's the matter with the dog, asked the doctor, He's nervous, What are we going to do, Let's see, if there is a corpse we just give it a wide berth, at this stage the dead no longer frighten us, For me it's easier, I can't see them. They crossed the hall of the supermarket until they reached the door which opened on to the corridor leading to the basement store. The dog of tears followed them, but it stopped from time to time, howled to them, then duty obliged it to continue. When the doctor's wife opened the door, the stench grew stronger, It smells terrible, said her husband, You stay here, I'll be right back. She went down the corridor, it became darker with every step and the dog of tears followed her as if it were being dragged along. Filled with the stench of putrefaction, the air seemed thick. Halfway down, the woman vomited, What can have happened here, she thought between retchings and then she murmured these same words over and over again until she got to the metal door which went down into the basement. Confused by her nausea, she had not noticed before that there was a tenuous shimmer of light down there. Now she knew what it was. Small flames flickered around the edges of the two doors, that of the staircase and that of the goods lift. A new attack of vomiting gripped her stomach, it was so violent that it attracted the attention of the dog. The dog of tears gave a very long howl, it let out a wail that seemed never-ending, a lament which resounded through the corridor like the last voice of the dead down in the basement. The doctor heard the vomiting, the convulsions, the coughing, he ran as well as he could, he stumbled and fell, he got up and fell again, at last he held his wife in his arms, What happened, he asked, with a trembling voice she replied, Get me out of here, please, get me out of here, for the first time since the onset of blindness, it was the doctor who guided his wife, he guided her without knowing where, anywhere away from those doors, those flames that he could not see. When they had got out of the corridor,

her nerves suddenly went to pieces, her sobbing became convulsive, there is no drying tears like these, only time and exhaustion can stop them, therefore the dog did not approach, it just looked for a hand to lick. What happened, the doctor asked again, what did you see, They are dead, she managed to say between sobs, Who is dead, They are, and she could not go on. Calm yourself, tell me when you can. A few minutes later she said, They are dead, Did you see anything, did you open the door, asked her husband, No, I only saw will-o'-the-wisps around the doors, they clung there and danced around and did not let go, I think it must have been phosphorised hydrogen as a result of the decomposition of the bodies, What could have happened, They must have found the basement, rushed down the stairs looking for food, I remember how easy it was to slip and fall on those steps, and if one fell, they would all fall, they probably never reached where they wanted to go, or if they did they could not return because of the obstruction on the staircase, But you said that the door was closed, Most likely other blind people closed it, converting the basement into an enormous tomb and I am to blame for what happened, when I came running out of there with my bags, they must have suspected that it was food and went in search of it, In a way, everything we eat has been stolen from the mouths of others and if we rob them of too much we are responsible for their death, one way or another we are all murderers, A small consolation, I don't want you to start burdening yourself with imaginary guilt, when you already have a hard enough time shouldering the responsibility for six real and useless mouths, How could I live without your useless mouth, You would live in order to support the other five who are there, The question is, for how long. It won't be for much longer, when everything is finished we shall have to roam the fields in search of food, we'll pick all the fruit from the trees, we'll kill all the animals we can lay our hands on, if in the meantime dogs and cats do not start devouring us. The dog of tears did not react, this matter did not concern it, its recent transformation into a dog of tears had not been in vain.

The doctor's wife could hardly drag herself along. The shock had robbed her of all her strength. When they left the supermarket, she fainting, he blind, neither would be able to say who was assisting the other. Perhaps the intensity of the light had made her dizzy, she thought that she was losing her eyesight, but she was not afraid, it was only a fainting fit. She did not fall, nor even lose consciousness. She needed to lie down, close her eyes, breathe steadily, if she could just rest for a few minutes she was sure that she would regain her strength, she had to, her plastic bags were still empty. She did not want to lie down on the filth in the street, or return to the supermarket, not even dead. She looked around. On the other side of the street, a bit further on, was a church. There would be people inside, as everywhere, but it would be a good place to rest, at least it always had been. She said to her husband, I need to recover my strength, take me over there, There, where, I'm sorry, bear with me, and I'll tell you, What is it, A church, if I could only lie down for a while, I'd feel like new, Let's go. Six steps led up to the church, six steps, which the doctor's wife climbed with great difficulty, especially since she also had to guide her husband. The doors were wide open, which was a great help, a revolving door, even of the simplest type, would on this occasion have been a difficult

obstacle to overcome. The dog of tears hesitated on the threshold. Despite the freedom of movement enjoyed by dogs in recent months, all of them had genetically programmed into their brains the prohibition which once, long ago, fell on the species, that on entering churches, probably because of that other genetic code which obliges them to mark their territory wherever they go. The good and faithful services rendered by the forebears of this dog of tears, when they licked the festering sores of saints before they were recognised and approved as such, nevertheless acts of compassion of the most selfless kind, because, as we well know, not just any beggar can become a saint, no matter how many wounds he may have on his body, and in his soul too where the tongues of dogs cannot reach. The dog now had the courage to enter the sacred space, the door was open, there was no doorkeeper, and the strongest reason of all, the woman who had wept had already gone in, I do not know how she manages to drag herself along, she murmurs but a single word to her husband, Hold me, the church is full, it is almost impossible to find even a foot of floor unoccupied, one might literally say that there is no stone upon which to rest one's head, again the dog of tears proved its usefulness, with two growls and a couple of charges, all without malice, it opened up a space where the doctor's wife let herself fall, giving in to the faint, at last fully closing her eyes. Her husband took her pulse, it is firm and regular, only a little faint, then he tried to lift her up, she's not in a good position, it is important to get the blood back into the brain quickly, to increase the cerebral irrigation, the best thing would be to sit her up, put her head between her knees and trust to nature and the force of gravity. At last, after some failed attempts, he managed to lift her up. A few minutes later, the doctor's wife gave a deep sigh, moved almost imperceptibly, and started to regain consciousness. Don't get up just yet, her husband told her, keep your head down for a while longer, but she felt fine, there was no sign of vertigo, her eyes could already distinguish the tiles on the floor which the dog of tears had left reasonably clean thanks to his energetic scrabbling before lying down himself. She raised her head to the slender pillars, to the high vaults, to confirm the security and stability of her blood circulation, then she said, I am feeling fine, but at that very moment she thought she had gone mad or that the lifting of the vertigo had given her hallucinations, it could not be true what her eyes revealed, that man nailed to the cross with a white bandage covering his eyes, and next to him a woman, her heart pierced by seven swords and her eyes also covered with a white bandage, and it was not only that man and that woman who were in that condition, all the images in the church had their eyes covered, statues with a white cloth tied around the head, paintings with a thick brushstroke of white paint, and there was a woman teaching her daughter how to read and both had their eyes covered, and a man with an open book on which a little child was sitting, and both had their eyes covered, and another man, his body spiked with arrows, and he had his eyes covered, and a woman with a lit lamp, and she had her eyes covered, and a man with wounds on his hands and feet and his chest, and he had his eyes covered, and another man with a lion, and both had their eyes covered, and another man with a lamb, and both had their eyes covered, and another man with an eagle, and both had their eyes covered, and another man with a spear standing over a fallen man with horns and cloven feet, and both had their eyes covered, and another man carrying a

set of scales, and he had his eyes covered, and an old bald man holding a white lily, and he had his eyes covered, and another old man leaning on an unsheathed sword, and he had his eyes covered, and a woman with a dove, and both had their eyes covered, and a man with two ravens, and all three had their eyes covered, there was only one woman who did not have her eyes covered, because she carried her gouged-out eyes on a silver tray. The doctor's wife said to her husband, You won't believe me if I tell you what I have in front of my eyes, all the images in this church have their eyes covered, How strange, I wonder why, How should I know, perhaps it was the work of someone whose faith was badly shaken when he realised that he would be blind like the others, maybe it was even the local priest, perhaps he thought that when the blind people could no longer see the images, the images should not be able to see the blind either, Images don't see, You're wrong, images see with the eyes of those who see them, only that now blindness is the lot of everyone, You can still see, I'll see less and less all the time, even though I may not lose my eyesight I shall become more and more blind because I shall have no one to see me, If the priest covered the eyes of the images, That's just my idea, It's the only hypothesis that makes any sense, it's the only one that can lend some dignity to our suffering, I imagine that man coming in here from the world of the blind, where he would have to return only to go blind himself, I imagine the closed doors, the deserted church, the silence, I imagine the statues, the paintings, I see him going from one to the other, climbing up to the altars and tying the bandages with a double knot so that they do not come undone and slip off, applying two coats of paint to the pictures in order to make the white night into which they are plunged still thicker, that priest must have committed the worst sacrilege of all times and all religions, the fairest and most radically human, coming here to declare that, ultimately, God does not deserve to see. The doctor's wife did not have a chance to reply, somebody beside her spoke first, What sort of talk is that, who are you, Blind like you, she said, But I heard you say that you could see, That's just a manner of speaking which is hard to give up, how many more times will I say it, And what's this about the images having their eyes covered, It's true, And how do you know when you are blind, You would know too if you did what I did, go and touch them with your hands, the hands are the eyes of the blind, And why did you do it, I thought that in order to have got to where we are someone else must have been blind, And that story about the parish priest covering the eyes of the images, I knew him very well, he would be incapable of doing such a thing, You never know beforehand what people are capable of, you have to wait, give it time, it's time that rules, time is our gambling partner on the other side of the table and it holds all the cards of the deck in its hand, we have to guess the winning cards of life, our lives, Speaking of gambling in a church is a sin, Get up, use your hands if you doubt my words, Do you swear it is true that the images have their eyes covered, What do you want me to swear on, Swear on your eyes, I swear twice on the eyes, on yours and mine. Is it true, It's true. The conversation was overheard by the blind people in their immediate vicinity, and it goes without saying that there was no need to wait for the confirmation by oath before the news started to circulate, to pass from mouth to mouth, in a murmur which shortly changed its tone, first incredulous, then alarmed, again incredulous, it was unfortunate that there were several superstitious and

imaginative people in the congregation, the idea that the sacred images were blind, that their compassionate or pitying eyes only stared out at their own blindness, became all of a sudden unbearable, it was tantamount to having told them that they were surrounded by the living dead, one scream was enough, then another and another, then fear made all the people rise up, panic drove them to the doors, here the inevitable repeated itself, since panic is much faster than the legs which carry it, the feet of the fugitive trip up in their flight, even more so when one is blind, and there he lies on the ground, panic tells him, Get up, run, they are going to kill you, if only he could get up, but others have already run and fallen too, you have to be strong-minded not to burst out laughing at this grotesque entanglement of bodies looking for arms to free themselves and for feet to get away. Those six steps outside will be like a precipice, but finally, the fall will not be very serious, the habit of falling hardens the body, reaching the ground is, in itself, a relief, I'm staying where I am is the first thought, and sometimes the last, in fatal cases. What does not change either is that some take advantage of the misfortune of others, as is well known, since the beginning of the world, the heirs and the heirs of the heirs. The desperate flight of these people made them leave their belongings behind, and when necessity conquers fear, they come back for them, then the difficult problem will be to settle in a satisfactory manner what is mine and what is yours, we shall see that some of the little food we had has vanished, probably this was a cynical ruse on the part of the woman who said that the images had their eyes covered, the depths some people will stoop to, they invent such tall tales merely to rob poor people of the few crumbs remaining to them. Now, the fault was the dog's, seeing the square empty it went foraging around, it rewarded itself for its efforts, as was only fair and natural, and it showed, in a manner of speaking, the entrance to the mine which meant that the doctor's wife and her husband left the church without remorse over the theft, with their bags half full. If they can use half of what they grabbed they can be content, regarding the other half they will say, I don't know how people can eat this, even when misfortune is common to all, there are always some who have a worse time than others.

The report of these events, each one of its kind, left the other members of the group aghast and confused, it has to be noted that the doctor's wife, perhaps because words failed her, did not even manage to convey to them the feelings of utter horror she experienced at the basement door, that rectangle of pale flickering lights at the top of the staircase which led to the other world. The description of the bandaged eyes of the images left a strong enough impression on their imaginations, though in quite different ways, the first blind man and his wife, for example, were rather uneasy, for them it was mainly an unpardonable lack of respect. The fact that all human beings were blind was a calamity for which they were not responsible, these are misfortunes nobody can avoid, and for that reason alone covering the eyes of the holy images struck them as an unpardonable offence, and if the parish priest had done it, even worse. The reaction of the old man with the black eyepatch was quite different, I can imagine the shock you must have had, I imagine a museum in which all the sculptures have their eyes covered, not because the sculptor did not want to carve the stone until he reached the eyes, but

covered, as you say, with bandages, as if a single blindness were not enough, it's strange that a patch like mine does not create the same effect, sometimes it even gives people a romantic air, and he laughed at what he had said and at himself. As to the girl with the dark glasses, she said that she only hoped she would not have to see this cursed gallery in her dreams, she had enough nightmares already. They ate the rancid food at their disposal, it was the best they had, the doctor's wife said that it was becoming ever more difficult to find food, perhaps they should leave the city and go to live in the country, there at least the food they gathered would be healthier, And there must be goats and cows on the loose, we can milk them, we'll have milk, and there is water from the wells, we can cook what we want, the question is to find a good site, then everybody gave his opinion, some more enthusiastic than others, but for all of them it was obvious that the decision was pressing and urgent, the boy with the squint expressed his approval without any reservations, possibly because he retained pleasant memories from his holidays. After they had eaten, they stretched out to sleep, they always did, even during the quarantine, when experience taught them that a body in repose can put up with a lot of hunger. That evening they did not eat, only the boy with the squint got something to assuage his complaints and to allay his hunger, the others sat down to hear the reading, at least their minds would not be able to complain of lack of nourishment, the trouble is that the weakness of the body sometimes leads to a lack of attention of the mind, and it was not for lack of intellectual interest, no, what happened was that the brain slipped into a half sleep, like an animal settling down for hibernation, goodbye world, therefore it was not uncommon that the listeners gently lowered their eyelids, forced themselves to follow with the eyes of the soul the vicissitudes of the plot until a more energetic passage shook them from their torpor, it was not simply the noise of the book snapping shut, the doctor's wife had these subtle touches, she did not want to let on that she knew that the dreamer was drifting off to sleep.

The first blind man appeared to have entered into this soft state, but this was not the case. True, his eyes were closed, and he paid only scant attention to the reading, but the idea that they would all go to live in the country kept him from falling asleep, it seemed to him a serious error to go so far from his home, however kind the writer was, it would be useful to keep an eye on it, turn up from time to time. The first blind man was therefore wide awake, if any other proof were needed it would be the dazzling whiteness before his eyes, which probably only sleep would darken, but one could not even be sure of that, since nobody can be asleep and awake at the same time. The first blind man thought that he had finally cleared up this doubt when suddenly the inside of his eyelids turned dark, I've fallen asleep, he thought, but no, he had not fallen asleep, he continued hearing the voice of the doctor's wife, the boy with the squint coughed, then a great fear entered his soul, he thought he had passed from one blindness to another, that having lived in the blindness of light, he would now pass into a blindness of darkness, the fear made him tremble, What's the matter, his wife asked, and he replied stupidly, without opening his eyes, I am blind, as if that were news, she tenderly held him in her arms, Don't worry, we're all blind, there's nothing we can do about it, I saw everything dark, I

thought I had gone to sleep, but I hadn't, I am awake, That's what you should do, sleep, don't think about it. He was annoyed by this advice, here was a man in great distress, and his wife could say nothing other than that he should sleep. He was irritated and, about to utter a harsh reply, he opened his eyes and saw. He saw and shouted, I can see. His first shout was still one of incredulity, but with the second and the third and many more the evidence grew stronger, I can see, I can see, he madly embraced his wife, then he ran to the doctor's wife and embraced her too, it was the first time he had seen her, but he knew who she was, and the doctor, and the girl with dark glasses and the old man with the black eyepatch, there was no mistaking him, and the boy with the squint, his wife came behind him, she did not want to let him go, and he interrupted his embraces to embrace her again, then he turned to the doctor, I can see, I can see, doctor, he addressed him by his title, something they had not done for a long time, and the doctor asked, Can you see clearly, as before, are there no traces of whiteness, Nothing at all, I even think that I can see better than before, and that's no small thing, I've never worn glasses. Then the doctor said what all of them were thinking without daring to say it, It is possible that we have come to the end of this blindness, it is possible that we will all recover our eyesight, hearing those words, the doctor's wife began to cry, she should have been happy yet she was crying, what strange reactions people have, of course she was happy, my God, it is easy to understand, she cried because all her mental resistance had suddenly drained away, she was like a new-born baby and this cry was her first and still-unconscious sound. The dog of tears went up to her, it always knows when it is needed, that's why the doctor's wife clung to him, it is not that she no longer loved her husband, it is not that she did not wish them all well, but at that moment her feeling of loneliness was so intense, so unbearable, that it seemed to her that it could be overcome only by the strange thirst with which the dog drank her tears.

The general joy turned into nervousness, And now, what are we going to do, asked the girl with dark glasses, after all that has happened I won't be able to sleep, Nobody will, I believe we should stay here, said the old man with the black eyepatch, he broke off as if he still had some doubts, then he concluded, Waiting. They waited. The three flames of the lamp lit up the circle of faces. At first, they had talked animatedly, they wanted to know exactly what had happened, if the change had taken place only in the eyes or whether he had also felt something in his brain, then, little by little, their words grew despondent, at a certain moment it occurred to the first blind man to say to his wife that they would be going home the next day, But I am still blind, she replied, It doesn't matter, I'll guide you, only those present who heard it with their own ears could grasp how such simple words could contain such different feelings as protection, pride and authority. The second person to regain his eyesight, already late into the night, when the lamp, running out of oil, was flickering, was the girl with dark glasses. She had kept her eyes open as if sight had to enter through them rather than be rekindled from within, suddenly she said, I think I can see, it was best to be prudent, not all cases are the same, it even used to be said there is no such thing as blindness, only blind people, when the experience of time has taught us nothing other than that there are no blind people, but

only blindness. Here we already have three who can see, one more and they would form a majority, but even though in the happiness of seeing again we might ignore the others, their lives will be very much easier, not the agony it was until today, look at the state of that woman, she is like a rope that has broken, like a spring that could no longer support the pressure it was constantly subjected to. Perhaps it was for this reason that the girl with dark glasses embraced her first, and the dog of tears did not know whose tears it should attend to first, both of them wept so much. Her second embrace was for the old man with the black eyepatch, now we shall know what words are really worth, the other day we were so moved by the dialogue which led to the splendid commitment by these two to live together, but the situation has changed, the girl with dark glasses has before her an old man whom she can now see in the flesh, the emotional idealisations, the false harmonies on the desert island are over, wrinkles are wrinkles, baldness is baldness, there is no difference between a black eyepatch and a blind eye, that is what, in other words, he is going to say to her. Look at me, I am the man you said you were going to live with, and she replied, I know you, you're the man I am living with, in the end these are words that are worth even more than those that wanted to surface, and this embrace as much as the words. The third one to regain his sight the next day at dawn was the doctor, now there could no longer be any doubt, it was only a question of time before the others would recover theirs. Leaving aside the natural and foreseeable expansive comments of which there has already been sufficient mention above, there is now no need for repetition, even concerning the chief characters of this narrative, the doctor asked the question which hung in the air, What is happening out there, the reply came from the very building in which they lived, on the floor below someone came out on the landing shouting, I can see, I can see, it looks like the sun will rise over a city in celebration.

The next morning's meal turned into a banquet. What was on the table, besides being very little, would repel any normal appetite, as happens at all moments of elation, the strength of feelings took the place of hunger and their happiness was the best nourishment, nobody complained, even those who were still blind laughed as if the eyes which could already see were theirs. When they had finished, the girl with dark glasses had an idea, What if I now went to the door of my own flat with a piece of paper saying that I'm here, my parents would know where to find me if they return, Let me come with you, I want to know what is happening out there, said the old man with the black eyepatch, And we will go out too, said he who had been the first blind man to his wife, Perhaps the writer can already see and is thinking about returning to his own place, on the way I shall try to find something to eat. I'll do the same, said the girl with dark glasses. Minutes later, alone now, the doctor sat down beside his wife, the boy with the squint was dozing in a corner of the sofa, the dog of tears, stretched out with his muzzle on its forepaws, opened and closed its eyes from time to time to show that it was still watchful, through the open window, despite the fact that they were so high up, the noise of excited voices could be heard, the streets must be full of people, the crowd shouting just three words, I can see, said those who had already recovered their eyesight and

those who were just starting to see, I can see, I can see, the story in which people said, I am blind, truly appears to belong to another world. The boy with the squint murmured, he must be in the middle of a dream, perhaps he saw his mother and was asking her, Can you see me, can you see me, The doctor's wife asked, And the others, and the doctor answered, He will probably be cured by the time he wakes, it will be the same with the others, most likely they are already regaining their sight at this very moment, our man with the black eyepatch is in for a shock, Why, Because of the cataract, after all the time since I last examined him it must have deteriorated, Is he going to stay blind, No, when life gets back to normal, and everything is working again, I shall operate, it is a matter of weeks, Why did we become blind, I don't know, perhaps one day we'll find out, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see.

The doctor's wife got up and went to the window. She looked down at the street full of refuse, at the shouting, singing people. Then she lifted her head up to the sky and saw everything white, It is my turn, she thought. Fear made her quickly lower her eyes. The city was still there.

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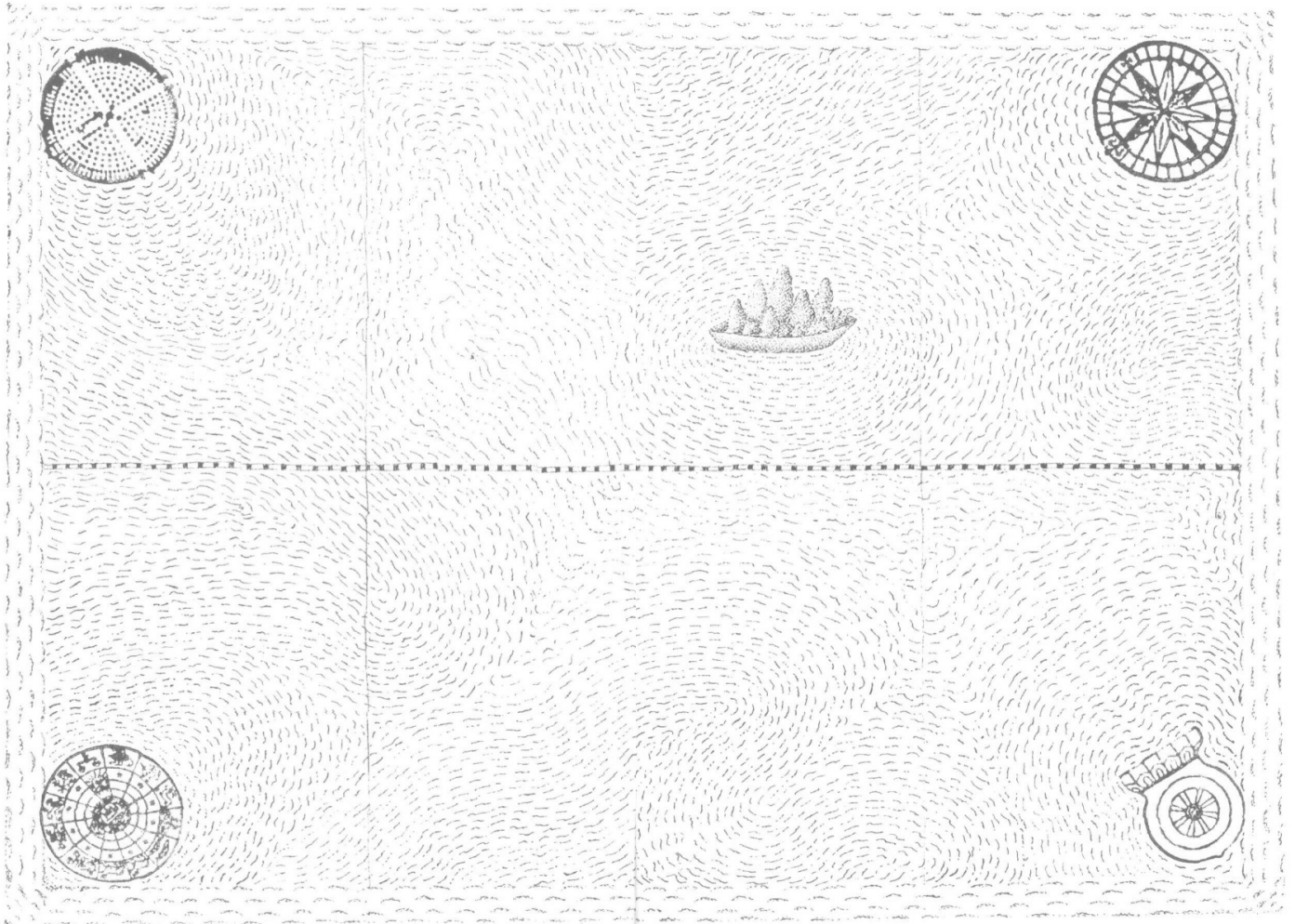
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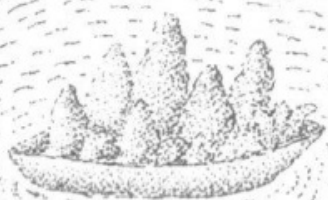
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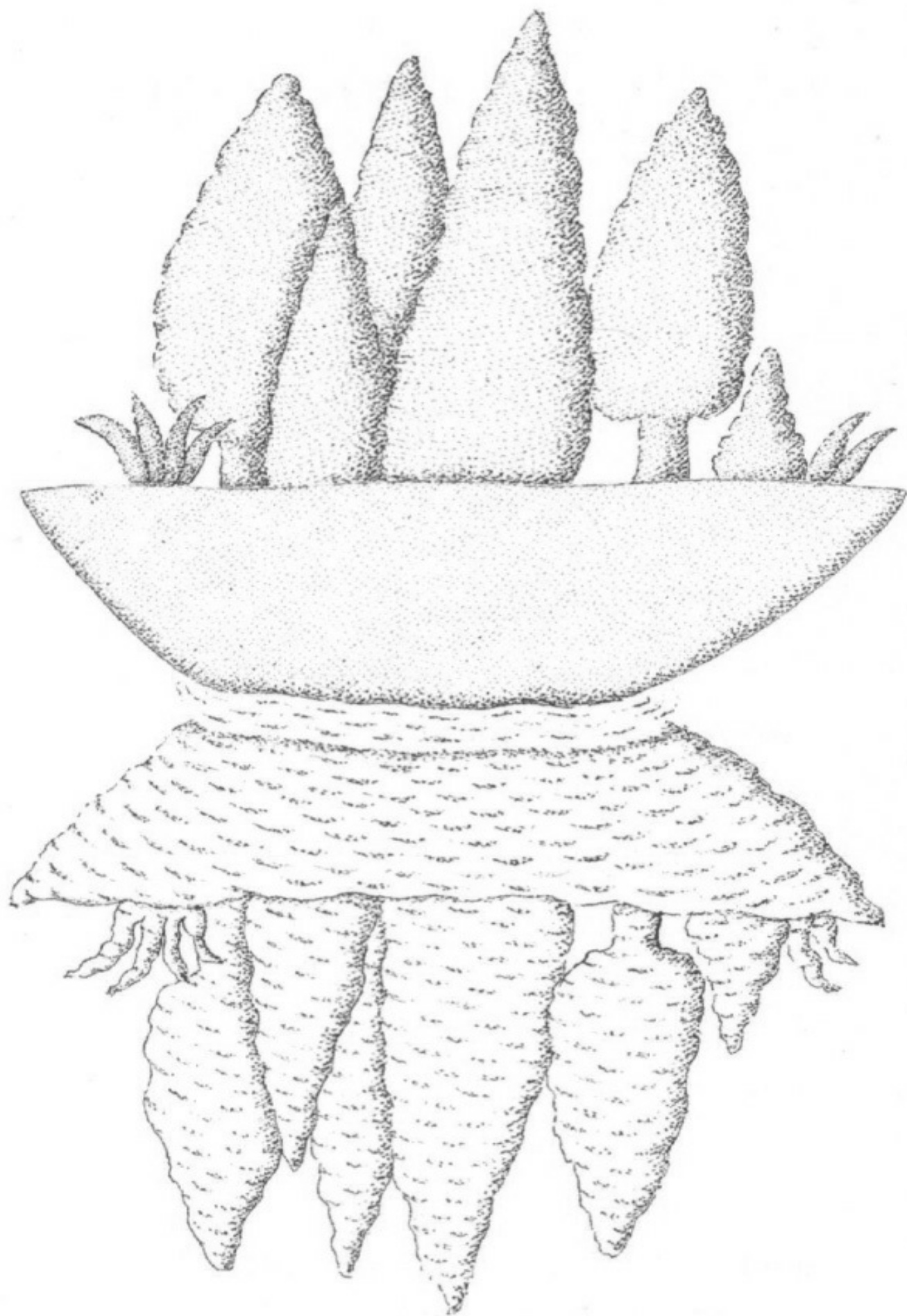
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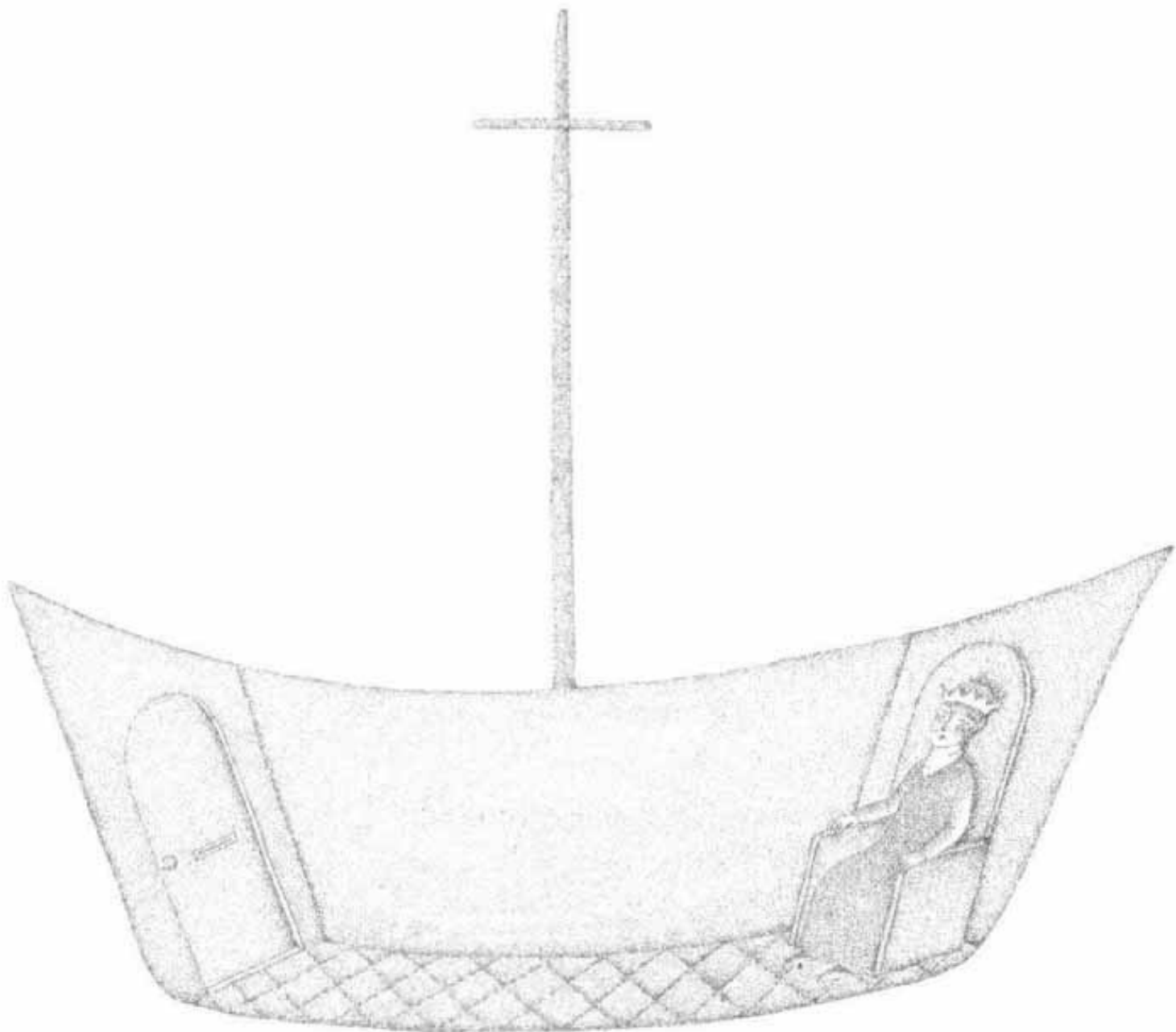
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A C E D B

A MAN WENT TO KNOCK AT THE KING'S DOOR AND said, Give me a boat. The king's house had many other doors, but this was the door for petitions. Since the king spent all his time sitting at the door for favors (favors being offered to the king, you understand), whenever he heard someone knocking at the door for petitions, he would pretend not to hear, and only when the continuous pounding of the bronze doorknocker became not just deafening, but positively scandalous, disturbing the peace of the neighborhood (people would start muttering, What kind of king is he if he won't even answer the door), only then would he order the first secretary to go and find out what the supplicant wanted, since there seemed no way of silencing him. Then, the first secretary would call the second secretary, who would call the third secretary, who would give orders to the first assistant who would, in turn, give orders to the second assistant, and so on all the way down the line to the cleaning woman, who, having no one else to give orders to, would half-open the door and ask through the crack, What do you want. The supplicant would state his business, that is, he would ask what he had come to ask, then he would wait by the door for his request to trace the path back, person by person, to the king. The king, occupied as usual with the favors being offered him, would take a long time to reply, and it was no small measure of his concern for the happiness and well-being of his people that he would, finally, resolve to ask the first secretary for an authoritative opinion in writing, the first secretary, needless to say, would pass on the command to the second secretary, who would pass it to the third secretary, and so on down once again to the cleaning woman, who would give a yes or a no depending on what kind of mood she was in.

However, in the case of the man who wanted a boat, this is not quite what happened. When the cleaning woman asked him through the crack in the door, What do you want, the man, unlike all the others, did not ask for a title, a medal, or simply money, he said, I want to talk to the king, You know perfectly well that the king can't come, he's busy at the door for favors, replied the woman, Well, go and tell him that I'm not leaving here until he comes, in person, to find out what I want, said the man, and he lay down across the threshold, covering himself with a blanket against the cold. Anyone wanting to go in or out would have to step over him first. Now this posed an enormous problem, because one must bear in mind that, according to the protocol governing the different doors, only one supplicant could be dealt with at a time, which meant that, as long as there was someone waiting there for a response, no one else could approach and make known their needs or ambitions. At first glance, it would seem that the person to gam most from this article in the regulations was the king, given that the fewer people bothering him with their various tales of woe, the longer he could spend, undisturbed, receiving, relishing and piling up favors. A second glance, however, would reveal that the king was very much the loser, because when people realized the unconscionable amount of time it took to get a reply, the ensuing public protests would seriously increase social unrest, and that, in turn, would have an immediate and negative effect on the flow



of favors being offered to the king. In this particular case, as a result of weighing up the pros and cons, after three days, the king went, in person, to the door for favors to find out what he wanted, this troublemaker who had refused to allow his request to go through the proper bureaucratic channels. Open the door, said the king to the cleaning woman, and she said, Wide open, or just a little bit. The king hesitated for a moment, the fact was that he did not much care to expose himself to the air of the streets, but then, he reflected, it would look bad, unworthy of his majestic self, to speak to one of his subjects through a crack in the door, as if he were afraid of him, especially with someone else listening in to the conversation, a cleaning woman who would immediately go and tell all and sundry who knows what, Wide open, he ordered. The moment he heard the bolts being drawn back, the man who wanted a boat got up from the step by the door, folded his blanket and waited. These signs that someone was finally going to deal with the matter, which meant that the space by the door would therefore soon be free,

brought together a number of other aspiring recipients of the king's generosity who were hanging about nearby ready to claim the place as soon as it became vacant. The unexpected arrival of the king (such a thing had never happened for as long as he had worn the crown) provoked enormous surprise, not only among the aforementioned candidates, but also among the people living on the other side of the street who, attracted by the sudden commotion, were leaning out of their windows. The only person who was not particularly surprised was the man who had come to ask for a boat. He had calculated, and his prediction was proving correct, that the king, even if it took him three days, was bound to be curious to see the face of the person who, for no apparent reason and with extraordinary boldness, had demanded to speak to him. Thus, torn between his own irresistible curiosity and his displeasure at seeing so many people gathered together all at once, the king very ungraciously fired off three questions one after the other, What do you want, Why didn't you say what you wanted straightaway, Do you imagine I have nothing better to do, but the man only answered the first question, Give me a boat, he said. The king was so taken aback that the cleaning woman hurriedly offered him the chair with the straw seat that she herself used to sit on when she had some needlework to do, for, as well as cleaning, she was also responsible for minor sewing chores in the palace, for example, darning the pages' socks. Feeling somewhat awkward, for the chair was much lower than his throne, the king was trying to find the best way to





arrange his legs, first drawing them in, then letting them splay out to either side, while the man who wanted the boat patiently waited for the next question, And may one know what you want this boat for, was what the king did in fact ask when he had finally managed to install himself with a reasonable degree of comfort on the cleaning woman's chair, To go in search of the unknown island, replied the man, What unknown island, asked the king, suppressing his laughter, as if he had before him one of those utter madmen obsessed with sea voyages, whom it would be as well not to cross, at least not straightaway, The unknown island, the man said again, Nonsense, there are no more unknown islands, Who told you, sir, that there are no more unknown islands, They're all

on the maps, Only the known islands are on the maps, And what is this unknown island you want to go in search of, If I could tell you that, it wouldn't be unknown, Have you heard someone talking about it, asked the king, more serious now, No, no one, In that case, why do you insist that it exists, Simply because there can't possibly not be an unknown island, And you came here to ask me for a boat, Yes, I came here to ask you for a boat, And who are you that I should give you a boat, And who are you to refuse me one, I am the king of this kingdom, and all the boats in the kingdom belong to me, You belong to them far more than they belong to you, What do you mean, asked the king, troubled, I mean that without them you're nothing, whereas, without you, they can still set sail, Under my orders, with my pilots and my sailors, But I'm not asking you for sailors or a pilot, all I'm asking you for is a boat, And what about this unknown island, if you find it, will it be mine, You, sir, are only interested in islands that are already known, And unknown ones too, once they're known, Perhaps this one won't let itself be known, Then I won't give you the boat, Yes, you will. When they heard these words, uttered with such calm confidence, the would-be supplicants at the door for favors, whose impatience had been growing steadily since this conversation had begun, decided to intervene in the man's favor, more out of a desire to get rid of him than out of any sense of solidarity, and so they started shouting, Give him the boat, give him the boat. The king opened his mouth to tell the cleaning woman to call the palace guard to come and reestablish public order and impose discipline, but, at that moment, the people watching from the windows of the houses opposite enthusiastically joined in the chorus, shouting along with the others, Give him the boat, give him the boat. Faced by such an unequivocal expression of the popular will and worried about what he might have missed meanwhile at the door for favors, the king raised his right hand to command silence and said, I'm going to give you a boat, but you'll have to find your own crew, I need all my sailors for the known islands. The cheers from the crowd drowned out the man's words of thanks, besides, judging from the movements of his lips, he might just as easily have been saying, Thank you, my lord, as Don't worry, I'll manage, but everyone clearly heard what the king said next, Go down to the docks, ask to speak to the harbormaster, tell him I sent you, and that he is to give you a boat, take my card with you. The man who was to be given a boat read the visiting card, which bore the word King underneath the king's name, and these were the words the king had written as he rested the card on the cleaning woman's shoulder, Give the bearer a boat, it doesn't have to be a large boat, but it should be a

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Handwritten signature or name at the bottom right, written in a cursive style.



safe, seaworthy boat, I don't want to have him on my conscience if things should go wrong. When the man looked up, this time, one imagines, in order to say thank you for the gift, the king had already withdrawn, and only the cleaning woman was there, looking at him thoughtfully. The man moved away from the door, a signal for the other supplicants finally to approach, there is little point in describing the ensuing confusion, with everyone trying to get to the door first, but alas, the door was once more closed. They banged the bronze doorknocker again to summon the cleaning woman, but the cleaning woman wasn't there, she had turned and left, with her bucket and her broom, by another door, the door of decisions, which is rarely used, but when it is used, it decidedly is. Now one can understand the thoughtful look on the cleaning woman's face, for it was at that precise moment that she had decided to go after the man as he set off to the port to take possession of the boat. She decided that she had had enough of a life spent cleaning and scrubbing palaces, that it was time to change jobs, that cleaning and scrubbing boats was her true vocation, at least she would never lack for water at sea. The man has no idea that, even though he has not yet started recruiting crew members, he is already being followed by the person who will be in charge of swabbing down the decks and of other such cleaning tasks, indeed, this is the way fate usually treats us, it's there right behind us, it has already reached out a hand to touch us on the shoulder while we're still muttering to ourselves, It's all over, that's it, who cares anyhow.

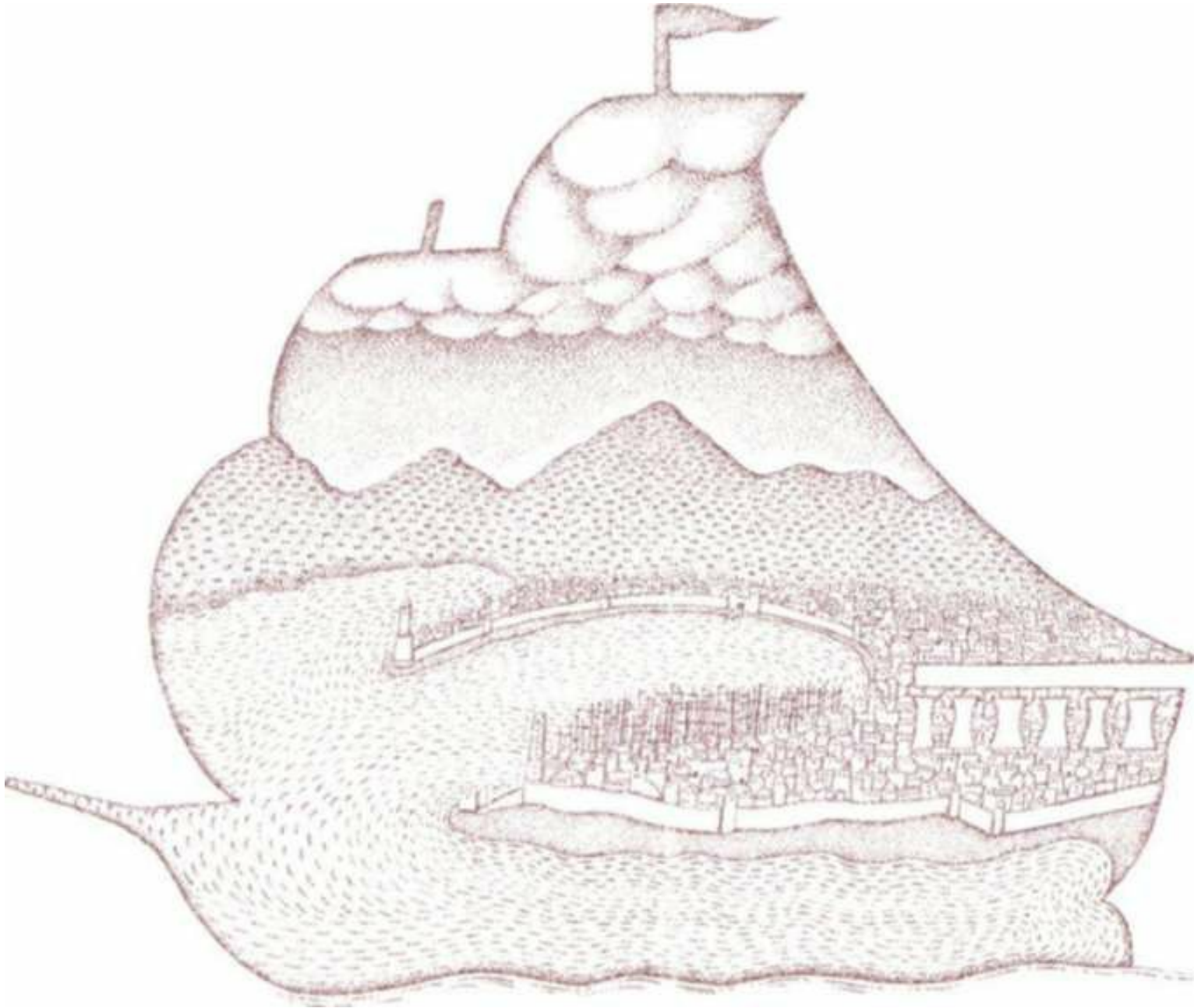
After walking quite a way, the man reached the harbor, went down to the dock,

asked for the harbormaster and, while he was waiting for him, set to wondering which of the boats moored there would be his, he knew it wouldn't be large, the king's visiting card was very clear on that point, that excluded the steamships, cargo ships and warships, nor could it be so small that it would not withstand the battering winds or the rigors of the sea, the king had been categorical on that point too, It should be a safe, seaworthy boat, those had been his actual words, thus implicitly excluding rowboats, barges and dinghies, which, although entirely seaworthy and safe, each in its own way, were not made to plough the oceans, which is where one finds unknown islands. A short way away, hidden behind some barrels, the cleaning woman ran her eyes over the moored boats, I fancy that one, she thought, not that her opinion counted, she hadn't even been hired, but first, let's hear what the harbormaster has to say. The harbormaster came, read the card, looked the man up and down, and asked the question the king had



neglected to ask, Do you know how to sail, have you got a master's ticket, to which the man replied, I'll learn at sea. The harbormaster said, I wouldn't recommend it, I'm a sea captain myself and I certainly wouldn't venture out to sea in just any old boat, Then give me one I could venture out in, no, not one like that, give me a boat I can respect and that will respect me, That's sailor's talk, yet you're not a sailor, If I talk like a sailor, then I must be one. The harbormaster reread the king's visiting card, then asked, Can you tell me why you want the boat, To go in search of the unknown island, There are no unknown islands left, That's just what the king said to me, He learned everything he knows about islands from me, It's odd that you, a man of the sea, should say to me that there are no unknown islands left, I'm a man of the land and yet I know that even known islands remain unknown until we set foot on them, But, if I understood you right, you're going in

search of one that no one has set foot on, Yes, I'll know it when I get there, If you get there, Well, boats do get wrecked along the way, but if that should happen to me, you must write in the harbor records that I reached such and such a point, You mean that you always reach somewhere, You wouldn't be the man you are if you didn't know that. The harbormaster said, I'm going to give you the boat you need, Which one, It's a very experienced boat, dating from the days when everyone was off searching for unknown islands, Which one, Indeed it may even have found some, Which is it, That one. As soon as the cleaning woman saw where the harbormaster was pointing, she emerged from behind the barrels, shouting, That's my boat, that's my boat, one must forgive her unusual and entirely unjustifiable claim of ownership, the boat just happened to be



the one she had liked too. It looks like a caravel, said the man, It is more or less, agreed the harbormaster, it started life as a caravel, then underwent various repairs and modifications that altered it a bit, But it's still a caravel, Yes, it's pretty much kept its original character, And it's got masts and sails, That's what you need when you go in search of unknown islands. The cleaning woman could contain herself no longer, As far as

I'm concerned, that's the boat for me, And who are you, asked the man, Don't you remember me, No, I don't, I'm the cleaning woman, Cleaning what, The king's palace, The woman who opened the door for petitions, The very same, And why aren't you back at the king's palace cleaning and opening doors, Because the doors I really wanted to open have already been opened and because, from now on, I will only clean boats, So you want to go with me in search of the unknown island, I left the palace by the door of decisions, In that case, go and have a look at the caravel, after all this time, it must be in need of a good wash, but watch out for the seagulls, they're not to be trusted, Don't you want to come with me and see what your boat is like inside, You said it was your boat, Sorry about that, I only said it because I liked it, Liking is probably the best form of ownership, and ownership the worst form of liking. The harbormaster interrupted their conversation, I have to hand over the keys to the owner of the ship, which of you is it to be, it's up to you, I don't care either way, Do boats have keys, asked the man, Not to get in with, no, but there are store cupboards and lockers, and the captain's desk with the logbook, I'll leave it all up to her, I'm going to find a crew, said the man and walked off.

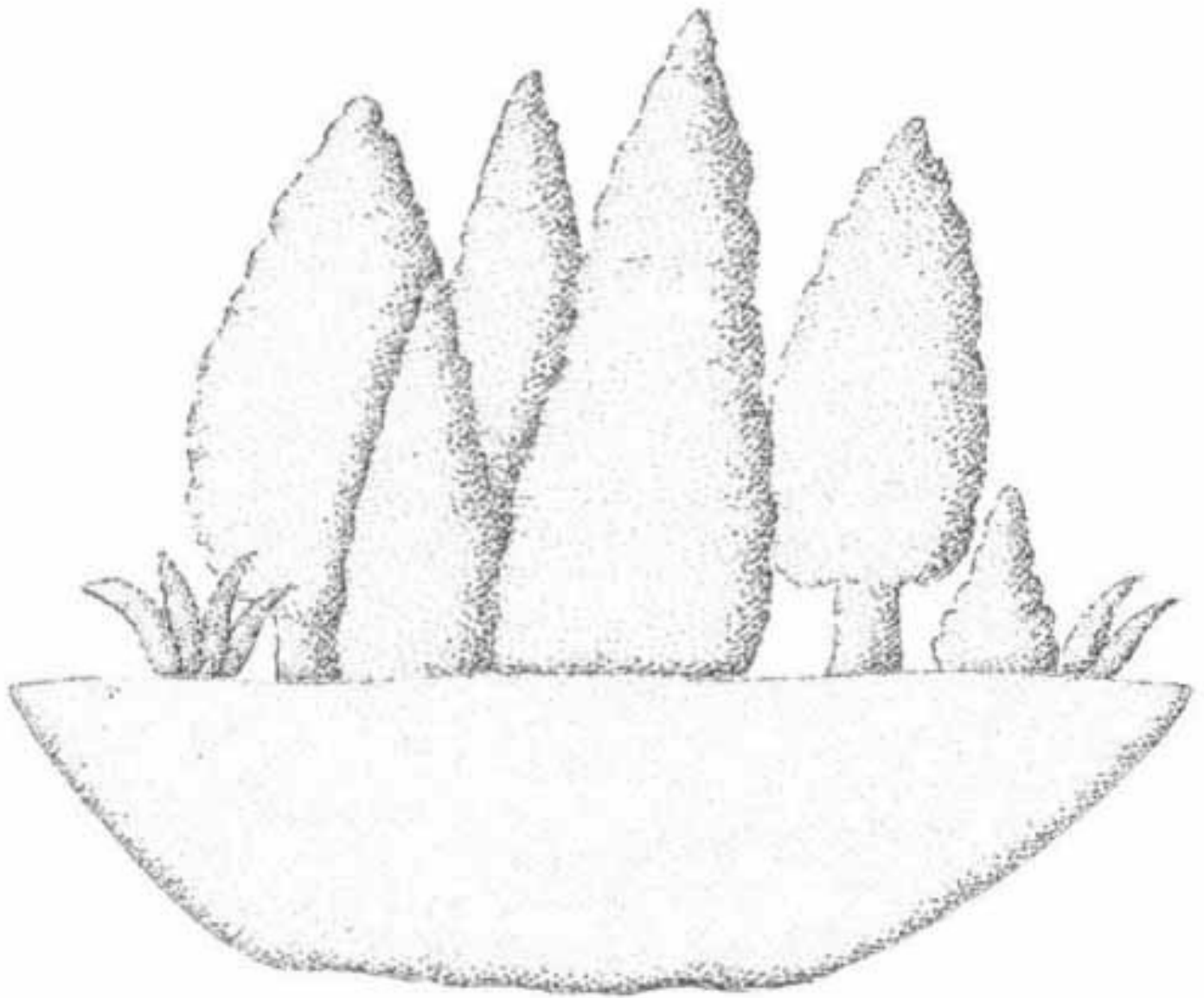
The cleaning woman went to the harbormaster's office to collect the keys, then she boarded the boat, where two things proved useful to her, the palace broom and the warning about the seagulls, she was only halfway up the gangplank joining the side of the ship to the quay when the wretches hurled themselves upon her, screaming furiously, beaks open, as if they wanted to devour her on the spot. They didn't know who they were dealing with. The cleaning woman set down the bucket, slipped the keys down her cleavage, steadied herself on the gangplank and, whirling the broom about her as if it were a broadsword of old, managed to scatter the murderous band. It was only when she actually boarded the ship that she understood the seagulls' anger, there were nests everywhere, many of them abandoned, others still with eggs in them, and a few with nestlings waiting, mouths agape, for food, That's all very well, but you're going to have to move house, a ship about to set sail in search of the unknown island can't leave looking like a henhouse, she said. She threw the empty nests into the water, but left the others where they were for the moment. Then she rolled up her sleeves and started scrubbing the deck. When she had finished this arduous task, she went and opened the sail lockers and began carefully examining the sails to see what state the seams were in after so long without going to sea and without being stretched by the vigorous winds. The sails are the muscles of the boat, you just have to see them swelling and straining in the wind to know that, but, like all muscles, if they're not used regularly, they grow weak, flabby, sinewless. And the seams are like the sinews of the sails, thought the cleaning woman, glad to find she was picking up the art of seamanship so quickly. Some seams were fraying, and these she carefully marked, since the needle and thread which, only yesterday, she had used to darn the pages' socks,



would not suffice for this work. The other lockers, she soon discovered, were empty. The fact that there was no gunpowder in the gunpowder locker, just a bit of black dust in the bottom, which she at first took to be mouse droppings, did not bother her in the least, indeed there is no law, at least not to the knowledge of a cleaning woman, that going in search of an unknown island must necessarily be a warlike enterprise. What did greatly annoy her was the complete absence of food rations in the food locker, not for her own sake, for she was more than used to the meager pickings at the palace, but because of the man to whom this boat was given, the sun will soon be going down, and he'll be back clamoring for food, as all men do the moment they get home, as if they were the only ones who had a stomach and a need to fill it, And if he brings sailors back with him to

crew the ship, they've always got monstrous appetites, and then, said the cleaning woman, I don't know how we'll manage.

She needn't have worried. The sun had just vanished into the ocean when the man with the boat appeared at the far end of the quay. He was carrying a package in his hand, but he was alone and looked dispirited. The cleaning woman went to wait for him by the gangplank, but before she could open her mouth to find out how the rest of the day had gone, he said, Don't worry, I've brought enough food for both of us, And the sailors, she asked, No one came, as you can see, But did some at least say they would come, she asked, They said there are no more unknown islands and that, even if there were, they weren't prepared to leave the comfort of their homes and the good life on board passenger ships just to get involved in some oceangoing adventure, looking for the impossible, as if we were still living in the days when the sea was dark, And what did you say to them, That the sea is always dark, And you didn't tell them about the unknown island, How could I tell them about an unknown island, if I don't even know where it is, But you're sure it exists, As sure as I am that the sea is dark, Right now, seen from up here, with the water the color of jade and the sky ablaze, it doesn't seem at all dark to me, That's just an illusion, sometimes islands seem to float above the surface of the water, but it's not true, How do you think you'll manage if you haven't got a crew, I don't know yet, We could live here, and I could get work cleaning the boats that come into port, and you, And I, You must have some skill, a craft, a profession, as they call it nowadays, I have, did have, will have if necessary, but I want to find the unknown island, I want to find out who I am when I'm there on that island, Don't you know, If you don't step outside yourself, you'll never discover who you are, The king's philosopher, when he had nothing to do, would come and sit beside me and watch me darning the pages' socks, and sometimes he would start philosophizing, he used to say that each man is an island, but since that had nothing to do with me, being a woman, I paid no attention to him, what do you think, That you have to leave the island in order to see the island, that we can't see ourselves unless we become free of ourselves, Unless we escape from ourselves, you mean, No, that's not the same thing. The blaze in the sky was dying down, the waters grew suddenly purple, now not even the cleaning woman could doubt that the sea really is dark, at least at certain times of the day. The man said, Let's leave the philosophizing to the king's philosopher, that's what they pay him for after all, and let's eat, but the woman did not agree, First, you've got to inspect your



boat, you've only seen it from the outside, What sort of state did you find it in, Well, some of the seams on the sails need reinforcing, Did you go down into the hold, has the ship let in much water, There's a bit in the bottom, sloshing about with the ballast, but that seems normal, it's good for the boat, How did you learn these things, I just did, But how, The same way you told the harbormaster that you would learn to sail, at sea, We're not at sea yet, We're on the water though, My belief was that, with sailing, there are only two true teachers, one is the sea and the other the boat, And the sky, you're forgetting the sky, Yes, of course, the sky, The winds, The clouds, The sky, Yes, the sky.

It took them less than a quarter of an hour to go round the whole ship, a caravel, even a converted one, doesn't really allow for long walks. It's lovely, said the man, but if I can't get enough crew members to work it, I'll have to go back to the king and tell him I don't want it any more, Honestly, the first obstacle you come across and you lose heart, The first obstacle was having to wait three days for the king and I didn't give up then, If

we can't find sailors willing to come with us, then we'll have to manage alone, You're mad, two people on their own couldn't possibly sail a ship like this, why, I'd have to be at the helm all the time, and you, well, I couldn't even begin to explain, it's madness, We'll see, now let's go and eat. They went up to the quarterdeck, the man still protesting at what he called her madness, and there the cleaning woman opened the package he had brought, a loaf of bread, hard goat's cheese, olives and a bottle of wine. The moon was now but a hand's breadth above the sea, the shadows cast by the yard and the mainmast came and lay at their feet. Our caravel's really lovely, said the woman,



then corrected herself, I mean your caravel, It won't be mine for very long I shouldn't think, Whether you sail it or not, it's yours, the king gave it to you, Yes, but I asked him to give it to me so that I could go in search of an unknown island, But these things don't just happen from one moment to the next, it all takes time, my grandfather always used

to say that anyone going to sea must make his preparations on land first, and he wasn't even a sailor, With no crew members we can't sail, So you said, And we'll have to provision the ship with the thousand and one things you need for a voyage like this, given that we don't know where it might lead us, Of course, and then we'll have to wait for the right season, and leave on a good tide, and have people come to the quay to wish us a safe journey, You're making fun of me, Not at all, I would never make fun of the person who got me to leave the palace by the door



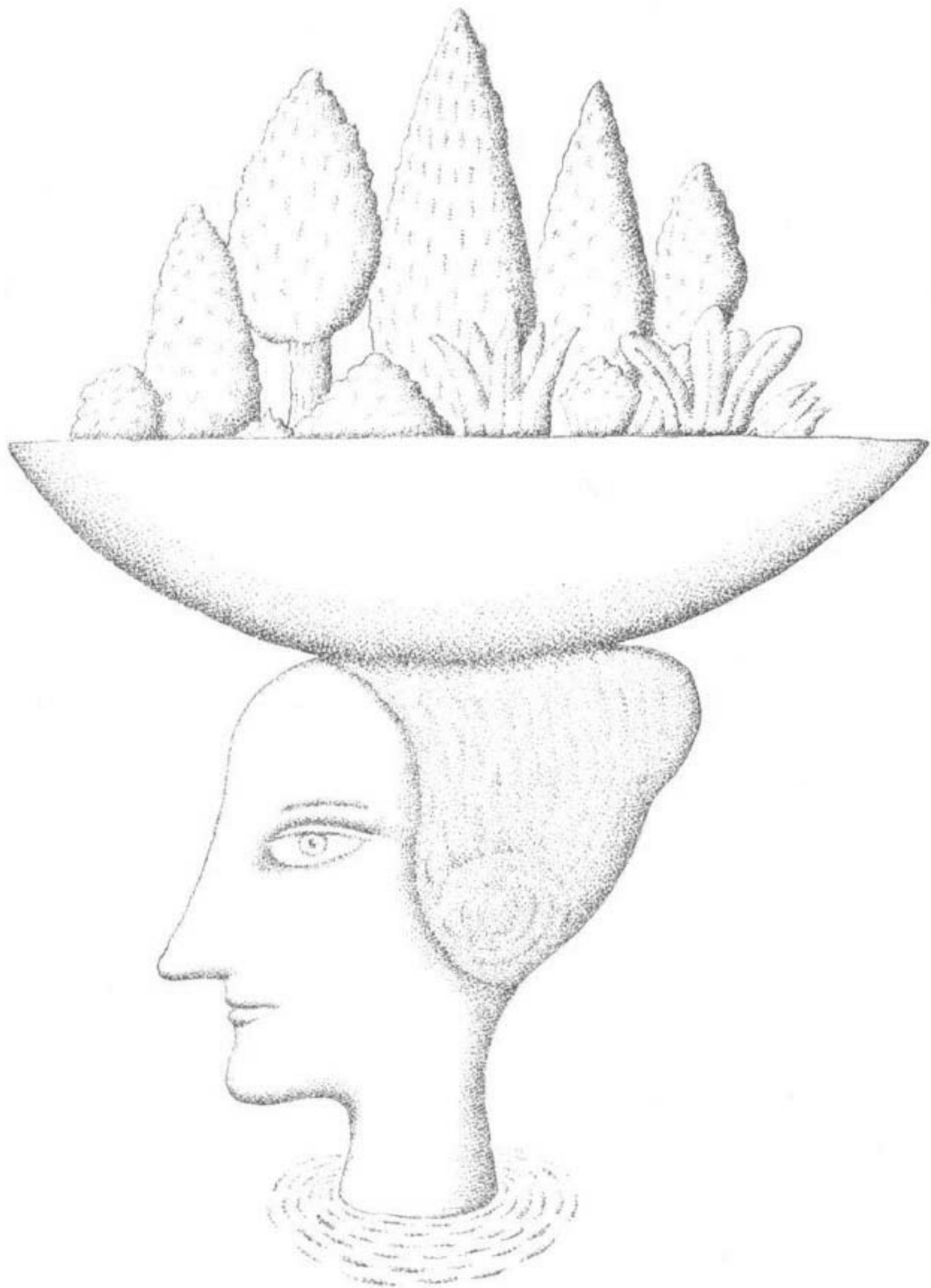
of decisions, Forgive me, And I won't go backthrough that door whatever happens. The moonlight was falling directly on the cleaning woman's face, Lovely, really lovely, thought the man, and this time he didn't mean the caravel. The woman did not think anything, she must have thought all she had to think in those three days during which she would open the door now and then to see if he was still out there, waiting. There wasn't a crumb of bread or cheese left, not a drop of wine, they had thrown the olive stones into the sea, the deck was as clean as it had been when the cleaning woman had wiped a cloth over it for the last time. A steamship's siren let out a potent growl, such as leviathans must have made, and the woman said, When it's our turn, we won't make so much noise about it. Although they were still in the harbor, the water lapped slightly as the steamship passed, and the man said, But we'll certainly sway about a lot more. They both laughed, then fell silent, after a while, one of them suggested that perhaps they should go to sleep, Not that I'm particularly sleepy, and the other agreed, No, I'm not either, then they fell silent again, the moon rose and continued to rise, at one point, the woman said, There are bunks down below, the man said, Yes, and that was when they got up and went below decks, where the woman said, See you tomorrow, I'm going this way, and the man replied, I'm going this way, see you tomorrow, they did not say port or starboard, probably because they were both new to the art. The woman turned back, Oh, I forgot, and she took two candle stumps out of her apron pocket, I found them when I was cleaning, but I don't have any matches, I do, said the man. She held the candles, one in each hand, he lit a match, then, protecting the flame beneath the dome of his cupped fingers, he carefully applied it to the old wicks, the flame took, grew slowly like the moonlight, lit the face of the cleaning woman, there's no need to say what he thought, She's lovely, but what she thought was this, He's obviously got eyes only for the unknown island, just one example of how people can misinterpret the look in another person's eyes, especially when they've only just met. She handed him a candle, said, See you tomorrow, then, sleep well, he wanted to say the same thing, only differently, Sweet dreams, was the phrase he came out with, in a little while, when he is down below, lying on his bunk, other phrases will spring to mind, wittier, more charming, as such phrases should be when a man finds himself alone with a woman. He wondered if she would already be asleep, if it had taken her long to fall asleep, then he imagined that he was looking for her and couldn't find her anywhere, that the two of them were lost on a vast ship, sleep is a skilled magician, it changes the proportions of things, the distances between them, it separates people and they're lying next to each other, brings them together and they can barely see one another, the woman is sleeping only a few yards away from him and he cannot reach her, yet it's so very easy to go from port to starboard.

He had wished her sweet dreams, but he was the one who spent all night dreaming. He dreamed that his caravel was on the high seas, with the three lateen sails gloriously full, cutting a path through the waves, while he controlled the ship's wheel and the crew rested in the shade. He couldn't understand what these sailors were doing there, the same ones who had refused to embark with him to go in search of the unknown island,

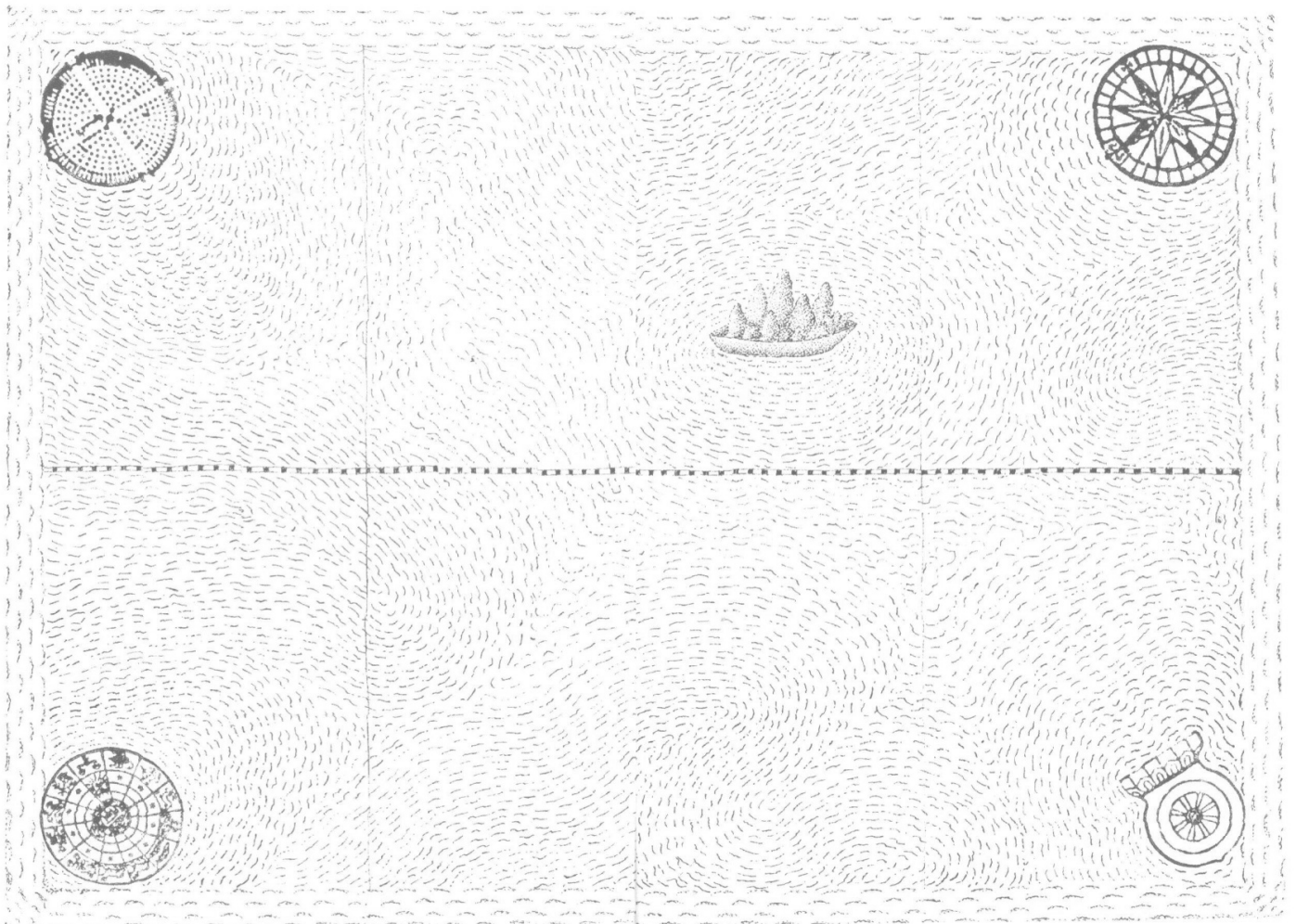
they probably regretted the crude irony with which they had treated him. He could see animals wandering the deck too, ducks, rabbits, chickens, the usual domestic livestock, pecking at the grains of corn or nibbling on the cabbage leaves that a sailor was throwing to them, he couldn't remember bringing them on board, but however it had happened, it was only natural they should be there, for what if the unknown island turned out to be a desert island, as had so often been the case in the past, it was best to play it safe, and we all know that opening the door to the rabbit hutch and lifting a rabbit out by the ears is always easier than having to pursue it over hill and dale. From the depths of the hold he could hear a chorus of neighing horses, lowing oxen, braying donkeys, the voices of the noble beasts so vital for carrying out heavy work, and how did they get there, how can they possibly fit into a caravel which has barely enough room for the human crew, suddenly the wind veered, the mainsail flapped and rippled, and behind was something he hadn't noticed before, a group of women, who, even without counting, must be as numerous as the sailors and are occupied in womanly tasks, the time had not yet come for them to occupy themselves with other things, it's obvious that this must be a dream, no one in real life ever traveled like this. The man at the ship's wheel looked for the cleaning woman, but couldn't see her, Perhaps she's in the bunk to starboard, resting after scrubbing the deck, he thought, but he was deceiving himself, because he knows perfectly well, although again he doesn't know how he knows, that, at the last moment, she chose not to come, that she jumped onto the quay, shouting, Goodbye, goodbye, since you only have eyes for the unknown island, I'm leaving, and it wasn't true, right now his eyes are searching for her and do not find her. At that moment, the sky clouded over and it began to



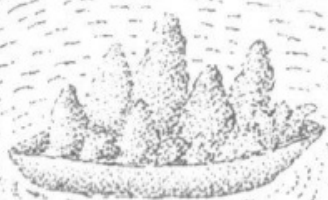
rain, and, having rained, innumerable plants began to sprout from the rows of sacks filled with earth lined up along the bulwarks, they are there not because of fears that there will not be enough soil on the unknown island, but because in that way one can gain time, the day we arrive, all we will have to do is transplant the fruit trees, sow the seeds from the miniature wheat fields ripening here, and decorate the flower beds with the flowers that will bloom from these buds. The man at the wheel asks the sailors resting on the deck if they can see any uninhabited islands yet, and they say they can see no islands at all, uninhabited or otherwise, but that they are considering disembarking on the first bit of inhabited land that appears, as long as there is a port where the ship can anchor, a tavern where they can drink and a bed to frolic in, since there's no room to do so here, with so many people crowded together. But what about the unknown island, asked the man at the wheel, The unknown island doesn't exist, except as an idea in your head, the king's geographers went to look at the maps and declared that it's been years since there have been any unknown islands, You should have stayed in the city, then, instead of hindering my voyage, We were looking for a better place to live and decided to take advantage of your journey, You're not sailors, We never were, I won't be able to sail this ship all alone, You should have thought of that before asking the king to give it to you, the sea won't teach you how to sail. Then the man at the wheel saw land in the distance and tried to sail straight past, pretending that it was the mirage of another land, an image that had traveled across space from the other side of the world, but the men who had never been sailors protested, they said that was where they wanted to disembark, This island's on the map, they cried, we'll kill you if you don't take us there. Then, of its own accord, the caravel turned its prow toward land, entered the port and drew alongside the quay, You can leave, said the man at the wheel, and they immediately all trooped off, first the women, then the men, but they did not leave alone, they took with them the ducks, the rabbits and the chickens, they took the oxen, the donkeys and the horses, and even the seagulls, one after the other, flew off, leaving the boat behind, carrying their nestlings in their beaks, something never seen before, but there's always a first time. The man at the wheel watched this exodus in silence, he did nothing to hold back those who were abandoning him, at least they had left him the trees, the wheat and the flowers, as well as the climbing plants that were twining round the masts and festooning the ship's sides. In the rush to leave, the sacks of earth had



split and spilled open, so that the whole deck had become a field, dug and sown, with just a little more rain there should be a good harvest. Ever since the voyage to the unknown island began, we have not seen the man at the wheel eat, that must be because he is dreaming, just dreaming, and if in his dreams he fancies a bit of bread or an apple, it would be pure invention, nothing more. The roots from the trees are now penetrating the frame of the ship itself, it won't be long before these hoisted sails cease to be needed, the wind will just have to catch the crown of the trees and the caravel will set off for its destination. It is a forest that sails and bobs upon the waves, a forest where, quite how no one knows, birds have begun to sing, they must have been hidden somewhere and suddenly decided to emerge into the light, perhaps because the wheat field is ripening and needs harvesting. Then the man locked the ship's wheel and went down to the field with a sickle in his hand, and when he had cut down the first few ears, he saw a shadow beside his shadow. He woke up with his arms about the cleaning woman, and her arms about him, their bodies and their bunks fused into one, so that no one can tell any more if this is port or starboard. Then, as soon as the sun had risen, the man and the woman went to paint in white letters on both sides of the prow the name that the caravel still lacked. Around midday, with the tide, The Unknown Island finally set to sea, in search of itself.







All the Names

Translated from the Portuguese
by Margaret Jull Costa

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For Pilar

You know the name you were given,
you do not know the name that you have.

The Book of Certainties

Above the door frame is a long, narrow plaque of enamelled metal. The black letters set against a white background say Central Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths. Here and there the enamel is cracked and chipped. The door is an old door, the most recent layer of brown paint is beginning to peel, and the exposed grain of the wood is reminiscent of a striped pelt. There are five windows along the facade. As soon as you cross the threshold, you notice the smell of old paper. It's true that not a day passes without new pieces of paper entering the Central Registry, papers referring to individuals of the male sex and of the female sex who continue to be born in the outside world, but the smell never changes, in the first place, because the fate of all paper, from the moment it leaves the factory, is to begin to grow old, in the second place, because on the older pieces of paper, but often on the new paper too, not a day passes without someone's inscribing it with the causes of death and the respective places and dates, each contributing its own particular smells, not always offensive to the olfactory mucous membrane, a case in point being the aromatic effluvia which, from time to time, waft lightly through the Central Registry, and which the more discriminating noses identify as a perfume that is half rose and half chrysanthemum.

Immediately beyond the main entrance is a tall, glazed double door, through which one passes into the enormous rectangular room where the employees work, separated from the public by a long counter that seamlessly joins the two side walls, except for a movable leaf at one end that allows people in and out. The room is arranged, naturally enough, according to a hierarchy, but since, as one would expect, it is harmonious from that point of view, it is also harmonious from the geometrical point of view, which just goes to show that there is no insurmountable contradiction between aesthetics and authority. The first row of desks, parallel with the counter, is occupied by the eight clerks whose job it is to deal with the general public. Behind them is a row of four desks, again arranged symmetrically on either side of an axis that might be extended from the main entrance until it disappears into the rear, into the dark depths of the building. These desks belong to the senior clerks. Beyond the senior clerks can be seen the deputy registrars, of whom there are two. Finally, isolated and alone, as is only right and proper, sits the Registrar, who is normally addressed as "Sir."

The distribution of tasks among the various employees follows a simple rule, which is that the duty of the members of each category is to do as much work as they possibly can, so that only a small part of that work need be passed to the category above. This means that the clerks are obliged to work without cease from morning to night, whereas the senior clerks do so only now and then, the deputies very rarely, and the Registrar almost never. The continual state of agitation of the eight clerks in the front row, who have no sooner sat down than they get up again, and are always rushing from their desk to the counter, from the counter to the card indexes, from the card indexes to the archives, tirelessly repeating this and other sequences and combinations to the blank indifference of their superiors, both immediate and distant, is an indispensable factor in understanding how it was possible, indeed shamefully easy, to commit the abuses,

irregularities and forgeries that constitute the main business of this story.

In order not to lose the thread in such an important matter, it might be a good idea to begin by establishing where the card indexes and the archives are kept and how they work. They are divided, structurally and essentially, or, put more simply, according to the law of nature, into two large areas, the archives and card indexes of the dead and the card indexes and archives of the living. The papers pertaining to those no longer alive are to be found in a more or less organised state in the rear of the building, the back wall of which, from time to time, has to be demolished and rebuilt some yards farther on as a consequence of the unstoppable rise in the number of the deceased. Obviously, the difficulties involved in accommodating the living, although problematic, bearing in mind that people are constantly being born, are far less pressing, and, up until now, have been resolved in a reasonably satisfactory manner either by recourse to the physical compression of the individual files placed horizontally along the shelves, in the case of the archives, or by the use of thin and ultra-thin index cards, in the case of the card indexes. Despite the difficulty with the back wall mentioned above, the foresight of the original architects of the Central Registry is worthy of the highest praise, for they proposed and defended, in opposition to the conservative opinions of certain mean-minded, reactionary individuals, the installation of five massive floor-to-ceiling shelves placed immediately behind the clerks, the central bank of shelves being set farther back, one end almost touching the Registrar's large chair, the ends of the two sets of shelves along the side walls nearly flush with the counter, and the other two located, so to speak, amidships. Considered monumental and superhuman by everyone who sees them these constructions extend far into the interior of the building, farther than the eye can see, and at a certain point darkness takes over the lights being turned on only when file has to be consulted. These are the shelves that carry the weight of the living. The dead, or, rather, their papers, are located still farther inside, in somewhat worse conditions than respect should allow, which is why it is so difficult to find anything when a relative, a notary or some agent of the law comes to the Central Registry to request certificates or copies of documents from other eras. The disorganisation in this part of the archive is caused and aggravated by the fact that it is precisely those people who died longest ago who are nearest to what is referred to as the active area, following immediately on the living, and constituting, according to the Registrar's intelligent definition, a double dead weight, given that only very rarely does anyone take an interest in them, only very infrequently does some eccentric seeker after historical trifles appear. Unless one day it should be decided to separate the dead from the living and build a new registry elsewhere for the exclusive use of the dead, there is no solution to the situation, as became clear when one of the deputies had the unfortunate idea of suggesting that the archive of the dead should be arranged the other way around, with the remotest placed farthest away and the more recent nearer, in order to facilitate access, the bureaucratic words are his, to the newly deceased, who, as everyone knows, are the writers of wills, the providers of legacies, and therefore the easy objects of disputes and arguments while their body is still warm. The Registrar mockingly approved the idea, on condition that the proposer

should himself be the one responsible, day after day, for heaving towards the back of the building the gigantic mass of individual files pertaining to the long since dead, in order that the more recently deceased could begin filling up the space thus recovered. In an attempt to wipe out all memory of his ill-fated, unworkable idea, and also to distract himself from his own humiliation, the deputy felt that his best recourse was to ask the clerks to pass him some of their work, thus offending against the historic peace of the hierarchy above as much as below. After this episode, the state of neglect grew, dereliction prospered, uncertainty multiplied, so much so that one day, months after the deputy's absurd proposal, a researcher became lost in the labyrinthine catacombs of the archive of the dead, having come to the Central Registry in order to carry out some genealogical research he had been commissioned to undertake. He was discovered, almost miraculously, after a week, starving, thirsty, exhausted, delirious, having survived thanks to the desperate measure of ingesting enormous quantities of old documents which neither lingered in the stomach nor nourished, since they melted in the mouth without requiring any chewing. The head of the Central Registry, who, having given the man up for dead, had already ordered the imprudent historian's record card and file to be brought to his desk, decided to turn a blind eye to the damage, officially attributed to mice, and immediately issued an internal order making it obligatory, at the risk of incurring a fine and a suspension of salary, for everyone going into the archive of the dead to make use of Ariadne's thread.

It would, however, be unfair to forget the problems of the living. It has long been known that death, either through innate incompetence or a duplicity acquired through experience, does not choose its victim according to length of life, a fact which, moreover, let it be said in passing, and if one is to believe the words of the innumerable philosophical and religious authorities who have pronounced on the subject, has, indirectly and by different and sometimes contradictory routes, had a paradoxical effect on human beings, and has produced in them an intellectual sublimation of their natural fear of dying. But, returning to the matter at hand, no one could ever accuse death of having left behind in the world some forgotten old man of no particular merit and for no apparent reason merely for him to grow ever older. We all know that, however long old people may last, their hour will always come. Not a day passes without the clerks' having to take down files from the shelves of the living in order to carry them to the shelves at the rear, not a day passes without their having to push towards the end of the shelves those that remain, although sometimes, by some ironic caprice of enigmatic fate, only until the following day. According to the so-called natural order of things, reaching the farthest end of the shelf means that fate has grown weary, that there is not much more road to be travelled. The end of the shelf is, in every sense, the beginning of the fall. However, there are files which, for some unknown reason, hover on the very edge of the void, impervious to that final vertigo, for years and years beyond what is conventionally deemed to be a sensible length for a human life. At first those files excite the professional curiosity of the clerks, but soon a feeling of impatience begins to stir in them, as if the shameless obstinacy of these Methuselahs were reducing, eating and devouring their own

life prospects. These superstitious clerks are not entirely wrong, if we bear in mind the many cases of employees at every level whose files had to be prematurely withdrawn from the archive of the living, while the covers of the files of those obstinate survivors grew yellower and yellower, until they became dark, inaesthetic stains at the end of a shelf, an offence to the public eye. That is when the Registrar says to one of the clerks, Senhor José, replace those covers for me, will you. '

Apart from his first name, José, Senhor José also has surnames, very ordinary ones, nothing extravagant, one from his father's side, another from his mother's, as is normal, names legitimately transmitted, as we could confirm in the Register of Births in the Central Registry if the matter justified our interest and if the results of that inquiry repaid the labour of merely confirming what we already know. However, for some unknown reason, assuming it is not simply a response to the very insignificance of the person, when people ask Senhor José what his name is, or when circumstances require him to introduce himself, I'm so-and-so, giving his full name has never got him anywhere, since the people he is talking to only ever retain the first part, José, to which they will later add, or not, depending on the degree of formality or politeness, a courteous or familiar form of address. For, and let us make this quite clear, the "Senhor" is not worth quite what it might at first seem to promise, at least not here in the Central Registry, where the fact that everyone addresses everyone else in the same way, from the Registrar down to the most recently recruited clerk, does not necessarily have the same meaning when applied to the different relationships within the hierarchy, for, in the varying ways that this one short word is spoken, and according to rank or to the mood of the moment, one can observe a whole range of modulations: condescension, irritation, irony, disdain, humility, flattery, a clear demonstration of the extent of expressive potentiality of two brief vocal emissions which, at first glance, in that particular combination, appeared to be saying only one thing. More or less the same happens with the two syllables of José, plus the two syllables of Senhor, when these precede the name. When someone addresses the above-named person either inside the Central Registry or outside it, one will always be able to detect a tone of disdain, irony, irritation or condescension. The caressing, melodious tones of humility and flattery never sang in the ears of the clerk Senhor José, these have never had a place in the chromatic scale of feelings normally shown to him. One should point out, however, that some of these feelings are far more complex than those listed above, which are rather basic and obvious, one-dimensional. When, for example, the Registrar gave the order, Senhor José, change those covers for me, will you, an attentive, finely tuned ear would have recognised in his voice something which, allowing for the apparent contradiction in terms, could be described as authoritarian indifference, that is, a power so sure of itself that it not only completely ignored the person it was speaking to, not even looking at him, but also made absolutely clear that it would not subsequently lower itself to ascertain that the order had been carried out. To reach the topmost shelves, the ones at ceiling height, Senhor José had to use an extremely long ladder and, because, unfortunately for him, he suffered from that troubling nervous imbalance which we commonly call fear of heights, and in order to avoid crashing to the ground, he had no option but to tie himself to the rungs with a strong belt. Down below, it did not occur to any of his colleagues of the same rank, much less his superiors, to look up and see if he was getting on all right. Assuming that he was all right was merely another way of justifying their indifference.

In the beginning, a beginning that went back many centuries, the employees actually lived in the Central Registry. Not inside it, exactly, in corporate promiscuity, but in some

simple, rustic dwellings built outside, along the side walls, like small defenceless chapels clinging to the robust body of the cathedral. The houses had two doors, a normal door that opened onto the street and an additional door, discreet, almost invisible, that opened onto the great nave of the archives, an arrangement which, in those days and indeed for many years, was held to be highly beneficial to the proper functioning of the service, since employees did not have to waste time travelling across the city, nor could they blame the traffic when they signed in late. Apart from these logistical advantages, it was extremely easy to send in the inspectors to find out if they really were ill when they called in sick. Unfortunately, a change in municipal thinking as regards the urban development of the area where the Central Registry was located, meant that these interesting little houses were all pulled down, apart from one, which the proper authorities had decided to preserve as an example of the architecture of a particular period and as a reminder of a system of labour relations which, however much it may pain the fickle judgements of the modern age, also had its good side. It is in this house that Senhor José lives. This was not deliberate, they did not choose him to be the residual repository of a bygone age it may have been a matter of the location of the house, in an out-of-the-way corner that would not disrupt the new plans, so it was neither punishment nor prize, for Senhor José deserved neither one nor the other he was simply allowed to continue living in the house. Anyway, as a sign that the times had changed and to avoid a situation that could easily be interpreted as a privilege the door that opened into the Central Registry was kept permanently closed that is they ordered Senhor José to lock it and told him that he could never go through it again That is why each day even if the most furious of storms is lashing the city, Senhor José has to enter and leave by the main door of the Central Registry just like anyone else. It must be said, however, that his having to obey that principle of equality is a relief to his methodical nature, despite the fact that, in this case, the principle works against him, even though, to tell the truth, he wishes he was not always the one who had to climb the ladder in order to change the covers on the old files, especially since, as we have already mentioned, he suffers from a fear of heights. Senhor José has the laudable modesty of those who do not go around complaining about their various nervous and psychological disorders, real or imagined, and he has probably never mentioned his fear to his colleagues, for if he had, they would spend all their time gazing fearfully up at him when he was perched high on the ladder, afraid that, despite his safety belt, he might lose his footing on the rungs and plummet down on top of them. When Senhor José returns to earth, still feeling somewhat dizzy, but disguising as best he can the last remnants of his vertigo, none of the other officials, neither his immediate colleagues nor his superiors, has any idea of the danger they have been in.

The moment has arrived to explain that, even though he had to go the long way round in order to enter the Central Registry and to return home, Senhor José felt only satisfaction and relief when the communicating door was finally closed. He had never been one for receiving visits from his colleagues in the lunch hour, and on the few occasions when he had been ill enough to stay in bed, he, on his own initiative, had gone

into work and presented himself before the deputy he worked under so that there would be no doubt about his honesty as an employee and so that they would not have to send the medical officer to his bedside. Now that the use of the door was forbidden to him, there was even less likelihood of an unexpected invasion of his domestic privacy, when, for example, he had accidentally left open on the table the project over which he had been labouring for many a long year, namely, his extensive collection of news items about those people in his country who, for good reasons and bad, had become famous. He was not interested in foreigners, however great their renown, for their papers were filed in far-off central registries, assuming that is what they call them there, and would be written in languages he would be unable to decipher, approved by laws he did not know, and he could never reach them, not even by using the longest of ladders. There are people like Senhor Jos´ everywhere, who fill their time, or what they believe to be their spare time, by collecting stamps, coins, medals, vases, postcards, matchboxes, books, clocks, sport shirts, autographs, stones, clay figurines, empty beverage cans, little angels, cacti, opera programmes, lighters, pens, owls, music boxes, bottles, bonsai trees, paintings, mugs, pipes, glass obelisks, ceramic ducks, old toys, carnival masks, and they probably do so out of something that we might call metaphysical angst, perhaps because they cannot bear the idea of chaos being the one ruler of the universe, which is why, using their limited powers and with no divine help, they attempt to impose some order on the world, and for a short while they manage it, but only as long as they are there to defend their collection, because when the day comes when it must be dispersed, and that day always comes, either with their death or when the collector grows weary, everything goes back to its beginnings, everything returns to chaos.

Now, since Senhor Jos´e's obsession is clearly wholly innocent, it's hard to understand why he takes such pains to prevent anyone's ever suspecting that he collects clippings from newspapers and magazines containing news and photos of famous people purely because they are famous, since he doesn't care whether they're politicians or generals, actors or architects, musicians or football players, cyclists or writers, speculators or ballerinas, murderers or bankers, con men or beauty queens. Yet he was not always so secretive. It is true that he never chose to talk about this hobby to the few colleagues whom he trusted, but that was due to his natural reserve, not to a conscious fear that they might ridicule him. His concern with the jealous defence of his privacy came about shortly after the demolition of the other houses in which Central Registry employees had lived, or, to be more exact, after being told that he could no longer use the communicating door. This might just be coincidence, there are, after all, so many coincidences in life, for one cannot see any close or immediate relationship between that fact and a sudden need for secrecy, but it is well known that the human mind very often makes decisions for reasons it clearly does not know, presumably because it does so after having travelled the paths of the mind at such speed that, afterwards, it cannot recognise those paths, let alone find them again. Anyway, whether or not that is the explanation, late one night, while he was at home quietly working on updating his clippings about a bishop, Senhor Jos´e had an illumination that would transform his life. It is possible that a

sudden, more disquieting awareness of the presence of the Central Registry on the other side of the thick wall, the enormous shelves laden with the living and the dead, the small, pale lamp hanging from the ceiling above the Registrars desk, which was lit day and night, the thick shadows filling the aisles between the shelves, the fathomless dark that reigned in the depths of the nave, the solitude, the silence, it may be that all this, in an instant, following the same uncertain mental paths already mentioned, had made him realise that something fundamental was missing from his collection, that is, the origin, the root, the source in other words, the actual birth certificate of these famous people, news of whose public doings he had devoted so much time to collecting. He did not know, for example, the names of the bishop's parents, nor who his godparents had been at baptism nor where exactly he had been born on which street in which building, on which floor and, as for his date of birth, if indeed it happened to appear in one of his clippings, the official register in the Central Registry was the only one that could testify to the truth of that, rather than a random scrap of information in a newspaper, it might not even be right, the journalist might have misheard or copied it down wrongly, the copyeditor might have changed it back, it would not be the first time in the history of the delectation that this had happened. The solution was within his grasp. The reason that the key to the communicating door was still in Senhor José's possession lay in the Registrar's unshakable belief in the absolute weight of his authority, in his certainty that any order uttered by him would be carried out with maximum rigour and scrupulousness, without the risk of capricious consequences or arbitrary digressions on the part of the subordinate who received it. Senhor José would never have thought of using it, he would never have taken it out of the drawer where he had placed it if he had not reached the conclusion that his efforts as a voluntary biographer would be of very little use, objectively speaking, without the inclusion of documentary proof, or a faithful copy, of the existence, not only real but official, of the subjects of those biographies.

Imagine now, if you can, the state of nerves, the excitement with which Senhor José opened the forbidden door for the first time, the shiver that made him pause before going in, as if he had placed his foot on the threshold of a room in which was buried a god whose power, contrary to tradition, came not from his resurrection, but from his having refused to be resurrected. Only dead gods are gods forever. The strange shapes of the shelves laden with papers seemed to burst through the invisible roof and rise up into the black sky, the feeble light above the Registrar's desk was like a remote, stifled star. Although he was familiar with the territory through which he would have to move, Senhor José realised, once he had calmed down sufficiently, that he would need the help of a light if he was to avoid bumping into the furniture, and, more important, in order not to waste too much time in finding the bishop's papers, first the record card and then his personal file. There was a small flashlight in the drawer where he had put the key. He went to get it and then, as if having a light to carry had filled him with new courage, he advanced almost resolutely between the desks to the counter, below which was the extensive card index pertaining to the living. He quickly found the bishop's card and, luckily, the shelf where the bishop's file was kept was within arm's reach. He therefore

had no need to use the ladder, but he wondered fearfully what his life would be like when he had to ascend to the upper regions of the shelves, up there where the black sky began. He opened the cabinet containing the forms, took one of each sort and went back to his house, leaving the communicating door open. Then he sat down and, his hand still shaking, began to copy the identifying data about the bishop onto the blank forms, his name in full, with not a single family name or particular omitted, the date and place of birth, the names of his parents, the names of his godparents, the name of the priest who baptised him, the name of the employee at the Central Registry who had registered his birth, all the names. By the time he had completed this brief task, he was exhausted, his hands were sweating and shudders were running up and down his spine, he knew all too well that he had committed a sin against the esprit de corps of the civil service, indeed nothing so tires a person as having to struggle, not with himself, but with an abstraction. By plundering those papers, he had committed an offence against discipline and ethics, perhaps even against the law. Not because the information contained in them was confidential or secret, they were not, since anyone could go to the Central Registry and ask for copies or certificates of the bishop's documents without explaining why or for what purpose, but because he had broken the hierarchical chain by proceeding without the necessary order or authorisation from a superior. He considered turning back and correcting the irregularity by tearing up or destroying these impertinent copies, handing over the key to the Registrar, Sir, I would not want to be held responsible if anything should go missing from the Central Registry, and, having done that, forget what can only be described as the sublime moments he had just lived through. However, what prevailed was the pride and satisfaction he felt at now knowing everything, that was the word he used, Everything, about the bishop's life. He looked at the cupboard where he kept the boxes with his collections of clippings and smiled with inner delight, thinking of the work that lay ahead of him, the nighttime sallies, the orderly gathering of record cards and files, the copies made in his best handwriting, he felt so happy that he was not even cowed by the thought that he would have to climb the ladder. He returned to the Central Registry and restored the bishop's papers to their rightful places. Then, with a feeling of confidence that he had never before experienced in his entire life, he shone the flashlight around him, as if finally taking possession of something that had always belonged to him but that he had only now been able to recognise as his. He stopped for a moment to look at the Registrar's desk, haloed by the wan light falling from above, yes, that was what he should do, he should go and sit in that chair, and from now on, he would be the true master of the archives, and only he, if he wanted to, forced as he was to spend his days here, could also choose to spend his nights here, the sun and the moon turning tirelessly around the Central Registry both the world and the centre of the world When we announce the beginning of something, we always speak of the first day, when one should really speak of the first night, the night is a condition of the day, night would be eternal if there were no night. Senhor José is sitting in the Registrar's chair and he will stay there until dawn, listening to the faint rustle of the papers of the living above the compact silence of the dead When the street lamps went off and the five windows above the main door turned the colour of dark ash, he got up from the chair and went into his house,

closing the communicating door behind him. He washed, shaved, had some breakfast, filed away the bishop's papers, put on his best suit, and when it was time, he went out through the other door, the street door, walked around the building and went into the Central Registry. None of his colleagues noticed who had arrived, they responded to his greeting as they always did, Good morning, Senhor José, they said and they did not know to whom they were speaking.

Fortunately, there are not that many famous people. As we have seen, even using such eclectic, generous criteria of selection and representation as those employed by Senhor José, it is not easy, especially when one is dealing with a small country, to come up with a good hundred truly famous people without falling into the familiar laxness of anthologies of the one hundred best love sonnets or the one hundred most touching elegies, which so often leave us feeling perfectly justified in suspecting that the last to be chosen are only there to make up the numbers. Considered in its entirety, Senhor José's collection far exceeded one hundred, but, for him, as for the compiler of anthologies of elegies and sonnets, the number one hundred was a frontier, a limit, a *ne plus ultra*, or, to put it in ordinary language, like a litre bottle which, however hard you try, will never hold more than a litre of liquid. According to this way of thinking, the relative nature of fame could, we believe, be best described as "dynamic," since Senhor José's collection, necessarily divided into two parts, on the one hand, the hundred most famous people, on the other, those who have not quite got that far, is in constant movement in that area which we normally refer to as the frontier. Fame, alas, is a breeze that both comes and goes, it is a weather vane that turns both to the north and to the south, and just as a person might pass from anonymity to celebrity without ever understanding why, it is equally common for that person, after preening himself in the warm public glow, to end up not even knowing his own name. If one applies these sad truths to Senhor José's collection, one will see that it, too, contains glorious rises and dramatic falls, one person will have left the group of substitutes and entered the ranks, another will no longer fit in the bottle and will have to be disposed of. Senhor José's collection is very much like life.

Working with determination, sometimes long into the night until dawn, with the foreseeable negative consequences on the level of productivity he was obliged to reach in his normal work as a clerk, it took Senhor José less than two weeks to collect and transcribe the original data into the individual files of the one hundred most famous people in his collection. He experienced moments of indescribable panic each time he had to perch on the topmost rung of the ladder in order to reach the upper shelves, where, as if his suffering from vertigo were not enough, it seemed that every spider in the Central Registry had decided to go and weave the densest, dustiest, most entangling webs that ever brushed a human face. Repugnance, or, put more crudely, fear, made him wave his arms about wildly to free himself from that repellent touch, it was just as well that he was tied firmly to the rungs with his belt, but there were occasions when both he and the ladder came close to tumbling down, dragging with them a cloud of ancient dust and a triumphal rain of papers. In one such moment of affliction he even went so far as to consider detaching the belt and accepting the risk of an unbroken fall, this happened when he imagined the shame that would forever stain his name and memory if his boss should come in one morning and discover Senhor José caught between two shelves, dead, his head cracked open and his brains spilling out, ridiculously bound to the ladder by a belt. Then it occurred to him that untying the belt would save him from ridicule, but not from death, and that it was not, therefore, worth it. Struggling against the fearful nature with which he came into the world, and despite the fact that he had to carry out

the work in near-darkness, towards the end of the task he managed to create and perfect a technique of locating and manipulating the files which allowed him to extract the documents he needed in a matter of seconds. The first time that he had the courage not to use the belt it was as if an immortal victory had been inscribed in his very modest curriculum vitae as clerk. He felt exhausted, in need of sleep, he had butterflies in the pit of his stomach, but he was happier than he had ever been in his entire life when the celebrity classified as number one hundred, now fully identified in accordance with all the rules of the Central Registry, took his place in the corresponding box, Senhor José thought then that, after such a great effort, he needed a bit of rest, and since the weekend began the following day, he decided to postpone until Monday the next phase of work, which involved giving full civil status to the forty or so famous people still waiting in the rearguard. He never dreamed that something more serious than simply falling from a ladder was about to happen to him. As a result of a fall he might have lost his life, which would doubtless have a certain importance from a statistical and personal point of view, but what, we ask, if that life were instead to remain biologically the same, that is, the same being, the same cells, the same features, the same stature, the same apparent way of looking, seeing and noticing, and, without the change even being registered statistically, what if that life became another life, and that person a different person.

He found it very hard to bear the abnormal slowness with which those two days dragged past, Saturday and Sunday seemed to him to last forever. He passed the time making clippings from newspapers and magazines, occasionally he opened the communicating door to contemplate the Central Registry in all its silent majesty. He felt that he was enjoying his work more than ever, for it allowed him to penetrate into the private lives of all those famous people, to know, for example, things that some went to great lengths to hide, for example, being the daughter of an unknown father or mother, or of unknown parentage, which was the case in one instance, or saying that they were from the capital of a district or province when in fact they had been born in some godforsaken village at a crossroads with a barbarous-sounding name, or even in a place that simply stank of manure and cowpens and barely deserved a name at all. With such thoughts, and others of a similarly sceptical cast, Senhor José arrived at Monday having just about recovered from the tremendous efforts he had made, and, despite the inevitable nervous tension caused by a permanent conflict between desire and fear, still determined to make further nocturnal excursions and further bold ascents. The day, however, began on a sour note. The deputy who was in charge of stores told the Registrar that, during the last two weeks, he had noticed that the number of record cards and file covers being used had risen considerably, and even taking into consideration the average number of administrative errors committed while filling them in, that number bore no relation to the number of new births registered. The Registrar wanted to know what measures the deputy had taken to discover the reasons for this strange increase in consumption and what other measures he intended taking to prevent its happening again. The deputy explained discreetly that he had taken no measures as yet, that he had not even allowed himself to have an idea, still less begin an initiative, without first

explaining the matter to his superior for his consideration, as he was doing at that very moment. The Registrar replied in his usual brusque way, Now that you've explained, you can act, and I want to hear no more of the matter. The deputy returned to his desk in order to think and, after an hour he returned to his boss with the draft of an internal memorandum, according to which the cabinet containing the forms would remain under lock and key, the key to remain permanently in his possession, as the person in charge of stores. The Registrar signed it and the deputy made a great show of locking the cabinet so that everyone would notice the change, and Senhor José, after his initial fright, breathed a sigh of relief because he had at least managed to complete the work on the most important part of his collection. He tried to remember how many record cards he had in reserve at home, twelve, perhaps fifteen. It wasn't that disastrous. When they ran out, he would copy onto ordinary paper the thirty that remained, the loss would only be an aesthetic one, You can't have everything, he thought to console himself.

As a possible pilferer of those forms, there was no reason why he should be considered any more suspicious than his other colleagues of the same rank, since only the clerks filled in the cards and the file covers, but all day Senhor José's fragile nerves made him fearful that the tremors of his guilty conscience might be seen and noticed from the outside. Despite this, he acquitted himself very well in the interrogation to which he was submitted. Adjusting his face and voice to suit the situation, he stated that he was always most scrupulous in his use of the forms, in the first place, because that was the way he was by nature, but above all, because he was conscious, at every moment, that the paper used in the Central Registry was paid for by public taxes, paid for over and over with the hard-earned money of taxpayers, and that he, as a responsible civil servant, had a strict duty to respect that and to make their money last. His declaration was well received by his superiors both for its form and for its content, so much so that the colleagues who were subsequently called for questioning repeated it with only minimal modifications of style, but it was thanks to the universal, tacit belief, inculcated in the staff over time by their chief's own peculiar personality, that, whatever happened, nothing in the Central Registry could be allowed to go against the interests of work, that no one even noticed that Senhor José had never uttered so many words consecutively since he had first started work there many years before. Had the deputy been versed in the investigatory methods of applied psychology, before you could say boo, Senhor José's deceitful speech would have collapsed around him, like a house of cards in which the king of spades had lost his footing, or like a vertigo sufferer on a ladder when that ladder is shaken. Fearful that, on reflection, the deputy in charge of the inquiry might suspect there was something fishy going on, Senhor José decided that to avoid further trouble he would stay home that night. He would not move from his corner, he would not go into the Central Registry, not even if someone were to promise him the extraordinary good fortune of discovering the document everyone has been looking for since the world began, nothing more nor less than the birth certificate of God. The wise man is only wise insofar as he is prudent, they say, and it must be acknowledged that Senhor José, despite recent irregularities in his conduct, did possess a kind of involuntary wisdom, albeit sadly

lacking in precision and definition, the kind of wisdom that appears to have entered the body via the respiratory tract or from too much sun on the head, which is why it is not considered worthy of any particular applause. If prudence now counselled him to withdraw, he, wisely, would listen to the voice of prudence. A one- or two-week stoppage in his investigations would help erase from his face any vestige of fear or anxiety it might otherwise have borne.

After a meagre supper, as was his custom and as dictated by necessity, Senhor José found himself with a whole evening before him and with nothing to do. He managed to pass half an hour leafing through some of the more famous lives in his collection, even adding a few recent clippings, but his thoughts were elsewhere. They were wandering through the darkness of the Central Registry, like a black dog on the trail of the ultimate secret. He began to think that there would be no harm in simply using up the forms he had in reserve, even if there were only three or four of them, just to occupy some of the night and to be able to sleep peacefully afterwards. Prudence tried to hold him back, to grip him by the sleeve, but, as everyone knows, or should know, prudence is only of any use when it is trying to conserve something in which we are no longer interested, for what harm could it do to open the door, quickly search out three or four record cards, all right, five, a nice round number, but he would leave the files for another occasion and that way he wouldn't have to use the ladder. That was the idea that finally decided him. With the flashlight held in his trembling hand to light his path, he entered the vast cavern of the Central Registry and went over to the card index. He was more nervous than he had thought and kept turning his head this way and that as if afraid he was being observed by thousands of eyes hidden in the darkness of the aisles between the shelves. He had still not got over that morning's shock. As quickly as his anxious fingers would allow, he started opening and closing drawers, looking under the different letters of the alphabet for the cards he needed, making mistake after mistake, until he finally managed to gather together the five most famous people in the second category. Feeling really frightened now, he scurried back home, his heart pounding, like a child who has gone to steal a cake from the pantry and who leaves it pursued by all the monsters of the dark. He slammed the door in their faces and turned the key twice, he didn't even want to think about the fact that he would have to return that same night in order to replace those wretched cards. In an attempt to calm himself down, he took a sip of the brandy he kept for special occasions, both good and bad. In his haste and because he was unused to drinking given that even good and bad had until then, been rare occurrences in his insignificant life, the brandy went down the wrong way, he coughed coughed again almost choked, a poor clerk clutching five record cards, at least he thought there were five, he coughed so hard that he dropped them, and there weren't five, but six, scattered on the floor, as anyone could see and count, one, two, three, four, five, six, one sip of brandy didn't usually have that effect.

When he finally managed to catch his breath, he bent down to pick up the cards, one, two, three, four, five, there was no doubt about it, six, and as he picked them up he

read the names on them, all of them famous, apart from one. In his haste and nervous agitation the intrusive card had got stuck to the one in front, the cards were so thin you barely noticed the difference in thickness. Now however much care and trouble you take over your handwriting, copying out five brief summaries of birth and life is not a long job. After half an hour, Senhor José could bring the evening to a close and again open the door. Reluctantly, he gathered together the six cards and got up from his chair. He did not feel at all like going back into the Central Registry, but there was no alternative, the following morning, the card index had to be complete and in its proper order. If anyone had to consult one of those cards and it was not in its place, the situation could become serious. Suspicion would lead to suspicion, investigation to investigation, and someone would inevitably remark that Senhor José lived right next door to the Central Registry, which, as we all know, does not even enjoy the elementary protection of a night watchman, someone might think to ask what had happened to the key that had never been handed in. What must be, will be, and there's nothing you can do about it, thought Senhor José rather unoriginally, and went over to the door. Halfway there, he suddenly stopped, It's odd, but I can't remember if the extra card belonged to a man or a woman. He turned back, he sat down again, he would thus delay a little longer before obeying the force of what must be. The card belongs to a woman of thirty-six, born in that very city, and there are two entries, one for marriage, the other for divorce. There must be hundreds, if not thousands of such cards in the index system, so it's hard to understand why Senhor José should be looking at it so strangely, in a way which, at first sight, seems intent, but which is also vague and troubled, perhaps this is the look of someone who, without making any conscious choice, is gradually losing his grip on something and has yet to find another handhold. Doubtless some will point out supposed, inadmissible contradictions in terms such as "troubled," "vague" and "intent," but they are people who take life as it comes, people who have never been brought face-to-face with destiny. Senhor José looks and looks again at what is written on the card, the handwriting, needless to say, is not his, it's in an old-fashioned hand, thirty-six years ago another clerk wrote the words you can read here, the name of the baby girl, the names of her parents and godparents, the date and hour of her birth, the street and the number of the apartment where she first saw the light of day and first felt pain, the same beginning as everyone else, the differences, great and small, come later, some of those who are born become entries in encyclopedias, in history books, in biographies, in catalogues, in manuals, in collections of newspaper clippings, the others, roughly speaking, are like a cloud that passes without leaving behind it any trace of its passing, and if rain fell from that cloud it did not even wet the earth. Like me, thought Senhor José. He had a cupboard full of men and women about whom the newspapers wrote almost every day, on the table was the birth certificate of an unknown person, and. it was as if he had placed them both in the pans of a scale, a hundred this side one the other and was surprised to discover that all of them together weighed no more than this one that one hundred equalled one, that one was worth as much as hundred. If someone had gone into his house at that moment and out of the blue asked him My dear sir do you really believe that the one that you are is' also worth the same as a hundred, that the hundred

people in your cupboard to be precise are worth the same as you, he would have replied without hesitation, My dear sir, I'm just a clerk, just an ordinary fifty-year-old clerk, who has never even been promoted to senior clerk, if I thought that I was worth the same as even one of the people in there, or worth the same as any one of the five less famous people, I would never have started my collection, Then why is it that you keep staring at the card of that unknown woman, as if she were suddenly more important than all the others, Precisely, my dear sir, because she is unknown, Oh, come on, the card index in the Central Registry is full of unknown people, But they're in the card index, they're not here, What do you mean, I don't quite know, In that case, forget all these metaphysical thoughts for which your brain doesn't seem particularly well suited, go and put the card back in its place and get a good night's sleep, That's what I hope to do, as I do every night, the tone of his reply was conciliatory, but Senhor José had one more thing to add, As for the metaphysical thoughts, my dear sir, allow me to say that any brain is capable of producing them, it's just that we cannot always find the words.

Contrary to his desire, Senhor José did not have his customary, relatively peaceful night's sleep. He was pursuing through the confused labyrinth of his unmetaphysical head the trail of motives that had led him to copy out the details from the unknown woman's card, and he could not find a single one that could consciously have determined that unexpected action. He could only remember the movement of his left hand picking up a blank card, then his right hand writing, his eyes going from one card to the other, as if, in reality, they were the ones carrying the words from there to here. He also remembered how, to his surprise, he had walked calmly into the Central Registry, the flashlight grasped firmly in his hand, feeling not the least bit nervous or anxious, how he had put the six cards back in their places, how the last had been that of the unknown woman, lit until the last moment by the flashlight beam, then sliding down, disappearing, vanishing between the card bearing the previous letter and the card bearing the subsequent letter, a name on a card, that's all. In the middle of the night, worn out from not sleeping, he turned on the light. Then he got up, put his raincoat on over his underclothes and went and sat at the table. He fell asleep much later, his head resting on his right forearm and his left hand on the copy he had made of the record card.

Senhor José's decision appeared two days later. Generally speaking, we don't talk about a decision appearing to us, people jealously guard both their identity, however vague it might be, and their authority, what little they may have, and prefer to give the impression that they reflected deeply before taking the final step, that they pondered the pros and cons, that they weighed up the possibilities and the alternatives, and that, after intense mental effort, they finally made a decision. It has to be said that things never happen like that. Obviously it would not enter anyone's head to eat without feeling hungry, and hunger does not depend on our will, it comes into being of its own accord, the result of objective bodily needs, it is a physical and chemical problem whose solution, in a more or less satisfactory way, will be found in the contents of a plate. Even such a simple act as going down into the street to buy a newspaper presupposes not only a desire to receive news, which, since it is a desire, is necessarily an appetite, the effect of specific physico-chemical activities in the body, albeit of a different nature, that routine act also presupposes, for example, the unconscious certainty, belief or hope that the delivery van was not late or that the newspaper stand is not closed due to illness or to the voluntary absence of the proprietor. Moreover, if we persist in stating that we are the ones who make our decisions, then we would have to begin to explain, to discern, to distinguish, who it is in us who made the decision and who subsequently carried it out, impossible operations by anyone's standards. Strictly speaking, we do not make decisions, decisions make us. The proof can be found in the fact that, though life leads us to carry out the most diverse actions one after the other, we do not prelude each one with a period of reflection, evaluation and calculation, and only then declare ourselves able to decide if we will go out to lunch or buy a newspaper or look for the unknown woman.

It is for these reasons that, even if we were to submit him to the closest of cross-questionings, Senhor José would be at a loss to explain how and why the decision made him, let's hear the explanation he would give, All I know is that it was Wednesday night and I was at home, feeling so tired I couldn't even face having any supper, my head still spinning after all day spent at the top of that wretched ladder, my boss should realise I'm too old for such acrobatics, that I'm not a slip of a boy anymore, not to mention my problem, What problem, I suffer from giddiness, vertigo, fear of falling, whatever you want to call it, You've never complained about it, No, I don't like to complain, That's very considerate of you, go on, Well, I was considering getting into bed, no, I tell a lie, I'd just taken off my shoes, when suddenly I made a decision, If you made a decision, do you know why you made it, I don't think I did make it, the decision made me, Normal people make decisions, they're not made by their decisions, Until that Wednesday night that's what I thought too, What happened on that Wednesday night, What I'm telling you now, I had the unknown woman's record card on my bedside table and I started looking at it as if for the first time, But you'd looked at it before, At home I'd done little else since Monday, So you were mulling over the decision, Or it was mulling over me, Now don't start that again, Anyway, I put my shoes back on, pulled on my jacket and my raincoat and I went out, I didn't even remember to put on a tie, What time was it, About half past

ten, Where did you go, To the street where the unknown woman was born, With what intention, I wanted to see the place, the building, the house, So you're finally ready to admit that there was a decision and that it was, as it should have been, made by you, No, sir, I merely became aware of it, For a mere clerk you certainly know how to argue, Generally speaking, clerks go unnoticed, people underestimate them, Go on, There was the building, there was a light on in the windows, You mean the house where the woman was born, Yes, What did you do next, I stayed there for a few minutes, Looking, Yes, sir, looking, Just looking, Yes, sir, just looking, And then, Then, nothing, You didn't knock on the door, you didn't go up, you didn't ask questions, Certainly not, it didn't even occur to me to do so at that hour of the night, What time was it, By then, it must have been about half past eleven, You walked there, Yes, sir, And how did you come back, I walked, You mean, there were no witnesses, What witnesses, The person who would have opened the door if you'd gone up, or the driver of a tram or a bus, for example, And what would they have been witnesses to, To the fact that you really did go to the street of the unknown woman, And what use would those witnesses be, They could prove that all this wasn't just a dream, I've told you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, I'm under oath, my word should be enough, It should be, perhaps, if it wasn't for one very telling detail, incongruous if you like, What detail, The tie, What's my tie got to do with it, A clerk from the Central Registry never goes anywhere without his tie on, it's impossible, it's against nature, As I've already told you, I wasn't myself, I was in the grip of a decision, That's just further proof that it was a dream, I don't see why, The choice is simple if you admit that you made a decision, just like everyone else, then I'm prepared to believe that you went to the street of the unknown woman without a tie on, a disgraceful deviation from professional conduct which I choose not to examine just now, or else you continue to say that you were made by the decision, and that that, as well as the unavoidable matter of the tie, could only possibly occur in a dream state, I say again that I did not make a decision, I looked at the card, I put on my shoes and I went out, So you dreamed it, No, I didn't dream it, You lay down, went to sleep and dreamed that you went to the street of the unknown woman, I can describe the street to you, You would have to prove to me that you had never been there before, I can tell you what the building's like, Come now, all buildings are grey in the dark, They usually say that about cats, It's the same with buildings, So you don't believe me, No, Why, if you don't mind my asking, Because what you say you did doesn't fit with my reality and what doesn't fit with my reality doesn't exist, The body that dreams is real, therefore, unless there's some higher authority on the subject, the dream the body is dreaming must be real too, A dream only has reality as a dream, You mean my only reality was a dream, Yes, that was the only reality experienced by you, Can I go back to work now, You can, but prepare yourself, because we still have to deal with the matter of the tie.

Having acquitted himself well in the administrative inquiry into the disappeared forms, Senhor José, in order not to lose the dialectical ground he had won, invented in his mind the fantasy of this new dialogue, from which, despite the ironic, threatening tone of his opponent, he emerged the easy winner, as a second, more attentive reading will

prove. And he did so with such conviction that he was even able to tell to himself and to maintain the lie with no sense of remorse, as if he would not be the first to know that he had in fact gone into the building and up the stairs, that he had put his ear to the door of the house where, according to the card, the unknown woman had been born. It's true that he did not dare ring the bell, he had told the truth about that, but he had remained for a few moments in the darkness of the landing, motionless, tense, trying to decipher the noises coming from within, so curious that he almost forgot his fear of being discovered and mistaken for a burglar. He could hear the squalling of a little baby, It must be her child, the gentle murmur of a woman rocking her baby, It must be her, then a man's voice said from the other side of the door, Doesn't that child ever shut up, Senhor José's heart skipped a beat out of sheer fear, what if the door were to open, as it very well might, perhaps the man was just about to go out, Who are you, what do you want, he would ask, What should I do now, Senhor José asked himself, poor thing, he didn't do anything, he stayed there, paralysed, defenceless, but he was in luck because the child's father did not share the old masculine habit of going out to the café after supper to chat with his friends. Then, when the only thing to be heard was the child's crying, Senhor José made his way slowly down the stairs, without putting on the light, gently sliding his left hand along the wall so as not to stumble, the curves of the bannister were too tight, at one point, he was almost overwhelmed by a wave of terror when he considered what would happen if another person, silent, invisible, were at that moment coming up the stairs, sliding his right hand along the wall, they would be certain to collide, the other man's head thudding into his chest, that would be even worse than being at the top of the ladder and having a spider's web tickle his face, it might be someone from the Central Registry who had followed him there in order to catch him in flagrante and thus be able to add to the disciplinary procedure which was doubtless already under way the incriminating, unanswerable piece of evidence that was still lacking When Senhor José finally reached the street his legs were trembling, sweat was dripping from his brow, Honestly, I'm a bundle of nerves he said to himself angrily. Then, absurdly, as if his brain had suddenly run out of control and gone shooting off in all directions as if time had collapsed everything, backwards and forwards compressing everything into one compact moment, he thought that the child whom he had heard crying behind the door was, thirty-six years before, the unknown woman, that he himself was a boy of fourteen with no reason to go looking for anyone, much less at that time of night. Standing on the pavement, he looked at the street as if he had never seen it before, thirty-six years ago the street lamps shone more dimly, the road wasn't tarmacked, it was cobbled, the sign over the corner shop said it was a shoe shop, not a fast-food place. Time moved, began to expand slowly, then faster, it seemed to buck violently, as if it were inside an egg struggling to get out, the roads succeeded one another, became superimposed, the buildings appeared and disappeared, they changed colour, shape, everything was jockeying anxiously for position before the light of day came to change it all back. Time started counting the days from the very beginning, using a multiplication table to make up for the delay, and it did this so accurately that Senhor José was once again fifty years old when he reached home. As for the tearful child, it was only an hour older, which just

goes to show that even though the clock would like to convince US otherwise, time is not the same for everyone.

Senhor José had yet another difficult night to add to other recent nights that had been no better. Meanwhile, despite the intense emotions experienced during his brief nocturnal excursion, he had just pulled the top part of the sheet over his ears, as was his custom, and had already fallen into a sleep which, at first glance, any other person would have described as deep and restful, when he was jerked into wakefulness again, as if some disrespectful, inconsiderate person had shaken him by the shoulder. He was woken by an unexpected idea that erupted into the middle of his sleep in such a devastating fashion that there wasn't even time for a dream to become woven about it, the idea that perhaps the unknown woman, the one on the card, was in fact the woman he had heard rocking the child, the one with the impatient husband, in which case his search would have ended, foolishly, at the very point when it should begin. His throat tightened with sudden anxiety, while his beleaguered reason tried to resist, it wanted him not to care, to say, Just as well really, that'll mean less work for me to do, but the anxiety would not let go, it continued to tighten and tighten its grip, and now it was his anxiety asking his reason, What's he going to do if he can't carry out this plan of his, He'll do what he always did, he'll collect newspaper clippings, photographs, news items, interviews, as if nothing had happened, Poor thing, I don't think he'll be able to, Why not, Because anxiety, when it comes, isn't that easy to get rid of, He could choose another record card and go in search of that person instead, Chance doesn't choose, it proposes, it was chance that brought him the unknown woman, and only chance has any say in these matters, There's no shortage of strangers in the files, But he has no reason to choose one rather than another, one in particular, and not just one of many, It doesn't seem a very good rule in life to let yourself be guided by chance, Regardless of whether it's a good rule or not, whether it's convenient or not, it was chance that put that card in his hands, And what if that woman is the same one, If she is, then that was what chance offered, With no further consequences, Who are we to speak of consequences, when out of the interminable line of consequences that come marching ceaselessly towards us we can only ever distinguish the first, Does that mean something could still happen, Not just something, everything, I don't understand, It's only because we live so sunk in ourselves that we don't notice that what is actually happening to us leaves intact, at every moment, what might happen to us, Does that mean that what might happen is constantly being regenerated, It's not only being regenerated, it's multiplying, you just have to compare the events of two consecutive days, I never thought of it like that, These are things known only to the angst-ridden.

As if this conversation had nothing to do with him, Senhor José tossed and turned in bed unable to get back to sleep, If she is the woman on the card, he repeated, if, after all this, she is the same woman, I'll tear up that wretched card and think no more about it. He knew he was merely trying to disguise his disappointment, he knew that he could not bear to return to his usual gestures and thoughts, it was as if he had been on the point of

setting off to discover a mysterious island and, at the last moment, with his foot already on the gangplank, someone had come up to him holding an outspread map, There's no point in your going now, the unknown island you wanted to find is here, look, on latitude so-and-so, longitude such and such, it's got ports and cities, mountains and rivers, all with their names and histories, you'd better just resign yourself to being who you are. But Senhor José did not want to resign himself, he continued to stare out at the horizon that appeared to be lost, and suddenly, as if a black cloud had lifted and allowed the sun to shine through, he realised that the idea which had woken him was misleading, he remembered that there were two entries on the card, one for marriage, the other for divorce, and the woman in that apartment was certainly married, if it was the same woman, there should be another entry on the card for a second marriage, of course, the Central Registry did sometimes make mistakes, but Senhor José preferred not to think about that.

Alleging personal reasons of irresistible force majeure, which he begged leave not to have to explain, bearing in mind, anyway, that in twenty-five years of dutiful and always punctual service, this was the first time he had ever done so, Senhor José asked permission to leave an hour early. In accordance with the regulations governing the complex hierarchical relationships in the Central Registry, he began by making his request to the senior clerk in his wing of the Registry, on whose good or bad mood would depend the terms in which the request was transmitted to the corresponding deputy, who, in turn, by the omission or addition of words, by emphasising one syllable or muting another, could, up to a point, influence the final decision. On this matter, however, there are far more doubts than there are certainties, because the reasons that lead the Registrar to allow or refuse this or other authorisations are known only to him, and because there is no memory or record, in all the years of the Central Registry's existence, of a single report, either written or verbal, giving the necessary background information. It will never be known, therefore, why Senhor José was authorised to leave half an hour earlier instead of a whole hour earlier as he had requested. It is perfectly legitimate to imagine, although it is gratuitous, unverifiable speculation, that first the senior clerk or later the deputy, or both of them together, had pointed out that such a prolonged absence would have a deleterious effect on the service, it is much more likely that the boss had merely decided to take advantage of the occasion to humiliate his subordinates yet again with one of his displays of discretionary authority. Informed of the decision by the senior clerk, to whom it had been transmitted by the deputy, Senhor José calculated the time allowed and concluded that, if he was not to arrive late at his destination, if he did not want to come face-to-face with the man of the house, already back from work, he would have to take a taxi, a luxury almost unknown to him. No one was expecting him, there might not even be anyone home at that hour, but what he wanted to avoid was having to deal with the husband's impatience, it would be far more awkward trying to satisfy the suspicions of a person like that than replying to the questions of a woman with a child in her arms.

No man appeared at the door nor did he hear his voice inside the house, so he must still have been at work or on his way home, and the woman was not carrying the child in her arms. Senhor José realised at once that the unknown woman, whether married or divorced, could not possibly be the one who stood before him. However well preserved she might be, however kind time might have been to her, it would be unnatural for someone with thirty-six years behind her to look less than twenty-five. Senhor José could simply have turned his back, come up with some instant excuse, say, for example, I'm sorry, I made a mistake, I was looking for someone else, but, in one way or another, the end of his Ariadne's thread was there, to use the mythological language of the Central Registry, not forgetting, too, the reasonable probability that other people lived in the house, among whom might be the object of his search, although, as we know, Senhor José's spirit vehemently rejects such a hypothesis. He took the record card out of his pocket, as he said, Good afternoon, madam, Good afternoon, what can I do for you, asked the woman, I work for the Central Registry and I've been charged with

investigating certain doubts that have arisen about the file of a person who we know was born in this house, Neither I nor my husband was born here, only our daughter, and she's only three months old now, I don't suppose it's her, No, of course not, the person I'm looking for is a woman of thirty-six, Well, I'm twenty-seven, You're obviously not the same person then, said Senhor José, and went on, What's your name. The woman told him, he paused to smile, then asked, Have you lived here long, Two years, Did you know the people who lived here before, these people, he read her the name of the unknown woman and the names of her parents, We don't know anything about them, I'm afraid, the apartment was empty, and my husband sorted out the lease with the agent, Is there an older resident in the building, There's a very old lady in the ground-floor apartment on the right, and I've heard people say that she's the oldest resident, It's unlikely she was here thirty-six years ago though, people today move around so much, I couldn't really say, you'd better talk to her, but I have to go now, my husband's about to arrive and he doesn't like to see me talking to strangers, besides, I have to make supper, As I said, I work for the Central Registry, so I'm not really a stranger, and I did come here on official business, I'm very sorry to have troubled you though. Senhor José's wounded tones softened the woman, No, no, it was no trouble, I just meant that if my husband had been here, he would have immediately asked you for your credentials, I can show you my identity card from work, look, Oh right, your name's Senhor José, but when I said credentials I meant some official document giving details of the case you've been charged with investigating, It didn't occur to the Registrar that anyone would be suspicious, Everyone's different, the woman who lives on the ground floor, for example, she doesn't open her door to anyone, I'm different, I like talking to people, Well, I'm very grateful to you for your help, I'm only sorry I can't be of more use to you, On the contrary, you've been a great help, you mentioned the lady downstairs and the matter of the credentials, Well, I'm glad you feel like that about it. The conversation looked set to continue for a few more minutes, but the peace in the house was suddenly interrupted by the crying of a child, who must have woken up, It's your little boy, said Senhor José, It's not a little boy, it's a little girl, I told you before, smiled the woman, and Senhor José smiled too. At that moment, the street door banged and the light on the stairs came on, It's my husband, I recognise the way he comes in the door, whispered the woman, go away and pretend you didn't speak to me. Senhor José did not go down the stairs. Noiselessly, on tiptoe, he went rapidly up to the landing above and stayed there, pressed against the wall, his heart pounding as if he were living through some dangerous adventure, while the young man's firm steps grew louder as they approached. The bell rang, between the opening and shutting of the door he could still hear the baby crying, then a great silence filled the stairwell. After a moment, the light went out. It was only then that Senhor José realised that almost the whole of his dialogue with the woman had taken place in the conspiratorial shadows of the stairway, as if both of them had something to hide, "conspiratorial" was the unexpected word that came into his head, What were we conspiring about, why "conspiratorial," he wondered, the fact is that she hadn't turned the light on again when it went out shortly after they had exchanged their first words. At last, he began to go back down the stairs, cautiously to begin with, then quickly, he

paused only for a moment to listen outside the door of the ground-floor apartment, he could hear a sound inside that must be the radio, he decided not to ring the bell, he would leave that new investigation for the weekend, for Saturday or Sunday, but this time he would not be caught out, he would present himself with his credentials in his hand, invested with a formal authority that no one would dare to question. They would be false credentials, of course, but, they would bear the irresistible force of an official stamp and impress, and they would save him the task of having to dispel suspicions before getting down to business. As for the chief's signature, he felt absolutely no qualms, it was hardly likely that the old lady in the ground-floor apartment would ever have seen the Registrar's signature, whose curlicues, when he thought about it, precisely because of their fantastic, ornamental nature, would not prove particularly difficult to imitate. If all went well this time, as it was bound to, he would continue to make use of the document whenever he encountered or foresaw difficulties in future investigations, because he was sure that his search would not end in that ground-floor apartment. Even if the woman had been there when the unknown woman's family had lived in the building, they might not have known each other, in the old lady's weary memory, it might all come down to a few vague recollections, it would depend on how many years had passed since the family on the second floor had moved somewhere else in the city. Or somewhere else in the country or even the world, he thought anxiously, once he was out in the street again. Wherever the famous people in his collection went, they always had a newspaper or a magazine following in their tracks and sniffing around them for just one more photograph, one more question, but nobody wants to know about ordinary people, no one is really interested in them, no one cares what they're up to, what they think, what they feel, even when they try to make you believe otherwise, it's all pretence. If the unknown woman had gone to live abroad, she would be beyond his reach, she might as well be dead. Full stop end of the story murmured Senhor José then he thought, that might not be the case, for when she departed! she would at least have left a life behind her, perhaps only a brief life four years five almost nothing or fifteen or twenty a meeting, an infatuation, a disappointment, a few smiles, a few tears, which seem, at first sight, the same for everyone but which are, in fact, different for us all. And different each time too. I'll go as far as I can, concluded Senhor José, with unaccustomed serenity. As if this were the logical conclusion to what he had thought, he went into a stationer's and bought a thick notebook with lined pages, like the ones students use to make notes on their school subjects, believing that they are actually learning them as they do so.

It didn't take him long to forge some credentials. Twenty-five years of daily calligraphic practice beneath the vigilance of zealous senior clerks and demanding deputies had left him with complete mastery of fingers, wrist and palm, absolute confidence in executing both curved lines and straight, an almost instinctive feel for thick and thin strokes, a consummate awareness of the degree of fluidity and viscosity of various inks, which, put to the test on this occasion, resulted in a document capable of resisting the scrutiny of the most powerful of magnifying lenses. The only incriminating features were his fingerprints and the invisible traces of sweat that clung to the paper,

but the likelihood of either of these being examined was, of course, negligible. The most competent graphologist called to testify would swear that the document in question was written by the Registrar himself and was as authentic as if it had been written in the presence of appropriate witnesses. In support of his worthy colleague's opinion, a psychologist would add that the content of the letter, the style and the vocabulary offer ample proof that its author is an extremely authoritarian person, with a harsh, inflexible, secretive nature, convinced of the Tightness of his own views, scornful of other people's opinions, as even a child would conclude from reading the text, which says, In the name of the authority conferred on me and which, under oath, I uphold, apply and defend, I, as Registrar of the Central Registry, declare to all those, be they civil or military, private or public, who might see, read and examine this letter written and signed by my own hand, that Senhor so-and-so, a clerk in my service and in the service of the Central Registry which I direct, govern and administer, has received directly from me the order and commission to find out and investigate everything regarding the life, past, present and future, of so-and-so, born in this city on such and such a date, daughter of so-and-so and such and such, and it should be recognised, with no further proof being required, that, for the duration of the investigation, he is in possession of the absolute powers which I, in this document and to this end, delegate to him. This is the express wish of the Central Registry and of my own will. So be it. Trembling with fear, having barely managed to read to the end of this impressive bit of paper, the above-mentioned child took refuge on her mother's lap, wondering how a clerk like Senhor José, so timid by nature, so mild in his manners, could possibly have conceived of, imagined, invented this expression of, to say the very least, despotic power, with no previous model to use as a guide, since there is no norm nor was there any technical need for the Central Registry ever to have written such a letter of authority. The frightened child will have to eat a lot of bread and a lot of salt before she begins to learn from life, by then, she will no longer be surprised to discover that, when the occasion arises, even the good can become hard and tyrannical, even if only in order to write a letter of authority, forged or otherwise. They will say to excuse themselves, That wasn't me, I was just writing, acting in the name of someone else, and they are probably just trying to delude themselves, for, in truth, whether visible or not, that hardness and despotism, not to say cruelty, came from within them, not from someone else. Even so, judging what has happened up until now by its effects, it is unlikely that the world will be seriously damaged by Senhor José's intentions and future actions, therefore let us provisionally suspend judgement until other events, more enlightening, in both the good and the bad senses, draw us a definitive portrait.

On Saturday, wearing his best suit, with his shirt washed and ironed, his tie almost matching and more or less correct, the envelope bearing the official seal and containing the letter of authority safe in his inside jacket pocket, Senhor José took a taxi to the door of the house, not in order to gain time, the day was his, but because it looked like rain, and he didn't want to appear before the lady in the ground-floor apartment with rain dripping from his ears, and with the bottoms of his trousers all spattered with mud, running the risk that she would slam the door in his face before he even had a chance to

explain why he was there. It filled him with excitement to imagine how the old lady would receive him, what the effect would be on the old girl, the pejorative term sprang unbidden to his mind, of reading a stern, solemn document like that, some people don't react at all as you would expect, he just hoped she wouldn't be one of them. Perhaps the expressions he had used were too hard and despotic, although verisimilitude demanded that it should be true to both the character and the calligraphy of the Registrar, besides, everyone knows that while it is true that you catch no flies with vinegar, it is no less true that some you can't even catch with honey. We'll see, he sighed. The first thing he saw shortly afterwards, having replied to the insistent questions from within, Who is it, What do you want, Who sent you, What's that got to do with me, was that the lady in the ground-floor apartment was not, after all, as ancient as he had imagined, those bright eyes, that straight nose, those firm, thin lips with no downward curve at the corners, did not belong to an old lady, her great age was noticeable only in the loose skin on her throat, he probably fixed on that because he had already started to notice in himself that unmistakable sign of physical decline, and he was only fifty. The woman would not open the door completely, she said repeatedly that she was not interested in the affairs of her neighbours, a perfectly reasonable response given that Senhor José, taking a wrong tack, had begun by saying that he was looking for someone on the second floor. The confusion seemed to end when he finally mentioned the name of the unknown woman, then the door opened a little more, only to return to its former position, Do you know the lady, asked Senhor José, Yes, I did, said the woman, I'd like to ask you a few questions about her, But who are you, As I already told you, I'm an authorised official from the Central Registry, And how am I supposed to know if that's true or not, I have a signed letter of authority from the Registrar, Look, I'm in my own home and I don't want to be disturbed, I'm afraid you have to cooperate with the Central Registry in cases such as this, What cases, The resolution of certain outstanding matters at the Central Registry, Why don't you go and ask her, We don't have her present address, if you know it, perhaps you could tell me, and I won't need to trouble you any further, It must be about thirty years since I heard from her, She must have been a child then, Yes. With that one word, the woman appeared to consider the conversation at an end, but Senhor José did not give up, he might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. He drew the envelope from his pocket, opened it and, with a slowness that must have seemed threatening, removed the letter, Read it, he ordered. The woman shook her head, No, I won't read it, it's nothing to do with me, If you don't read it, I will return accompanied by the police, and it will be all the worse for you. The woman resigned herself to taking the document he held out to her, she turned on the light in the corridor, put on the glasses she wore hanging round her neck and read it. Then she gave it back to him and standing to one side said You'd better come in they'll probably be listening to us from behind the door over there. Given the implicit alliance that the personal pronoun "us" seemed to represent, Senhor José realised that he had won that round. In a certain indefinable way, this was the first objective victory of his whole life, true it was an extremely fraudulent one, but there are so many people out there preaching that the ends justify the means, who was he to argue. He entered humbly, like a victor whose generosity prevents him from giving in to

the easy temptation of humiliating the vanquished, but who would, nevertheless, appreciate his greatness being noticed.

The woman led him to a small, neat, clean room, decorated according to the taste of a different age. She offered him a chair, sat down herself and, without giving her visitor time to ask any further questions, she said, I was her godmother. Senhor José had expected all kinds of revelations, but not that. He had gone there as a mere civil servant carrying out the orders of his superiors, and therefore without any involvement of a personal nature, at least, that was how the woman sitting opposite him should see him, but only he knew the effort it took not to break into a smile of beatific delight. From his other pocket he drew a copy of the record card, he looked at it for a long time as if memorising all the names on it, then he said, And your husband was the godfather, Yes, Can I speak to him too, I'm a widow, Ah, in that quiet exclamation there was as much genuine relief as there was feigned emotion, that was one less person with whom he would have to do battle. The woman said, We got on well, I mean, the two families, ours and theirs, we were real friends, and when the little girl was born they invited us to be her godparents, How old was the girl when they moved, She was about eight I think, You said a little while ago that it's nearly thirty years since you heard from her, That's right, Could you explain, Shortly after they'd moved I received a letter, Who from, From her, What did she say, Nothing much, it was the kind of letter that a child of no more than eight, with the few words she knows, would write to her godmother, Have you still got it, No, And the parents, did they never write, No, Didn't you find that strange, No, Why, That's a very personal matter, not for general consumption, As far as the Central Registry is concerned there are no personal matters. The woman looked at him hard, Who are you, My letter of authority tells you who I am, It just told me your name, Senhor José, isn't it, That's right, Senhor José, So you can ask me all the questions you want, and I can't ask you any, The only person who can question me is an official of the Central Registry of superior rank, You're a happy man, then, you can keep your secrets, Happiness does not, I believe, consist merely in being able to keep your secrets, Are you happy, It doesn't matter what I am, as I've already told you, only someone higher up in the hierarchy is authorised to ask me questions, Have you got any secrets, I won't answer that, But I have to answer, It's best if you do, What do you want me to tell you, What were these personal matters. The woman drew a hand across her forehead and slowly lowered her lined eyelids, then, without opening her eyes, she said, The girl's mother suspected I was having an affair with her husband, And was that true, It was, it had been going on for a long time, Was that why they moved, Yes. The woman opened her eyes and asked, Do you like my secrets, They're only of interest to me insofar as they have to do with the person I'm looking for, besides, I wasn't authorised to find out anything else, So you don't want to know what happened next, Not officially no, But personally perhaps, I'm not in the habit of prying into other people's lives, said Senhor José, forgetting about the hundred and forty or so that he had in his cupboard, then he added, But probably nothing very extraordinary happened, since you're a widow you say, You've got a good memory, It's a fundamental quality for anyone working at the Central Registry, just to

give you an idea, my boss, for example, knows by heart all the names that exist or ever have existed, all the names and all the surnames, What's the point of that, The Registrar's brain is like a duplicate of the Central Registry, I don't understand, Since he's capable of making every possible combination of name and surname, my boss's brain knows not only the names of all the people who are now alive and of all those who have died, he would also be able to tell you the names of all those who will be born from now until the end of the world, You know more than your boss, Never, beside him I'm nothing, that's why he's the Registrar and I'm just a clerk, You both know my name, That's true, But that's all he knows about me, You're right there, the difference is that he already knew it before, whereas I only knew it after I'd been given this job to do, And in one bound you were ahead of him, here you are in my house, you can see my face, hear me say that I deceived my husband, and, in all these years, you are the only person I've ever told, what more proof do you need that beside you, your boss is an ignoramus, Don't say that, it's not right, Have you any further questions to ask me, What questions, For example, if I was happy in my marriage after what happened, It's irrelevant to the matter in hand, Nothing is irrelevant, just as all the names are in your boss's head, so one person's life is everyone's life, You're very wise, So I should be, I've lived a long time, Compared with you I know nothing and I'm fifty, You'd be amazed how much you learn between fifty and seventy, Is that how old you are, A bit more actually, Were you happy after what happened, So you are interested, It's just that I don't know much about other people's lives, Just like your boss, just like your Central Registry, Yes, I suppose so, Well I was forgiven if that's what you mean Forgiven Yes it often happens forgive one another as they say The usual phrase is love one another It comes to the same thing you forgive each other because you love each other, you. love each other because you forgive each other you're just a child you have a lot to learn So I see Are you married No You've never lived with a woman, No, I couldn't really say I've lived with one, Just passing relationships, temporary Not even that live alone, when I feel the need, I do what everyone else does, I look for a woman and I pay, You do realise that you're answering my questions, Yes, but I don't mind now, perhaps that's how you learn, by answering questions, Now I'm going to tell you something, Go on, I'll begin by asking you if you know how many people there are in a marriage, Two, a man and a woman, No, there are three people in a marriage, there's the woman, there's the man, and there's what I call the third person, the most important, the person who is composed of the man and woman together, I've never thought of that, For example, if one of the two commits adultery, the person who is most hurt, who receives the deepest cut, however incredible it may seem, is not the other person, but that other "other" which is the couple, not one person, but two, And can you really live with that person made up of two people, I have enough trouble living with myself, The most common thing in marriage is to see the man or the woman, or both, each in their own way, trying to destroy the third person that they form together, the one that resists, that wants to survive regardless, The arithmetic's too complicated for me, Get married, find a woman, and then you'll see, Oh, no, it's too late for me, Don't bet on it, who knows what you might find when you reach the end of your mission, or whatever you called it, The doubts I was ordered to clear up are the Central

Registry's doubts not mine, And what doubts are those, if you don't mind my asking, It's a confidential matter, I can't tell you A fat lot of good your confidentiality does you, Senhor José, you'll soon, have to leave and. you'll do so knowing exactly what you knew when you came nothing, That's true, and Senhor José shook his head despondently.

The woman looked at him as if she were studying him, then she asked, How long have you been involved in this investigation, Well, to be honest, I only started today, but the Registrar is going to be furious when I turn up empty-handed, he's a very impatient person, That would be a most unfair way to treat a clerk who, it seems, doesn't mind working on Saturdays, Well, I had nothing else to do, it was a way of catching up on my work, You didn't do much catching up, I'm going to have to think about it, Ask your boss's advice, that's why he's a boss, You don't know him, he doesn't allow people to ask him questions, he just gives the orders, So, what now, Like I said, I'm going to have to think about it, Then think, You really don't know anything, where they went to live when they left here, the letter you received must have had the sender's address on it, it must have, Yes, but that letter doesn't exist anymore, You didn't answer the letter, No, Why, Given the choice between killing something and letting it die, I chose killing, in the figurative sense, of course, It seems I've come to a dead end, Perhaps not, What do you mean, Give me a piece of paper and something to write with. Senhor José passed her a pencil with trembling hands, You can write here, on the back of the card, it's a copy. The woman put on her glasses and scribbled a few words, There you are, it's not their address or anything, it's just the name of the road where the school was that my goddaughter used to go to after they moved, perhaps you'll find out what you need to know there, assuming the school still exists of course. Senhor José's mind was divided between personal gratitude for the favour and official irritation because it had taken so long. He dealt with the gratitude by saying Thank you, and nothing more, and then in a moderate tone, he allowed his irritation to show, I can't understand why you took so long to give me the address of the school, knowing that any information, however insignificant, would be of vital importance to me, Don't exaggerate, Nevertheless, I'm very grateful to you and I say that on my own behalf and on behalf of the Central Registry which I represent, but I insist on knowing why you took so long to give me that address, It's very simple, I don't have anyone to talk to. Senhor José looked at the woman! she looking at him, there's no point wasting words in explaining the expression in their eyes, all that matters is what he managed to say after a silence, Neither do I. Then the woman got up out of her chair, opened the drawer of the sideboard behind her and took out what seemed to be an album, Photographs, thought Senhor José, startled. The woman opened the album and leafed through it, in a few seconds she found what she was looking for, the photograph wasn't stuck in, it was only held in place by four little cardboard corners, Here you are, take it, she said, it's the only one I have of her, just don't ask me if I've got any photographs of the parents, I won't. Senhor José held out a tremulous hand and received a black-and-white photo of a girl of eight or nine, a small, thin, probably pale face, serious eyes beneath eyebrow-length bangs, a mouth trying to smile but failing, and fixed like that. Senhor José, being a sensitive soul, felt his own eyes fill with tears, No one

would think you worked for the Central Registry, said the woman, Well, I do, he said, Would you like a cup of coffee, That would be very nice.

They didn't talk much while they were drinking their coffee and nibbling biscuits, just a few words about how quickly cruel time passed, It passes and we don't even notice, It was morning only a moment ago and now it's nearly dark, in fact, the afternoon was drawing to a close, but perhaps they were talking about life, about their lives, about life in general, that's what happens when we listen to a conversation and don't pay attention, the most important things always escape us. The coffee was finished, the words were finished, Senhor José got up and said, I must be going, thank you for the photograph and the address of the school, the woman said, Well, if you're ever passing this way again, then she accompanied him to the door, he held out his hand, and said, Thank you very much, and like a gentleman from another age, he raised her hand to his lips, it was then that the woman smiled mischievously and said, It might be a good idea to try looking her up in the phone book.

Such was the force of this blow that, once his disoriented feet were out in the street again, it took Senhor José a while to realise that a very fine, almost diaphanous rain was falling on him, the sort of rain that soaks you vertically and horizontally, and from every other angle as well. It might be a good idea to try looking her up in the phone book, the old girl had remarked slyly as they said goodbye, and each of those words, innocent in themselves, incapable of offending even the most susceptible of creatures, was transformed in an instant into an aggressive insult, a proof of insufferable stupidity, as if, throughout that conversation, so rich in emotions after a certain point, she had been observing him coldly and had come to the conclusion that this awkward official sent by the Central Registry to seek out things both distant and hidden was incapable of seeing what was right in front of his eyes and within reach of his hands. Having no hat or umbrella, Senhor José received the fine spray of water directly on his face, the swirling confusion of drops resembling the disagreeable thoughts coming and going inside his head, but all of them, he noticed, were circling round one central point, still barely discernible, but which, little by little, was becoming clearer. It was true that he hadn't even thought of doing something as simple and everyday as consulting the telephone book in order to find out both the telephone number and the address of the person whose name they were listed under. If he wanted to discover the unknown woman's whereabouts, that should have been his first action, in less than a minute he would have found out where she was, then, on the pretext of clearing up some imaginary query in her file at the Central Registry, he could arrange to meet her at her home, saying that he wanted to save her having to pay a bit of tax, for example, and then, immediately afterwards, risking everything with one bold gesture, or days later, when he had gained her confidence, saying to her, Tell me about your life. He hadn't done that, and although he was fairly ignorant of the arts of psychology and the secrets of the unconscious, he was beginning now, with considerable accuracy, to understand why he hadn't. Let's imagine a hunter, he was saying to himself, let's imagine a hunter who has lovingly gathered together his equipment, the rifle, the cartridge belt, the bag of provisions, the canteen of water, the net bag to collect his booty in, his walking shoes, let's imagine him setting out with his dogs, determined, confident, prepared, as one should be on these hunting expeditions, for a long day, and then, as he turns the next corner, he comes across a flock of partridges right by his house, ready and willing to be killed, and although they take flight, however many of them are brought down, they still don't actually fly away, to the delight and surprise of the dogs, who have never in their lives seen manna fall from heaven in such quantities. What interest could such an easy kill have for the hunter, with those partridges offering themselves up, so to speak, to his gun, wondered Senhor José, and he gave the obvious answer, None. That's what has happened to me, he added, inside my head, and probably inside everyone's head, there must be a kind of autonomous thought that thinks for itself, that decides things without the participation of any other thought it is the thought we have known for as long as we have known ourselves and which we address familiarly as "tu," the one that allows itself to be guided by us in order to take us where we think we consciously want to go, but that, in the end, might be being led along an entirely different path, in another direction, and not towards

the nearest corner, where a flock of partridges is waiting for us all unknowing, although we know that it is the search that gives meaning to any find and that one often has to travel a long way in order to arrive at what is near. The clarity of this thought, whether the former or the latter, the special thought or the habitual one, the truth that, once you've arrived, it matters little how you arrived there, was so dazzling that Senhor José stopped, stunned, in the middle of the pavement, wrapped in the misty drizzle and in the light of a street lamp that happened to come on at that very moment. Then, from the depths of a contrite and grateful soul, he regretted the evil, unmerited thoughts, those all too conscious thoughts he had heaped upon the kind old lady in the ground-floor apartment, when in truth he was in her debt, not only for the address of the school and for the photo, but also for the full and perfect explanation of a process that apparently had no explanation. And since she had left hanging in the air that invitation to go back and see her, If you're ever passing this way again, those were her words, clear enough for her not to bother with the rest of the phrase, he promised himself that he would knock on her door again one of these days, both to tell her how his researches were going and to surprise her with the revelation of his real reason for not consulting the phone book. Obviously this would mean having to confess to her that the letter of authority was false, that the search had not been ordered by the Central Registry, but was his own idea and, inevitably, tell her about everything else too. Everything else was his collection of famous people, his fear of heights, the age-blackened documents, the spiders' webs, the monotonous shelves of the living, the chaos of the dead, the frowsty smell, the dust, the despair and finally the record card which for some reason had got stuck to the others, So that it and the name it bore would not be forgotten, The name of the little girl I have with me, he realised, and had not the powdery rain continued to fall from the skies, he would have taken the photo out of his pocket to look at it. If he was ever to describe to anyone what the Central Registry was like inside, it would be to that lady in the ground-floor apartment. Its a matter that only time can resolve, thought Senhor José. At that precise moment, time brought him the bus that would take him near to his house, it was full of drenched people, men and women of various ages and shapes, some young, some old, some younger, some older. The Central Registry knew them all, knew their names, where they had been born and who their parents were, it counted up and counted off their days one by one, that woman, for example, with her eyes closed, the one with her head resting on the window, must be what, thirty-five, thirty-six, that was all Senhor José needed for his imagination to take wing, And what if she's the woman I'm looking for, it wasn't, in fact, impossible, in this life we meet strangers all the time, and you just have to resign yourself to it, we can't go around asking everyone, What's your name, and then produce a record card from our pocket to see if that is the person we want. Two stops later, the woman got off, then she stood on the pavement waiting for the bus to continue its journey, she probably wanted to cross to the other side of the road and, since she wasn't carrying an umbrella, Senhor José could see her face full on despite the tiny raindrops clinging to the bus windows, there was a moment when, perhaps impatient because the bus was taking a while to draw away, she looked up, and that was when her eyes met his. Both he and she stayed like that until the bus set off again, they stayed like

that for as long as they could see each other, Senhor José craning and turning his neck, the woman following his movements from where she was standing, perhaps asking herself, I wonder who that is, he saying to himself, It's her.

It wasn't very far from Senhor José's stop to the Central Registry, a most praiseworthy show of consideration on the part of the transport services for the people who had to go to the Central Registry to deal with various papers, but despite that, Senhor José arrived home soaked from head to foot. He quickly took off his raincoat, changed his trousers, socks and shoes, rubbed his dripping hair with a towel, and, while he was doing all this, continued his interior dialogue, It's her, It's not her, It could be, It could, but it wasn't, But what if it was, You'll know that when you find the woman on the card, If it was her, I'll say we've already met, that we saw each other on the bus, She won't remember, If I find her soon, she's bound to remember, But you don't want to find her soon, perhaps not even later, if you really wanted to you would look up her name in the telephone book, that's where you should start, I forgot, The phone book's in there, I don't feel like going into the Central Registry just now, You're afraid of the dark, Not at all, I know that darkness like the back of my hand, You don't even know the back of your hand, If that's what you think, then just let me wallow in my own ignorance, after all, the birds don't know why they sing, but they still sing, You're very poetic, No, just sad, Hardly surprising considering the life you lead, Imagine the woman on the bus was the woman on the card, imagine I never find her again, that that was the one and only time, that my destiny was there and I let it slip by, You have one way of finding out, What, Do what the old girl in the ground-floor apartment said, Watch your tongue, please, But she is an old girl, She's just getting on a bit, Oh, enough of your hypocrisy, we're all getting on a bit, the question is how much, if it's not much, you're young if it's a lot, you're old, the rest is just idle twaddle, Oh, forget it, All right, Anyway, I'm going to look in the phone book, That's what I've been telling you to do for the last half hour. In pyjamas and slippers and wrapped in a blanket, Senhor José went into the Central Registry. His unusual outfit made him feel rather uneasy, as if he were being disrespectful to the venerable archives, to that eternal yellowish light which, like a moribund sun, hovered above the Registrars desk. The telephone book was there, on one corner of the table, you were not allowed to consult it without permission, even if it was an official call, and now, as he had done before, Senhor José could sit down at the desk, it's true that he had done so only once before, in a peerless moment that had seemed to him triumphant and glorious, but this time he didn't dare, perhaps because he was improperly dressed, out of an absurd fear that someone might surprise him like that, but what other living being, apart from him, wandered about there after hours. He thought it might be best to take the phone book with him, he would feel more comfortable at home, without the threatening presence of those towering shelves that seemed about to hurl themselves down from the shadowy ceiling, up there where the spiders weave and gorge. He shuddered as if the dusty, sticky webs really were falling on him and he very nearly made the rash mistake of picking up the phone book without first taking the precaution of measuring exactly the distances that separated it, above and to the side, from the edge of the table, and not just the

distances, the precise angles too, fortunately, though, the Registrar's geometrical and topographical inclinations showed a clear preference for right angles and parallel lines. He returned home in the certainty that, shortly afterwards, when he replaced the phone book, it would be in exactly the right place, to the millimetre, and that the Registrar would not have to give orders to his deputies to find out who had used it how when and why. Up until the very last moment he was still expecting something to happen that would prevent him from taking the book a murmur, a suspicious creaking, a bright light emerging suddenly out of the mortuary depths of the archives, but there was absolute quiet, not even the sound of the woodworms tiny grinding jaws.

Now, Senhor José, with the blanket round his shoulders, is sitting at his own table, in front of him is the telephone book, he opens it at the beginning and lingers over the instructions, the codes, the price tariffs, as if that were what he was looking for. After a few moments, a sudden, unwitting impulse makes him leaf rapidly through the pages, forwards and backwards, until he stops on the page where the name of the unknown woman should be. Either it isn't there or his eyes won't see it. No, it's not there. It should come after that name, and it doesn't. It should come before that name, and it doesn't. Just as I said, thought Senhor José, and it wasn't true that he had said any such thing, that's just a way of proving oneself right in the eyes of the world, of giving expression, in this case, to joy, any police investigator would have shown his irritation by thumping the table, not Senhor José, Senhor José wears the ironic smile of someone who, having been sent to look for something he knew did not exist, returns from the search with these words on his lips, Just as I said, either she hasn't got a phone or she doesn't want her name to appear in the book He was so pleased that, immediately after that, without bothering to weigh the pros and cons, he looked for the name of the unknown woman's father, and that was there. Not a fibre of his being trembled. On the contrary, determined now to burn all his bridges, drawn on by an impulse known only to the true researcher, he looked for the name of the man. whom the unknown woman had divorced, and he was there too If he had a map of the city he would be able to mark the first five established staging posts, two in the street where the girl in the photo had been born another at the school and now these the beginning of a design made up like that of all lives of broken lines, crossings, intersections, but never bifurcations, because the spirit never goes anywhere without its legs, and the body would be incapable of moving without the wings of the spirit. He noted down the addresses, then what he would need to buy, a large map of the city, a thick piece of cardboard of the same size on which to fix it, a box of pins with coloured heads, red so they could be seen from a distance, for lives are like paintings, you always need to look at them from four paces away, even if one day you manage to touch their skin, catch their smell, taste them. Senhor José was quite calm, he wasn't troubled by the fact that he now knew where the unknown woman's parents and former husband lived, the husband, curiously enough, lived quite close to the Central Registry, obviously, sooner or later, Senhor José would go and knock at their doors, but only when he felt the moment had arrived, only when the moment told him, Now. He closed the phone book, returned it to the boss's desk, to the exact place where he had

taken it from, and he went back home. According to the clock, it was suppertime, but the emotions of the day must have distracted his stomach, which gave no signs of impatience. He sat down again, pulled the blanket around him, tugging at the corners so as to cover his legs, and took up the notebook he had bought at the stationer's. It was time to begin making notes on how the search was going, the people he had met, the conversations he had had, his thoughts, his plans and tactics for an investigation that promised to be complex, The steps taken by someone in search of someone else, he thought, and the truth is, that although the process was only in its early stages, he already had a lot to say, If this were a novel, he murmured as he opened the notebook, the conversation with the lady in the ground-floor apartment would be a chapter in itself. He picked up a pen to begin but stopped halfway his eyes caught the paper on which he had written down the addresses, there was something he hadn't considered before the perfectly plausible hypothesis that the unknown woman, after she got divorced, had gone to live with her parents, the equally possible hypothesis that her husband had left the apartment, leaving the telephone in his name. If that was so, and bearing in mind that the street in question was near the Central Registry, the woman on the bus might well have been the same one. The inner dialogue seemed to want to start up again, It was, It wasn't, It was, It wasn't, but this time, Senhor José paid no heed to it and, bending over the notebook, he began to write the first words, Thus, I went into the building, went up the stairs to the second floor and listened at the door of the apartment where the unknown woman was born, then I heard a little baby crying, it could be her child I thought, and, at the same time, I heard a woman crooning to it softly, It must be her, later, I found out that it wasn't.

Contrary to what people might think when viewing these things from the outside, life is not necessarily easy in a government department, certainly not in this Central Registry of Births, Marriages and Deaths, where, since time which cannot be described as immemorial simply because the Registry contains a record of everything and everyone, thanks to the persistent efforts of an unbroken line of great Registrars, all that is most sublime and most trivial about public office has been brought together, the qualities that make of the civil servant a creature apart, both usufructuary and dependent of the physical and mental space defined by the reach of his pen nib. Put simply, and with a view in this preamble to a more exact understanding of the general facts considered in the abstract, Senhor José has a problem to solve. Knowing how difficult it had been to squeeze out of the rule-bound reluctance of the hierarchy one miserable half hour off, which meant that he was not caught in flagrante by the husband of the young woman in the second-floor apartment, we can imagine his current distress as, night and day, he racks his brain for some convincing excuse that would allow him to ask for not one hour, but two, not two, but three hours, which is probably the amount of time he will need if he is to carry out a useful search of the schools archives. The effects of this constant, obsessive disquiet soon revealed themselves in mistakes at work, in lack of attention, in sudden bouts of drowsiness during the day due to insomnia, in short, Senhor José, until then considered by his various superiors to be a competent, methodical and dedicated civil servant, began to be the object of severe warnings, reprimands and calls to order that only served to confuse him all the more, and, needless to say, the way he was carrying on, he could be absolutely sure of a negative response if, at some point, he could actually bring himself to ask for the longed-for time off. Things reached such a pitch that, after fruitless analysis by senior clerks and deputies in turn, they had no option but to bring the matter to the notice of the Registrar, who, at first, found the whole business so absurd that he could not understand what all the fuss was about. The fact that a civil servant should have so grievously neglected his duties made any benevolent tendency towards reaching an exculpatory decision impossible, it constituted a grave offence against the working traditions of the Central Registry, something that could only be justified by some grave illness. When the delinquent was brought into his presence, that was exactly what the Registrar asked Senhor José, Are you ill, I don't think so, sir, Well, if you're not ill, how do you explain your recent poor standard of work, I don't know, sir, perhaps it's because I haven't been sleeping well, In that case, you are ill, No, it's just that I'm not sleeping very well, If you're not sleeping well, it's because you're ill, a healthy person always sleeps well, unless he has something weighing on his conscience, some reprehensible mistake, the sort that your conscience cannot forgive, for conscience is most important, Yes, sir, If your errors at work are caused by insomnia and if your insomnia is being caused by a guilty conscience, then we have to discover what your mistake was, I haven't made any mistakes, sir, Impossible, the only person here who doesn't make mistakes is me but what's wrong, why are you staring at the telephone book, Sorry, sir, I got distracted, A bad sign, you know perfectly well that you must always look at me when I'm talking to you, it's in the disciplinary regulations, I'm the only one who has the right to look away, Yes, sir, Now what was your mistake, I don't know,

sir, That only makes matters worse, forgotten mistakes are always the worst ones, I've fulfilled all my duties, The information I have regarding your conduct is satisfactory, but that only serves to show that your recent poor professional performance was not the consequence of some forgotten mistake, but of a recent mistake, one you have only just made, My conscience is clear, Consciences keep silent more often than they should, that's why laws were created, Yes, sir, Now I have to make a decision, Yes, sir, Indeed, I already have, Yes, sir, I'm giving you a day's suspension, Is that just a suspension of salary, sir, or is it also a suspension from work, asked Senhor José, seeing a glimmer of hope, Of salary, of course, we can't have work being any more disrupted than it already has been, only a while ago I gave you half an hour off, you surely weren't expecting your bad behaviour to be rewarded with a whole day's leave, No sir, For your sake, I hope this serves as a lesson, and that, in the interests of the Central Registry, you soon go back to being the punctilious worker you always have been up until now, Yes, sir, That's all, you may go back to your desk.

Desperate, close to tears, his nerves in tatters, Senhor José did as he was told. During the few minutes that the difficult conversation with his boss had lasted, the work had piled up on his desk, as if the other clerks, his colleagues, taking advantage of his precarious disciplinary situation, had chosen to punish him on their own account. There were also several people waiting their turn to be served. They were standing before him not by chance nor because they thought, when they came into the Central Registry, that the absent clerk would perhaps be a kinder, more welcoming sort than the others they could see behind the counter, but because the other clerks had told them to go there. Since staff regulations stated that attending to clients had absolute priority over any work you might have on your desk, Senhor José approached the counter, knowing that, behind him, papers would continue to rain down. He was lost. Now, after the Registrar's angry warning and subsequent punishment, even if he were to invent the impossible birth of a child or the dubious death of a relative, he could abandon any hopes he might have had that, in the near future, they would give him permission to leave early or to arrive late, even if it were only a matter of an hour, half an hour, even a minute. In this house of archives, memory is tenacious, slow to forget, so slow that it will never entirely forget anything. Ten years hence, should Senhor José suffer a lapse of concentration, however insignificant, you can be sure that someone will immediately remind him, in detail, of these unfortunate days. Probably that was what the Registrar meant when he said that the worst errors are those that are apparently forgotten. For Senhor José, frantic with work, tormented by thoughts, the rest of the day was utter torture. While one part of his conscious mind was giving clear explanations to members of the public, filling in and stamping documents, filing away record cards, the other part was monotonously cursing the chance or coincidence that had somehow transformed into morbid curiosity something that would not even cause a flicker in the imagination of a sensible, well-balanced person. The boss is right, thought Senhor José, the interests of the Central Registry should come before all else, if I led a proper, normal life, I certainly would not, at my age, have started collecting actors, ballerinas, bishops and football players, it's stupid,

useless, ridiculous, a fine legacy I'll leave when I die, just as well I haven't got anyone to leave it to really, it probably all stems from living alone, now if I had a wife. When he reached this point, his thoughts stopped, then took another route, a narrow, uncertain path, at the start of which he could see the picture of a little girl, at the end of which she would be, if she were there a real person, a grownup woman an adult, thirty-six and divorced, What do I want her for, what would I do with her if I met her. The thought broke off again and abruptly retraced its steps, And how exactly do you think you're going to find her, if they won't give you time off to go and look for her, it asked him, and he didn't reply, at that precise moment he was busy telling the last person in the queue that the death certificate he had asked for would be ready the following day.

Some questions, however, are very determined, they don't give up, and this one returned to the attack when, weary in body, exhausted in spirit, Senhor José finally went home. He had thrown himself down on the bed like a rag, he wanted to sleep, to forget his boss's face, the unfair punishment, but the question came and lay down next to him, insinuating in a whisper, You can't go looking for her, they won't let you, this time it was impossible to pretend he was busy talking to a member of the public, he still tried to ignore it, though, he said he'd have to find a way and that if he didn't, then he would just give up, but the question would not let go, You give in awfully easily, if that's the case, then it wasn't worth forging a letter of authority and making that nice, unhappy lady in the ground-floor apartment talk about her sinful past, it shows a lack of respect for other people visiting their homes like that and probing into their intimate lives. The allusion to the letter made him suddenly sit up on the edge of the bed, frightened. He had it in his jacket pocket, he had been walking around with it all these days, just imagine if for some reason or other he had dropped it, or, with the state his nerves were in, if he had fainted, become unconscious, and one of his colleagues, not with any ill intention, had, as he unbuttoned his jacket to let him breathe, seen the white envelope with the official Central Registry stamp on it, and said, What's this, and then a senior clerk and then a deputy and then the director. Senhor José didn't want to think about what would happen next, he leapt up, went over to his jacket, which was hanging on the back of a chair, took out the letter, and, looking anxiously about him, wondered where the devil he could possibly hide it. None of the furniture could be locked, all his sparse belongings were within easy reach of any interfering busybody who might enter. It was then that he noticed his collections lined up in the wardrobe, there lay the solution to this difficulty. He found the bishop's file and stuck the envelope inside, a bishop never excites much curiosity however pious his reputation, not like a cyclist or a Formula One racing driver. Relieved, he went back to bed, but the question was there waiting for him, You didn't resolve anything, the problem isn't the letter, it makes no difference whether you hide it or show it, that won't lead you to the woman, Look, I said I'll find a way, I doubt it, the boss has got you bound hand and foot, he won't let you take a step, Then I'll wait until things calm down, And then, I don't know, I'll think of something, You could resolve the matter right now, How, You could phone her parents, say that you're phoning on behalf of the Central Registry and ask them to give you her address, I can't do that, Tomorrow you

go to the woman's house, what kind of conversation you'll have I can't imagine, but at least you'll get your peace of mind back, I probably won't want to talk to her when she's there in front of me, Well, in that case, why are you looking for her, why are you investigating her life, I collect articles about the bishop too, but I don't particularly want to talk to him either, That seems absurd to me, It is absurd, but it's about time I did something absurd in my life, Do you mean to tell me that if you do manage to find this woman, she won't even know you were looking for her, Probably, Why, I can't explain, Anyway, you're not even going to get to visit the girl's school, schools are like the Central Registry, they're closed on weekends, I can go into the Central Registry whenever I want, That's hardly a remarkable achievement given that the door of your house opens on to it, You've obviously never had to go in there yourself, I go wherever you go and see whatever you see, Do continue, I will, but you are not going to get into that school, We'll see. Senhor José got up, it was time for supper, if the extremely light meals he usually ate at night merited the name. While he was eating, he was thinking, then, still thinking, he washed the plate, the glass and the cutlery, gathered up the crumbs fallen on the tablecloth, and, as if that gesture had been the inevitable conclusion to his thoughts, he opened the door that led out into the street. Opposite him, on the other side of the pavement, was a telephone box, a stone's throw away if you like, just twenty paces and he would reach the end of a thread that would carry his voice to her, the same thread would bring him an answer, and there, in one way or another, his search would end, he could calmly go back home, win back his boss's trust, and then the world, spinning in its own invisible tracks, would resume its usual orbit, the deep peace of someone who simply awaits the hour when all things will be done, always supposing that those words, so often spoken and repeated, have any real significance. Senhor José did not cross the road, he put on his jacket and his raincoat and went out.

He had to change buses twice before he reached his destination. The school was a long, two-storey building with dormer windows, separated from the street by high railings. The intervening space, a strip of land with a sprinkling of rather small trees, was probably used as a playground by the pupils. There was no light anywhere. Senhor José looked about him, even though it wasn't that late, the street was deserted, that's the good thing about these out-of-the-way places, especially if it's not the weather to have your windows open, the locals huddle inside their houses, and besides, there's nothing to see outside. Senhor José walked to the end of the road, crossed to the other sidewalk and walked slowly back towards the school like someone out enjoying a stroll in the evening cool and who has no one at home waiting for him. Right by the main door, he bent down as if he had just noticed that his shoelace had come un tied, a tired old trick, no one's fooled by it, but it can still be used for want of something better when the imagination can't come up with any alternative. With his elbow, he nudged the gate, which moved a little, it wasn't locked. Methodically, Senhor José tied a second knot over the first, got up, stamped his foot on the ground to test the firmness of the knots, and continued on his way, more briskly now, as if he had suddenly remembered that he did, in fact, have someone waiting for him.

Senhor José lived through the days until the weekend as if he were watching his own dreams. In the Central Registry no one saw him make a single mistake, he was never distracted, he never once muddled one document up with another, he got through enormous quantities of work which, at any other time, would have made him protest, silently of course, against the inhuman treatment of which clerks have always been victims, and all this was carried out and borne without a word, without a murmur. The Registrar glanced at him a couple of times from a distance, we know that he was not in the habit of looking at subordinates, far less at subordinates of such lowly rank, but Senhor José's spiritual concentration reached such a degree of intensity that it was impossible not to notice it in the perennially paralysed atmosphere of the Central Registry. On Friday, when the office was closing, the Registrar, with no prior warning, broke all the rules, scorned all the traditions, leaving the staff in a state of shock, for, as he passed Senhor José on his way out, he asked him, Are you feeling better. Senhor José said that he was, that he was much better, that he had not suffered from insomnia again, and the Registrar said, That conversation of ours must have done you good, he looked as if he were going to add something more, some idea that had suddenly occurred to him, but he closed his mouth and left, he had said quite enough, to cancel the punishment that had been imposed would be to subvert discipline. The other clerks, the senior clerks and even the deputies looked at Senhor José as if seeing him for the first time, the director's few words had made him a different person, it was rather like what happens when a child is taken to be baptised, one child is taken there, quite another child is brought back. Senhor José finished tidying his desk, then awaited his turn to leave, the rule was that the first to leave was always the longest-serving deputy registrar, then the senior clerks, then the clerks, always in order of length of service, it was left to the other deputy to close the door. Unusually, Senhor José did not immediately walk around the Central Registry building in order to go into his house, he set off into the nearby streets, he went to three different shops and in each of them he made a purchase, half a kilo of lard in one, a soft towel in another, and a third small object, a mere trifle, that fitted in the palm of his hand, and this he put in his jacket pocket because there was no need for it to be wrapped. Only then did he go home. It was long past midnight when he went out again. At that hour, there were few buses around, only very infrequently would one appear, which is why, for the second time since he had encountered the unknown woman's card, Senhor José decided to take a taxi. He felt a kind of vibration in the pit of his stomach, like a hum, a frenzy, but his mind remained calm, or rather, he was incapable of thought. There was a moment when Senhor José, hunched in the back of the taxi as if afraid of being seen, still tried to imagine what might happen to him, the consequences it could have for his life, if the action he was about to undertake should go wrong, but the thought hid behind a wall, I'm not coming out, it said, then he understood, because he knew himself well, he knew that the thought wanted to protect him, not from fear, but from cowardice. When they neared his destination, he asked the taxi to stop, he would walk the remaining short distance. He had his hands in his pockets, holding beneath his buttoned-up raincoat the packages containing the lard and the towel. Just as he was turning the corner into the street where the school was, a few drops of rain fell on

him, which, when he was almost at the gate, immediately became a great torrent raking noisily along the pavement. It has been said, from classical times onwards, that fortune favours the bold, in this case, the intermediary charged with that responsibility was the rain, or, in other words, heaven, anyone passing at that late hour would certainly be more concerned with trying to avoid a sudden drenching than watching the actions of a man in a raincoat who, given his apparent age, had escaped from the shower with quite unexpected speed, he was there a minute ago, now he's gone. Sheltering beneath one of the trees inside the railings, his heart beating wildly, Senhor José was breathing hard, amazed at the agility with which he had moved, he who, when it came to physical exercise, went no further than climbing to the top of the ladder in the Central Registry, and God knows he hated that. He was out of sight of the street, and he believed that, by moving cautiously from tree to tree, he could reach the school door without anyone outside seeing him. He had persuaded himself that there was no guard inside, in the first place, because of the absence of light, both the other day and now, and in the second place, because schools, except for certain very particular, exceptional reasons, are not places that are deemed to be worth burgling. His reasons were definitely exceptional and particular, which is why he had gone there armed with half a kilo of lard, a towel and a glass cutter, for that was the object that had not required wrapping. Meanwhile, he had to think carefully about what he was going to do. Gaining entry at the front would be imprudent, someone living in one of the upper storeys on the opposite side of the street might be peering out at the rain that was still falling heavily and see a man breaking one of the school's windows, there are plenty of people who wouldn't lift a finger to prevent a violent act being carried out, on the contrary, they would let the curtain fall and return to bed, saying, That's their business, but there are other people who would save the world if only the world would let them, they would immediately call the police and rush out onto the verandah shouting, Stop thief, a harsh epithet which Senhor José does not deserve, at worst forger, but only we know about that. I'll go around to the rear of the building, it might be easier there, thought Senhor José, and perhaps he was right, so often the backs of buildings are badly cared for, with piles of old junk, boxes awaiting re-use, empty paint cans, broken bricks from building work, all that anyone wanting to improvise a ladder, reach a window and climb in could possibly desire. In fact, Senhor José did find some of these useful objects, but, as he could tell by touch, they were all very neatly arranged underneath the porch, against the wall, in the darkness, and it would take too much time and effort to select and carry away the things that would best suit the structural needs of the pyramid he would have to scale. If I could just get onto the roof, he muttered, and, in principle, the idea was an excellent one, since there was a window about two feet above where the porch joined the wall, Even so, it's not going to be easy, the roof is very steep and with this rain it's bound to be slippery, treacherous, he thought. Senhor José felt himself beginning to lose heart, that's what happens when someone has no experience in burgling, when someone has not had the benefit of lessons from master climbers, he hadn't even thought to come and inspect the place beforehand, he could have done so the other day when he noticed that the gate wasn't locked, he must have thought himself so fortunate on that occasion that he preferred not to push his luck. He had in his pocket

the small flashlight that he had used in the Central Registry to be able to read the record cards, but he didn't want to turn it on here, a shape in the darkness that might pass more or less unseen is one thing, a moving circle of light betraying his presence is quite another, quite different, much worse, declaring Look, here I am. He took shelter under the porch, he could hear the rain drumming tirelessly on the roof, and he didn't know what to do. There were trees on this side too, taller and leafier than those in the front, if there were any other buildings hidden behind them, he couldn't see them from where he was standing, Therefore, they can't see me either, thought Senhor José, and after hesitating a moment longer, he turned on his flashlight and moved it rapidly from side to side. He had been absolutely right, the objects in the school junkyard were very carefully disposed and arranged, like neatly dovetailing bits of machinery. He turned on the flashlight again, this time pointing the beam upwards. Lying across the junk but apart from the other things, as if it were something that was occasionally put to use, was a stepladder. Either because of the unexpected nature of the discovery, or because of a sudden, random memory of the heights he had to scale in the Central Registry, Senhor José felt a rush, a popular and expressive phrase in current usage that removes the need for the word "vertigo" to be articulated by mouths not born for it, and thus aids communication. The stepladder wasn't long enough to reach the window, but it would do to climb onto the porch and, from then on, he was in God's hands.

Thus invoked, God decided to help Senhor José out of his difficulty, which is not so very extraordinary when one considers the enormous number of burglars who, ever since the world began, have been fortunate enough to return from their burglaries, not only laden with goods, but also unharmed, that is, having suffered no divine punishment. Providence determined that the corrugated concrete sheets that formed the roof of the porch, as well as having a rough finish, also had on the lower edges a projecting edge whose attractive, ornamental qualities the factory designer had, imprudently, been unable to resist. Thanks to this, and despite the steepness of the porch roof, Senhor José, with a foot here, a hand there, moaning, sighing, catching his fingernails, scuffing the toes of his shoes, managed to drag himself up. Now all he had to do was get in. The moment has come to reveal that the methods used by Senhor José, as cat burglar and housebreaker, are completely outmoded, not to say antiquated, even archaic. A long time ago, not even he can remember in which book or newspaper, he had read that lard, a soft towel and a glass cutter were the essential tools for anyone trying to enter through a window with malicious intent, and, in blind faith, he had equipped himself with these unusual aids. He could, of course, in order to hasten the task, have simply smashed the glass, but he was afraid, when he was planning the break-in, that the unavoidable sound of splintering glass would alarm the neighbourhood, and although it was true that the bad weather, with its own natural noises, might diminish the risk, it would be best to keep strictly to the discipline of the method. So, resting his feet on that providential edge, his knees digging into the rough ridges of the roof, Senhor José started cutting the glass with the diamond blade, along the frame. Then, breathing hard from the effort and the awkwardness of his position, he wiped the glass as best he could with his handkerchief,

to assist the desired adhesive qualities of the lard, or, rather, what remained of the lard, since his violent efforts in climbing the steep slope had left the package a shapeless, sticky mass with inevitable consequences for the cleanliness of the clothes he had on. Even so, he managed to spread an acceptably thick layer of lard all over the window, then over that, as carefully as possible, he laid the towel which, after endless contortions, he finally managed to extract from his raincoat pocket. Now he would have to calculate precisely the force of the blow required, not so weak as to require repetition, nor so strong that the glass would fail to cling to the towel. Holding the upper part of the towel against the window frame with his left hand so that it would not slip, Senhor José made a fist of his right hand, brought his arm back and dealt the glass a sharp blow that fortunately produced only the dull muted sound of a gun fitted with a silencer. He had got it right the first time, a notable achievement for a beginner. One or two small fragments of glass fell inside, nothing more, but that didn't matter, there was no one in there. For a few seconds, despite the rain, Senhor José lay stretched out on the porch roof, recovering his strength and savouring his triumph. Then, straightening up, he reached in, fumbled for and found the window catch, dear God, the risks burglars take, opened it wide and, grasping the windowsill, his feet frantically scrabbling for non-existent footholds, he managed to lift himself up, raise one leg, then the other, and finally drop through to the other side, as lightly as a leaf falling from a tree.

Respect for the facts, and a simple moral obligation not to offend the credulity of anyone prepared to accept as plausible and coherent the difficulties of such an extraordinary exploit, demand immediate clarification of that last statement: Senhor José did not drop as lightly from the windowsill as a leaf falling from a bough. On the contrary, he fell very heavily, the way an entire tree would fall, when he could perfectly easily have lowered himself gradually down from his temporary seat until his feet touched the ground. The fall, given the thud with which he hit the ground and the subsequent succession of painful collisions, revealed to him, before his eyes could confirm the fact, that the place he had landed in was like a prolongation of the porch outside, since both places were used as a storage space for things no longer needed, although it had probably happened the other way around, this place came first and, only later, when there was no more room here, did they resort to the porch outside. Senhor José sat there for a few moments, waiting for his breathing to return to normal and for his arms and legs to stop shaking. Then he turned on the flashlight, being careful to shine it only on the floor in front of him, and he saw that, between the piled-up furniture on either side, there was a path that led to the door. It troubled him to think that the door might be locked, in which case he would have to break it down despite having none of the necessary implements and despite the ensuing noise. Outside it was still raining, everyone must be asleep, but we can't be sure, there are people who sleep so lightly that even the whine of a mosquito is enough to wake them, then they get up, go to the kitchen for a glass of water, look casually out of the window and see a black rectangular hole in the wall of the school, and perhaps think, They're awfully careless at that school, imagine leaving a window open in weather like this, or, If I remember rightly, that window was closed, it must have been blown open by the wind, no one is going to think there's a thief inside, besides, they'd be quite wrong, because Senhor José, may we remind you once again, has not come here to steal. It has just occurred to him that he should close the window so that no one outside will notice the break-in, but then he has doubts, he wonders if it wouldn't be better to leave it as it is, They'll think it was the wind or carelessness on the part of some employee, if I close it they'll immediately notice that there's no glass in it, especially since the glass is opaque, almost white. Convinced that the rest of the world follows the same deductive paths as he does, he decided to leave the window open and then began to crawl past the furniture to the door. It wasn't locked. He gave a sigh of relief, from then on, there should be no further obstacles. Now what he needed was a comfortable chair, or, even better, a sofa, to spend what remained of the night resting, if his nerves would let him sleep. As an experienced chess player, he had calculated the moves, indeed, when you're reasonably sure of the immediate objective causes, it's not that difficult to think through the range of probable and possible effects and their transformation into causes, all in turn generating effects causes effects and causes effects causes, and so on into infinity, but we know that Senhor José has no need to go quite that far. To prudent people it will seem foolish for the clerk to have walked straight into the lion's den, and then, as if that were not audacious enough, to remain there calmly for what remained of the night and all of tomorrow, with the risk of being caught in flagrante by someone with far greater deductive powers than his in the matter of open windows. It must be recognised,

however, that it would have been even less sensible to have gone walking from room to room putting on lights. The combination of an open window and a light, when everyone knows that the legitimate users of a house or a school are absent, is a mental leap that anyone can make, however trusting they may be, they usually call the police.

Senhor José ached all over, he had skinned his knees, which were possibly bleeding, the discomfort caused by his trousers rubbing against them could mean nothing else, apart from that, he was soaked to the skin and dirty from head to foot. He removed his dripping raincoat and thought, If there was an inner room here, I could turn on the light, and a bathroom, a bathroom where I could have a wash, or at least wash my hands. Feeling his way, opening and shutting doors, he found what he was looking for, first, a small, windowless room lined with shelves containing stationery for school and office, pencils, notebooks, loose paper, pens, erasers, bottles of ink, rulers, set squares, bevel squares, protractors, drawing sets, tubes of glue, boxes of staples, and other things he couldn't see. With the light on he could at last examine the damage caused by his adventure. The wounds to his knees were not as bad as he had imagined, they were only superficial grazes, although still painful. In the morning, when he would no longer need to turn on lights, he would look for something that can be found in every school, the white first-aid cabinet, disinfectant, alcohol, peroxide, cotton wool, bandages, compresses, plasters, not all of which he would need. None of those remedies would be of any help to his raincoat, which is suffering from terminal grime, the lard having impregnated the fabric, Perhaps I could get the worst of it off with alcohol, thought Senhor José. Then he went in search of a bathroom, and he was lucky, he didn't have to walk very far before he found one which, to judge by its tidiness and cleanliness, must have been used by the teachers. The window, which also opened onto the back of the school, apart from having frosted glass, obviously more necessary here than in the storeroom through which he had entered, had internal wooden shutters, thanks to which Senhor José could at last turn on the light, have a wash and be able to see what he was doing. Then, more or less clean, his strength restored, he went in search of a place to sleep. Although, as a student, he had not been in a school like this, so luxurious and spacious, he knew that every school has a head teacher, and that every head teacher has a study, and that all such studies have a sofa, which was exactly what his body was crying out for. He continued to open and close doors, he looked inside rooms to which the diffuse light from outside gave a ghostly air, where the students' desks looked like lines of tombs, where the teacher's desk was like a sombre sacrificial altar, and the blackboard the place where everyone would be called to account. He saw, pinned to the walls, like the vague stains that time leaves behind on the skins of people and things, maps of the sky, of the world and of different countries, hydrographic and orographic maps of the human body, the channelling of the blood, the digestive tract, the ordering of the muscles, the communication network of the nervous system, the framework of the bones, the bellows of the lungs, the labyrinth of the brain, the section of the eye, the tangle of the genitals. The classrooms followed one after the other, along corridors that circled the school, everywhere there was the smell of chalk, almost as old as that of bodies, there are even

those who believe that God, after shaping the clay from which he later made them, began by drawing a man and a woman with a stick of chalk on the surface of the first night, which is where we get the one certainty we have, that we were, are and will be dust, and that we will be lost in another night as dark as that first night. In some places the darkness was thick, absolute, as if swathed in black cloths, but in others, there hovered the vibrant shimmer of an aquarium, a phosphorescence, a blue-tinged luminosity that could not possibly come from the street lamps, or, if it did, it was transformed as it came in through the glass. Remembering the pale lamp eternally suspended above the Registrar's desk, and which the surrounding shadows always seemed about to devour, Senhor José murmured, The Central Registry is different, then he added, as if requiring a response to his own remark, Probably the greater the difference, the greater the similarity, and the greater the similarity, the greater the difference, at that moment he did not yet know how right he was.

There were only classrooms on that floor, the head teacher's study was doubtless upstairs, removed from voices, from irksome noises, from the hubbub of students entering and leaving their classes. There was a skylight above the staircase and, as he went up the stairs, he moved from darkness into light, which, in the circumstances, had no other meaning than the prosaic one of allowing us, at last, to be able to see where we are putting our feet. Chance ordained that during this new search, before he found the head teacher's study, Senhor José should first enter the school secretary's office, a room with three windows that looked out onto the street. The room contained the usual furniture found in offices of this type, there were a few desks and an equal number of chairs, as well as cupboards, filing cabinets, card indexes, Senhor José's heart leapt to see them, that was what he had come looking for, files, index cards, records, statements, notes, the history of the unknown woman when she had been a girl and an adolescent, always assuming that there were no other schools in her life after this one. Senhor José opened a card-index drawer at random, but the light coming in from the street was not bright enough for him to see what kinds of records it contained. I've got plenty of time, thought Senhor José, what I need now is to sleep. He left the office, and two doors farther along, he finally found the head teachers study. Compared with the austerity of the Central Registry, it would be no exaggeration here to speak of luxury. The floor was carpeted, the window was hung with heavy curtains, which were drawn shut, there was a large, old-fashioned desk and a modern chair in black leather, all this Senhor José discovered because, when he opened the door and found himself in complete darkness, he did not hesitate to turn on first his flashlight, and then, the centre light. Since you could see no light coming in from the outside, no one outside would be able to see light coming from inside. The head teacher's chair was comfortable, he could sleep there, but even better was the long, broad, three-seater sofa that seemed charitably to be opening its arms to him in order to welcome and comfort his weary body. Senhor José looked at his watch, it was a few minutes before three. Seeing how late it was, for he hadn't even noticed time passing, he felt suddenly very tired, I've had enough, he thought, and, unable to contain himself, out of pure nervous exhaustion, he began to sob, to weep

uncontrollably, almost convulsively, standing there, as if he were once again the little first-year student, in another school, who had committed some mischief and been summoned by the head teacher to receive his just punishment. He threw his drenched raincoat down on the floor, took his handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and raised it to his eyes, but the handkerchief was just as wet as everything else, for his entire being, from head to foot, he realised now, seemed to be oozing water, as if he were nothing but a wrung-out rag, his body was filthy, his spirit bruised, and both felt equally wretched, What am I doing here, he asked himself, but he preferred not to answer, he was afraid that, once laid bare, the reason that had brought him to this place would strike him as absurd, ridiculous, crazy. A sudden shiver ran through him. I've caught a cold already, he said out loud and immediately sneezed twice, and then, while he was blowing his nose, he found himself following the capricious paths of a thought which goes where it chooses without offering any explanation, and remembering those film actors who are constantly plunging into water fully clothed or getting drenched by torrential rain, and who never catch pneumonia, or even a simple cold, as happens every day in real life, at most, they wrap themselves up in a blanket over their wet clothes, which would seem a ludicrous thing to do if we did not know that filming is about to be interrupted so that the actor can withdraw to his dressing room, take a hot bath and don his monogrammed dressing gown. Senhor José began to take off his shoes, then he removed his jacket and shirt, pulled off his trousers and hung them on a tall hat stand that he found in one corner, now all he needed was to wrap himself up in that film's inevitable blanket, a difficult accessory to find in a head teacher's study, unless the head teacher was an elderly person, the sort whose knees get cold when he's been sitting down for any length of time. Senhor José's deductive powers led him once more to the correct conclusion, the blanket lay carefully folded on the seat of the chair. It wasn't a large blanket, it didn't cover him completely, but it would be better than lying naked all night. Senhor José turned off the centre light, used the flashlight to guide himself back to the sofa and, sighing, stretched out on it, but then immediately curled up tight in order to fit his whole body beneath the blanket. He was still shivering, he had kept on his underclothes and they were still damp, probably with sweat, from the physical effort, the rain couldn't possibly have penetrated that far. He sat up on the sofa, slipped off his vest and pants, removed his socks, then wrapped the blanket around him as if he were trying to make of it a second skin, and thus, rolled up like a wood louse, he let himself sink into the darkness of the study, waiting for a little merciful warmth that would transport him into the mercy of sleep. Both took a long time to come, driven away by a thought that would not leave him, What if someone walks in and finds me in this state, I mean, naked, they would call the police, they would handcuff him, they would ask him his name, his age and his profession, the head teacher would be the first to arrive, then the Registrar, and both would look at him with harsh, condemnatory eyes, What are you doing here, they would ask, and he would have no voice to reply with, he couldn't explain to them that he was looking for an unknown woman, they would probably all just burst out laughing, and then ask again, What are you doing here, and they would keep asking until he confessed everything, the proof of this was that they were still repeating it in his dreams when, as morning was returning to

the world, Senhor José finally managed to abandon his exhausting vigil, or it abandoned him.

He woke up late, dreaming that he was back on the porch roof with the rain pounding down on him as loudly as a waterfall, and the unknown woman, in the shape of a film actress from his collection, was sitting on the window ledge with the head teacher's blanket folded in her lap, waiting for him to complete his climb, at the same time saying to him, Wouldn't it have been better to have knocked at the front door, to which he, panting, replied, I didn't know you were here, and she, I'm always here, I never go out, then, just as it seemed she was about to bend towards him in order to help him up, she suddenly disappeared, the porch disappeared with her, and only the rain remained, falling, falling without cease upon the chair belonging to the Registrar, where Senhor José saw himself sitting. His head ached slightly, but his cold didn't seem to have got any worse. A sliver of greyish light slipped in between the curtains, which meant that, contrary to appearances, they had not been completely closed. No one will have noticed, he thought, and he was right, the light of a star is brighter than bright, but not only is the greater part of it lost in space, a mere mist is enough to hide the excess light from our eyes. Even if those living on the other side of the street had come to peer out the window to see what the weather was like, they would think that the luminous thread undulating between the drops sliding down the windowpane was just the rain glittering. Still wrapped in the blanket, Senhor José slightly parted the curtains, it was his turn to find out what the weather was like. It wasn't raining at that moment, but the sky was covered by a single dark cloud, so low it seemed to touch the rooftops, like a huge tombstone. Just as well, he thought, the fewer people out in the street the better. He went over and felt the clothes he had taken off, to see if they were in a fit state to be put back on. His shirt, vest, underpants and socks were reasonably dry, his trousers rather less so, but his jacket and raincoat would take many more hours to dry. To avoid the damp-stiffened cloth rubbing against his grazed knees, he put everything on except his trousers and set off in search of the first-aid cabinet. Logically, it must be on the ground floor, near the gymnasium and the accidents that tend to happen there, next to the playground where, between classes, in games of greater or lesser violence, the students go to work off their energy and, more important, the tedium and anxiety provoked by study. He was right. After washing his wounds with peroxide, he dabbed them with some disinfectant that smelled of iodine and carefully bandaged them, using so many plasters that it looked as if he were wearing knee pads. He was still able, though, to flex his joints enough to walk. He put on his trousers and felt like a new man, although not new enough to forget the general malaise affecting his whole body. There must be something here for colds and headaches, he thought, and soon afterwards, having found what he needed, he had two pills in his stomach. He did not need to take any precautions to avoid being seen from outside, since, as one would expect, the window in the first-aid room was also made of frosted glass, but from then on, he would have to pay attention to every move he made, he couldn't afford any mistakes, he must keep well away from the windows and, if he absolutely had to go over to a window, then he would have to do so on all fours, he must

behave, in short, as if he had never done anything in his life but burgle houses. A sudden burning in his stomach reminded him that it had been a mistake to take the pills unaccompanied by food, even if only a biscuit, Right, where would I find biscuits here, he asked himself, realising that now he had a new problem to solve, the problem of food, since he wouldn't be able to leave the building until it was dark, Very dark, he added. Although, as we know, he is easily satisfied when it comes to food, he would have to eat something to dull his appetite until he got home, Senhor José, however, replied to that necessity with these stoical words, It's only one day, no one ever died from not eating for a few hours. He left the first-aid room, and although the secretary's office, where he would go to do his research, was on the second floor, he decided, out of sheer curiosity, to take a turn about the rooms on the ground floor. He immediately found the gymnasium, with its cloakrooms, its wall bars and other apparatus, the beam, the box, the rings, the pommel horse, the springboard, the mattresses, in his day, schools didn't have all this sports equipment, nor would he have wanted them to, being, as he had been then and as he continued to be, what is generally termed a bit of a wimp. The burning in his stomach was getting worse, a wave of bile rose into his mouth pricking his throat if only he could get rid of his headache, It's the cold, I've probably got a fever he thought as he opened another door Blessed be the spirit of curiosity, it was the refectory. Then Senhor José's thoughts grew wings, he rushed off in search of food Where there's a refectory there's a kitchen where there's a kitchen he didn't need to complete the thought, the kitchen was there with its oven its pots and pans its plates and glasses its cupboards, its huge fridge. He headed straight for it! flung open the door, and there was the food all Ut up, once more may the god of the curious be praised, as well as the god of burglars, in some cases no less deserving. A quarter of an hour later, Senhor José was definitely a new man, restored in body and soul, with his clothes almost dry, his knees bandaged and his stomach working on something rather more nutritious and substantial than two bitter anti-cold pills. Around lunchtime, he would return to this kitchen, to this kindly fridge, but now he must go and investigate the card indexes in the secretary's office, to advance a step further, whether a large step or a small one he had yet to find out, in probing the circumstances of the unknown woman's life thirty years ago, when she was just a little girl with serious eyes and bangs down to her eyebrows, she would have sat down on that bench to eat her afternoon snack of bread and jam, perhaps sad because she had blotted her fair copy, perhaps glad because her godmother had promised her a doll.

The label on the drawer was explicit, Students in Alphabetical Order, other drawers were marked differently, First-year Students, Second-year Students, Third-year Students and so on up to the final year of school. Senhor José took a quiet professional pleasure in the archive system, organised in such a way as to facilitate access to the cards of students by two convergent and complementary routes, one general, the other particular. A separate drawer contained the teachers' record cards, as one could tell from the label, Teachers. Seeing that label immediately set in motion, in Senhor José's mind, the gears of his highly efficient deductive mechanism, If, as it is logical to suppose, he thought, the

teachers in this drawer are those currently teaching in the school, then the student cards, out of mere archivistic coherence, must refer to the current student population, besides, anyone can see that the record cards of thirty years' worth of students, and that's a low estimate, could never fit in these half-dozen drawers, however thin the cards. With no hope of finding the card, but merely to soothe his conscience, Senhor José opened the drawer where, according to the alphabet, the card belonging to the unknown woman would be found. It wasn't there. He closed the drawer and looked around him, There must be another card index for former pupils, he thought, they can't possibly destroy them when they come to the end of their course, that would be a crime against the most elementary rules of archivism. If such a card index existed, however, it wasn't there. Nervously, and knowing full well that the search would be fruitless, he opened the cupboards and the drawers in the desk. Nothing. As if it could not bear the disappointment, his headache intensified. What now, José, he asked himself. We must look elsewhere, he replied. He left the secretary's office and looked up and down the long corridor. There were no classrooms here, therefore the rooms on this floor, apart from the head teacher's study, must have other uses, one of them, as he saw straightaway, was the staff room, another seemed to be a storeroom for redundant school material, and the other two contained, at last, what seemed to be, what must be, the schools historic archive, arranged in boxes on large shelves. Senhor José was at first exultant, but, and this is the advantage of someone with experience in his line of work, or, given his suddenly dashed hopes, the painful disadvantage, only a few minutes sufficed for him to realise that what he wanted wasn't there either, the files were of a purely bureaucratic nature, letters received, duplicates of letters sent, statistics, attendance records, progress charts, rule books. He searched again, twice, in vain. Feeling desperate, he went out into the corridor, All this effort for nothing, he said, and then, again, forcing himself to obey logic, It's impossible, those wretched record cards must be somewhere, if these people keep all those years of correspondence that is of no use to anyone, they must have kept students' record cards, which are vital documents for biographies, it wouldn't surprise me in the least if some of the people in my collection were students at this school. In other circumstances, it might have occurred to Senhor José that, just as he had enriched his collection of clippings with copies of the relevant birth certificates, it would also be interesting to add documents regarding attendance and success at school. However, that would never be anything but an impossible dream. It was one thing having the birth certificate in hand in the Central Registry, quite another having to wander the city breaking into schools in order to find out if so-and-so got an eight or a fifteen in math in the fourth year, and if someone else really was such an unruly pupil as he claimed to have been in interviews. And if, in order to get into each of those schools, he had to suffer as much as he had suffered breaking into this one, then it would be better to remain in the peace and quiet of his home, resigned to knowing of the world only what the hands can grasp without actually leaving the house, words, images, illusions.

Determined to get to the bottom of things once and for all, Senhor José went back into the archive, If there's any logic in this world, then the record cards must be here, he

said. He went through the shelves in the first room, box by box, bundle by bundle, with a fine-tooth comb, a turn of phrase that must have its origins in the days when people needed to comb their hair with what was also called a nit comb in order to catch what a normal comb missed, but the search again proved vain, there were no record cards. That is, there were, placed higgledy-piggledy in a large box, but only from the last five years. Convinced now that all the other record cards had been destroyed, torn up, thrown into the rubbish, if not burned, it was with a feeling of hopelessness, with the indifference of someone merely fulfilling a useless obligation, that Senhor José went into the second room. However, his eyes, if the expression is not entirely inappropriate, took pity on him, however hard you try you will find no other explanation for the fact that they immediately placed before him a narrow door between two shelves, as if they knew, from the start, that the door was there. Senhor José thought he had reached the end of his work, the crowning moment of all his efforts, indeed the opposite would reveal an unforgivable harshness on the part of fate, there must be some reason why ordinary people persist in saying, despite all life's vicissitudes, that bad luck is not always waiting just behind the door, behind this one, anyway, as in the old stories, there must be a treasure, even if, in order to reach it, it might still be necessary to fight the dragon. This one does not have furious, drooling jaws, it does not snort smoke and fire through its nostrils, it does not roar loud as any earthquake, it is simply a waiting, stagnant darkness, thick and silent as the ocean deeps, there are reputedly brave people who would not have the courage to go any farther, some would even run away at once, terrified, fearful that the obscene beast would grab them round the throat with its claws. Although not a person whom one could give as an example or model of bravery, Senhor José, after his years in the Central Registry, has acquired a knowledge of the night, of shadows, obscurity and darkness that makes up for his natural timidity and now permits him, without excessive fear, to reach his arm into the body of the dragon in search of the light switch. He found it, he flicked it on, but there was no light. Shuffling forwards so as not to stumble, he advanced little until he barked his right shin on something hard. He bent down to feel the obstacle and, just as he realised that it was a metal step he felt the shape of the flashlight in his pocket in the midst of so many contradictory emotions, he had completely forgotten about it. Before him was a spiral staircase that ascended into thicker darkness than that on the threshold and which swallowed up the beam of light before it could show him the way upwards. The staircase has no bannister exactly what chronic vertigo sufferer does not need on the fifth step, if he manages to get that far Senhor José will lose all notion of the real height he has reached, he will feel that he's going to fall helplessly to the ground, and he will fall. But that is not what happened. Senhor José is being ridiculous, but it doesn't matter, only he knows just how absurd and ridiculous what he is doing is, no one will see him drag himself up that staircase like a lizard recently awoken from hibernation, clinging anxiously to the steps, one after the other, his body trying to follow the apparently never-ending, spiralling curve, his knees again bearing the brunt. When Senhor José's hands finally touched the smooth floor of the attic, his physical strength had long since lost the battle with his frightened spirit, which is why he could not immediately get up, he lay down there, his shirt and face

resting on the dust covering the floor, his feet hanging over the steps, what torments people have to go through when they leave the safety of their homes to become embroiled in mad adventures.

After a few moments, still lying facedown, because he was not so foolish as to attempt to stand up in the midst of the darkness, running the risk of taking a false step and plunging back into the abyss from which he had come, Senhor José managed, with difficulty, to turn around and to remove the flashlight he had put in his back trouser pocket. He switched it on and shone it over the floor immediately ahead of him. There were scattered papers, cardboard boxes, some of them burst, all of them thick with dust. A few yards ahead he could see what seemed to be the legs of a chair. He raised the beam slightly, it was a chair. It seemed in good condition, the seat, the back, and above it, hanging from the low ceiling, was a bare lightbulb. Just like in the Central Registry, thought Senhor José. He directed the beam around the room and saw the fleeting shapes of shelves that seemed to cover every wall. They were not high shelves, nor could they be, given the steepness of the roof, and they were weighted down with boxes and shapeless bundles of paper. I wonder where the light switch is, thought Senhor José, and the reply was as expected, It's downstairs and it doesn't work, I don't think I can find the record cards with only this flashlight, besides I'm beginning to think the battery might be getting low, You should have thought of that before, Perhaps there's another switch in here, Even if there is, we already know that the bulb's burned out, We don't know that, It would have come on otherwise, The only thing we know is that we tried the switch and the light didn't come on, Exactly, It could mean something else, What, That there's no bulb downstairs, So I'm right, the bulb here has burned out too, But there's nothing to say that there aren't two switches and two bulbs, one on the stairs and the other in the attic, now the one downstairs has burned out, but we still don't know about the one upstairs, If you're clever enough to deduce that, then find the switch. Senhor José abandoned the awkward position in which he was still lying and sat up, My clothes will be in a dreadful state by the time I leave here, he thought, and pointed the beam at the wall nearest the opening onto the stairs, If there is a switch, then it will be here. He found it at the precise moment when he was reaching the discouraging conclusion that the only switch was indeed downstairs. As he shifted his free hand on the floor in order to get more comfortable, the light went on, the switch, one of those button switches, had been installed in the floor, so that it would be within immediate reach of anyone coming up the stairs. The yellowish light from the bulb barely reached the wall at the back, there was no sign of footprints on the floor. Remembering the record cards that he had seen on the floor below, Senhor José said out loud, It's at least six years since anyone came in here. When the echo of his words had faded, Senhor José noticed that there was a vast silence in the attic, as if the silence that had been there before contained a larger silence, the woodworms must have stopped their excavating work. From the ceiling hung spiders' webs black with dust, their owners must have died long ago from lack of food, there was nothing here that would attract a stray fly, especially not with the door shut downstairs, and the moths, the silverfish and the woodworms in the beams had no reason to

exchange the galleries of cellulose, where they lived, for the outside world. Senhor José got up, vainly trying to brush the dust from his trousers and shirt, his face looked like the face of some eccentric clown, with a great stain on one side only. He went and sat down on the chair, underneath the bulb, and started talking to himself, Let's look at this rationally, he said, if the old record cards are here, and everything indicates that they are, it is highly unlikely that they are going to be grouped student by student, that is, that the record cards of each student will be all together, so that you can see at a glance the whole of their scholastic career, its more likely that, at the end of each school year, the secretary bundled up all the record cards corresponding to that year and placed them here, I doubt she would even have gone to the trouble of putting them in boxes, or perhaps she did, we'll have to see, I hope, if she did, she at least thought to write the relevant year on them, but one way or another, it will just be a question of time and patience. This conclusion had not added greatly to his initial premise, from the very beginning of his life, Senhor José has known that he only needs time in order to use patience, and from the very beginning he has been hoping that patience will not run out of time. He got up, and faithful to the rule that, in all searches, the best plan is to start at one point and proceed from there on with method and discipline, he set to work at the end of one of the rows of shelves, determined to leave no piece of paper unturned, always checking that there wasn't another piece of paper hidden between top and bottom sheets. Each movement he made, opening a box, untying a bundle, raised a cloud of dust, so much so that in order not to be asphyxiated, he had to tie his handkerchief over his nose and mouth, a preventive measure that the clerks were advised to follow each time they went into the archive of the dead in the Central Registry. In a matter of moments his hands were black and the handkerchief had lost any remaining trace of whiteness, Senhor José had become a coal miner hoping to find in the depths of the mine the pure carbon of a diamond.

He found the first file after half an hour. The girl no longer had bangs, but, in this photograph taken at fifteen, her eyes had the same air of wounded gravity. Senhor José placed it carefully on the chair and continued his search. He was working in a kind of dream state, meticulous, feverish, moths fluttered out from beneath his fingers, terrified by the light, and little by little, as if he were rummaging in the remains of a tomb, the dust became grafted onto his skin, so fine that it penetrated his clothing. At first, when he picked up a bundle of record cards, he went straight to what really interested him, then he began to linger over names, images, for no reason, just because they were there and because no one else would go into this attic to remove the dust covering them, hundreds, thousands of faces of boys and girls, looking straight at the camera, at the other side of the world, waiting, for what exactly they didn't know. It wasn't like that in the Central Registry, in the Central Registry there were only words, in the Central Registry you could not see how faces had changed or continued to change, when that was precisely what was most important, the thing that time changes, not the name, which never changes. When Senhor José's stomach began to rumble, there were seven record cards on the chair, two of them with identical pictures, her mother must have said, Take this one from

last year, there's no need to go to the photographer again, and she took the picture, sad that she wouldn't have a new photograph this year. Before going down to the kitchen, Senhor José went to the head teacher's bathroom to wash his hands, he was amazed by what he saw in the mirror, he hadn't imagined that his face could possibly get into this state, filthy, furrowed with lines of sweat, It doesn't even look like me, he thought, and yet he had probably never looked more like himself. When he had finished eating, he went up to the attic as fast as his knees would allow, it occurred to him that if the light failed, something to bear in mind after all this rain, he would not be able to complete his search. Assuming that she hadn't repeated a year, he only had five more record cards to find, and if he were now to be plunged into darkness, all his efforts would be in part lost, since he would never be able to get back into the school. Absorbed in his work, he had forgotten about his headache, his cold, and now he realised that he was feeling worse. He went downstairs again to take another two pills, then went back up, making a supreme effort, and resumed his work. The afternoon was drawing to a close when he found the last record card. He turned off the light in the attic, closed the door and, like a sleepwalker, put on his jacket and raincoat, removed as best he could any sign of his passing and sat down to wait for night to come.

The next morning, almost as soon as the Central Registry had opened and when everyone else was at their desk, Senhor José half-opened the communicating door and said pst-pst to attract the attention of the nearest clerk. The man turned and saw a flushed face and blinking eyes, What do you want, he asked, in a low voice so as not to disturb anyone, but with a note of ironic recrimination in his words, as if the scandal of absence only confirmed the worst suspicions of one already scandalised by Senior José's lateness, I'm ill, said Senhor José, I can't come to work. Annoyed, his colleague got up, took three steps in the direction of the senior clerk in charge of his wing, and said, Excuse me, sir, Senhor José is over there saying he's ill. The senior clerk also got up, took four steps in the direction of the respective deputy and told him, Excuse me, sir, the clerk Senhor José is over there saying he's ill. Before taking the five steps that separated him from the Registrar's desk, the deputy went over to ascertain the nature of the illness, What's wrong with you, he asked, I've got a cold, said Senhor José, A cold has never been a reason not to come to work, I've got a fever, How do you know you've got a fever, I used a thermometer, What are you, a few degrees above normal, No sir, my temperature's well over 100, You never get a fever like that with an ordinary cold, Then maybe I've got flu, Or pneumonia, Thanks very much, It's just a possibility, I'm not saying you've actually got pneumonia, No, I know you're not, And how did you get in this state, Probably because I got caught in the rain, Imprudence always has its price, You're right, Any illness contracted for non-work-related reasons should simply not be considered, Well, I wasn't, in fact, at work when it happened, I'll tell the Registrar, Yes, sir, Don't shut the door, he might want to give you further instructions, Yes, sir. The Registrar did not give any instructions, he merely looked over the bent heads of the clerks and made a gesture with his hand, a brief gesture, as if dismissing the matter as insignificant or as if postponing any attention he might give it until later, at that distance, Senhor José could not tell, always supposing that his red, streaming eyes could see that far. Anyway, it seems that Senhor José, terrified by that look and not realising what he was doing, opened the door wider, thus revealing himself full-length to the Central Registry, an old dressing gown over his pyjamas, his feet in a pair of down-at-heel slippers, the shrunken look of someone who has caught a terrible cold, or a malignant form of flu, or a fatal strain of bronchopneumonia, you never know, it happens often enough, a gentle breeze can so easily turn into a raging hurricane. The deputy came over to him to say that today or tomorrow he would be visited by the official doctor, but then, oh miracle, he uttered some words that no lowly clerk in the Central Registry, neither he nor anyone else, had ever had the joy of hearing before, The Registrar hopes that you will soon feel better, and the deputy himself didn't quite seem to believe what he was saying. Dumbstruck, Senhor José still had sufficient presence of mind to look across at the Registrar in order to thank him for his unexpected good wishes, but the Registrar had his head down, as if he were hard at work, which, knowing as we do the work habits of this particular Central Registry, is most unlikely. Slowly, Senhor José closed the door, and, trembling with excitement and fever, got back into bed.

He had been drenched not only by the rain that fell on him while he slithered about

on the porch roof, struggling to get into the school. When night came and he finally left through the window and reached the street, he could not, poor thing, have imagined what awaited him. The extremely tortuous circumstances of his ascent, but, above all, the dust accumulated in the attic archive, had left him, from head to foot, in an indescribably grimy state, his hair and face were smeared with black, his hands were like charred stumps, not to mention his clothes, his raincoat was like an old rag impregnated with lard, his trousers looked as if he had been rubbing them with tar, his shirt as if it had been used to clean a chimney thick with centuries of soot, even a vagabond living in the most extreme poverty would have sallied forth onto the street with more dignity. When Senhor José was two blocks away from the school, by which time it had stopped raining, he hailed a taxi to take him home, and the inevitable happened, the driver, seeing that black figure emerge suddenly from the depths of the night, took fright and accelerated, and that was not the only time, Senhor José hailed three other taxis and they all disappeared round the corner as if pursued by the devil himself. Senhor José resigned himself to having to walk home, he certainly wasn't going to get onto a bus, oh well, it would be just one more weariness to add to the one that barely allowed him to drag his feet along, but the worst thing was that, shortly afterwards, the rain started again and didn't stop throughout the whole of that interminable walk, streets, sidewalks, squares, avenues, through a city that seemed deserted, apart from that lone man, dripping water, without even the partial protection of an umbrella, you can understand why, no one takes an umbrella along when they go burgling, no more than you would when going to war, he could have taken shelter in a doorway and waited for a break in the clouds, but it wasn't worth it, he couldn't get any wetter than he was. When Senhor José reached home, the only reasonably dry part of his clothing was a pocket in his jacket, the inside pocket on his left side, where he had placed the school record cards of the unknown girl, he had kept them covered with his right hand all the time, to protect them from the rain, anyone who saw him would have thought he had something wrong with his heart, especially given the pained look on his face. Shivering, he took all his clothes off, wondering confusedly how he would solve the problem of getting that pile of clothes on the floor washed, he didn't have so many suits, shoes, socks and shirts that he could afford to send it all off to the dry cleaners, as if he were a man of means, a complete suit, he was bound to need one of those items of clothing when he had to put his remaining clothes on tomorrow. He decided to worry about that later, now he just had to get the filth off his body, the worst thing was that the heater didn't work very well, the water sometimes came out boiling hot, sometimes ice cold, just the thought of it made him shudder, and then, like someone trying to convince himself, he murmured, Perhaps it would do my cold good, a blast of hot water followed by cold, or so I've heard. He went into the cubicle that served him as a bathroom, looked in the mirror and realised why the taxi drivers had been frightened. He would have felt exactly the same and fled from this hollow-eyed phantom with a kind of black drool running from the corners of his mouth. The heater didn't behave too badly this time, it unleashed only a couple of cold lashes at the beginning, and the rest of the time it was comfortingly warm, besides, a quick scalding blast from time to time even helped dissolve the dirt. When he got out of the shower,

Senhor José felt reinvigorated, like new, but as soon as he got into bed, he started shivering again, it was then that he thought of opening the drawer in his bedside table, where he kept his thermometer, and shortly afterwards, was saying, One hundred, if I feel the way I do now tomorrow morning, I won't be able to go to work. Whether it was the effects of fever or exhaustion, or both, this thought did not trouble him, the abnormal idea of being absent from work did not seem strange to him, for at that moment, Senhor José did not seem like Senhor José, or, rather, there were two Senhor José's lying in bed, with the blankets up to their nose, one Senhor José who had lost all sense of responsibility, another to whom this was all a matter of complete indifference. He dozed for a few moments with the light on and then woke with a start when he dreamed that he had left the record cards on the chair in the attic, that he had left them there deliberately, as if during this whole adventure his sole aim had been merely to seek them out and find them. He also dreamed that someone went into the attic after he had left, saw the pile of thirteen record cards and asked, What mystery is this. Half-dazed, he got up and went to look for them, he had put them on the table when he emptied out his jacket pockets, and then returned to bed. The record cards were smeared with black fingermarks, some even bore the clear impress of his fingerprints, he would have to wipe them off tomorrow to foil any attempt at identification, How stupid, he thought, we leave fingerprints on everything we touch, if I clean those off Til just leave others, the difference is that some are visible and others are not. He closed his eyes and shortly afterwards fell asleep again, the hand barely grasping the record cards fell limply onto the bedcover, some slipped to the floor, there were the pictures of a girl at different ages, from child to adolescent, wrongfully brought here, no one has the right to carry off photos that don't belong to them, unless they were a gift, carrying a photo of someone in your pocket is like carrying a little bit of their soul. Senhor José's dream, from which this time he did not awake, was a different one now he saw himself wiping away the fingerprints he had left at the school, they were everywhere, on the window through which he had entered, in the first-aid room, in the secretary's office, in the head teacher's study, in the refectory, in the kitchen, in the archive, he decided it wasn't worth worrying about the ones in the attic, no one was likely to go in there and ask, What mystery is this, the trouble was that the hands that wiped away the visible traces left behind them an invisible trace, if the head teacher at the school were to report the burglary to the police and there was a serious investigation, Senhor José would go to prison, as sure as two and two are four, imagine the dishonour and the shame that would forever stain the reputation of the Central Registry. In the middle of the night, Senhor José woke up burning with fever, apparently delirious, saying, I didn't steal anything, I didn't steal anything, and it was true that, strictly speaking, he hadn't stolen anything, however much the head teacher might search and investigate, however many verifications, counts and comparisons he made, inventory in hand, ticking off one item after the other, his conclusion would be the same, There has been no theft, at least not what you could call theft, doubtless the person in charge of the kitchen would remind him that there was food missing from the fridge, but, supposing that this had been the only crime committed, stealing in order to eat, according to a fairly widely held view, is not theft, even the head

teacher is in agreement there, the police, of course, are of a different opinion, on principle, they, however, would have no option but to go away, grumbling, There's some mystery there, no one burgles a school just to grab a spot of breakfast. In any event, since the head teacher's formal written statement, in which he said that nothing valuable or non-valuable was missing from the school, the police had decided not to take any fingerprints, as routine demanded, We've got more than enough work as it is, said the one in charge of the investigation squad. Despite these tranquillising words, Senhor José could not get back to sleep again all night, fearful that the dream would be repeated and that the police would return with their magnifying glasses and their special dust.

He has nothing in the house that might help reduce his fever and the doctor will only come later in the afternoon, he might not even come today, and he won't bring any medicine with him, he'll merely write out the usual prescription for cases of cold and flu. The dirty clothes are still in a heap in the middle of the room and Senhor José looks at the heap from the bed, with a perplexed air, as if it didn't belong to him, only a remnant of common sense stops him from asking, Who was it who came in here and took off all their clothes, and it was the same common sense that forced him to think, at last, about the complications, both personal and professional, that would result if a colleague came through the door to find out how he was, on instructions from the Registrar or on his own initiative, and came face-to-face with all that filth. When he stood up, he felt as if someone had suddenly planted him at the very top of a ladder, but the dizziness he felt this time was different, it was a result of fever, as well as physical weakness, because what he had eaten at the school, apparently sufficient at the time, had served more as a comfort to his nerves than as nourishment to his body. Supporting himself against the wall, he managed, with some difficulty, to reach a chair and sit down. He waited for his head to return to normal before considering where he could hide his dirty clothes, not in the bathroom, doctors always have to wash their hands when they leave, and he certainly couldn't hide them under the bed, which was one of those old-fashioned, long-legged beds, anyone would be able to see the clothes, even without bending down, and they wouldn't fit in the cupboard where he kept his famous people, and besides it wouldn't be right, the sad truth is that, although his brain had now stopped spinning, it was still not working properly, the only place where the dirty clothes would be safe from prying eyes was the place where they usually hung when they were clean, that is, behind the curtain covering the niche that he used as a wardrobe, only the most impertinent of colleagues or doctors would go poking their nose in there. Pleased with himself for having reached a conclusion after such lengthy deliberation, a conclusion which, in other circumstances, would have been more than obvious, Senhor José started shunting the clothes towards the curtain with his foot in order not to get his pyjamas dirty. There was a great damp stain left on the floor which would take several hours to disappear completely, if someone came in before then and asked questions, he would say that he had knocked some water over or that there had been a stain on the floor and he had tried to get rid of it. From the moment he got up, Senhor José's stomach had been begging him for the charity of a cup of coffee with milk, a biscuit, a slice of bread and

butter, anything to pacify his suddenly awoken appetite, now that his worries about the immediate fate of his clothes had disappeared. The bread was dry and hard, only a scraping of butter was left, he was out of milk, all he had was some rather mediocre coffee, as we know, a man who had never found a woman who would love him enough to agree to join him in this hovel, such a man, apart from rare exceptions which have no place in this story, will never be more than a poor devil, it's odd that we always say poor devil and never poor god, especially when he was unfortunate enough to turn out as disastrously as this one, we are referring, by the way, to the man not the god. Despite the meagre and unconsoling food, Senhor José felt well enough to have a shave, after which he judged he was looking considerably better, so much so that he ended up saying to the mirror, My fever seems to have subsided. This reflection led him to wonder whether it would be a good, prudent policy to turn up for work anyway, it was only a few steps away, he would say, The work of the Central Registry comes first, and the Registrar, bearing in mind how cold it was outside, would forgive him for not having taken the long way around as was the rule, and might even record such clear proof of esprit de corps and dedication to work in Senior José's file. He thought about it, but decided against it. His whole body ached, as if someone had knocked him down, beaten him and shaken him, his muscles ached, his joints ached, and it wasn't because of the physical effort of climbing and breaking in, anyone could see that these aches and pains were different, This is flu, he concluded.

He had just got into bed when he heard someone knock on the door that opened into the Central Registry, it must be some charitable colleague, taking seriously the Christian precept of visiting the sick and the imprisoned, no, it couldn't be a colleague, it was still hours until lunchtime, and good works could only be done out of hours, Come in, he said, it's only on the latch, the door opened and the deputy whom he had told about his illness appeared in the doorway, The Registrar asked me to find out if you're taking anything while you're waiting for the doctor to come, No, sir, I haven't got anything suitable in the house, Then have these pills, Thank you very much, I'll pay you later if you don't mind, just so that I don't have to get up, how much do I owe you, It was an order from the Registrar, you don't ask the Registrar how much you owe him, I realise that, I'm sorry, You'd better take a pill now, and the deputy came in without waiting for an answer, All right, thank you, that's very kind of you, Senhor José could not stop him from coming in, he could not say Halt, you cannot come in here, sir, this is a private house, in the first place, because you don't speak like that to a superior, in the second place, because there was no memory in the oral tradition of the Central Registry nor any record in the written annals of a Registrar's ever having taken such an interest in the health of a clerk to the point of sending someone to bring him some pills. The deputy himself was perplexed with the novelty of it all, he would never have done it on his own initiative, however, he did not allow himself to be distracted, he behaved like someone who knew perfectly well what he was about and was familiar with every corner of the house, which is not to be wondered at, before the town planners went to work on the neighbourhood, he too had lived in a house like this. The first thing he noticed was the large damp stain on the floor,

What's that from, a leak, he asked, Senhor José was tempted to say yes, simply in order not to give any further explanations, but he preferred to put it down to an accident of his own making, as he had at first thought, he didn't want the plumber coming to the house and then writing a report to the Registrar saying that the pipes, although old, were in no way responsible for the appearance of that damp stain on the floor. The deputy approached bearing a glass of water and a pill, his mission as designated nurse had softened his normally authoritarian features, but that look soon returned, accentuated by something that could be described as wounded surprise, when, as he approached the bed, he noticed the unknown girl's school records lying on the bedside table. Senhor José noticed the other man's surprise as soon as it happened and it was as if his whole world collapsed about him. His brain instantaneously sent an order to the arm muscles on that side, Get that off there, you idiot, but immediately, with the same speed, electrical impulse after electrical impulse, it changed its mind, if I may put it that way, like someone who has just recognised his own stupidity, Please, don't touch them, pretend you haven't noticed. That is why, with an agility totally unexpected in someone in the grip of the physical and mental depression which is the first known consequence of flu, Senhor José sat on the edge of the bed pretending he wanted to help the deputy in his charitable efforts, he reached out a hand to receive the pill, which he put in his mouth, as well as the water to help it down his tight, anxious throat, at the same time, taking advantage of the fact that the mattress on which he was lying was at the same height as the bedside table, he covered the cards with the elbow of his other arm, dropping his forearm forwards, with the palm of his hand imperatively open, as if he were saying to the deputy Stop right there. What saved him was the photograph stuck to the record card, that is the most notable difference between school records and those of birth and life, it would be impossible for the Central Registry to receive a new picture every year of all those whose names were inscribed in the archive of the living, and it wouldn't be every year, it would be every month, every week, every day, a photograph per hour, my God, how time passes, and the work it would generate, how many clerks would they have to recruit, a photograph a minute, a second, the amount of glue, the wear and tear on scissors, the care in the selection of staff, so as to exclude dreamers who might sit staring eternally at one picture, letting their minds wander, like idiots watching the clouds drift by. The deputy's face now bore the expression he wore on his worst days, when papers were piling up on all the desks and the Registrar called him over to ask if he was really quite sure he was doing his job properly. Thanks to the photograph, he did not think that the record cards on top of his subordinate's bedside table belonged to the Central Registry, but the speed with which Senhor José had covered them up made him suspicious, especially since Senhor José had done so as if by chance or distractedly. The damp stain on the floor had already aroused his distrust, now it was some record cards of an unknown nature with a photograph attached, a photograph of a child, as he could just make out. He couldn't count the cards, since they were placed one on top of the other, but from the thickness, there must have been at least ten of them, Ten record cards with photos of children on them, how odd, what can they be doing there, he thought, intrigued, and he would have been even more intrigued if he had known that the cards, in

fact, all belonged to the same person and that the pictures on the last two were of an adolescent girl, with a grave but pleasant face. The deputy placed the packet of pills on the bedside table and withdrew. As he was leaving, he looked back and saw Senhor José still there with his elbow covering the cards, I'd better talk to the chief, he said to himself. As soon as the door had closed, Senhor José, with a brusque movement, as if afraid of being caught out, thrust the record cards under the mattress. There was no one there to tell him it was too late, and, besides, that was something he preferred not to think about.

It's flu, said the doctor, you'd better start by taking three days' sick leave. Head swimming, legs weak, Senhor José had got out of bed to open the door, Forgive me for keeping you waiting outside, Doctor, that's what happens when you live alone, the doctor came in grumbling, Terrible weather, closed his dripping umbrella and left it in the hall, What seems to be the problem, he asked when Senhor José, teeth chattering, had just got back between the sheets, and then, without waiting for him to reply, he said, It's flu. He took his pulse, told him to open his mouth, briskly applied his stethoscope to his chest and back, It's flu, he said again, you're very lucky, it could easily have turned into pneumonia, but it's flu, you'd better start by taking three days' sick leave, and then we'll see. He had just sat down at the table to write a prescription when the communicating door opened, it was only on the latch, and the Registrar appeared, Good afternoon, Doctor, You mean bad afternoon, don't you, sir, it would be a good afternoon if I were sitting nice and cosy in my consulting rooms rather than wandering the streets in this ghastly weather, How's our patient, asked the Registrar, and the doctor replied, I've given him three days' sick leave, it's just a bout of flu. At that moment, it wasn't just a bout of flu. With the bedclothes up to his nose, Senhor José was trembling as if he were suffering from malaria, so much so that the iron bedstead on which he was lying shook, however, that irrepressible trembling was not the result of fever, but of sheer panic, a complete disorientation of the mind, The Registrar, here, he was thinking, the Registrar in my house, the Registrar asking him, How are you feeling, Better, sir, Did you take the pills I sent you, Yes, sir, Did they help at all, Yes, sir, Well, now you can stop taking those and take the medicine the doctor has prescribed, Yes, sir, Unless they're the same ones, let me see now, yes, they are, plus a couple of injections, I'll take care of this. Senhor José could hardly believe that the person who, before his very eyes, was folding up the prescription and putting it carefully away in his pocket really was the Registrar. The boss whom he had grown to know only with great difficulty would never behave in this way, he would never come in person to ask about his health, and the idea of his wanting to take charge of buying the medicine of a mere clerk was simply absurd. And he'll need a nurse to give him the injections, said the doctor, leaving the problem to be resolved by someone who was ready or able to do so, not the poor, scrawny, flu-ridden devil with the beginnings of a greying stubble on his chin, as if the evident discomfort of the house were not enough, and that damp stain on the floor which looked very much like the result of bad plumbing, the sad tales a doctor could tell about life, if it were not all confidential, On no account must you go out in this state, he added, I'll take care of everything, Doctor, said the Registrar, I'll phone the Central Registry nurse, he'll buy the medicine and come here to give the injections, There aren't many bosses like you left, said the doctor. Senhor José nodded feebly, that was the most he could do, obedient and reliable, yes, he had always been that, and had taken a certain paradoxical pride in it, though without ever being fawning and subservient, he would never, for example, make imbecilic, flattering remarks like, He's the best Registrar there is, There isn't another one like him in the world, They broke the mould when they made him, For him, despite my vertigo, I even climb that wretched ladder. Senhor José is worried and anxious about something else now, he wants his boss to leave, to go before the doctor goes, he trembles to

imagine himself alone with him, at the mercy of fatal questions, What's the meaning of that damp stain, What were those record cards on your bedside table, Where did you get them, Where did you hide them, Whose photo was on them. He closed his eyes, adopted an expression of unbearable suffering, Leave me in peace on my bed of pain, he seemed to be begging them, but he suddenly opened his eyes again, when, terrified, he heard the doctor say, Well, I'll be on my way, call me if he gets any worse, though I'm pretty sure he won't, it's definitely not pneumonia, I'll keep you posted, Doctor, said the Registrar while he accompanied him to the door. Senhor José closed his eyes again, heard the door close, Now, he thought. The Registrar's firm steps approached the bed, then stopped, He's probably looking at me now, Senhor José didn't know what to do, he could pretend he'd gone to sleep, that he had fallen gradually asleep the way a weary patient does, but his twitching eyelids betrayed him, he could also, for better or worse, give a pathetic moan, of the kind that pierces the heart, but that was a bit over the top for a mere bout of flu, only a fool would be deceived, certainly not this Registrar, who knows all there is to know about the kingdoms of the visible and the invisible. He opened his eyes and the Registrar was there, a few steps away from the bed, his face expressionless, simply looking at him. Then Senhor José came up with an idea that he thought might save him, he would thank the Central Registry for all their care he would thank them eloquently effusively, perhaps that way he would avoid the questions, but just as he was about to open his mouth to utter the familiar phrase, I don't know how to thank you his boss turned, his back at the same time saying four words Take care of yourself that was what he said in a tone that was at once deferential and imperative, only the best bosses can combine contrary feelings in such a harmonious way, which is why their subordinates venerate them. Senhor José tried, at least, to say Thank you, sir, but the Registrar had already left, delicately closing the door behind him, as one should when leaving an invalid's room. Senhor José has a headache, but the headache is almost nothing compared to the tumult going on inside him. Senhor José finds himself in such a state of confusion that his first action, when the Registrar has left, is to slip his hand under the mattress to make sure the record cards are still there. His second action offended even more against common sense, for he got out of bed and went and turned the key in the communicating door twice, like someone desperately barring the door after his house has been burgled. Lying down again was only the fourth action, the third had been when he turned back, thinking, What if the Registrar returns, in that case, it would be more prudent, in order to avoid arousing suspicion, to leave the door on the latch. Senhor José is caught between several devils and the deep blue sea.

It was already dark when the nurse arrived. In fulfilment of the orders he had received from the Registrar, he brought with him the pills and phials that the doctor had prescribed, but, to Senhor José's surprise, he also brought a package which he placed gingerly down on the table and said, I hope it's still hot, I hope I haven't spilled anything, which meant that there was food inside, as the Mowing words confirmed, Eat it while it's hot, but first, I'll give you that injection. Now, Senhor José did not like injections, especially ones into the veins in the arm, when he always had to look away, which was

why he was so pleased when the nurse told him that the jab would be in his posterior, he was very polite, this nurse, from another age, he had got used to using the term "posterior" instead of bottom so as not to shock the sensibilities of lady patients, and had almost ended up forgetting the usual term, he used "posterior" even when he was dealing with patients for whom "bottom" was merely a ridiculous euphemism and who preferred the vulgar variant "bum." The unexpected appearance of food and the relief he felt at not being injected in the arm broke down Senhor José's defences, or perhaps he simply forgot, or more simply still, perhaps he hadn't noticed until then that his pyjama trousers were stained with blood at the knees, a consequence of his nocturnal adventures as a climber of school roofs. The nurse, holding the syringe prepared and ready, instead of saying Turn over, asked, What's that, and Senhor José, converted by this lesson from life to the definitive kindness of injections in the arm, replied instinctively, I fell down, You don't have much luck do you, first you fall down, then you get the flu, it's just as well you've got a kind boss, now turn over, then I'll take a look at those knees. Debilitated in body, soul and will, his nerves shattered, Senhor José almost burst into tears like a child when he felt the needle go in and the slow, painful entry of the liquid into the muscle, I'm a wreck, he thought, and it was true, a poor feverish human animal, lying on a poor bed in a poor house, with the dirty clothes worn to carry out the crime hidden away, and a damp stain on the floor that seemed never to dry. Turn over onto your back again, and let's have a look at those knees, said the nurse, and sighing, coughing, Senhor José obeyed, heaving himself around again, and now, bending forwards, he can see the nurse rolling up his pyjama legs above the knee, he can see him removing the dirty plasters, dabbing peroxide on them and very carefully and slowly unsticking them, fortunately he's a real professional, the bag he carries with him is a veritable first-aid kit, he has a cure for almost everything. When he saw the wounds, the look on his face was that of someone unconvinced by Senhor José's explanation, that business about a fall, his experience of grazes and bruises even led him to remark with unconscious perspicacity, Anyone would think you'd been rubbing your knees against a wall, I told you. I fell, Did you tell your boss about this, It's nothing to do with work, a person can have a fall without telling his superiors, Unless the nurse they've called in to give you an injection has to do some extra work, Which I didn't ask for, No, that's true you didn't, but if tomorrow you come down with a serious infection because of these wounds, then who's going to get blamed for neglect and lack of professionalism, me, besides, the boss likes to know everything, that's his way of pretending that he doesn't care about anything, All right, I'll tell him tomorrow, I would advise you most strongly to do so, that way the report will be confirmed, What report, Mine, I can't see that a few simple grazes can be significant enough to be mentioned in a report, Even the simplest graze is significant, Once mine have healed they'll leave nothing but a few small scars that will disappear in time, Ah, yes, wounds heal over on the body, but in the report they always stay open, they neither close up nor disappear, I don't understand, How long have you been working at the Central Registry, Going on twenty-six years, How many Registrars have you had up until now, Including this one, three, And you've never noticed anything, Noticed what, You've never twigged, I don't know what you mean, Is it or is it not true that the

Registrars have very little to do, It's true, everyone says so, Then it's time you knew that, in the many empty hours they enjoy while their staff are working, their main occupation is collecting information about their subordinates, all kinds of information, they've been doing it for as long as the Central Registry has existed, one after the other, from the very beginning. Senhor José shuddered, which did not pass unnoticed by the nurse, You shuddered, he said, Yes, I did, Just so that you have a clearer idea of what I'm telling you, even that shudder must appear in my report, But it won't, No, it won't, I know why, Tell me, Because then you would have to say that the shudder occurred when you were telling me that the bosses collect information about the staff at the Central Registry and the boss would be bound to want to know why you had that conversation with me and also how a nurse came to know about such a confidential matter, so confidential that in twenty-five years of working in the Central Registry I have never heard anything about it, There's a lot of the confidant in nurses, although rather less so than with doctors, Are you insinuating that the Registrar confides in you, I'm not saying that he does, I'm not even insinuating that he should, I simply take orders, So then you just have to follow them, No, you're wrong, I have to do a great deal more than just follow them, I have to interpret them, Why, Because there's usually a difference between what he tells me to do and what he actually wants, He sent you here so that you could give me an injection, That's how it would appear, And what did you see in this case, apart from what it appears to be, You can't imagine the number of things you can discover by looking at someone's wounds, You only saw them by chance, You can never discount chance, it's a great help, What did you discover in my wounds then, That you grazed them on a wall, I fell, So you said, Information like that, always supposing that it's true, wouldn't be of much help to the Registrar, It doesn't matter to me whether it is or not, I just write the reports, He already knows about the flu, But not about the wounds on your knees, He knows about the damp stain on the floor too, But not about the shudder, If you've nothing further to do here, I'd be grateful if you'd leave, I'm tired, I need to sleep, You must eat first, don't forget, I hope your supper hasn't gone completely cold after all this talking You don't need much food when you're just lying in bed, But you. need some, Was it the Registrar who told you to bring me some food, Do you know anyone else who might have done it, Yes, if she knew where I lived, Who, An elderly lady who lives in a ground-floor apartment Wounds on the knees a sudden unexplained shudder an old lady in a ground-floor apartment, Yes ground floor right, This would be the most important report I've ever written in my life if I wrote it You're not going to write it though, Yes I am, but only to say that I gave you an injection, Thank you for cleaning my wounds, Of all the things I was taught, that's what I'm best at. After the nurse had left, Senhor José remained lying down for a few more minutes, not moving, recovering his calm and his strength. It had proved a difficult dialogue, with traps and false doors swinging open at every step, the slightest slip could have dragged him into a full and complete confession if his mind had not been attentive to the multiple meanings of the words he carefully pronounced, especially those that appeared to have only one meaning, those are the ones you have to be most careful with. Contrary to what is generally believed, meaning and sense were never the samething, meaning shows itself at once, direct, literal, explicit, enclosed in

itself, univocal, if you like, while sense cannot stay still, it seethes with second, third and fourth senses, radiating out in different directions that divide and subdivide into branches and branchlets, until they disappear from view, the sense of every word is like a star hurling spring tides out into space, cosmic winds, magnetic perturbations, afflictions.

At last, Senhor José got out of bed, put his feet in his slippers and drew on the dressing gown that he also used as an extra blanket on cold nights. Although gripped by hunger, he opened the door and looked out into the Central Registry. He could feel within himself a strange boldness, a feeling of absence, as if many days had passed since the last time he had been there. Nothing had changed though, there was the long counter where they dealt with petitioners and supplicants, beneath them the drawers where they kept the index cards of the living, then the eight tables for the clerks, the four for the senior clerks, the two for the deputies, the large desk belonging to the Registrar with the light above it still on, the huge shelves reaching up as far as the ceiling, the petrified darkness on the side inhabited by the dead. Although there was no one in the Central Registry, Senhor José locked the door, there was no one in the Central Registry, but still he locked the door. Thanks to the new plasters that the nurse had put on his knees, he could walk more easily, the dressing no longer pulled on his wounds. He sat down at the table, undid the package, there were two pans, one on top of the other, first the soup and below it a dish of meat and potatoes, still warm. He ate the soup eagerly, then, unhurriedly, finished off the meat and potatoes. I'm lucky to have a boss like him, he murmured, remembering the nurse's words, if it weren't for him, I'd be stuck here dying of hunger and neglect, like a lost dog. Yes, I'm lucky, he repeated, as if he needed to convince himself of what he had just said. Feeling restored, he returned to bed, first visiting the cubicle that served as his bathroom. He was just about to fall asleep when he remembered the notebook in which he had set down the first stages of his search. I'll write it tomorrow, he said, but this new urgency was almost as pressing as that of eating, which was why he went to fetch the notebook. Then, sitting on the bed, wearing his dressing gown, his pyjama jacket buttoned up to the neck and bundled up in blankets, he picked up the story where he had left off. The Registrar said to me, If you're not ill, how do you explain the poor work you've been doing recently, I don't know, sir, perhaps it's because I haven't been sleeping well. Assisted by his fever, he continued writing long into the night.

It took not three days but a week for Senhor José's fever to subside and for his cough to get better. The nurse came every day to give him an injection and to bring him some food, the doctor came every other day, but this extraordinary assiduousness, on the doctor's part that is, should not lead us to any hasty conclusions about some imagined standard of efficiency among health officials and home visits, since it was quite simply the consequence of a clear-cut order from the head of the Central Registry, Doctor, treat that man as if you were treating me, he's important. The doctor did not understand the reasons behind this evidently favoured treatment that he was being asked to administer, still less the lack of objectivity of the value judgement expressed, he had occasionally visited the Registrar's own house for professional reasons, and he had seen his comfortable, civilised way of life, an inner world that bore no resemblance whatsoever to the rough hovel of this permanently ill-shaven Senhor José who appeared not even to have a change of sheets. Senhor José did have sheets, he wasn't that poor, but, for reasons known only to him, he rejected out of hand the nurse's offer to air the mattress for him and replace the sheets, for they stank of sweat and fever, It'll only take me five minutes and the bed will be like new, No, I'm fine as I am, don't worry, It's all part of my job you know, Like I said, I'm fine as I am. Senhor José could not reveal to anyone's eyes that he was hiding between the mattress and the base of the bed the school records of an unknown woman and a notebook containing the story of his break-in at the school where she had studied as both a child and a young girl. To put them somewhere else, amid the files he used for his clippings about famous people, for example, would immediately resolve the difficulty, but the sense of defending a secret with his own body was too strong, too thrilling even, for Senhor José to give it up. In order not to have to discuss the matter again with the nurse, or with the doctor, who, although he made no comment, had already cast a critical glance over the crumpled sheets and visibly wrinkled his nose at the smell, Senhor José got up one night and, making a supreme effort, he himself changed the sheets. And so as not to give either the doctor or the nurse the slightest excuse to reopen the matter and, who knows, go and report the clerks incorrigible lack of hygiene to the Registrar, he went to the bathroom, shaved and washed as best he could, then took an old but clean pair of pyjamas from a drawer and went back to bed. He felt so pleased with himself and so restored that, like someone playing a game with himself, he decided to set down in his notebook an explicit, detailed account of all the hygienic preparations and treatments he had just put himself through. His health was returning, as the doctor was quick to tell the Registrar The man is cured in another two days he can go back to work without any danger of a relapse. The Registrar said only Good but with distracted air as if he "were thinking about something else.

Senhor José was cured, but he had lost a lot of weight, despite the bread and victuals brought regularly by the nurse, albeit only once a day, but quite sufficient in quantity to maintain an adult body not subject to any exertions. One has to bear in mind, however, the debilitating effect of fever and prolonged sweating on the adipose tissues, especially when, as in this case, there wasn't much of them to start with. Personal remarks were frowned upon in the Central Registry, especially if in any way connected

with people's state of health, which is why Senhor José's frail appearance and extreme thinness were not the object of any comment on the part of colleagues or superiors, that is, of any spoken comments, for the way they looked at him was fairly eloquent in their common expression of a kind of scornful commiseration, which other people, unfamiliar with the customs of the place, would have erroneously interpreted as a discreet and silent reserve. So that people would see how troubled he was to have been absent from work for so many days, Senhor José was first in line at the door of the Central Registry in the morning, awaiting the arrival of the newest deputy, whose job it was to open the door and to close it at the end of the day. The original key, a real work of art by an old Baroque engraver, as well as a physical symbol of authority, of which the deputy's key was merely an austere, inferior copy, was in the possession of the Registrar, though he apparently never used it, either because of the weight and complexity of the design, which made it awkward to carry around, or because, according to some unwritten hierarchical protocol, in effect since the remotest of times, he always had to be the last to enter the building. One of the many mysteries of life in the Central Registry, which really would be worth investigating if the matter of Senhor José and the unknown woman had not absorbed all our attention, was how the staff, despite the traffic jams afflicting the city, always managed to arrive at work in the same order, first the clerks, regardless of length of service, then the deputy who opened the door, then the senior clerks, in order of precedence, then the oldest deputy and, finally, the Registrar, who arrives when he has to arrive and does not have to answer to anyone. Anyway, the fact stands recorded.

The feeling of scornful commiseration which, as we have said, greeted Senhor José's return to work, lasted until the arrival of the Registrar, half an hour after the office had opened, and was instantly replaced by a feeling of envy, understandable in the circumstances, but, fortunately, not manifested in words or deeds. What else could one expect, the human soul being what we know it to be, though we cannot claim to know everything. A rumour had been going around the Central Registry, slipping in through the back door, so to speak, and whispered in corners, that the Registrar had been unusually concerned about Senhor José's bout of flu, even going so far as to have the nurse bring him food, as well as visiting him in his house at least once, and during office hours too, in front of everyone, who knows, he may well have visited him again. It is easy, therefore, to imagine the suppressed outrage, in every rank, when the Registrar, even before going to his own desk, stopped beside Senhor José and asked him if he was now completely recovered from his illness. The outrage was all the greater because this was the second time it had happened, they could all remember that other occasion, not so long ago, when the boss had asked Senhor José if his insomnia had improved, as if Senhor José's insomnia was, as far as the normal running of the Central Registry was concerned, a matter of life or death. Hardly able to credit what they were hearing, the staff witnessed a conversation between equals, utterly absurd however you looked at it, with Senhor José thanking the Registrar for his kindness, even referring openly to the food, which, in the strict atmosphere of the Central Registry, had all the force of a profanity and obscenity and the Registrar explaining that he couldn't possibly have abandoned him to the

wretched fate of those who live alone without having anyone to give him a bowl of soup and smooth his sheets. Loneliness, Senhor José, declared the Registrar solemnly never made for good company all the great sadnesses, great temptations and great mistakes are almost always the result of being alone in life without a prudent friend to advise us when we are troubled by something more serious than our normal everyday problems, Well I don't know that I would say I was actually sad, sir, replied Senhor José, perhaps I am rather melancholy by nature, but that's hardly a defect, and as for temptations, well, I have to say that I am little inclined to them either by my age or my circumstances, I mean, I don't seek them out and they don't seek me, And what about mistakes, Are you referring to mistakes at work, sir, No, I'm referring to mistakes in general, mistakes at work are departmental mistakes which the department ultimately resolves, All I can say is that I've never harmed anyone, at least not knowingly, And what about mistakes committed against yourself, I must have made many of those, perhaps that's why I'm alone, In order to make more mistakes, Only those born of loneliness, sir. Senhor José, who, as was his duty, had got to his feet as the Registrar approached, suddenly felt his legs buckle and a wave of sweat sweep over his body. He went pale, his hands anxiously sought the support of his desk, but that support was not enough, Senhor José had to sit down on his chair, murmuring, Excuse me, sir, excuse me. The Registrar regarded him for some seconds with an impenetrable look on his face and went to his desk. He called over the deputy responsible for Senhor José's section and gave him a muttered order, adding, more audibly, There's no need to go through the official channels, which meant that the instructions the deputy had just received, intended for a clerk, should, against all the rules, customs and traditions, be carried out by himself. The hierarchical chain had been subverted once before, when the Registrar had ordered this same deputy to take Senhor José the pills, but that infraction could be justified by the suspicion that the senior clerk responsible would prove incapable of satisfactorily carrying out the mission which consisted not so much in taking a few anti-flu tablets to a sick man as having a look around the house and reporting back. A senior clerk would find the damp stain on the floor perfectly acceptable that is unremarkable and easily explained by the wintry weather they had been having at the time, and would probably not even have noticed the record cards on the bedside table, he would return to the Central Registry in the happy belief that he had done his duty, declaring to the Registrar, Nothing unusual to report, sir. It must be said, however, that the two deputies, and this one in particular, more directly involved in the process by his active participation in it, realised that the Registrar's behaviour was determined by an objective, a strategy, a central idea. They couldn't imagine what that idea or objective might be, but all their experience and knowledge of their boss told them that, in this affair, every word and every deed must inevitably point to one end, and that Senhor José, placed by his own actions or by a chance circumstance on the path towards that end, either was merely an unwittingly useful instrument or was himself its unexpected and entirely surprising cause. Such opposing arguments, such contradictory feelings, meant that the order, from the tone in which it was subsequently communicated to Senhor José, sounded far more like a favour the Registrar had ordered to be asked of him than the clear, categorical instruction that had effectively been issued,

Senhor José, said the deputy, the Registrar is of the opinion that, given your fainting fit of a moment ago, your health is not sufficiently recovered for you to come to work, It wasn't a fainting fit, I didn't lose consciousness, it was just a momentary weakness, Well, weakness or fainting fit, momentary or lasting, what the Central Registry wants is for you to make a complete recovery, I'll work sitting down as much as I can, in a few days' time I'll be right as rain, The Registrar thinks it would be best if you took a short holiday, not your whole twenty days, of course, perhaps ten, ten days to rest and regain your strength, take it easy, go for a few strolls round the city, there are gardens to visit, parks, and the weather's glorious just now, a proper period of convalescence, we won't even recognise you when you come back. Senhor José looked at the deputy in amazement, this really wasn't the kind of conversation a deputy had with a mere clerk, there was something almost indecent about it. Obviously the Registrar wanted him to go on holiday, which was, in itself, intriguing, but, as if that were not enough, he was showing an unusual, indeed disproportionate, interest in his health. None of this corresponded to the usual patterns of behaviour in the Central Registry, where holiday plans were always calculated with meticulous precision in order to achieve, by pondering multiple factors, some of which were known only to the Registrar, a fair distribution of the time set aside for annual leisure. It was unheard of for the Registrar to ignore the plans already made for the current year and simply send a clerk home. Senhor José was confused, you could see it in his face. He could sense his colleagues' perplexed eyes on his back, he could feel the deputy's growing impatience with what must seem to him baseless indecision, and he was about to say, Yes, sir, like someone simply obeying an order, when suddenly his face lit up, he had just seen what those ten days of freedom could mean, ten days during which he could carry out his investigations without being tied down to the servitude of work, to a timetable, never mind about parks, gardens or convalescence, God bless whoever invented flu, and so Senhor José smiled when he said, Yes, sir, he should have been more discreet in the way he expressed himself, you never know what a deputy might go and tell the boss, In my opinion, he reacted very strangely, first, he seemed upset, or as if he hadn't quite understood what I'd said, then, it was as if he'd won first prize in the lottery, he didn't seem the same person, Do you have any evidence that he's a gambling man, I don't think so, it was just a manner of speaking, Then there must be some other reason. Senhor José was already saying to the deputy, It would really suit me to have a few days off, I must thank the Registrar, I'll pass your thanks on to him, Perhaps I should do it personally You know perfectly well that is not the custom Nevertheless, considering the exceptional nature of the matter, and having said those, bureaucratically speaking, most pertinent of words, Senhor José turned to where the Registrar was sitting, he wasn't expecting him to be looking in his direction, still less that he would have heard the whole conversation, which was what he doubtless intended to indicate with that abrupt gesture of the hand, at once bored and imperious, No ridiculous words of gratitude, please, just fill out the form and leave.

Back at home, Senhor José's prime concern was for the clothes kept in the niche that he used as a wardrobe. They had been dirty before, but now were transformed into pure

filth, exuding a sour smell mingled with a whiff of mould, there was even mildew growing in the cuffs of his pants, imagine it, a dank bundle, jacket, shirt, trousers, socks, underwear, all wrapped in a raincoat, which, at the time, had been dripping wet, what condition would you expect to find it in after a whole week. He stuffed the clothes into a large plastic bag, made sure that the record cards and the notebook were still safely tucked away between the mattress and the base of the bed, the notebook at the head, the record cards at the foot, he checked that the communicating door with the Central Registry was locked, and finally, weary, but with his mind at rest, he set off for a nearby laundry of which he was a customer, although hardly one of the most frequent. The woman there could not or did not care to conceal a reproving look when she emptied out the contents of the bag onto the counter, I'm sorry but anyone would think these clothes had been dragged through the mud, You're not far wrong, since Senhor José had to He, he decided to do so within the bounds of possibility, Two weeks ago, when I was bringing you these clothes to be cleaned, the bag suddenly burst and all the clothes fell into a big muddy puddle caused by the road-work they were doing at the time, you remember how much it rained then, And why didn't you bring the clothes in at once, I was confined to bed with the flu, I couldn't risk leaving the house, I could have caught pneumonia, It's going to cost you quite a bit more, it'll have to go in the machine twice, and even then, Never mind, And these trousers, have you seen the state these trousers are in, is it really worth having them cleaned, I mean the knees are all worn, it looks as if you'd been rubbing against a wall in them. Senhor José had not noticed the terrible state in which the climb had left his poor trousers, almost worn through at the knees, with a small tear on one of the legs, a serious matter for a person like him, so ill provided with clothes. Is there nothing you can do about it, he asked, Oh, I can do something about it, but they'll have to be sent to an invisible mender, I don't know of any, Oh, we can deal with that for you, but it's not going to be cheap, these invisible menders charge quite a bit, It'll be better than being without a pair of trousers, Or else we could patch them, If they were patched, I'd only be able to use them at home, I'd never be able to wear them to work, No, of course not, You see I work for the Central Registry, Ah, you work for the Central Registry, said the woman with a new tone of respect in her voice that Senhor José thought it best to ignore, regretting having been so indiscreet as to admit for the first time where he worked, a truly professional burglar would not go around scattering clues like that, what if the woman in the laundry were married to the man in the hardware store where Senhor José went to buy the glass cutter or the butcher's where he bought the lard, and then that night, during one of those banal conversations with which husbands and wives pass the evening, one of them were suddenly to mention these small episodes from daily commercial life, other criminals, convinced that they were above all suspicion, have gone to prison for far less. Anyway, there didn't seem to be much danger there, not unless the woman was concealing some abject, treacherous intention behind the words she was saying to him now, with a kind smile, that this time they'd give him a special price, with the laundry paying for the invisible mender, Seeing that the gentleman works for the Central Registry, she explained. Senhor José thanked her politely but uneffusively and left. He felt unhappy. He was leaving too many trails about the city,

talking with too many people, this was not the kind of investigation he had imagined, to tell the truth he hadn't actually imagined anything, the idea had just occurred to him now, the idea of looking for and finding the unknown woman with no one knowing anything about his activities, as if it were a question of one invisible being seeking out another. Instead of that closed secret, that absolute mystery, there were already two people, the wife with the jealous husband and the elderly lady in the ground-floor apartment, who knew what he was up to, and that, in itself, was already a danger, for example, let us suppose that either of them, with the praiseworthy aim of helping him in his search, as befits a good citizen, should appear at the Central Registry during his absence, I'd like to speak to Senhor José, Senhor José isn't here, he's on holiday, Oh, that's a shame, I've got some important information for him about the person he was looking for, What information, what person, Senhor José didn't even want to think about what would follow, the rest of the conversation between the woman with the jealous husband and the senior clerk, I found a journal underneath a loose floorboard in my room, You mean a magazine, No, sir, a journal, a diary, the kind of thing some people like to keep, I used to keep one before I got married, And what's that got to do with us, here at the Central Registry we're only interested in knowing who's born and who dies, Perhaps the diary I found belongs to some relative of the person that Senhor José has been looking for, I didn't know Senhor José was looking for anyone, besides, it's not a matter that affects the Central Registry the Central Registry does not get involved in the private lives of its staff, It's not private, Senhor José told me he was acting on behalf of the Central Registry, Wait there and I'll call the deputy, but when the deputy came over to the counter, the elderly lady from the ground-floor apartment was already leaving, life had taught her that the best way to protect your own secrets is to respect other people's, When Senhor José gets back from his holidays, would you mind telling him that the old lady from the ground-floor apartment was here, Don't you want to leave your name, It's not necessary, he'll know who I am. Senhor José could breathe easily, the lady in the ground-floor apartment was discretion itself, she would never tell the deputy that she had just received a letter from her goddaughter, The flu has addled my brains, he thought, these are just fantasies, there aren't any diaries hidden beneath floorboards, and, after a silence of so many years, she wouldn't suddenly think to write a letter to her godmother, just as well the old lady had the good sense not to give her name, the Central Registry would only have to get hold of that one loose thread to find out everything, the copying of the record cards, the forging of the letter, it would be as easy for them as putting together a jigsaw puzzle while looking at the picture on the lid of the box. Senhor José went back home, on that first day he preferred not to follow the advice the deputy had given him, to go for walks, go to a garden and feel the good sun on his pale convalescent's face, in a word, to recover the strength that the fever had drained from him. He needed to decide what steps he should take from then on, but he needed above all to quell an anxiety. He had left his small house there at the mercy of the Central Registry, clinging to the monstrous wall as if it were about to be swallowed up by it. There must have been some remnant of fever lingering in his brain for that idea to occur to him, that this was what had happened to the other staff houses, all devoured by the

Central Registry so that it could extend its walls. Senhor José quickened his step, if, when he got there, the house had disappeared, and the record cards and the notebook along with it, he didn't even want to imagine such a misfortune, the efforts of weeks all reduced to nothing, the dangers he had gone through all in vain. Curious people would be there asking him if he had lost anything of value in the disaster, and he would say yes, Some papers, and they would ask again, Shares, Bonds, Credits, that's the first thing that would occur to ordinary people, people with no spiritual horizons, their thoughts are all concerned with material interests and gains, he would say yes, mentally giving different meanings to those words, they would be his share in other people's lives, the bonds he had begun to form, the credit he had gained.

The house was there, but it seemed much smaller, unless the Central Registry had grown in size in the last few hours. Senhor José went in, lowering his head, even though it wasn't necessary to do so, the street door was the same height it had always been, and, as far as one could see, those shares, bonds and credits had not made him grow physically in size. He went and listened at the communicating door, not because he expected to hear the sound of voices from the other side, it was the custom at the Central Registry to work in silence, but to assuage the confused feelings of suspicion he had felt ever since the Registrar had ordered him to take some holiday time. Then he went and lifted the mattress on the bed, removed the record cards and set them out in chronological order on the table, from the oldest to the most recent, thirteen small cardboard rectangles, a succession of faces going from small child to larger child, from the beginning of adolescence to near-womanhood. During those years the family had moved three times, but never so far away that she had to change schools. There was no point drawing up complicated plans of action, the only thing that Senhor José could do now was to go to the address on the last card.

He went there the following morning, but he decided not to go up and ask the present occupants of the apartment and the buildings other tenants if they had known the girl in the photograph. It was more than likely that they would tell him they hadn't, that they had been living there only a short time, or that they didn't remember, You know how it is, people come and go, I really can't remember anything about the family, it's not worth puzzling your head about, and if someone did say yes and did seem to have a vague recollection, they would probably only go on to add that their relationship had been the usual one among the polite classes, So you never saw them again, Senhor José would ask, No, never, after they moved out, I never saw them again, That's a shame, I've told you everything I know, I'm sorry not to be of more use to the Central Registry. The good fortune of immediately finding the lady in the ground-floor apartment, so well informed, so close to the original sources, could not possibly happen twice, but only much later, when none of what is being related here was of any importance anymore, did Senhor José discover that here too the same good fortune had acted prodigiously in his favour, saving him from the most disastrous of consequences. Unbeknownst to him, by some diabolical coincidence, one of the deputies at the Central Registry lived in that building, you can imagine the terrible scene, our trusting Senhor José knocking at the door, showing the index card, possibly even the forged letter of authority, and the woman who came to the door saying treacherously, Come back later when my husbands at home, he always deals with matters like this, and Senhor José would go back, his heart full of hope, and would come face-to-face with a furious deputy, who would arrest him on the spot, literally not figuratively, for the Central Registry's regulations permit of neither precipitate actions nor improvisation, the worst thing being that we don't even know what all the regulations are. Having resolved this time, as if his guardian angel had been whispering the advice urgently in his ear, to turn his attention to the shops in the area, Senhor José had unwittingly saved himself from the worst disgrace in his long career as a civil servant. He contented himself, then, with looking up at the windows of the apartment where the unknown woman had lived when she was young, and in order to get properly inside the skin of a real investigator, he imagined her leaving for school, carrying her satchel, walking to the bus stop and waiting there, it wasn't worth following her, Senhor José knew perfectly well where she was going, he had the relevant proof hidden between the mattress and the base of his bed. A quarter of an hour later, her father left, he sets off in the opposite direction, that's why he doesn't leave with his daughter when she goes to school, unless it's simply that father and daughter don't like to walk along together and give this as an excuse or give no excuse at all, but there will be some kind of tacit agreement between the two, so that the neighbours won't notice their mutual indifference. Now Senhor José needs to be patient for a little while longer, until the mother goes out shopping, as usually happens in families, that way he will know where he should make his inquiries, the nearest commercial establishment three buildings along is that chemist's shop but Senhor José immediately doubts that he will obtain any useful information there, the assistant is a young man young in age and young as an employee, he himself says so, I don't know, I've only been here two years. But Senhor José won't be discouraged by that, he has read more than enough newspapers and magazines, not to

mention the lessons life has been teaching him, to know that these investigations, carried out in the old way, take a lot of work, involve a lot of walking, pounding streets and pavements, going up stairs, knocking at doors, coming down stairs, the same questions asked a thousand times, identical replies, almost always in a reserved tone of voice, I don't know, I've never heard of such a person, only very rarely does it happen that from the back room there emerges an older pharmacist who has heard the conversation and is, by nature, extremely inquisitive, Can I help you, he asked, I'm looking for someone, replied Senhor José, at the same time raising his hand to his inside jacket pocket in order to show the letter of authority. He did not complete the movement, a sudden feeling of unease stopped him, this time it wasn't the work of any guardian angel, what made him slowly withdraw his hand was the look in the pharmacist's eye, a look that was more like a dagger, a perforating drill, no one would think it, with his lined face and his white hair, but the effect of that look is to put even the most ingenuous of creatures immediately on guard, which is probably why the pharmacist's curiosity is never satisfied, the more he wants to know the less people tell him. That is what happened with Senhor José. He did not even show him the letter of authority, he did not say that he had come on behalf of the Central Registry, he merely took from his other pocket the girl's most recent school record card, which, fortunately, he had remembered to bring with him, Our school needs to find this lady in order to give her a diploma that she failed to pick up from the secretary's office, Senhor José felt a pang of pleasure, almost enthusiasm, at the exercise of inventive abilities he had imagined he had, so sure of himself that he remained unperturbed by the pharmacist's question, And you're only looking for her now, all these years later, It's quite possible she won't be interested, he replied, but the school is under an obligation to do all it can to make sure the diploma is delivered, And you've waited all this time for her to appear, To tell you the truth, we didn't even notice, it was a lamentable lack of attention on our part, a bureaucratic error, if you like, but it's never too late to right a wrong, It will definitely be too late if the lady's already dead, We have reason to believe that she's still alive, Why, We began by consulting the records, Senhor José was careful not to mention the words Central Registry, that was what saved him, because, at least at that moment, it meant that the pharmacist did not suddenly recall that a deputy registrar from the said Central Registry was one of his customers and lived three buildings down. For the second time, Senhor José had escaped the ultimate punishment. It's true that the deputy only rarely went into the chemist's, such purchases, and indeed all other purchases, apart from condoms, which the deputy was morally scrupulous enough to go and buy elsewhere, were made by his wife, so it's not that easy to imagine a conversation between the pharmacist and him, although one can't exclude the possibility of another conversation, the pharmacist saying to the deputy's wife, There was some school administrator in here looking for someone who used to live in the building where you live, at one point he mentioned consulting the records it was only after he'd gone that I thought it strange that he should have said records rather than Central Registry, it seemed to me that he had something to hide, there was even a moment when he raised his hand to his inside jacket pocket as if he were about to show me something, but he had second thoughts and instead took a school record card from

his other pocket, I've been racking my brains to think what it could all be about, I think you should talk to your husband, you never know, there are some funny people about, Perhaps it's the same man I noticed the day before yesterday, standing on the pavement looking up at our windows, A middle-aged chap, a bit younger than me, who looked as if he'd only recently recovered from an illness, That's the one, You know I've got an instinct for these things, it never fails, there aren't many people can pull the wool over my eyes, It's a shame he didn't knock at my door, I'd have told him to come back in the afternoon, when my husband was home, then we'd know who he was and what he wanted, I'm going to keep an eye out in case he shows up again, And I'll make a point of mentioning it to my husband. Which she did, but she didn't tell the whole story, she unwittingly left out the most important detail, perhaps the most important of all, she did not say that the man who had been hanging around the building looked as if he had only recently recovered from an illness. Accustomed to making links between causes and effects, since that is essentially what underpins the system of forces which, from the beginning of time, has ruled in the Central Registry, where everything was, is and will continue to be forever linked to everything, what is still alive to what is already dead, what is dying to what is being born, all beings to all other beings, all things to all other things, even when the only thing they seem to have in common, both beings and things, is what at first sight appears to separate them, the wise deputy would immediately have thought of Senhor José, the clerk who, with the inexplicably benevolent compliance of the Registrar, had been behaving very strangely lately. Finding the end of the thread and then untangling the whole skein would be only a step. That will not happen, though, Senhor José will not be seen again in that area. Of the ten different shops he went into to ask questions, including the pharmacy, in only three of them did he find someone who claimed to remember the girl and her parents, the picture on the report card jogged their memories, unless, of course, it merely took the place of their memories, it's quite likely that the people questioned simply wanted to be nice and did not want to disappoint this man who looked as if he had just got over a nasty bout of flu and who spoke to them of a school diploma issued twenty years earlier and never delivered. When Senhor José got home, he felt exhausted and discouraged, this first stage in the new phase of his investigations had indicated no route along which to continue, quite the contrary, it seemed to have placed before him an unscalable wall. The poor man threw himself down on the bed wondering why he didn't do what the pharmacist, with ill-disguised sarcasm, had suggested, If I were you, I would already have solved the problem, How, asked Senhor José, I'd have looked in the phone book, that's the easiest way of finding someone these days, Thanks for the suggestion, but we've already done that, and the lady's name isn't there, replied Senhor José, thinking that would shut the man up, but the pharmacist returned to the charge, Go to the tax office then, they know everything about everyone. Senhor José stood staring at this spoilsport, struggling to disguise his embarrassment, the lady in the ground-floor apartment hadn't thought of that, then he managed to murmur a response, That's a good idea, I'll tell the head teacher. He left the pharmacy feeling furious with himself, as if, at the last moment, he had lacked the presence of mind to respond to an insult, he was all set to go back home without asking

any more questions, but then, resigned, he thought, The wine has been poured, I must drink it, he did not, like someone else, say, Take this cup away from me, what you want is to kill me The second shop was a hardware store the third a butcher's, the fourth stationer's, the fifth an electrical goods shop the sixth a haberdasher's the usual routine suburban selection, and so on to the tenth shop, fortunately, his luck held, after the pharmacist no one else mentioned the tax office or the telephone directory: Now lying on his back, with his hands interlaced behind his head, Senhor José looks up at the ceiling and asks What am I going to do now and the ceiling replied, Nothing, your knowing her last address, I mean, the last address she lived at during her schooldays, gave you no clue as to how to continue your search, of course, you could go to earlier addresses, but that would be a waste of time, if the most recent shopkeepers couldn't help you, the others certainly won't be able to, So you think I should give up then, You've probably got no option, unless you go to the tax office, it shouldn't be difficult with that letter of authority you've got, besides they're civil servants like you, It's a forgery, Yes, you're right, you'd probably better not use it, I wouldn't like to be in your skin if one day they catch you redhanded, You couldn't be in my skin, you're just a plaster ceiling, I know, but what you're seeing of me is also a skin, besides, the skin is only what we want others to see of us, underneath it not even we know who we are, I'll hide the letter, If I were you, I'd tear it up or burn it, I'll put it with the bishop's papers, where I kept it before, Well, it's up to you, I don't like the tone you said that in, it doesn't augur at all well, The wisdom of ceilings is infinite, If you're such a wise ceiling, then give me an idea, Keep looking at me, sometimes it works.

The idea that the ceiling gave to Senhor José was to cut his holiday short and go back to work, You tell the boss that you're much stronger now and ask him to reserve the other days for another occasion, that is if you ever find a way out of the hole you've got yourself into, with all doors shut and not a single clue to follow, The Registrar is going to find it strange a member of staff going in to work when he's not obliged to and without being called, You've done stranger things than that recently, I lived a peaceful life before this absurd obsession, looking for a woman who doesn't even know I exist, But you know that she exists, that's the problem, I'd better just give up once and for all, Maybe, maybe, anyway just remember that not only the wisdom of ceilings is infinite, life's surprises are too, What do you mean by that tired old cliché, That the days go by and never come again, That's an even tired cliché, don't tell me that the wisdom of ceilings consists only in clichés like that, said Senhor José scornfully, You know nothing about life if you think there is more than that to know, replied the ceiling and fell silent. Senhor José got off the bed, hid the letter in the wardrobe, among the bishop's papers, then went to fetch his notebook and began describing the frustrating events of the morning, laying particular emphasis on the pharmacist's unpleasant manner and his gimlet eye. At the end of the report he wrote, as if the idea had been his, I think it's best that I go back to work. When he was putting away the notebook underneath the mattress, he remembered that he hadn't had any lunch, his head told him, not his stomach, if, over a period of time, people forget to eat, they get out of the habit of listening to the clock of hunger. If Senhor José

were to continue his holiday, he wouldn't in the least mind going back to bed for the rest of the day, skipping lunch and supper, sleeping all night if he could, or taking refuge in the voluntary torpor of someone who has decided to turn his back on the disagreeable facts of life. But he had to feed his body in order to work the following day, he would hate it if weakness made him break out in a cold sweat again and suffer ridiculous dizzy spells that would be greeted with the feigned commiseration of his colleagues and the impatience of his superiors. He beat two eggs, added a few slices of chorizo sausage, a generous pinch of sea salt, put some oil in a frying pan, and waited until it had heated to just the right point, that was his one culinary talent, otherwise he resorted to opening cans. He ate the omelette slowly in small geometrically precise pieces, making it last as long as possible, not from any gastronomical pleasure, but just to fill the time. Above all, he did not want to think. His imaginary and metaphysical dialogue with the ceiling had served to disguise his complete mental disorientation the feeling of panic provoked by the idea that he would now have nothing further to do in life, if as he had reason to fear the search for the unknown woman was over. He felt a hard knot in his throat, like when he was told off as a child and he was expected to cry, and he would resist, resist, until at last the tears came, as they came now. He pushed his plate away, rested his head on his folded arms and cried without shame, at least this time there was no one here to laugh at him. On these occasions, ceilings can do nothing to help people in distress, they must merely wait up there until the storm passes, until the soul has unburdened itself, until the body is rested. That is what happened to Senhor José. After a few moments, he felt better, he brusquely wiped away the tears with his shirtsleeve and went to wash his plate and the cutlery. He had the whole afternoon ahead of him and nothing to do. He considered going to visit the lady in the ground-floor apartment, to tell her more or less what had happened, but then he thought that it wasn't worth it, she had told him everything she knew, and perhaps she would finally ask him what the devil the Central Registry was up to going to so much trouble over one person, a woman of no importance, it would be an indecent lie, as well as arrant stupidity, to tell her that we are all equal in the eyes of the Central Registry, just as the sun is there for everyone each time it rises, there are things one should avoid saying to an older person if we don't want them to laugh in our faces. Senhor José went to a corner of the house to get an armful of magazines and old newspapers from which he had already cut out articles and photographs, he might have missed something interesting, or there might be an article about someone who seemed a promising candidate for the rocky road to fame. Senhor José was returning to his collections.

The person who seemed least surprised was the Registrar. Having, as usual, arrived when everyone else was already at their places working, he paused for three seconds beside Senhor José's desk, but he didn't say a word. Senhor José was expecting to be submitted to a thorough interrogation as to the reasons for his early return to work, but the Registrar merely listened to the explanations given by the deputy in charge of that section, whom he later dismissed with an abrupt wave of his right hand, his index finger and middle finger held stiffly together, the others slightly bent, which, according to the

gestural code of the Central Registry, meant that he did not care to hear another word on the matter. Caught between an initial expectation that he would be interrogated and relief at being left in peace, Senhor José struggled to clarify his ideas, to concentrate all his senses on the work that the senior clerk had placed on his desk, twenty or so birth certificates the information from each of which had to be transferred onto record cards and then filed away in the card-index system under the counter, in proper alphabetical order. It was a simple task, but a responsible one, which, fortunately for Senhor José, who was still weak in legs and head, could at least be carried out sitting down. The errors of copyists are the least excusable, there's no point in their coming to us and saying, I got distracted, on the contrary, recognising that one was distracted is the same as confessing that one was thinking about something else instead of giving full attention to the names and dates whose supreme importance lies in the fact that, in the present instance, it is those names and dates that give legal existence to the reality of existence. Especially the name of the person who was born. A simple error of transcription, a change in the initial letter of a surname for example, would mean that the index card would be put in the wrong place possibly far from where it should be as would inevitably happen in this Central Registry, where there are so many names, indeed where all the names are if the clerk who in times past had copied Senhor José's name onto the card had written José instead his mind confused by a similarity in pronunciation that verges on coincidence, there would be no end of work, involved, in trying to find the lost record card in order to write on it any of the three most commonly occurring notes marriage divorce death two more or less avoidable, the other not. That is why Senhor José copies with the greatest of care, letter by letter, these proofs of the existence of these new beings which have been entrusted to him, he has already transcribed sixteen birth certificates, now he is drawing the seventeenth towards him, he's preparing the record card, when his hand suddenly trembles, his eyes swim, beads of sweat appear on his forehead. The name before him, of a person of the female sex, is, in almost every detail, identical to that of the unknown woman, only the last name is different, and even then, the first letter is the same. It is highly likely that this card, bearing the name that it does, will have to be filed immediately after the other one, which is why Senhor José, like someone unable to control his impatience as the moment of a long-awaited encounter approaches, got up from his chair as soon as he had finished the transcription, ran to the appropriate drawer in the card index, nervously riffled through the cards, looked for and found the place. The unknown woman's card was not there. The fatal words immediately flashed up in Senhor José's head, the fulminating words, She's dead. Because Senhor José knows that the absence of a card from the card-index system inevitably means the death of the person whose name is on the card, he has lost count of the cards which he himself, in his twenty-five years as a civil servant, has removed from there and carried to the archive of the dead, but now he is refusing to accept the evidence that this could be the reason for the disappearance, some careless, incompetent colleague must have misfiled the card, perhaps it's a little further on a. little further back, Senhor José, out of desperation, wants to deceive himself, never, in all the centuries of the Central Registry's existence, has a card in this index system been misplaced there is only one possibility only one that the

woman might still be alive, and that is if her card is temporarily in the possession of one of the other clerks because some new piece of information is to be added to it, Perhaps she's got married again, thought Senhor José, and, for an instant, his unexpected irritation at the idea mitigated his disquiet. Then, barely noticing what he was doing, he placed the card onto which he had copied the details from the birth certificate in the place of the one that had disappeared, and, his legs trembling, he returned to his desk. He could not ask his colleagues if, by any chance, they had the woman's card, he could not walk around all their desks trying to get a glimpse of the papers they were working on, all he could do was watch the drawer in the card-index system to see if someone replaced the small cardboard rectangle taken from there by mistake or for a less routine reason than death. The hours passed, morning gave way to afternoon, Senhor José barely managed to eat a thing at lunchtime, he must have something wrong with his throat to be so easily afflicted by these knots, these tightnesses, these anxieties. During the whole day not one colleague went to open that drawer, not one lost card found its way back, the unknown woman was dead.

That night, Senhor José returned to the Central Registry. He took with him the flashlight and a hundred-yard roll of strong string. He had put a new battery in his flashlight that would suffice for several hours of continual use, but, more than chastened by the difficulties he had been obliged to confront during the dangerous break-in and theft at the school, Senhor José had learned that in life you can never be too careful, especially when you abandon the straight paths of honest behaviour and wander off down the tortuous shortcuts of crime. What if the little bulb were to blow, what if the lens that protects and intensifies the light were to come loose from the casing, what if the flashlight, with the battery lens and bulb intact, were to fall down a hole so that he couldn't reach it with his arm or even with a hook, then, not daring to use the real Ariadne's thread, despite the fact that the drawer in the Registrar's Office where it was kept, along with a powerful flashlight, was never locked, Senhor José will instead use an ordinary, rustic ball of string bought at the hardware store, and that string will lead back to the world of the living the person who, at this very moment, is preparing to enter the kingdom of the dead. As a member of the Central Registry, Senhor José has legitimate access to any documents in the civil register, which are, need we repeat, the very substance of his work, so some may think it strange that, when he found the card missing, he did not simply say to the senior clerk he worked under, I'm going to look for the card of a woman who died. For it would not be enough just to say that, he would have to give a reason that was both administratively sound and bureaucratically logical, the senior clerk would be bound to ask, What do you want it for, and Senhor José could hardly reply, To be quite sure that she's really dead, what would happen to the Central Registry if everyone started satisfying the same or similar curiosities, which were not only morbid but unproductive too. The worst that could come of Senhor José's nocturnal expedition would be that he would be unable to find the unknown woman's papers in the chaos that is the archive of the dead. Of course, at first, since we're dealing with a recent death, the papers should be at what was commonly termed the entrance, which is immediately problematic because of the impossibility of knowing exactly where the entrance to the archive of the dead is. It would be too simple to say, as do some stubborn optimists, that the space designated for the dead obviously begins where the space for the living ends, and vice versa, perhaps adding that, in the outside world, things are arranged in a similar fashion, given that, apart from exceptional events, albeit not that exceptional, such as natural disasters or wars, you don't normally see the dead mingling in the street with the living. Now, for both structural and non-structural reasons, this can in fact happen in the Central Registry. It and it does. As we have already explained from time to time when the congestion caused by the continual and irresistible accumulation of the dead begins to block the path of staff along the corridors and consequently to obstruct any documentary research they have no option but to demolish the wall at the rear and rebuild it a few yards farther back. However through an involuntary oversight on our part we failed to mention the two perverse effects of this congestion. First while the wall is being built it is inevitable that for lack of a space of their own at the back of the building the cards and files of the recently dead come dangerously close to, and, on the near side, even touch the files of the living, which are to be found on the far end of their respective shelves,

giving rise to an embarrassing fringe of confusion between those who are still living and those who are now dead. Second, once the wall has been built and the roof extended, and the filing away of the dead can at last return to normality, that same border conflict, as it were, will prevent, or, at the very least, prove extremely prejudicial to, the transport into the outer darkness of the dead intruders, if you'll pardon the expression. Added to these far from minor inconveniences is the fact that, without the knowledge of the Registrar or their colleagues, the two youngest clerks have no qualms, either because they have not been properly trained or because of a grave deficiency in their personal ethics, about simply sticking a dead person anywhere, without going to the trouble of seeing if there might be space inside the archive of the dead. If luck were not on Senhor José's side this time, if chance did not favour him, the adventure of breaking into the school, however risky, will have been child's play compared to what awaits him here.

One might ask why Senhor José needs a hundred-yard-long piece of string if the length of the Central Registry, despite successive extensions, is no more than eighty. That is the question of a person who imagines that one can do everything in life simply by following a straight line, that it is always possible to proceed from one place to another by the shortest route, perhaps some people in the outside world believe that they have done so, but here, where the living and the dead share the same space, sometimes, in order to find one of them, you have to make a lot of twists and turns, you have to skirt round mountains of bundles, columns of files, piles of cards, thickets of ancient remains, you have to walk down dark gulleys, between walls of grubby paper which, up above, actually touch, yards and yards of string will have to be unravelled, left behind, like a sinuous, subtle trail traced in the dust, there is no other way of knowing where you have to go next, there is no other way of finding your way back. Senhor José tied one end of the string to the leg of the Registrar's desk, not out of any lack of respect, but merely to gain a few yards, then tied the other end to his ankle, and, placing on the floor the ball of string, which unravelled with each step he took, he set off along one of the central corridors filled by the files of the living. His plan is to start his search at the far end, where the unknown woman's file and card should be, even though, for reasons already explained, it is highly unlikely that they will have been filed away correctly. As Senhor José is a civil servant from another age, trained in the old methods and disciplines, his strict character would be repelled by any collusion with the irresponsible habits of the new generation, by beginning the search in a place where a dead person would have been deposited only by a deliberate and scandalous infraction of basic archivistic rules. He knows that the main difficulty he is going to have to do battle with is the lack of light. Apart from the Registrar's desk, above which hangs the inevitable lamp giving off its usual dull light, the whole of the Central Registry is plunged in darkness, in dense shadows. Turning on other lights in the building, however dim they might be, would be too risky, a keen policeman doing his rounds of the area, or a good citizen, the sort who is concerned about the safety of the community, might spot the diffuse light through the high windows and immediately sound the alarm. Senhor José will, therefore, have only the feeble circle of light, which wavers before him in time to the rhythm of his

steps, but also because the hand holding the flashlight is trembling. There is an enormous difference between visiting the archive of the dead in normal working hours, with the presence behind you of your colleagues who although not particularly supportive as we have seen, would always come running if there were any real danger or if your nerve suddenly, irresistibly failed, especially if the Registrar said, Go and see what's happened to him, between that and venturing alone, in the middle of a black night, into the heart of those catacombs of humanity, surrounded by names, hearing the whisper of the papers, or a murmur of voices, for those who have ears to hear.

Senhor José has gone as far as the end of the shelves of the living, he is now looking for a passage along which he can reach the far end of the Central Registry, in theory, and in accordance with the way the space was laid out, it should follow the Dissecting longitudinal line on the plan, the imaginary Une that divides the rectangular design of the building into two equal parts, but the avalanches of files, which are always happening however firmly the masses of paper are held in place, have made something that was intended to provide direct, rapid access into a complex network of passages and paths, where you are constantly confronted by obstacles and cul-de-sacs. During the day and with all the lights on, it is still relatively easy for the researcher to keep a straight course, you just have to pay attention, be vigilant, take care to follow the least dusty roads, a sign that they are the most frequented, and up until now, apart from a few scares and some worrying delays, there has not been a single instance of a staff member failing to return from an expedition. But the light from a pocket flashlight does not fill one with confidence, it seems to create its own shadows, what Senhor José should have done, since he did not dare to use the Registrar's flashlight, was to have bought one of those really powerful modern ones, the sort that can light everything to the farthest ends of the earth. It's true that the fear of getting lost doesn't trouble him too much, to a certain extent the constant tension of the string tied round his ankle comforts him, but if he starts wandering about, going in circles, getting caught up in the cocoon, he will eventually be unable to take another step, and will have to go back and start again. He has already had to do so for another reason, when the fine string, too fine really, got caught up among the bundles of paper and snagged on the corners, and then there could be no going backwards or forwards. Given all these problems and entanglements, it is understandable that any progress will be slow, and that Senhor José's knowledge of the topography of the place will be of little use to him, especially since a huge pile of files, the height of a man, has just blocked what had every appearance of being a straight path, throwing up a thick cloud of dust, in the midst of which fluttered terrified moths, almost transparent in the beam of the flashlight. Senhor José hates these creatures, which, at first sight, one would have said had been placed in the world as ornaments, just as he hates the silverfish that proliferate here too, they are all voracious eaters, blamed for the destruction of so many memories, for so many parentless children, for so many legacies fallen into the eager hands of the State owing to lack of legal proof, however vehemently one swears that the relevant document was eaten, sullied, chewed up and devoured by the beasts that infest the Central Registry, and which, as a matter of

common humanity, should be taken into account, no one, alas, can convince the lawyer working for the widows and orphans, who should be on their side but isn't, Either the paper turns up, or there's no legacy. As for the mice, one need hardly mention how destructive they are. Nevertheless, despite the extensive damage they cause, these rodents also have their positive side, if they didn't exist the Central Registry would have burst at the seams, or would be twice the length it is. An unwary observer might be surprised that the colonies of mice have not increased so in numbers that they have devoured every single one of the files, especially considering the obvious impossibility of a hundred-percent-efficient deinfestation programme The explanation although there are those who harbour certain doubts as to its real relevance, must be in the lack of water or the insufficient moisture in the atmosphere, in the dry diet of the creatures who find themselves trapped in the place where they have chosen to live or where ill luck has brought them, which would have resulted in a marked atrophy of the genital musculature with extremely negative consequences for their copulatory performance. Others disagree with this attempt at an explanation and insist that muscles have nothing to do with it, and so the controversy rages on.

Meanwhile, covered in dust, with the heavy tatters of spiders' webs clinging to his hair and shoulders, Senhor José finally reached a clearing between the most recent papers to be filed away and the wall at the back, still separated by about three yards and forming an irregular corridor, narrower with each day that passed, that joins the two side walls. The darkness here is absolute. The feeble daylight that manages to penetrate the layer of filth covering the windows inside and out, especially the last windows on either side, which are nearest to him, does not reach this far because of the soaring piles of bundled documents that almost touch the ceiling. As for the rear wall, it is entirely and inexplicably blank, that is, there isn't even a simple bull's-eye window to aid the frail beam from the flashlight. No one has ever been able to understand why the board of architects, resorting to a rather unconvincing aesthetic excuse, have stubbornly refused to modify the historic plan and authorise the creation of windows in the wall when it proves necessary to move it back yet again, despite the fact that from a layman's point of view, it would simply be satisfying a practical need. They should be here now, muttered Senhor José, then they'd know how difficult it is. The piles of paper on either side of the central passage are of different heights, the file and card of the unknown woman could be in either of them, although it's more likely to be in one of the lower piles, if the law of least effort was that preferred by the clerk charged with filing them away. Unfortunately, in our disoriented society, there is no shortage of twisted minds, and it would come as no surprise if the clerk who came to put away the unknown woman's file and card, if indeed it was here that he came, had had the mischievous idea, born of sheer malice, of placing the enormous stepladder used for this purpose next to the highest pile of papers and climbing up it to place file and card right on the top. That is how things are in this world.

In a methodical, unhurried way, almost as if he were remembering the gestures and movements of the night he had spent in the school attic, when the unknown woman was

probably still alive, Senhor José began his search. There was far less dust covering the papers here, which is easy enough to understand when you bear in mind that not a day passes without the files and cards of the deceased being brought here, which, imaginatively speaking, but in evident bad taste, would be the same as saying that in the depths of the Central Registry the dead are always clean. Only up high, where, as we have already said, the papers almost touch the ceiling, the dust sieved by time settles tranquilly on the dust already sieved by time, so much so that with the files you find up there, you have to clap the covers together to remove the dust, if you want to know who they belong to. If Senhor José fails to find what he's looking for on the lower levels, he will again have to sacrifice himself and climb the stepladder, but this time he will only have to be perched up there for a minute, he won't even have time to get dizzy, the flashlight beam will show him, at a glance, if a file was placed there recently. If the death of the unknown woman could be placed with a considerable degree of probability within the extremely short period of time corresponding, give or take a day, according to Senhor José, to one of the two periods in which he was absent from work, the week when he had flu and during his briefest of holidays, checking the documents in each of the piles can be done quite quickly, and even if the woman had died before, immediately after the memorable day on which the card fell into Senhor José's hands, not so much time had elapsed that the documents would now be filed away beneath an excessive number of other files. This repeated examination of situations as they arise, these persistent reflections, these meticulous ponderings on the light and the dark, on the straight and the labyrinthine, on the clean and the dirty, are all going on, just as we describe them, in Senhor José's head. But the apparently exaggerated amount of time it takes to explain them, or, strictly speaking, to reproduce them, is the inevitable consequence not only of the complexity, in both form and content, of the above-mentioned factors, but also of the very special nature of the mental circuitry of our particular clerk, who is now about to be tested to the limit. Advancing step by step along the narrow corridor formed, as we said, by the piles of documents and by the back wall, Senhor José has gradually been moving closer to one of the side walls. In principle, and speaking purely abstractly, no one would think of describing such a corridor, with its comfortable width of almost three yards, as narrow, but if you consider it in relation to the actual length of the corridor, which, we repeat, stretches from wall to wall, then we should really ask how it is that Senhor José, whom we know to be subject to serious perturbations of a psychological nature, for example, vertigo and insomnia, has not until now suffered a violent attack of claustrophobia in this enclosed and suffocating space. The explanation can perhaps be found precisely in the fact that the darkness does not allow him to perceive the limits of this space, which could be here or there, and that all he can see before him is the familiar, calming mass of papers. Senhor José has never spent so much time here, usually you just go there, file away the documents of a finished life and return to the safety of your desk, and if it's true that, on this occasion, from the moment he set off into the archive of the dead, he has been unable to shrug off a disquieting feeling of a presence surrounding him, he has attributed it to the diffuse terror of the hidden and the unknown to which even the most courageous of people have an all too human right. Senhor José

had not felt fear, what you could really call fear, until he reached the end of the corridor and came face-to-face with the wall. He bent down to examine some papers fallen on the floor and that could well have been those of the unknown woman scattered here at random by the indifferent clerk, and suddenly, before he even had time to examine them, he stopped being Senhor José, clerk at the Central Registry, he stopped being fifty years old, now he is a very young José who has just started going to school, he is the child who hated going to sleep because every night he had the same obsessive nightmare, a massive stone wall, a blind wall, a prison, and over there, at the far end of the corridor, hidden in the darkness, there is just a small stone. A small stone that was slowly growing, that he could not see now with his eyes, but which the memory of the dreams he had dreamed told him was there, a stone that was increasing in size and moving as if it were alive, a stone that was expanding sideways and upwards, that was climbing the walls, and dragging itself towards him, curled in upon itself, as if it were not stone but mud, as if it were not mud but thick blood. The child emerged screaming from the nightmare when the filthy mass was touching his feet, when the tightening garrote of fear was almost strangling him, but poor Senhor José cannot wake from a dream which is no longer his. Cowering against the wall like a frightened dog, he points the flashlight with tremulous hand towards the other end of the corridor, but the beam doesn't reach that far, it stops halfway, more or less where the path to the archive of the living is to be found. He thinks that if he runs fast he'll be able to escape the advancing stone, but fear tells him, Be careful, how do you know it isn't there waiting for you you'll walk straight into the lion's den. In the dream the advance of the stone was accompanied by a strange music that seemed to be born out of the air, but here the silence is absolute, total, so dense that it swallows up Senhor José's breathing, just as the darkness swallows the beam from the flashlight, and which it has just swallowed completely. It was as if the darkness had suddenly advanced and covered Senhor José's face like a sucker. The child's nightmare was over though. For the child, ah, who can understand the human heart, the fact that he could not see the walls of the prison, both near and far, was tantamount to their having ceased to be there, it was as if the space around him had suddenly grown larger, freer, stretching out to infinity, as if the stones were just the inert mineral of which they are made, as if water were simply the basic ingredient of mud, as if blood flowed only in his veins, not outside them. Now it is not a childhood nightmare that is frightening Senhor José, what paralyses him with fear is once more the thought that he might die in this place, just as, all that time ago, he imagined that he might fall from that other ladder and lie dead here, undocumented in the midst of all the documents of the dead, crushed by the darkness, by the avalanche that would soon unleash itself from above, and that tomorrow they would come and find him, Senhor José hasn't come in to work, I wonder where he is, He'll turn up, and when a colleague came to transfer other files and other cards, he would find him there, exposed to the light of a far superior flashlight than this one which had served him so badly when he needed it most. The minutes passed that had to pass before Senhor José could gradually begin to hear inside himself a voice saying, Look, apart from being afraid, nothing really bad has happened to you yet, you're sitting here quite unharmed, it's true the flashlight went out on you, but what do you

need a flashlight for, you've got the string tied round your ankle, with the other end tied to the leg of the Registrar's desk, you're safe, like an unborn child attached by the umbilical cord to its mother's womb, not that the Registrar is your mother, or your father, but relationships between people here are complicated, what you must remember is that childhood nightmares never come true, far less dreams, that business with the stone really was pretty horrible, but it's probably got a scientific explanation, like when you used to dream you were flying over houses and gardens, rising, falling, hovering with your arms outstretched, do you remember, it was a sign that you were growing, probably the stone had a function too, if you have to experience terror, then rather sooner than later, besides, you should know better than anyone that the dead people here aren't really dead, it's a macabre exaggeration to call this the archive of the dead, if the papers you have in your hand are those of the unknown woman, they are just paper, not bones, they're paper, not putrefying flesh, that was the miracle worked by your Central Registry, transforming life and death into mere paper, it's true that you wanted to find that woman, but you didn't manage it in time, you couldn't even do that, or, rather, you wanted it and didn't want it, you hesitated between desire and fear, it happens to lots of people, you probably should have just gone to the tax office after all, as someone told you to, it's over, it's best just to leave it, her time has run out and the end of your time isn't far off either.

Pressed right up against the unstable wall formed by the files, Senhor José got to his feet, very slowly and carefully so that none of the files would fall on top of him. The voice that had addressed that speech to him was now saying things like this, Don't be afraid, the darkness you're in is no greater than the darkness inside your own body, they are two darknesses separated by a skin, I bet you've never thought of that, you carry a darkness about with you all the time and that doesn't frighten you, a little while ago, you nearly started screaming just because you imagined some danger, just because you remembered the nightmare you used to have when you were little, my dear chap, you have to learn to live with the darkness outside just as you learned to live with the darkness inside, now, please, get up and put the flashlight back in your pocket, it's useless now, and, since you're determined to take them with you, slip the papers in between your jacket and your shirt, or to be safer, between your shirt and your skin, take a firm hold of the piece of string, wind it up as you go along so that you don't get it tangled round your feet, and off you go, you don't want to be that worst of all things, a coward. Lightly brushing the wall of paper with his shoulder, Senhor José took two timid steps. The darkness opened like black water and closed behind him, another step and another, he had already lifted five yards of string from the floor and wound them up, Senhor José could have done with a third hand to feel the air in front of him, but there's a simple enough remedy, he merely has to raise his two hands to face height, one hand rolling, the other being rolled, the bobbin principle. Senhor José is nearly out of the corridor, a few steps more and he'll be safe from any new attack by the nightmare stone, the string tightens a little, but that's a good sign, it means that it's got caught, at floor level, on the corner of the passage leading to the archive of the living. Oddly enough,

during that whole walk, right to the end, just as if someone were throwing them down from above, papers and more papers kept raining down on Senhor José's head, slowly, first one, then another and another, like a farewell. And when, at last, he reached the Registrar's desk, when, even before he untied the string, he took out from inside his shirt the file he had picked up from the floor, and when he opened it and saw that it was the unknown woman's file, his excitement was such that he did not hear the door of the Central Registry closing, as if someone had just left the building.

The fact that psychological time is not the same as mathematical time was something that Senhor José had learned in exactly the same way as, over a lifetime, he had acquired other types of useful knowledge, drawing first of all, of course, on his own experiences, for, despite never having risen higher than the post of clerk, he does not merely follow where others go, but drawing too on the formative influence of a few books and magazines of a scientific nature in which one can put one's trust or faith, depending on the feeling of the moment, and also, why not, a number of popular works of fiction of an introspective type, which also tackled the subject, though employing different methods and with an added dash of imagination. However, on no other occasion had he had a real objective sense, as physical as a sudden muscular contraction, of the effective impossibility of measuring the time that we might call the time of the soul, as when, back in his house again, looking once more at the unknown woman's date of death, he struggled, vaguely, to place it in the time that had passed since he first set out to find her. To the question, What were you doing on that day, he could give an almost immediate response, he would just have to go and look at the calendar and, thinking simply as plain Senhor José, the Central Registry clerk who had been away from work sick, he would say, That day I was in bed with flu, I didn't go to work, but if they went on to ask him, Now relate it to your activities as a researcher and tell me when it was, then he would have to go and consult the notebook that he kept beneath the mattress, It was two days after I broke into the school, he would reply. Assuming the date of death written on the card was correct, the unknown woman had indeed died two days after the deplorable episode that had transformed a hitherto honest Senhor José into a criminal, but these intersecting statements, that of the clerk cutting across that of the researcher, that of the researcher cutting across that of the clerk, apparently more than enough to match the psychological time of one with the mathematical time of the other, did not remove from either statement a feeling of dizzying disorientation. Senhor José is not standing on the top rungs of a very high ladder, looking down and seeing how the rungs grow ever narrower until they become one point touching the ground, but it is as if his body, instead of seeing itself as an integral unit existing in each passing moment, found itself fragmented during those last few days, during that period not of real or mathematical time, but of psychological or subjective time, as if it were contracting and dilating along with time itself. I am utterly absurd, Senhor José told himself sternly, the day already contained twenty-four hours when it was determined how many hours it should have, an hour has and always has had sixty minutes, the sixty seconds of the minute have been there since eternity, if a clock starts to go fast or slow it is a defect in the machine not in time, Perhaps one of my springs has gone. The idea brought a faint smile to his lips, Since, as far as I know, the fault does not lie in the mechanism of real time, but in the psychological mechanism that measures it, what I should do is look for a psychologist who could repair my escape wheel. He smiled again, then grew serious, The matter can be resolved more easily than that, besides, nature has already done so, the woman is dead, there's nothing more to do, I'll keep the file and the card in case I want to have some palpable souvenir of this adventure, for the Central Registry it will be as if that person had never been born, I doubt that anyone will ever need these papers,

otherwise I could just leave them in some part of the archive of the dead, at the entrance, along with the oldest ones, here or there it doesn't matter, they all share the same history, they were born, they died, who now is going to be interested in who she was, her parents, if they loved her, will weep for her for a time, then they will weep less, then they will stop weeping, that's how it usually is, it will make no difference to the man she divorced, it's true she might have some current romantic relationship, she might be living with someone, or about to marry again, but that will be the history of a future that cannot now be lived, there is no one else in the world interested in the strange case of the unknown woman. He had before him the file and the card, he also had the thirteen school reports, the same name repeated thirteen times, twelve different images of the same face, one of them repeated, but each and every one of them dead in the past, already dead before the woman they later became had died, old photographs are very deceiving, they give us the illusion that we are alive in them, and it's not true, the person we are looking at no longer exists, and if that person could see us, he or she would not recognise him- or herself in us, Who's that looking at me so sadly, he or she would say. Then, suddenly, Senhor José remembered that there was another picture, the one the lady in the ground-floor apartment had given him. He had unexpectedly just found the answer to the question of who else would be interested in the strange case of the unknown woman.

Senhor José did not wait until Saturday. The following day when the office closed, he went to the laundry to pick up the clothes he had left there to be cleaned. He listened abstractedly to the conscientious assistant saying to him, Now just have a look at this darning, look, run your fingers over it and tell me if you can notice any difference, you wouldn't even know there was anything there, that is how people who content themselves with mere appearances speak. Senhor José paid her, put the package under his arm and went home to change his clothes. He was going to visit the lady in the ground-floor apartment and he wanted to look clean and presentable, to take advantage not only of the perfect, truly praiseworthy work done by the invisible mender, but also of the rigorous crease in his trousers, the gleaming starch in his shirt, the miraculous recovery of his tie. He was just about to leave when a morbid thought went through his mind, which is, as far as one knows, the only thinking organ at the service of the body, What if the lady in the ground-floor apartment has died too, she wasn't exactly brimming with health, besides, in order to die you need only be alive, especially at her age, he imagined himself ringing the bell again and again, and, after a long time, hearing the door of the ground-floor apartment opposite opening and a woman appearing, irritated by all the noise, and saying, There's no point ringing, no one's there, Has she gone out, She's dead, Dead, Exactly, When did it happen, A fortnight ago, and who might you be, I'm from the Central Registry, Well, it doesn't look like you do your work very well over there, you say you're from the Central Registry, but you didn't even know she'd died. Senhor José told himself he was being obsessive, but he preferred to sort things out right there and then, so as not to have to put up with the rudeness of the woman in the other ground-floor apartment. He would go in to the Central Registry and in less than a minute

he would have checked the old lady's card, by now, the two cleaning ladies must have finished their work, not that it takes them long, they just empty the wastepaper bins, sweep and lightly mop the floor as far as the shelf just behind the Registrar's desk, it's impossible to persuade them, with kind words or cruel, to go any farther, they're afraid, they wouldn't be caught dead in there, they say, they too are of the kind who content themselves with appearances, that's just the way they are. After looking at the unknown woman's card to check the name of the lady in the ground-floor apartment, her godmother, Senhor José very gingerly opened the door and peered out. As he had foreseen, the cleaning ladies were no longer there. He entered, walked quickly over to the card index and looked for her name, She's here, he said, and gave a sigh of relief. He went back home, finished dressing and went out. In order to get the bus that would drop him near where the lady lived, he had to go to the square opposite the Central Registry, that was where the stop was. Although the evening was quite advanced, much of the daylight lingering in the sky still hovered over the city, it would be at least twenty minutes before the street lamps came on. Senhor José was waiting for the bus with a few other people, he probably wouldn't manage to get on the first bus to come along. And indeed that is what happened. But a second bus appeared soon afterwards, and this one wasn't full. Senhor José got on in time to get a place by the window. He looked out, noticing how, due to some unusual optical effect, the diffusion of light in the atmosphere lit the facades of the buildings with a reddish tone, as if the sun were about to rise at that very moment for each and every one of them. There was the Central Registry, with its ancient door and the three black stone steps that led up to it, and the five narrow windows on the front, the whole building had the air of a ruin fixed in time, as if it had been mummified rather than restored when the dilapidated state of its materials demanded it. Some hold-up in the traffic was preventing the bus from proceeding. Senhor José felt nervous, he didn't want to arrive too late to call on the lady in the ground-floor apartment. Despite the full and frank conversation they had had, despite certain confidences exchanged, some of which were unexpected in people who had only just met, they hadn't become so close that he could go knocking on her door at any hour of the day or night. Senhor José looked again at the square. The light had changed, the facade of the Central Registry had grown suddenly grey, but it was nevertheless a luminous grey that seemed to vibrate, to tremble, and it was then, just as the bus was pulling away, slowly moving out into the traffic lane, that a tall, well-built man walked up the steps of the Central Registry, opened the door and went in. The Registrar, murmured Senhor José, what's he doing at the Central Registry at this hour. Impelled by a sudden, inexplicable panic, he got up suddenly from his seat, made as if to get off, provoking a look of surprise and irritation in the passenger beside him, then sat down again, puzzled by his own behaviour. He realised that his impulse was to rush home, as if to protect it from some danger, which was, of course, absurdly illogical. A thief, always supposing, now really, yet another absurd illogicality, that the boss was a thief, wouldn't go in through the front door of the Central Registry in order to reach Senhor José's front door. But then it was bordering on the absurd for the Registrar to want to go back there after the office was closed, for, as we stated earlier, there would be no work waiting for him,

Senhor José could stake his life on that. Imagining the head of the Central Registry doing overtime was rather like trying to imagine a square circle. The bus had already left the square, and Senhor José was still trying to work out the deep reasons that had driven him to behave in that disoriented fashion. He decided in the end that the reason must lie in the fact that, after a good few years as sole resident, he had grown used to being the only nocturnal tenant of the group of edifices formed by the Central Registry and his house, if the latter deserves the name of edifice, doubtless appropriate from a rigorously linguistic point of view, since an edifice can be any kind of building, but obviously inappropriate when compared with the architectural dignity that seems to emanate from the word itself, especially when spoken. Seeing his boss go into the Central Registry had had the same impact on him, he thought, as if, when he went back home, he were to find him sitting in his chair. The relative calm that this idea brought Senhor José, that is, not taking into account pertinent and morally embarrassing considerations, the physical and material impossibility of the Registrar entering the private rooms of his subordinate and even using his chair, immediately melted away when he remembered the unknown woman's school record cards and wondered if he had put them back under the mattress or carelessly left them out on the table. Even if his house were as safe as a bank vault, with special combination locks and reinforced floors, walls and ceiling, those record cards should never but never have been left out. The fact that there was no one there to see them did not excuse the grave imprudence committed, how are we, being ignorant, to know how far the advances of science might go, just as radio waves, which no one can see, carry sounds and images through the air and the wind, leaping over mountains and rivers, crossing oceans and deserts, it would not be so very extraordinary if scanner waves and photographic waves had not already been discovered or invented, or were to be discovered tomorrow, waves capable of penetrating walls and recording and transmitting to the outside world the deeds, mysteries and humiliations of our life that we had thought safe from indiscretions. Hiding them, those deeds, mysteries and humiliations under a mattress, still continues to be the safest way of hiding things, especially when we bear in mind that it is increasingly difficult for the customs of today to understand the customs of yesterday. However expert that scanner wave or photographic wave might be, it would never think of sticking its nose between a mattress and a bed base.

As everyone knows, our thoughts, both anxious and happy thoughts, and others which are neither one thing nor the other, sooner or later grow weary and bored with themselves, it's just a question of letting time do its work, it's just a matter of leaving them to the lazy daydreaming that comes naturally to them, adding no new irritating or polemical reflection to the bonfire, above all taking supreme care not to intervene whenever an attractive bifurcation, branch Une, or turning appears before a thought which is already ripe for distraction. Or, rather, you can intervene, but only to give it a gentle shove from behind, especially if it's a troubling thought, as if we were saying, Go on, off you go, you're fine. This was what Senhor José did when that mad, providential fantasy of the photographic wave and the scanner wave came to him, he at once

abandoned himself to his imagination, let it show him those invasive waves scouring the whole room in search of those records, which he had not, in fact, left on the table, perplexed and ashamed because they could not carry out the orders they had received, Remember, either you find those records, read them and photograph them, or we go back to the old-style espionage. Senhor José still thought about the Registrar, but it was a purely residual thought, one that helped him find an acceptable explanation for his return to the Central Registry outside of normal hours, He must have forgotten something he needed, what other reason could there be. Without realising, he repeated out loud the final part of the phrase, What other reason could there be, again provoking the distrust of the passenger travelling next to him, whose thoughts immediately became clear and explicit when he changed his seat, The guy is mad, we're sure that he used these or similar words to think it. Senhor José did not notice the withdrawal of the man next to him on the seat, he moved seamlessly on to thoughts of the lady in the ground-floor apartment, she was there before him at the door, Do you remember me, I'm from the Central Registry, Of course I do, I've come here about that matter we discussed the other day, You've found my goddaughter, No, I haven't, or rather, yes, that is, I mean, I'd like to have a little chat with you, if you wouldn't mind, if you've got a moment, Come in, I've got something to tell you too. That, more or less, was what Senhor José and the lady in the ground-floor apartment said when she opened the door and saw him there, Ah, its you, she exclaimed, so he had no need to ask, Do you remember me, I'm Senhor José from the Central Registry, but despite this, he couldn't resist asking the question, so constant, so imperious, so demanding it would seem is our need to go about the world declaring who we are, even when we've just heard someone else say, Ah, it's you, as if just because they've recognised us, they know us and need to know nothing more about us, or as if the little that remained unknown wasn't worth the effort of formulating another question.

Nothing had changed in the small living room, the chair where Senhor José had sat the first time was in the same place, at the same distance from the table, the curtains hung as they had before, in the same folds, the woman made the same gesture when she folded her hands in her lap, right over left, only the light from the ceiling seemed slightly paler, as if the bulb were burning out. Senhor José asked, How have you been since my last visit, and then he reproached himself for his lack of sensitivity, worse still, for the utter crassness he was revealing, he should know that you don't always have to Mow the rules of elementary politeness to the letter, you must take into account the circumstances, you have to weigh each case, let's imagine that the woman responds now with a broad smile, I'm very well, thank you, my health is excellent, I'm in good spirits, I haven't felt this fit for ages, and then he blurts out, Well, I'm sorry to tell you this, but your goddaughter has died, what do you make of that. But the woman didn't reply to his question, she merely shrugged indifferently, then she said, Do you know, for some days I've been thinking of phoning you at the Central Registry, then I decided not to, I thought that sooner or later you would come and visit me, It's just as well you didn't phone, the Registrar doesn't like us getting phone calls, he says it gets in the way of work, Of course,

but that needn't have been a problem, I just had to give him the information I had, he wouldn't have had to call you over. Beads of sweat broke out on Senhor José's forehead. He had just discovered that, for weeks, ignorant of the danger, unconscious of the threat hanging over him, he had been living on the brink of absolute disaster, the public exposure of irregularities in his professional conduct, the continual and wilful affront he was in the process of committing against the venerable deontological laws of the Central Registry, whose chapters, articles, paragraphs and clauses, however complex, due to the extreme archaism of the language, had finally been reduced down by the experience of two centuries to nine practical words, Don't stick your nose in where it isn't wanted. For a moment, Senhor José hated and detested the woman before him, he insulted her mentally, he called her a feeble old woman, cretin, nincompoop, and like someone who can find no better way of overcoming some sudden, violent shock, he was almost on the point of saying to her, Well, try this on for size, your goddaughter, the one in the picture, has kicked the bucket. The woman asked, Are you feeling ill, Senhor José, would you like a glass of water, No, I'm fine, don't worry, he replied, ashamed of that wicked impulse, I'm going to make you some tea, There's no need, really, I don't want to be any bother, at that moment, Senhor José was feeling as base and humble as the dust in the street, the woman had left the room, he heard her rattling cups in the kitchen, a few minutes passed, first you have to boil the water, Senhor José remembers having read somewhere, probably in one of the magazines where he gets his clippings of famous people, tea should be made with water that has just boiled but is not actually boiling, he would have been quite happy with a glass of cold water, but the tea would do him far more good, everyone knows that there's nothing like a nice cup of tea for lifting the spirits, all the manuals say so, both in the East and the West. The lady of the house appeared with a tray, she had also brought a plate of biscuits, as well as the teapot, cups and the sugar bowl. I didn't even ask if you liked tea, it only just occurred to me that perhaps you would prefer coffee, she said, No, I like tea, I really do, Do you take sugar, No, I don't, suddenly he went pale and started sweating, he thought he should explain, It must be the remains of the flu I caught, So if I'd phoned, you probably wouldn't even have been there, and I really would have had to tell your boss what had happened. This time the sweat only dampened Senhor José's palms, but even so it was lucky that his cup was on the table, had he been holding it at that moment it would have fallen to the floor, or spilled scalding tea all over the wretched clerk's legs, with inevitable consequences, first the burn, then the return of his trousers to the laundry. Senhor José took a biscuit from the plate, nibbled at it slowly, listlessly and, disguising with chewing the difficulty he was having in formulating any words, he managed to ask the long-delayed question, And what was this information you had to give me. The woman took a sip of tea, reached a hesitant hand out to the plate of biscuits, but did not complete the gesture. She said, You remember that I suggested to you, at the end of your visit, just when you were leaving, that you should look up my goddaughter's name in the phone book, Yes I do, but I decided not to follow your advice, Why, It's rather difficult to explain, Well, you probably had your reasons, It's easy enough to give reasons for what we do or don't do, when we see that we haven't got a reason or not enough of a reason, then we try to invent one, in the case

of your goddaughter, for example, I could now say that I preferred to take the longest, most complicated route, And is that one of the real reasons or one of the invented ones, Let's just say there's as much truth in it as there is falsehood, And which bit is the falsehood, Me pretending that the reason I gave to you should be taken as the whole truth, And it isn't, No, because I've left out the reason why I preferred that route and not another more direct one, You're bored with the routine of your job, That could be another reason, How are your investigations going, Tell me first what happened, let's pretend that I was at the Central Registry when you first thought of phoning me and that the boss doesn't mind us getting phone calls. The woman raised the cup to her lips again, replaced it on the saucer without making the slightest noise and said, as her hands returned to her lap, again her right hand covering her left, I did what I told you to do, You phoned her, Yes, You spoke to her, Yes, When was that, A few days after you came here, I couldn't cope with all the memories, I couldn't sleep, And what happened, We talked, She must have been surprised, She didn't seem to be, But that would be the normal reaction after so many years of separation and silence, You obviously don't know much about women, especially when they're unhappy, So she was unhappy, It didn't take long before we were both crying, as if we were bound to each other by a thread of tears, What happened next, What do you mean, Did she tell you anything about her life, Very little, just that she'd been married, but was now divorced, We know that already, it's on her card, We left it that she would come and visit me as soon as she had time, Did she come, No, not as yet, What do you mean, Just that she hasn't come, And she hasn't phoned either, No, she hasn't, How long ago was this, About two weeks, More or less, Less I think, yes, less, And what did you do, At first, I thought she'd changed her mind, that she didn't want to renew old friendships, that she didn't want us to get close, those tears must have been a moment of weakness and nothing more, it happens often enough, there are times in our lives when we just let go, when we're capable of telling the first stranger we meet about our pain and sorrow, do you remember, when you were here, Of course I remember, and I never thanked you properly for the trust you placed in me, It wasn't a question of trust, it was despair, Whatever it was, I promise you will never regret it, you can trust me, I'm very discreet, Yes, I'm sure I won't regret it, Thank you, But the reason I know I won't regret it is because nothing really matters to me anymore, Ah. It wasn't easy passing from a disconsolate interjection like that to a direct question of the type, So, then what did you do, it required time and tact, so Senhor José fell silent, waiting for what would happen next. As if she were aware of that too, the woman asked, Would you like some more tea, he accepted, Yes, please, and held out his cup. Then the woman said, A few days ago I telephoned her house, And what happened, No one answered, I got the answering machine, You only phoned once, On the first day, yes, but the following days I tried several times and at different hours, I phoned in the morning, I phoned in the afternoon, I phoned after supper, I even phoned at midnight, And nothing, Nothing, I thought perhaps she'd gone away, Did she tell you where she worked, No. The conversation could not continue to roll around the black hole hiding the truth, the moment was approaching when Senhor José would say Your goddaughter is dead, in fact, he should have told her as soon as he arrived, that's what the woman will say to him

shortly, Why didn't you tell me straightaway, why did you ask all those questions if you knew she was already dead, and he will be unable to lie alleging that he remained silent because he didn't want to spring the painful news on her, without preparation, without due respect, in truth, the only reason for this long, slow dialogue had been the words she had said at the start, I've got something to tell you too, at that point, Senhor José lost the resigned serenity that would have made him reject the temptation of knowing about that tiny, useless thing, whatever it was, he lacked the serene resignation necessary to say, It doesn't matter, she's dead. It was as if what the lady in the ground-floor apartment had to tell him might still, who knows how, make time run backwards and, at the very last moment, steal the unknown woman back from death. Weary, with no other desire now than to delay the inevitable for a few more seconds, Senhor José asked, You didn't consider going to her house, asking the neighbours if they'd seen her, Of course I did, but I didn't go, Why, Because it would look as if I was interfering, she might not like that, But you phoned, That's different. There was a silence, then the expression on the woman's face began to change, it became interrogative, and Senhor José realised that she was going to ask, at last, what questions relating to the matter of her goddaughter had brought him there today, had he managed to speak to her and when, was the problem with the Central Registry resolved and how, I regret to tell you that your goddaughter is dead, said Senhor José. The woman opened her eyes very wide, raised her hands from her lap and covered her mouth, What, Your goddaughter has died, How do you know, asked the woman without thinking, That's what the Central Registry is there for, said Senhor José, and he shrugged his shoulders slightly, as if to say, It's not my fault, When did she die, I've got the card here, if you want to see it. The woman reached out her hand, held the card close to her eyes then moved it farther off, mumbling, My glasses, but she didn't go and look for them, she knew they wouldn't help, even if she wanted to she wouldn't be able to read what was written there, her tears were blurring the words. Senhor José said, I'm very sorry. The woman left the room and was gone for a few brief moments, when she came back she was drying her eyes with a handkerchief. She sat down, poured herself some more tea, then asked, Did you come here just to tell me that my goddaughter had died, Yes, That was very kind of you, I thought it was my duty really, Why, Because I felt I was in your debt, Why, Because of the nice way you received me and helped me, the way you answered my questions, Now that force of circumstances has brought the job they gave you to an end, you won't have to wear yourself out any more looking for my poor goddaughter, No, I won't, Perhaps the Central Registry has already instructed you to start looking for another person, No, no, cases like this are very rare, That's the good thing about death, it brings everything to a close, Its not always like that, that's when the battles begin between heirs, the ferocious dividing up of the spoils, then there's inheritance tax to be paid, For the person who's died I meant, As for that, yes, you're right, everything ends, It's odd, you never explained to me why the Central Registry was looking for my goddaughter, why they were so interested in her, As you said, death resolves all problems, So there was a problem, Yes, What, It's not worth talking about it, the matter is of no importance now, What matter, Please don't insist, it's confidential, said Senhor José desperately. The woman angrily put

down her cup and saucer and, looking straight at him, said, All the time that you and I have been together here, both the other day and today, right from the start, one of us has always told the truth and the other has always lied, But I didn't He then and I'm not lying now, You'll admit that I always talked to you frankly, clearly, openly, that it would never even have occurred to you that there might be a single He in anything I said, Absolutely, Then if there's a liar in this room, as I know there is, it's certainly not me, I'm not a liar, No, I'm sure you're not a liar by nature, but you lied when you first came here, and you've been lying ever since, You wouldn't understand, I understand enough not to believe that the Central Registry sent you here looking for my goddaughter, You're wrong, they did send me, Then if you've nothing more to say to me, if that is your final word, please leave my house this instant, now, she almost shouted that last word, and then she began to cry. Senhor José got up, took a step towards the door, then sat down again, Forgive me, he said, don't cry, I'll tell you everything.

When I'd finished talking, she asked me, And what do you think you'll do now, Nothing, I said, Are you going to go back to your collections of famous people, I don't know, possibly, I'll have to fill my time somehow, I fell silent, thinking, and then said, No, I don't think I will, Why, Well, when you think about it, their lives are always the same, they never change, they appear, they talk, they show themselves off, they smile for the photographers, they're always arriving or departing, Just like us, Not like me, Like you and me and everyone, we all show ourselves off in various places, we talk, we leave our homes and come back, sometimes we even smile, the difference is that no one takes any notice of us, We can't all be famous, Just as well, imagine if your collection were as big as the Central Registry, It would have to be even bigger, the Central Registry only wants to know when we're born and when we die, and that's about it, Whether we marry, get divorced, widowed or remarried, the Central Registry has absolutely no interest in finding out if we were happy or unhappy while all that was going on, Happiness and unhappiness are just like famous people, they come and they go, the worst thing about the Central Registry is that they're not interested in what we're like, for them we're just a piece of paper with a few names and dates on it, Like my goddaughter's card, Or yours, or mine, What would you have done if you'd actually met her, I don't know, perhaps I'd have spoken to her, perhaps not, I never really thought about it, And did it occur to you that, at the moment when she was actually there before you, you would know as much about her as you did on the day you first decided to look for her, that is, nothing, and that if you wanted to know who she was, you would have to begin looking again and that, from then on, it would be much more difficult, if, unlike famous people, who like showing themselves off, she preferred not to be found, You're right, But, since she's dead, you can go on looking for her, she won't mind now, I don't understand, Up until now, despite all your efforts, the only thing you've found out is that she went to a school, in fact, the very one I told you about, I've got photographs, Photographs are just bits of paper too, We could share them, And we would imagine that we were sharing her out between us, one bit for you, one bit for me, There's nothing more to be done, that's what I said at the time, assuming that she considered the matter closed, but she asked me, Why don't you go and talk to her parents, to her ex-husband, What for, To try and learn something more about her, how she lived, what she did, Her husband probably wouldn't want to talk about her, it's all water under the bridge, But her parents are bound to, parents never let slip a chance to talk about their children, even if they're dead, at least that's been my experience, I didn't go and see them before and I'm certainly not going to now, before, I could have said that I'd been sent by the Central Registry, What did my goddaughter die of, I don't know, How is that possible, her death must be registered at the Central Registry, On the card we just put the date of death, not the cause, But there must be a certificate, doctors are obliged by law to certify a death, when she died, they wouldn't just write She's dead, The death certificate wasn't with the papers I found in the archive of the dead, Why, I don't know, they must have dropped it when they were taking her file to be put away, or else I dropped it, anyway, it's lost, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack, you can't imagine what it's like in there, From what you've told me I can, You can't, it's impossible, you'd have to actually be there, In that case you've got a

perfect reason to go and talk to her parents, tell them that, unfortunately, her death certificate has got lost in the Central Registry, that you have to complete the file otherwise your boss will punish you, show them how humble and anxious you are, ask the name of the doctor who came, where she died, and what of, if it happened at home or in the hospital, ask everything, you've still got your letter of authority, I suppose, Yes, but don't forget it's a false one, It fooled me, it'll probably fool them too, no life is without its lies, perhaps there's some deceit involved in this death as well, If you worked at the Central Registry, you'd know that there is no deceiving death. She must have thought the remark didn't merit a response, and she was perfectly right, because what I'd said was just for effect really, one of those essentially empty expressions that appear to be deep but have nothing inside. We were silent for about two minutes, she was looking at me reproachfully, as if I had made her a solemn promise which I had broken at the last moment. I didn't know where to put myself, I just wanted to say goodnight and leave, but that would have been both stupid and rude, a lack of consideration which the poor lady certainly didn't deserve, it's just not in my nature to do something like that, that's the way I was brought up, it's true I can't remember ever having gone to tea at someone's house when I was small, but it comes to the same thing. I was thinking that it would be best to take up her idea and begin searching again, only from the opposite direction this time, that is, from death into life, when she said, Take no notice, I get these ridiculous ideas now and then, when you're old and realise that time is running out, you start imagining that you have the cure for all the ills of the world in your hand, and get frustrated because no one pays you any attention, I've never had ideas like that, You will, in time, you're still very young, Me, young, I'm nearly fifty-one, You're in the prime of life, Don't make fun of me, You only become wise after seventy, and then it's no use to you anyway, not to you or anyone else. Since I still have a long way to go before I reach that age, I didn't know whether to agree or not, so I thought it best to say nothing. It was time I said goodbye, so I said, I won't trouble you any more, thank you for all your patience and kindness, and forgive me, it was that mad idea of mine that got me into this, it's all absolutely absurd, there you were, sitting contentedly in your home, and along I come with my lies, my deceitful stories, I blush to think of some of the questions I asked you, Contrary to what you've just said, I wasn't sitting here contentedly, I was lonely, being able to tell you some of the sad things that have happened in my life was like getting rid of a great weight, Well, if that's how you feel, then I'm glad, It is and I don't want you to leave without asking you something, Ask anything you like, as long as it's within my power to help, You're the only person who can help, what I have to ask you is very simple, come and see me now and then, when you remember or feel like visiting, even if it's not to talk about my goddaughter, Why I'd be delighted to come and visit you, There'll always be a cup of coffee or tea waiting for you, That would be reason enough to come, but there are plenty of others, Thank you and, look, don't take any notice of that idea of mine, it's as mad as yours was, I'll think about it. I kissed her hand as I had on the first occasion, but then something unexpected happened, she kept hold of my hand and raised it to her lips. No woman had ever done that to me, I felt something like a shock in my soul, a tremor in my heart, and even now, now that it's morning, and many

hours have passed, while I finish writing up the events of the day in my notebook, I look at my right hand and it seems different to me, although I can't quite say how, it must be an internal rather than an external matter. Senhor José stopped writing, put down his pen, put the unknown woman's school record cards carefully away in the notebook, he had, in fact, left them on top of the table, and went and hid them away again between the mattress and the base of the bed. Then he heated up the stew left over from lunch and sat down to eat. There was an almost absolute silence, you could scarcely hear the noise made by the few cars still out and about in the city. What you could hear most clearly was a muffled sound that rose and fell, like a distant bellows, but Senhor José was used to that, it was the Central Registry breathing. Senhor José went to bed, but he wasn't sleepy. He remembered the events of the day, the unpleasant surprise of seeing his boss go into the Central Registry out of hours, and his troubling conversation with the lady in the ground-floor apartment, which he had set down in his notebook, faithful as to the meaning, less so as regards form, which is both understandable and forgivable, since memory, which is very sensitive and hates to be found lacking, tends to fill in any gaps with its own spurious creations of reality, but more or less in line with the facts of which it has only a vague recollection, like what remains after the passing of a shadow. It seemed to Senhor José that he had still not reached a logical conclusion about what had happened, that he still had to make a decision, otherwise his last words to the lady in the ground-floor apartment, I'll think about it, would be no more than a vain promise, of the sort that is always cropping up in conversation and that no one expects will be kept. Senhor José was desperate to get to sleep when, suddenly, from unknown depths, the longed-for solution welled up within him, like the end of a new Ariadne's thread, On Saturday, I'll go to the cemetery, he said out loud. The excitement made him sit up in bed, but the calm voice of good sense stepped in with some advice, Now that you've decided what you're going to do, lie down and go to sleep, don't be such a child, you don't really want to go there at this time of night, do you, and jump over the cemetery wall, although that's just a manner of speaking, of course. Obediently, Senhor José slipped down between the sheets, pulled them up to his nose and lay for a minute, his eyes open, thinking, I'm not going to be able to get to sleep. A minute later he was sleeping.

He woke late, shortly before the Central Registry was due to open, he didn't even have time to shave, he pulled on some clothes and left the house at a crazy gallop quite inappropriate to his age and his condition. All the other staff, from the eight clerks to the two deputies, were sitting down, their eyes fixed on the wall clock, waiting until the minute hand was resting exactly on the number twelve. Senhor José addressed the senior clerk in charge of his section, to whom he was expected to offer his first excuse, and he apologised for being late, I slept badly, he said, even though he knew, from long years of experience, that such an explanation was pointless, Sit down, came the abrupt reply. When, immediately after that, the minute hand slipped forward to indicate the transition from waiting time to work time, Senhor José, tripping over his shoelaces, which he had forgotten to tie, still had not reached his desk, a fact coldly observed by the senior clerk,

who noted down this remarkable fact in the day's diary. More than an hour passed before the Registrar arrived. He looked rather withdrawn, almost sombre, and this filled the staff with fear, at first sight, anyone would say that he had slept badly too, but he was his usual composed self, perfectly shaven, without a crease in his suit or a hair out of place. He paused for a moment by Senhor José's desk and looked at him severely, though without saying a word. Embarrassed, Senhor José began a gesture that seems instinctive in men, that of raising his hand to rub his cheek to see if his beard had grown, but he stopped halfway, as if, by doing so, he might disguise what was obvious to everyone else, his unforgivably scruffy appearance. Everyone thought that a reprimand would not be long in coming. The Registrar went over to his own desk, sat down and called over the two deputies. The general feeling was that things were looking very bad for Senhor José, if not, the boss would not have summoned both of his immediate inferiors, he must have wanted to hear their opinion of the heavy sanction he intended to impose, His patience has run out, the other clerks thought gleefully, for they had been scandalised by the recent unmerited favouritism shown to Senhor José by the boss, About time too, they said to themselves sententiously. They soon realised, however, that this was not the case. While one of the two deputies gave orders for everyone, senior clerks and clerks, to turn and face the Registrar, the other went around the counter and closed the entrance door, having first affixed a notice outside saying Closed temporarily for official business. What on earths going on, wondered the staff, including the deputies, who knew as much as the others, or perhaps slightly more, only that the Registrar had told them that he was going to speak. The first thing he said was Sit down. The order passed from the deputies to the senior clerks, from the senior clerks to the clerks, there was the inevitable noise produced by the scuffing of chairs, placed with their backs to their respective desks, but all this was done quickly, in less than a minute the silence in the Central Registry was absolute. You couldn't hear a fly, although everyone knew they were there, some perched in safe places, others dying in the filthy spiders' webs hanging from the ceiling. The Registrar rose slowly to his feet, equally slowly he surveyed the staff, one by one, as if he were seeing them for the first time, or as if he were trying to recognise them after a long absence, oddly enough, his expression was no longer sombre, or, rather, it was, but in a different sense, as if he were tormented by some moral pain. Then he spoke, Gentlemen, in my role as head of the Central Registry, the latest in a long line of Registrars begun when the oldest of the documents existing in our archives was first collected, in fulfilment of the responsibilities bestowed on me and following the example of my predeces sors, I have been scrupulous in obeying and in making others obey the written laws that regulate our work, never forgetting, indeed, at every moment, always mindful of tradition. I am aware that times have changed, I am aware of society's need for a continuous updating of working methods and processes, but I understand, as did those who were in charge of the Central Registry before me, that the preservation of the spirit, of the spirit of what I will call continuity and organic identity, must prevail over any other consideration, for if we fail to proceed along that path, we will witness the collapse of the moral edifice which, as the first and last depositories of life and death, we continue here to represent. There will doubtless be those who protest because there is not a single

typewriter to be seen in the Central Registry, still less other far more modern equipment, because the cabinets and shelves are made of wood, or because the staff still have to dip their pens in inkwells and use blotters, there will be those who consider us to be ridiculously frozen in time, who demand of the government the rapid introduction into our work of advanced technologies, but while it is true that laws and regulations can be altered and substituted at any moment, the same cannot be said of traditions, which is, as such, both in form and sense, immutable. No one is going to travel back in time in order to change a tradition that was born in time and that was fed and sustained by time. No one is going to tell us that what exists did not exist, no one would ever dare, like a child, to want what has happened not to have happened. And if they did, they would be wasting their time. These are the foundations of our reason and our strength, this is the wall behind which we have, until today, been able to defend both our identity and our autonomy. Thus we have continued and thus we would continue if new thoughts had not surfaced indicating to us the need for new paths.

So far there had been nothing new in the Registrar's speech, although it was true that this was the first time that anyone in the Central Registry had heard something resembling a solemn declaration of principles. The uniform mentality of the staff had been based on providing a service, which was regulated in the early days by rigour and precision, but, due perhaps to a certain degree of historical institutional weariness, had allowed among more recent generations the grave and continuing acts of neglect mentioned before and which were worthy of censure even from the most benevolent of viewpoints. Their dulled consciences touched, the staff assumed that this would be the main subject of the unexpected lecture, but they were soon undeceived. Besides, if they had paid a little more attention to the expression on the Registrar's face, they would have realised at once that his objective was not of a disciplinary nature, it wasn't a general reprimand, in which case his words would have sounded like sharp blows and his whole face would have been filled with a look of scornful indifference. None of these signs was apparent in the attitudes the Registrar struck, merely a feeling as of someone who, having been accustomed always to winning, finds himself for the first time in his life confronted by a force greater than his. And the few, in particular the deputies and the odd senior clerk, who thought they had deduced from the Registrar's last words that he was about to announce the immediate introduction of modernisations which were already current coinage beyond the walls of the Central Registry, were soon forced to recognise, much to their amazement, that they had been wrong. The Registrar continued to speak, Do not imagine, however, that the thoughts to which I refer are merely such thoughts as would lead us to open our doors to modern inventions, that would not even require any thought, we would simply call in the appropriate technician and within twenty-four hours we would have the place full of machinery of every kind. Much as it pains me to say this and however scandalous it may seem to you, the matter that my thoughts called into question, much to my surprise, was one of the fundamental aspects of Central Registry tradition, that is, the spatial distribution of the living and the dead, their obligatory separation, not only into different archives, but in different areas of the building. There

was a faint whispering, as if the common thought of the astonished workers had become audible, there can be no other explanation, since none of them would have dared to utter a word. I realise that this troubles you, continued the Registrar, because, when I first thought it, I too felt almost as if I had committed a heresy, worse still, I felt guilty of offending against the memory of those who held this position of authority before me, and against those who worked at the desks now occupied by you, but the irresistible pressure of evidence forced me to confront the weight of tradition, a tradition which, all my life, I had considered immovable. Becoming aware of these facts was no chance occurrence nor the fruit of a sudden revelation. On two occasions since I have been head of the Central Registry, I have received two premonitory warnings, to which, at the time, I attributed no particular importance, except that I reacted to them in a way which I myself can only describe as primitive, but which I now realise paved the way for me to welcome with an open heart a third and more recent warning, about which I will not speak on this occasion, for reasons which I believe should remain secret. The first occasion, which you will doubtless remember, was when one of my deputies here present proposed that the archive of the dead should be arranged the other way around, that is, with the oldest farthest off and the most recent nearest. Because of the amount of work involved in such a change and bearing in mind the small staff we have at our disposal, the suggestion was manifestly impracticable, and I conveyed those feelings to the proposer of the idea, however, I did so in terms that I would prefer now to forget and that I would like him to forget too. The deputy referred to blushed with satisfaction and turned around to show himself, before turning back to face his superior, nodding slightly, as if he were thinking, You see, if you paid a little more attention to what other people told you. The Registrar went on, I did not realise then that behind an apparently absurd idea, which, from the operational point of view, was indeed absurd, lay an intuition of something absolutely revolutionary, an unwitting, unconscious intuition its true, but no less effective for that. Of course, one could expect no more from the brain of a mere deputy, but as Registrar, I was obliged, both by the duties imposed on me by my post and by reason of experience, to understand immediately what the seeming futility of the idea concealed. This time the deputy did not turn around, and if he blushed with hurt pride no one saw it because he kept his head bowed. The Registrar paused to give a deep sigh and then went on, The second occasion was when the researcher went missing in the archive of the dead and was only discovered a week later, almost at death's door, when we had nearly lost hope of finding him alive. Since it was, in a sense, such a common occurrence, for I cannot believe that anyone here has not, at least once in his life, got lost in there, I merely took the necessary precautions, issuing an order imposing the obligatory use of Ariadne's thread, a classical, and if I may say, ironic description, of the length of string that I keep in the drawer. The fact that since then nothing similar has occurred is proof that it worked. In light of the direction my talk is taking, one might ask what conclusions I should have drawn from the affair of the lost genealogist, and I would say, with all humility, that but for certain other recent events and the thoughts which those events aroused in me, I would never have come to understand the double absurdity of separating the dead from the living. It is absurd in the first place from the archivistic point

of view, when one considers that the easiest way of finding the dead would be to look for them among the living, since the latter, because they are alive, are always there before us, but it is equally absurd from the mnemonic point of view, for if the dead are not kept in the midst of the living, sooner or later they will be forgotten and then, if you'll forgive the rather vulgar expression, it's the Devils own job to find them when we need them, which, again, sooner or later, we always do. For all those listening to me, without regard to rank or personal circumstance, it will be clear that I have been talking only about the Central Registry, not the outside world, where, in order to protect the physical hygiene and mental health of the living, we usually bury the dead. But I would go so far as to say that an identical need for physical hygiene and mental health should ensure that we of the Central Registry, we who write and manipulate the papers of life and death, should reunite the dead and the living in one single archive which we will call the historic archive, and where they will be inseparable, a circumstance which, beyond these walls, law, custom and fear do not allow. I will issue an order that will specify, firstly, that from this date on, the dead will remain in the same place that they occupied in the archive while alive, secondly, that gradually, file by file, document by document, from the most recent to the most ancient, we will move towards the reintegration of the past dead into the archive which will then become everyone's present. I know that the second part of the operation will take several decades to carry out, that we will no longer be alive, nor, probably, will the subsequent generation, when the papers of the last dead person, torn, worm-eaten, darkened by the dust of ages, return to the world from which, by one last, unnecessary act of violence, they were removed. Just as definitive death is the ultimate fruit of the will to forget, so the will to remember will perpetuate our lives. Were I expecting you to express an opinion you would perhaps argue, with what you fondly imagine to be subtlety, that such a perpetuity will be of no use to those who have died. That would be the argument of one who sees no further than the end of his own nose. In that case, and always assuming I took the trouble to respond, I would have to explain to you that I have been talking only about life here, not death, and if you failed to realise that before, that is because you will never be capable of understanding anything at all.

The reverential silence in which the final part of his speech had been heard was rudely shaken by the sarcasm of those last words. The Registrar had gone back to being the boss they had always known, arrogant and ironic, implacable in his judgements, rigorous as regards discipline, as he immediately went on to demonstrate, Purely in your interests, not in mine, I must make it clear to you that you would be making the biggest mistake of your lives if you were to consider the fact that I have spoken to you with an open heart and mind a sign of personal weakness or a diminution of official authority. The reason I did not simply issue an order for the reintegration or unification of the two archives to take place, without further explanation, as I would have been perfectly entitled to do, was that I wanted you to understand the deeper reasons behind the decision, it was because I wanted the work awaiting you to be carried out in the spirit of one who feels he is engaged in building something and not with the sense of bureaucratic alienation of one who has simply been ordered to put one set of papers together with

another. Discipline in the Central Registry will continue to be what it has always been, no distractions, no daydreaming, no word not directly concerned with work, no unpunctuality, no negligence in matters of personal behaviour, in either manners or appearance. Senhor José thought, He must mean me, because I haven't shaved, but this didn't worry him, the reference was probably intended to be a general one, but, just in case, he lowered his head very slowly, like a student who has not learned his lesson and wants to avoid being called to the blackboard. It seemed that the speech had reached its end, but no one moved, they had to await the order to go back to work, which is why they all jumped when the Registrar said in a loud, sharp tone, Senhor José. Senhor José got swiftly to his feet, What can he want of me, he no longer thought that the reason for that abrupt call could be his unshaven beard, something far more serious than a simple reprimand was about to take place, or so he judged from the severe expression on the Registrar's face, at least that was what a terrible fear was beginning to scream at him inside his head when he saw the Registrar advancing in his direction, stopping in front of him, Senhor José can barely breathe, he awaits the first word as a condemned man waits for the blade to fall, for the rope to tighten or for the firing squad to shoot, then the Registrar said, That beard. He then turned on his heel and signalled to his deputies for work to recommence. There was a certain look of placid calm on his face now, an air of strange peace, as if he too had come to the end of a day's work. No one will share these impressions with Senhor José, in the first place, so as not to fill his head with even more fantasies, secondly, because the order is clear, No word not directly concerned with work.

One enters the cemetery via an old building with a façade which is the twin sister of the Central Registry façade. There are the same three black stone steps, the same ancient door in the middle, the same five narrow windows above. Apart from the great two-leaved door alongside the façade, the only observable difference would be the sign above the entrance, in the same enamelled lettering, that says General Cemetery. The large door was closed many years ago, when it was clear that access through there had become impracticable, that it had ceased satisfactorily to fulfil the end for which it had been intended, that is, to allow easy passage not only for the dead and their companions, but also for those who would visit the dead afterwards. Like all cemeteries in this or any other world, it was tiny when it started, a small patch of land on the outskirts of what was still the embryo of a city, turned to face the open air of the fields, but later, alas, with the passing of time, the inevitable happened, it kept growing and growing and growing, until it became the immense necropolis that it is today. At first, it was surrounded by a wall and, for generations, whenever the pressure inside began to hinder both the orderly accommodation of the dead and the free circulation of the living, they did the same as in the Central Registry, they would demolish the walls and rebuild them a little farther on. One day, it must be close to four centuries ago, the then keeper of the cemetery had the idea of leaving it open on all sides, apart from the area facing onto the street, alleging that this was the only way to rekindle the sentimental relationship between those inside and those outside, much diminished at the time, as anyone could see just by looking at the neglected state of the graves, especially the oldest ones. He believed that, although walls served the positive aims of hygiene and decorum, ultimately, they had the perverse effect of aiding forgetfulness, which is hardly surprising, given the popular wisdom which has declared, since time began, that what the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve over. We have many reasons to think that the motives behind the Registrar's decision to break with tradition and routine and to unify the archives of the dead and of the living, thus reintegrating human society in the specific documentary area under his jurisdiction, were purely internal. It is, therefore, all the more difficult for us to understand why no one immediately applied the earlier lesson provided by a humble, primitive cemetery keeper, who, as was only natural in his line of work and bearing in mind the times he lived in, was doubtless not particularly well educated, but was, nevertheless, a man of revolutionary instincts, and who, sad to say, has not even been given a decent gravestone to point out the fact to future generations. On the contrary, for four centuries now, curses, insults, calumnies and humiliations have been heaped upon the memory of the unfortunate innovator, for he is held to be the person historically responsible for the present state of the necropolis, which is described as disastrous and chaotic, mostly because not only does the General Cemetery still have no walls about it but it could never possibly be walled in again. Allow us to explain. We said earlier that the cemetery grew, not, of course, because of some intrinsic reproductive powers of its own, as though, if you will permit us a somewhat macabre example, the dead had engendered more dead, but simply because the city's population grew and so therefore did its size. Even when the General Cemetery was still surrounded by walls, something occurred which, in the language of municipal bureaucracy, is called an urban

demographic explosion, and this happened more than once and in successive ages. Little by little, people came to live in the wide fields behind the cemetery, small groups of houses appeared, villages, hamlets, second homes, which grew in turn, occasionally contiguous, but still leaving between them large empty spaces, which were used as farmland or woods or pasture or areas of scrub. Those were the areas into which the General Cemetery advanced when its walls were demolished. Like floodwaters that begin by encroaching on the low-lying land, snaking along valleys and then, slowly, creeping up hillsides, so the graves gained ground, often to the detriment of agriculture, for the besieged owners had no alternative but to sell off strips of land, at other times, the graves skirted orchards, wheat fields, threshing floors and cattle pens, always within sight of the houses, and, often, if you like, right next door. Seen from the air, the General Cemetery looks like an enormous felled tree, with a short, fat trunk, made up of the nucleus of original graves, from which four stout branches reach out, all from the same growing point, but which, later, in successive bifurcations, extend as far as you can see, forming, in the words of an inspired poet, a leafy crown in which life and death are mingled, just as in real trees birds and foliage mingle. That is why the main door of the General Cemetery ceased to serve as a passageway for funeral processions. It is opened only very infrequently, when a researcher into old stones, having studied one of the very early funerary markers in the place, asks permission to make a mould of it, with the consequent deployment of raw materials, such as plaster, tow and wires, and, a not unusual complement, delicate, precise photographs, the sort that require spotlights, reflectors, batteries, light meters, umbrellas and other artifacts, none of which are allowed through the small door that leads from the building into the cemetery because it would disturb the administrative work carried on inside.

Despite this exhaustive accumulation of details, which some may consider insignificant, a case, to resort to botanical comparisons again, of not being able to see the forest for the trees, it is quite possible that some vigilant, attentive listener to this story, someone who has not lost a sense of standards inherited from mental processes determined, above all, by the logic acquired from knowledge, it is quite possible that such a listener might declare himself radically opposed to the existence, and still more to the spread, of such wild, anarchic cemeteries as this, which has grown to the point where it is almost cheek by jowl with the places that the living had intended for their exclusive use, that is, houses, streets, squares, gardens and other public amenities, theatres and cinemas, cafes and restaurants, hospitals, insane asylums, police stations, playgrounds, sports fields, fairgrounds and exhibition areas, car parks, large department stores, small shops, side streets, alleyways, avenues. For, while aware of the General Cemetery's irresistible need for growth, in symbiotic union with the development of the city and its increased population, they consider that the area intended for one's final rest should nevertheless keep within strict bounds and obey strict rules. An ordinary quadrilateral of high walls, with no decoration or fantastic architectural excrescences, would be more than sufficient, instead of this vast octopus, more octopus really than tree, however much that may pain poetic imaginations, reaching out with its eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-

four tentacles, as if to embrace the whole world. In civilised countries, the correct practice, with advantages proven by experience, is for bodies to remain beneath the earth for a few years, five usually, at the end of which, apart from the odd case of miraculous incorruptibility, what little is left after the corrosive work of quicklime and the digestive work of worms is dug up to make room for the new occupants. In civilised countries, they do not have this absurd practice of plots in perpetuity, this idea of considering any grave forever untouchable, as if, since life could not be made definitive, death can be. This has obvious consequences, the blocked-off door, the anarchic internal traffic system, the ever longer route that funerals have to make around the General Cemetery before they reach their destination at the far end of one of the octopus's sixty-four tentacles which they would never find if they did not have a guide with them. Like the Central Registry, although, by some deplorable lapse of memory, this information was not given at the appropriate moment, the General Cemetery's unwritten motto is All the Names, although it should be said that, in fact, these three words fit the Central Registry like a glove, because it is there that all the names are to be found, both those of the dead and those of the living, while the cemetery, given its role as ultimate destination and ultimate depository, has to content itself only with the names of the dead. This mathematical evidence, however, is not enough to silence the keepers of the General Cemetery who, confronted by what they call their apparent numerical inferiority, usually shrug their shoulders and argue, With time and patience everyone ends up here, the Central Registry, from this point of view, is merely a tributary of the General Cemetery. Needless to say, it is an insult to the Central Registry to call it a tributary. Despite these rivalries, this professional competitiveness, relations between those who work in the Central Registry and those in the Cemetery are openly friendly and full of mutual respect, because, at bottom, apart from the inevitable institutional collaboration between them, given the formal similarity and objective contiguity of their respective statutes, they know that they are digging at either end of the same vine, the vine called life and which is situated between two voids.

This is not the first time that Senhor José has been to the General Cemetery. The bureaucratic need to check certain data, clarify discrepancies, compare facts, clear up differences, means that the people working in the Central Registry have to go to the cemetery with relative frequency, a task that nearly always falls to the clerks, hardly ever to the senior clerks, and never, need it be said, to the deputies or the Registrar. Sometimes, for similar reasons, the clerks and, on rare occasions, the officials from the General Cemetery go to the Central Registry, where they are received with the same cordiality with which Senhor José will be greeted here. Like the facade, the interior of the building is a perfect copy of the Central Registry, although, of course, one must point out that the people working in the General Cemetery usually say that the Central Registry is a perfect copy of the cemetery building, indeed an incomplete copy, since they lack the great door, to which those at the Central Registry reply that a fat lot of good the door is anyway, since it's always closed. Nevertheless, here we find the same long counter stretching the whole length of the enormous room, the same towering shelves, the same

arrangement of staff, in a triangle, with the eight clerks in the first row, the four senior clerks behind them, then the two deputy keepers, for that is what they are called here, not deputy registrars, just as the keeper, at the apex, is not a registrar, but a keeper. However, there are other members of staff at the cemetery apart from the clerks. Sitting on two continuous benches, on either side of the entrance door, opposite the counter, are the guides. Some people continue bluntly to call them gravediggers, as in the old days, but their professional title, in the city's official gazette, is cemetery guide, which, contrary to what one might expect or imagine, is not just a well-intentioned euphemism intended to disguise the painful brutality of a spade digging a rectangular hole in the earth, rather, it is a correct description of a role which is not merely a question of lowering the dead into the depths, but of leading them over the surface too. These men, who work in pairs, wait there in silence for the funeral corteges to arrive and then, armed with the respective pass, filled in by the clerk chosen to deal with the matter, they get into one of the cars waiting in the parking lot, the ones that have a luminous sign at the rear that flicks on and off and says Follow me, like the cars used at airports, at least the keeper of the General Cemetery is quite right in that regard, when he says that they are more advanced in matters of modern technology than they are at the Central Registry, where tradition still dictates that the clerks use old-fashioned pens and inkwells. The fact is that when you see the funeral car and those in it obediently following the guides along the well-tended streets of the city and along the rough roads of the suburbs, with the light flashing on and off all the way to the grave, Follow me, Follow me, Follow me, it is impossible not to agree that not all changes in the world are for the worst. And although the detail may not be of any real importance for a global understanding of the story, it may be of interest to explain that a marked personality trait among these guides is a belief that the universe is in fact ruled by a superior thought process which is permanently alert to human needs, because if that were not so, they argue, cars would not have been invented at precisely the moment when they became most necessary, that is, when the General Cemetery had become so vast that it would be a real calvary to bear the deceased to his or her particular Golgotha by the traditional methods, whether using stick and rope or a two-wheeled cart. When someone sensibly remarks to them that they should be more careful in their use of words, since Golgotha and calvary originally mean one and the same thing, and that it makes no sense to use terms denoting pain and sorrow with regard to the transportation of someone who will never suffer again, you can guarantee that they will respond, rudely, that each man knows himself, but only God knows all men.

Senhor José went in and went straight up to the counter, casting a cold eye over the seated guides, whom he disliked because their existence tilted the numerical balance of staff in the cemetery's favour. Since he was known to the people there, he did not need to show the identity card proving that he was a member of staff at the Central Registry, and as for the famous letter of authority, it hadn't even occurred to him to bring it, besides, even the least experienced of the clerks would have seen at a glance that it was false from beginning to end. Of the eight clerks lined up behind the counter, Senhor José

chose one of the men with whom he got on best, a man a little older than himself, who had the absorbed air of one who no longer expects anything more from life. Like all the other clerks, he always seemed to be there whatever day it was. At first, Senhor José had thought that the people who worked at the cemetery never got a day off or took a holiday, that they worked every day of the year, until someone told him that this was not the case, that there was a group of casual workers contracted to work on Sundays, we are no longer in the days of slavery, Senhor José. Needless to say, the clerks at the General Cemetery have long hoped that the aforesaid casual workers might take over on Saturday afternoons too, but, for alleged reasons of budgets and finances, that demand has not yet been met, and in vain did the cemetery staff invoke the example of the Central Registry staff, who only worked on Saturday mornings, for, according to the sibylline communique issued from above refusing their request, The living can wait, the dead cannot. Anyway, it was unheard of for a member of staff from the Central Registry to appear there for work reasons on a Saturday afternoon, when everyone assumed he would be enjoying his weekly leisure time with his family, going on a trip into the country, or occupied with domestic tasks that have to wait until there's a bit of free time, or merely lazing about, or even wondering what is the point of having leisure time if we don't know what to do with it. In order to avoid any awkward questions, which could easily become embarrassing, Senhor José adroitly pre-empted the other person's curiosity, giving the excuse he had already prepared, It's a special case, very urgent, my deputy needs this information first thing on Monday morning, that's why he asked me to come to the General Cemetery today, in my free time, I see, you'd better tell me what it's about then, It's very simple, we just want to know when this woman was buried. The man took the card that Senhor José held out to him, copied the name and date of death onto a piece of paper, and went to consult the relevant senior clerk. Senhor José couldn't catch what they said, here, as in the Central Registry, you can speak only in a low voice, and they were some way away from him too, but he saw the senior clerk nod and, judging by his lips, he was sure that he had said, Fine, go ahead. The man went to look in the card index under the counter, where all the cards of those who died in the last fifty years were to be found, the others filled the high shelves that stretched into the interior of the building, he opened one of the drawers, found the woman's card, copied down the relevant date and came back to where Senhor José was standing, Here it is, he said, and added, as if he thought the information might be useful, She's in the section for suicides. Senhor José felt a sudden contraction in the pit of his stomach which, according to an article he had read once in a popular magazine about science, is the approximate location of a kind of many-pointed star of nerves, a radiating junction called the solar plexus, however, he managed to hide his surprise behind an automatic mask of indifference, the cause of death would, of course, be on the lost death certificate, which he had never seen, but as a clerk in the Central Registry, especially coming to the cemetery, as he was, on business, he could not let on that he did not know. Very carefully he folded up the piece of paper and put it in his wallet and thanked the clerk, not forgetting to add, as one official to another, although that is purely a manner of speaking, since both were mere clerks, that he was always at his disposal should he need anything at the Central Registry

and always assuming that it was within his power to grant it. When he had taken two steps towards the door, he turned around, I've just had an idea, since I'm here, I think I'll spend part of the afternoon taking a little stroll around the cemetery, if you could let me through here, I wouldn't have to go the long way around, Hang on, I'll go and ask, said the clerk. He took the request to the senior clerk to whom he had spoken before, but instead of replying, the latter got up and went over to the deputy keeper in charge of his work. Although he was even farther away this time, Senhor José could see by the nod the deputy gave and by the movement of his lips that he was going to be allowed to use the inner door. The clerk did not return to the counter immediately, he first opened a cabinet from which he took a large card which he then placed beneath the head of a machine with little coloured lights on it. He pressed a button, there was a mechanical noise, more lights came on, and then a smaller piece of paper emerged from a slit in the side. The clerk put the card back in the cabinet and then came back to the counter, You'd better take a map with you, there have been cases of people getting lost, and it's incredibly difficult to find them again, the guides have to go out looking for them in the cars and that gums up the works, you get funerals backed up outside, People panic easily, all they have to do is go in a straight line in the same direction, they're bound to reach somewhere, now in the archive of the dead in the Central Registry it really is complicated, because there are no straight lines, In theory, you're right, but the straight lines here are like the straight lines in a labyrinth of corridors, they're constantly breaking off, changing direction, you walk around a grave and suddenly you don't know where you are, In the Central Registry, we use Ariadne's thread, it never fails, There was a time when we used it too, but it didn't last long, the thread was found cut on several occasions and no one ever found out who the culprit was or why they'd done it, It certainly wasn't the dead, that's for sure, Who knows, The people who got lost were people with no initiative, they could have oriented themselves by the sun, Some probably would have if they hadn't been unlucky enough to get lost on a cloudy day, We haven't got one of those machines in the Central Registry, We've found them really useful. The conversation could not go on any longer, the senior clerk had already looked at them twice, and the second time he was frowning, it was Senhor José who remarked in a low voice, That senior clerk has already looked over here twice, I don't want you to get into any trouble on my account, I'll just show you where the woman is buried, see the end of this path, the wavy line here is a stream which, for the moment, still serves as a boundary line, the grave is in that corner there, you can identify it by the number, And by the name, Yes, if someone's put one there, but it's the numbers that count, the names wouldn't fit on the map, you'd need a map the size of the world, Scale one to one, Yes, scale one to one, and even then, the names would have to be superimposed on each other, Is it up-to-date, We update it every day, Now tell me, what made you think I'd want to see the woman's grave, No reason, perhaps because, in your place, I'd have done the same, Why, Just to be certain, That she's dead, No, to be certain that she'd been alive. The senior clerk looked at them for a third time, made a movement as if he were about to get up, but did not complete it, Senhor José bade a hasty farewell to the clerk, Thank you, thank you, he said, at the same time nodding slightly in the direction of the keeper, a person to

whom one should always bow, just as one gives thanks to heaven, even when it's cloudy, with the important difference that then you don't lower your head, you raise it.

The oldest part of the General Cemetery, which was a few dozen yards behind the administrative building, was the one preferred by archaeologists for their investigations. These ancient stones, some so worn by time that you could only make out a few barely visible marks that could as easily be the remains of letters as the result of scratches made by an unskilled chisel, continued to be the object of intense debate and polemic in which, with no hope, in the majority of cases, of ever knowing who had been buried beneath them, archaeologists merely discussed, as if it were a matter of vital import, the probable date of the tombs. Such insignificant differences as a few hundred years here or there were the motive for long, long controversies, both public and academic, which almost always resulted in the violent breakup of personal relationships and even in mortal enmities. Things got still worse, if that were possible, when historians and art critics decided to stick their oar in, for while it was relatively easy, in the circumstances, for the board of archaeologists to reach agreement over a broad concept of antiquity acceptable to all, leaving aside actual dates, the matter of truth and beauty created a veritable tug-of-war among the men and women of aesthetics and history, each pulling for their own side, and it was a not uncommon sight to see a critic suddenly changing his opinion simply because the changed opinion of another critic meant that they both now agreed. Throughout the centuries, the ineffable peace of the General Cemetery, with its banks of spontaneous vegetation, its flowers, its creepers, its dense bushes, its festoons and garlands, its nettles and its thistles, the powerful trees whose roots often dislodged tombstones and forced up into the sunlight a few startled bones, had been both the target of and a witness to fierce wars of words and to one or two physical acts of violence. Whenever incidents of this nature occurred, the keeper would begin by ordering the available guides to go and separate the illustrious contenders, and when some particularly difficult situation arose, he would go there in person to remind the fighters ironically that there was no point tearing their hair out over such minor matters during their lifetime, since, sooner or later, they would all end up together in the cemetery bald as coots. Just like the Registrar, the keeper of the General Cemetery made brilliant use of sarcasm, which confirms the general assumption that this character trait had proved indispensable in their rise to their respective high ranks, together, of course, with a competent knowledge, both practical and theoretical, of archivistic technique. On one matter, however, historians, art critics and archaeologists are in agreement, the obvious fact that the General Cemetery is a perfect catalogue, a showcase, a summary of all styles, especially architectural, sculptural and decorative, and therefore an inventory of every possible way of seeing, being and living that has existed up until now, from the first elementary drawing of the outline of the human body, subsequently carved and chiselled out of bare stone, to the chromium-plated steel, reflecting panels, synthetic fibres and mirrored glass which are used willy-nilly in the current age.

The first funerary monuments were made of dolmens, cromlechs and menhirs, then

there appeared, like a great blank page in relief, niches, altars, tabernacles, granite bowls, marble urns, tombstones, smooth and carved, columns, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and Composite, caryatids, friezes, acanthuses, entablatures and pediments, false vaults, real vaults, as well as stretches of brick wall, the gables of Cyclopean walls, lancet windows, rose windows, gargoyles, oriel windows, tympanums, pinnacles, paving stones, flying buttresses, pillars, pilasters, recumbent statues representing men in helmet, sword and armour, capitals with and without ornamentation, pomegranates, lilies, immortelles, campaniles, cupolas, recumbent statues representing women with small hard breasts, paintings, arches, faithful dogs lying down, swaddled infants, the bearers of gifts, mourners with their heads covered, needles, mouldings, stained-glass windows, daises, pulpits, balconies, more pinnacles, more tympanums, more capitals, more arches, angels with wings spread, angels with wings folded, tondos, empty urns, or urns filled with false stone flames or with a piece of languid crepe draped about them, griefs, tears, majestic men, magnificent women, delightful children cut down in the flower of life, old men and old women who could have expected no more, whole crosses and broken crosses, steps, nails, crowns of thorns, lances, enigmatic triangles, the occasional unusual marble dove, flocks of real doves wheeling above the cemetery. And silence. A silence interrupted only from time to time by the steps of the occasional sighing lover of solitude drawn here by a sudden bout of sadness from the rustling outskirts where someone can still be heard weeping at a graveside on which they have placed bunches of fresh flowers, still damp with sap, piercing, one might say, the very heart of time, these three thousand years of graves of every shape, meaning and appearance, united by the same neglect, by the same solitude, for the sadness they once gave rise to is now too old for there to be any surviving heirs. Orienting himself with the map, although occasionally wishing he had a compass, Senhor José walks towards the area set aside for suicides, where the woman on the card is buried, but his step is slower now, less determined, from time to time he stops to study a sculptural detail stained by lichen or discoloured by the rain, a few mourners caught in mid-lament, a few solemn depositions, a few hieratic folds, or else he struggles to decipher an inscription whose lettering attracted him in passing, its understandable that even the very first line takes him a long time to decipher, for, despite having occasionally had to examine parchments more or less contemporary with these in the Central Registry, this clerk is not versed in ancient forms of writing, which is why he has never got beyond being a clerk. On top of a small rounded hillock, in the shadow of an obelisk that was once a geodesic marker, Senhor José looks around him as far as he can see, and he finds nothing but graves rising and falling with the curves of the land, graves poised on the edge of the occasional precipitous slope and spreading out over the plains, There are millions of them, he murmurs, then he thinks of the vast amount of space they would have saved if the dead had been buried standing up, side by side, in serried ranks, like soldiers at attention, and at their head, as the only sign of their presence there, a stone cube on which would be written, on the five visible sides, the principal facts about the life of the deceased, five stone squares like five pages, the summary of a whole book that had proved impossible to write. Almost as far as the horizon, far, far into the distance, Senhor José can see slowly moving lights, like yellow lightning, flicking on and

off at constant intervals, they are the guides' cars calling to the people behind them, Follow me, Follow me, one of them suddenly stops, the light disappears, that means it's reached its destination. Senhor José looked up at the sun, then at his watch, it's getting late, he'll have to walk fast if he wants to reach the unknown woman before dusk. He consulted the map, ran his index finger over it to reconstruct, approximately, the route he had followed from the administrative building to the place where he now finds himself, compared it with the distance he still has to walk and almost lost courage. In a straight line, according to the scale, it would be about three miles, but, as we have already said, in the General Cemetery, the straight continuous line never lasts for long, to those three miles as the crow flies, you will have to add another two, or possibly three, travelling overland. Senhor José calculated the amount of time left and the strength still remaining in his legs, he heard a prudent voice telling him to leave it for another day, when he had more time to visit the grave of the unknown woman, because, now he knows where she is, any taxi or bus could drop him off nearer to the actual place, skirting around the cemetery, as families do when they come to weep over their loved ones and place new flowers in the jars or refresh the water, especially in summer. Senhor José was still weighing this perplexing problem when he remembered his adventure at the school, the grim, rainy night, the steep, slippery mountain slope of the porch roof, and then, soaked from head to toe, his grazed knee rubbing painfully against his trousers, his anxious search inside the building, and how, by dint of tenacity and intelligence, he had managed to conquer his own fears and overcome the thousand difficulties that blocked his path until he discovered and finally entered the mysterious attic, confronting a darkness even more frightening than that in the archive of the dead. Anyone brave enough to do all that had no right to feel discouraged by the thought of a walk, however long it might be, especially when doing so in the frank brilliance of the bright sun which, as we all know, is the friend of heroes. If the shades of dusk caught up with him before he had reached the unknown woman's grave, if night came to cut off all paths back, sowing them with invisible terrors and preventing him from going any farther, he could lie down on one of these mossy stones, with a sad stone angel to watch over his sleep, and wait for the birth of the new day. Or else he could shelter beneath a flying buttress like that one over there, thought Senhor José, but then it occurred to him that, farther on, he wouldn't find any flying buttresses. Thanks to the generations yet to come and to the consequent development of civil engineering, it won't be long before they invent less expensive means of holding up a wall, indeed it is in the General Cemetery that the results of progress are set out before the eyes of the studious or the merely curious, there are even those who say that a cemetery like this is a kind of library which contains not books but buried people, it really doesn't matter, you can learn as much from people as from books. Senhor José looked back, from where he was he could see only the roof ridge of the administrative building above the taller funerary monuments, I had no idea I'd come so far, he murmured, and having said that, as if, in order to make a decision, he had needed only to hear the sound of his own voice he once more continued on his way. When he at last reached the section of the suicides, with the sky already sifting the still-white ashes of the dusk, he thought that he must have gone the wrong way or that there was

something wrong with the map. Before him was a great expanse of field, with numerous trees, almost a wood, where the graves, apart from the barely visible gravestones, seemed more like tufts of natural vegetation. You could not see the stream from there, but you could hear the lightest of murmurs slipping over the stones, and in the atmosphere, which was like green glass, there hovered a coolness which was not just the usual coolness of the first hour of dusk. Being so recent, only a matter of a few days ago, the grave of the unknown woman must be on the outer limit of the area, the question was in which direction. Senhor José thought that the best thing, in order not to get lost, would be to walk over to the small stream and then go along the bank until he found the latest graves. The shadow of the trees covered him immediately, as if night had suddenly fallen. I should be afraid, murmured Senhor José, in the midst of this silence, among these tombs, with these trees surrounding me, instead I feel as calm as if I were in my own house, except that my legs ache from having walked so much, here's the stream, if I was afraid, I could leave here this minute, all I'd have to do is cross the stream, I'd just have to take my shoes and socks off and roll up my trouser legs, hang my shoes around my neck and wade across, the water wouldn't even reach my knees, I'd soon be back in the land of the living again, with those lights over there that have just gone on. Half an hour later, Senhor José reached the end of the field, when the moon, almost full, almost completely round, was just coming up over the horizon. There the graves did not as yet have carved headstones to cover them nor any sculptural adornments, they could only be identified by the white numbers painted on the black labels stuck in at the head of the grave, like hovering butterflies. The moonlight gradually spread over the field, slipped slowly through the trees like a habitual, benevolent ghost. In a clearing, Senhor José found what he was looking for. He didn't take from his pocket the piece of paper the cemetery clerk had given him, he had made no particular effort to remember the number, but he knew it when he needed to, and now it was there before him, brilliantly lit, as if written in phosphorescent paint. Here she is, he said.

Senhor José got cold during the night. After having uttered those redundant, useless words, Here she is, he wasn't sure what else he should do. It was true that, after long and arduous labours, he had managed, at last, to find the unknown woman, or rather, the place where she lay, a good six feet beneath an earth that still sustained him, but, he thought to himself, the normal response would be to feel afraid, fearful of the place, the hour, the rustling trees, the mysterious moonlight, and, in particular, of the strange cemetery surrounding him, an assembly of suicides, a gathering of silences that, from one moment to the next, might begin to scream, We came before our time was due, our own will brought us here, but what he felt inside him seemed more like indecision, doubt, as if, just when he thought he had reached the end of everything, he realised that his search was not yet finished, as if having come here were merely another point on the journey, of no more importance than the ground-floor apartment belonging to the elderly lady, or the school, or the chemist's where he had gone to ask questions, or the archive in the Central Registry where they kept the papers of the dead. He was so overcome by this feeling that he even muttered, as if trying to convince himself, She's dead, there's nothing more I can do, there's nothing anyone can do about death. For long hours he had walked through the General Cemetery, he had passed through epochs, eras, dynasties, through kingdoms, empires and republics, through wars and epidemics, through infinite numbers of disparate deaths, beginning with the first sorrow felt by humanity and ending with this woman who had committed suicide only a few days ago, Senhor José, therefore, knows all too well that there is nothing anyone can do about death. On that walk made up of so many dead, not one of them got up when they heard him pass, not one begged him to help them reunite the scattered dust of their flesh with the bones fallen from their sockets, not one asked him, Come and breathe into my eyes the breath of life, they know all too well that there is nothing anyone can do about death, they know it, we all know it, but, in that case, where does it come from, this feeling of angst that grips Senhor José's throat, this unease of mind, as if he had cravenly abandoned a half-completed task and now did not know how to return to it with any dignity. On the other side of the stream, not far off, one can see a few houses with the windows lit, the moribund lights of the street lamps in the suburbs, the fleeting beam of a car passing on the road. And immediately ahead, only thirty paces away, as sooner or later had to happen, a small bridge joins the two banks of the stream, so Senhor José won't have to take off his shoes and roll up his trouser legs when he wants to cross to the other side. In normal circumstances he would have done so a long time ago, especially since we know he is not a person of great courage, courage he is going to need if he is to survive a whole night in a cemetery unscathed, with a dead person lying beneath his feet and a moonlight capable of making shadows walk. The circumstances, however, are these and no others, here it is not a question of courage or cowardice, here it is a matter of life and death, which is why Senhor José, despite knowing that he will often feel afraid during the night, despite knowing that the sighing of the wind will terrify him that at dawn the cold fallen from the sky will join forces with the cold rising from the earth, Senhor José is going to sit down beneath a tree, huddled up in the shelter of a providential hollow trunk. He turns up his jacket collar, makes himself as small as possible in order to retain the warmth of his body, folds his arms so that his

hands are in his armpits, and prepares to wait for day. He can feel his stomach asking him for food, but he takes no notice, no one ever died from going for a while without eating between meals, except when the second meal was so long in being served that it did not appear in time to be served at all. Senhor José wants to know if it really is all over, or if, on the contrary, there is still something he has forgotten to do, or, more important, something that he had never even considered before and that might turn out to be, after all, the essence of the strange adventure into which chance had plunged him. He had looked for the unknown woman everywhere, and had found her here, beneath that little mound of earth which will soon be overgrown by weeds, if the stonemason doesn't come first to level it out and place on it the marble stone with the usual inscription of dates, the first and the last, and the name, though the family might be the sort who prefer a simple rectangular frame, in the middle of which they will later sow a decorative lawn, a solution that offers the double advantage of being less expensive and providing a home for the insects that live above ground. The woman is there then, all the roads in the world have closed for her, she walked that part of the road she had to walk and stopped where she wanted to, end of story, but Senhor José cannot rid himself of an obsessive thought, that he is the only person who can move the final piece on the board, the definitive piece, the one which, if moved in the right direction, will give real meaning to the game, at the risk, if he does not do so, of leaving the game at stalemate for all eternity. He has no idea what magical move that will be, but his decision to spend the night here was not made in the hope that the silence would come and whisper it in his ear or that the moonlight would kindly sketch it out for him among the shadows of the trees, he is simply like someone who, having climbed a mountain to reach the landscapes beyond, resists going back down into the valley until his astonished eyes have taken their fill of vast horizons.

The tree in which Senhor José has taken shelter is an ancient olive tree, whose fruits the local people still come and pick despite the fact that the olive grove has now become a cemetery. Over the many years of its life, the tree's trunk has gradually split open down one side, from top to bottom, like a cradle stood on its end so as to take up less space, and it is there that Senhor José manages to doze off now and then, it is there that he jerks awake, startled by the wind buffeting his face or when the silence and stillness of the air grew so profound that his drowsing spirit began to dream about the cries of a world sliding into the void. At one point, like someone determined to cure a dog bite with a hair of the dog that bit him, Senhor José decided to make use of his imagination in order to re-create mentally all the classic horrors appropriate to the place in which he found himself, the processions of lost souls swathed in white sheets, the dances macabres of skeletons rattling their bones in time to the music, the ominous figure of death skimming the ground with a bloody scythe to make sure that the dead resign themselves to remaining dead, but, because none of this was actually happening in reality, because it was just the work of his imagination, Senhor José gradually began to drift towards an enormous inner peace, only occasionally disturbed by the irresponsible flutterings of will-o'-the-wisps, enough to strain most people's nerves to breaking point,

however tough they might be or however much they might know about the elementary principles of organic chemistry. Indeed, our fearful Senhor José is displaying a courage which the many upsets and afflictions through which we saw him pass earlier would not have led us to expect, which, once again, just goes to show that it is in moments of extreme duress that the spirit gives the true measure of its greatness. Towards dawn, now almost indifferent to fear, lulled by the gentle warmth of the tree embracing him, Senhor José dropped off to sleep with remarkable calm, while the world about him slowly re-emerged from the malevolent shadows of the night and from the ambiguous brilliance of a now departing moon. When Senhor José opened his eyes, it was already broad daylight. He was chilled to the bone, the tree's friendly vegetable embrace must have been just another deceiving dream, unless the tree, considering that it had fulfilled the duty of hospitality to which all olive trees, by their very nature, are obliged, had released him too soon and abandoned him, helpless, to the cold of a low, delicate mist that hovered over the cemetery. Senhor José struggled to his feet, feeling every joint in his body creak, and stumbled towards the sun, at the same time beating his arms vigorously about him in order to warm himself. Beside the grave of the unknown woman, nibbling the damp grass, was a white sheep. All around, here and there, there were other sheep grazing. And an old man, with a crook in his hand, was coming towards Senhor José. He was accompanied by an ordinary dog, neither large nor small, which, while it gave no sign of aggression, looked very much as if it were only awaiting a word from its master to attack. The man stopped on the other side of the grave with the inquisitive air of one who, without asking for any explanation, clearly believes he is owed one, and Senhor José said, Good morning, to which the other man replied, Good morning, It's a lovely day, Not bad, I fell asleep, Senhor José said, Ah, you fell asleep, said the man in a doubtful tone, I came here to visit the grave of a friend of mine, I sat down to rest under that olive tree and I went to sleep, You spent the night here, Yes, It's the first time I've ever met anyone here at this hour, which is when I bring the sheep to graze, You're not here during the rest of the day, then, asked Senhor José, It would look bad, it would show a lack of respect, with the sheep getting in the way of the funerals or leaving their droppings when the people who come here to remember their loved ones are walking about praying and crying, besides, the guides don't want us to get in the way when they're digging graves, so I have no option but to bring them a bit of cheese now and then so that they don't go complaining to the keeper, Since the General Cemetery is open on all sides, anyone can come in, and that includes animals, in fact, I'm surprised that I didn't see a single cat or dog when I walked up here from the office, There's no shortage of stray cats and dogs, Well, I didn't see any, You mean you walked all the way, Yes, You could have caught a bus, or a taxi, or come in your car, if you've got one, I didn't know where the grave was, that's why I had to go and ask first at the office, and then it was such a lovely day, I decided to walk, It's odd that they didn't tell you to go around, they usually do, I asked them to let me in and they did, Are you an archaeologist, No, A historian, No, An art critic, Certainly not, A genealogist, Please, Then I don't understand why you would want to make that great long trek, nor how you managed to sleep among all these tombs, I'm pretty used to the place, but I wouldn't stay here a minute after the

sun's gone down, Well, that's what happened, I sat down and I went to sleep, You're a brave man, No, I'm not that either, Did you find the person you were looking for, It's that one there, right beside you, Is it a man or a woman, A woman, She still hasn't got a name, I imagine the family will be deciding on a headstone now, I've noticed that the families of suicides are more likely to neglect that elementary duty than others, perhaps they're filled with remorse, they probably think they're to blame, It's possible, Considering that we don't know each other, how come you're answering all my questions, most people would tell me to mind my own business, It's just the way I am, I always answer what I'm asked, You're a subaltern, a subordinate, a dependant, a manservant, an errand boy, I'm a clerk at the Central Registry, Then you're just the person to be told the truth about the land of suicides, but first, you must swear solemnly that you'll never reveal the secret to anyone, I swear by all that I hold most sacred, And what exactly do you hold most sacred, I don't know, Everything, Or nothing, It's a bit of a vague oath, don't you think, I can't come up with a better one, Swear on your honour, that used to be the surest oath, All right then, I'll swear on my honour, but, you know, the head of the Central Registry would die laughing if he heard one of his clerks swearing on his honour, Between a shepherd and a clerk it's a serious enough oath, not laughable at all, so we'll stick with that, So what is the truth about the land of suicides, asked Senhor José, Not everything here is what it seems, It's a cemetery, it's the General Cemetery, It's a labyrinth, You can see when something's a labyrinth, Not always, This is the invisible kind, I don't understand, For example, the person lying here, said the shepherd, touching the mound of earth with the end of his crook, is not the person you think Suddenly, the ground began to shake beneath Senhor José's feet, the one remaining piece on the board, his final certainty, the unknown woman who had at last been found, had just disappeared. Do you mean that this number is wrong, he asked, trembling, A number is a number, a number is never wrong, replied the shepherd, if you took this one from here and put it somewhere else, even if it was at the very ends of the earth, it would still continue to be the number it is, I don't understand, You will, Please, I'm all confused, None of the bodies buried here corresponds to the names you see on the marble stones, I don't believe it, Well, it's true, And what about the numbers, They've all been swapped around, Why, Because someone changes them before the stones with the names on them are brought and put in place, Who, Me, But that's a crime, protested Senhor José indignantly, There's no law against it, I'm going to report you right now to the cemetery officials, You swore on your honour, I withdraw the oath, this situation invalidates it, You can replace a bad word with a good word, but neither one nor the other can be withdrawn, your word is your word, an oath is an oath, Death is sacred, It's life that's sacred, Mr. Clerk, at least so they say, But in the name of decency, you should have a minimum of respect for the person who died, people come here to remember their relatives and friends, to meditate or pray, to place flowers or to weep before a beloved name, and now it seems, because of one mischievous shepherd, the person lying there has another name entirely, these venerable mortal remains don't belong to the person they were thought to belong to, that way, you make death a farce, Personally, I don't believe one can show greater respect than to weep for a stranger, But death, What,

Death should be respected, And what in your opinion does respecting death involve, Not profaning it for a start, Death itself cannot be profaned, You know very well that it's the dead I'm talking about, not death itself, And can you see the slightest sign of profanation here, Swapping the names around is hardly a minor profanation, Well, I can understand a clerk in the Central Registry having ideas like that about names. The shepherd stopped, made a sign to the dog to go and fetch a sheep that had wandered off, then went on, I haven't yet told you the reason why I began changing the numbers on the graves, I doubt it's of any interest to me, I'm sure it will be, Go on then, If, as I believe, it's true that people who commit suicide do so because they don't want to be found, these people here, thanks to what you called a mischievous shepherd, are now free forever from importunate visitors, in truth, not even I, even if I wanted to, would be able to remember where the numbers should be, all I know is what I think when I pass by these marble stones complete with the person's name and the correct dates of birth and death, What do you think, That it's possible not to see a lie even when it's right in front of us. The mist had vanished a long time ago, you could now see how large the flock of sheep was. The shepherd made a movement above his head with the crook, it was an order for the dog to gather the sheep together. The shepherd said, It's time for me to take the sheep away, the guides might find me here, I can already see the lights of two cars, but they're not coming this way, I'm going to stay for a while longer, said Senhor José, Are you really going to report me, asked the shepherd, I'm a man of my word, what is sworn is sworn, They'd probably tell you to keep your mouth shut anyway, Why, Imagine the work involved in disinterring all these people and identifying them, many of them are nothing more than dust now anyway. The sheep were all gathered together, apart from the occasional straggler which came leaping nimbly over the graves to escape the dog and join its sisters. The shepherd asked, Were you a friend or a relative of the person you came to visit, I didn't even know her, And despite that you came looking for her, It was precisely because I didn't know her that I came looking for her, You see I was right when I said that one can show no greater respect than to weep for a stranger, Goodbye, We might see each other again sometime, I doubt it, You never know, Who are you, I'm the shepherd of these sheep, And that's all, That's all. A light flickered in the distance, That one's coming over here, said Senhor José, It looks like it, said the shepherd. With the dog at their head, the flock began to move towards the bridge. Before disappearing behind the trees on the other side, the shepherd turned around and waved. Senhor José waved back. He could see the intermittent light on the guides' car more clearly now. It disappeared occasionally into a hollow or was momentarily concealed from view by one of the motley structures in the cemetery, the towers, the obelisks, the pyramids, then it reappeared, brighter, nearer, and it was coming fast, a clear sign that there were not many people accompanying it. When he had said to the shepherd, I'm going to stay for a while longer, Senhor José's intention had been merely to remain alone for a few minutes before setting off again. He just wanted to ponder his own feelings a little, to judge the real depths of his disappointment, to accept it, to put his spirit to rest, to say once more, It's over, but now he had another idea. He went across to one of the graves and adopted the pose of someone meditating deeply on the irremediable precariousness of existence,

on the vacuity of all dreams and all hopes, on the absolute fragility of worldly and divine glories. He was so deep in thought that he didn't even appear to notice the arrival of the guides and the half dozen or so people, slightly more, accompanying the coffin. He did not move during the whole time that it took to open the grave, lower the coffin, fill in the hole, make the usual mound with the surplus earth. He did not move when one of the guides placed at the head of the mound the black metal tag marked in white with the number of the grave. He did not move when the guides' car and the hearse moved off, he did not move during the bare two minutes that the people lingered by the grave uttering useless words and wiping away the odd tear, he did not move when the two cars they had arrived in drove off across the bridge, he did not move until he was alone again. He took the number corresponding to the unknown woman and placed it on the new grave. Then he took the number from that one and placed it on the other grave. The exchange was made, the truth had become a lie. Besides, it might well be that the shepherd, finding a new grave there tomorrow, would unwittingly move the false number on it back to the unknown woman's grave, an ironic possibility in which the lie, apparently repeating itself, would become true again. The workings of chance are infinite. Senhor José headed for home. On the way, he went into a cafe, where he ordered coffee and toast. He couldn't stave off hunger a moment longer.

Determined to catch up on his lost sleep, Senhor José got into bed as soon as he arrived home, but only two hours later, he was awake again. He had had a strange, enigmatic dream in which he saw himself in the middle of the cemetery, amid a multitude of sheep so numerous that he could barely see the mounds of the graves, and each sheep had a number on its head that kept changing continually, but, because the sheep were all the same, you couldn't tell if it was the sheep that were changing numbers or if the numbers were changing sheep. He heard a voice shouting, I'm here, I'm here, it couldn't come from the sheep because they stopped talking a long time ago, nor could it be the graves because there is no record of a grave ever having spoken, and yet the voice kept calling insistently, I'm here, I'm here, Senhor José looked in that direction and saw only the raised snouts of the animals, then the same words rang out behind him, or to the right, or to the left, I'm here, I'm here, and he would turn swiftly, but he couldn't tell where it was coming from. Senhor José began to grow desperate, he wanted to wake up and he couldn't, the dream was continuing, now the shepherd was there with his dog, and Senhor José thought, There's nothing this shepherd doesn't know, he'll tell me whose voice it is, but the shepherd didn't speak, he just made a gesture with his crook above his head, the dog went to round up the sheep, herding them towards a bridge which was crossed by silent cars with signs made of lightbulbs that flickered on and off, saying Follow me, Follow me, Follow me, in a moment the flock disappeared, the dog disappeared, the shepherd disappeared, all that remained was the cemetery floor strewn with numbers, the ones that before had been on the heads of the sheep, but, because they were now all together, all attached end to end in an uninterrupted spiral of which he himself was the centre, he couldn't tell where one began and the other finished. Anxious, drenched in sweat, Senhor José woke up saying, I'm here. His eyes were closed, he was half-conscious, but he said, I'm here, I'm here, twice out loud, then opened his eyes to the mean little space where he had lived for so many years, he saw the low ceiling, the cracked plaster, the floor with its warped floorboards, the table and the two chairs in the middle of the living room, if such a term has meaning in a place like this, the cupboard where he kept the clippings and photos of his celebrities, the corner beyond which lay the kitchen, the narrow recess that served as a bathroom, that was when he said, I must find a way of freeing myself from this madness, he meant, obviously, the woman who would now forever be unknown, the house, poor thing, was not to blame, it was just a sad house. Fearful that the dream would return, Senhor José did not attempt to fall asleep again. He was lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling, waiting for it to ask him, Why are you looking at me, but the ceiling ignored him, it merely observed him, expressionless. Senhor José gave up any hope of help coming from there, he would have to resolve the problem on his own, and the best way would still be to persuade himself that there was no problem, When the beast dies, the poison dies with it, was the rather disrespectful proverb that came to his lips, calling the unknown woman a poisonous beast, forgetting for a moment there are poisons so slow-acting that they produce an effect only when we have long since forgotten their origin. Then the penny dropped, he muttered, Careful, death is often a slow poison, then he wondered, When and why did she begin to die. It was at that point that the ceiling, without there being any apparent

connection, direct or indirect, with what it had just heard, emerged from its indifference to remind him, There are at least three people you haven't spoken to yet, Who, asked Senhor José, Her parents and her ex-husband, It wouldn't be a bad idea to go and talk to her parents, I thought of doing that earlier on, but I decided to leave it for another occasion, If you don't do it now, you never will, meanwhile you can divert yourself by going a little farther down this road, before you finally bump your nose against the wall, If you weren't a ceiling, stuck up there all the time, you would know that it has not been a diverting experience, But it has been a diversion, What's the difference, Go and look it up in the dictionary, that's what they're there for, I was just asking, everyone knows that a diversion is not the same as something being diverting, What about the other one, What other one, The ex-husband, he would probably be the person who could tell you most about your unknown woman, I imagine that married life, a life lived in common, must be like a sort of magnifying glass, I can't imagine any reserve or secret that could resist the microscope of continual observation, On the other hand, there are those who say that the more you look the less you see, but whatever the truth of the matter, I don't think it's worth going to talk to him, You're afraid he'll start talking about the reasons for the divorce, you don't want to hear anything bad about her, People on the whole are rarely fair, not to themselves or to other people, and he would more than likely tell me the story so that it looked as if he had been in the right all along, An intelligent analysis, I'm not stupid, No, you're not, it's just that you take a long time to understand things, especially simple things, For example, That there was no reason why you should go looking for this woman, unless, Unless what, Unless you were doing it out of love, Only a ceiling would come up with such an absurd idea, I believe I've told you on another occasion that the ceilings of houses are the multiple eye of God, I don't remember, I may not have said it in those precise words, but I'm saying it now, Tell me then how I could possibly love a woman I didn't even know and whom I'd never even seen, That's a good question, there's no doubt about it, but only you can answer it, The idea doesn't have a leg to stand on, It doesn't matter whether it's got legs or not, I'm talking about quite another part of the anatomy, the heart, the thing that people say is the engine and seat of affections, I repeat that I could not possibly love a woman I didn't know, whom I never saw, except in some old photos, You wanted to see her, you wanted to know her, and that, whether you like it or not, is love, These are the imaginings of a ceiling, They're your imaginings, a man's imaginings, not mine, You're so arrogant, you think you know everything about me, I don't know everything, but I must have learned a thing or two after all these years of living together, I bet you've never considered that you and I live together, the great difference between us is that you only notice me when you need advice and cast your eyes upwards, while I spend all my time looking at you, The eye of God, You can take my metaphors seriously if you like, but don't repeat them as if they were yours. After this, the ceiling decided to remain silent, it had realised that Senhor José's thoughts were already turned to the visit he was going to make to the unknown woman's parents, the last step before bumping his nose against the wall, an equally metaphorical expression which means, You've reached the end.

Senhor José got out of bed, cleaned himself up as best he could, prepared something to eat and, having thus recovered his physical vigour, he summoned up his moral vigour in order to telephone, with suitable bureaucratic coolness, the unknown woman's parents, in the first place, to find out if they were home, in the second place, to ask if they would mind receiving a visit today from a member of staff from the Central Registry who needed to talk with them about a matter concerning their dead daughter. Had it been any other kind of call, Senhor José would have gone out to use the public phone box on the other side of the street, however, in this case, there was a danger that, when they picked up the phone, they would hear the sound of coins dropping into the machine, and even the least suspicious of people would be bound to want to know why a member of staff from the Central Registry was phoning from a public call box, especially on a Sunday, about matters relating to his work. The solution to that difficulty was, it seemed, not far away, all he had to do was to creep once more into the Central Registry and use the telephone on the Registrar's desk, but it was just as risky doing that, because the detailed list of telephone calls, sent every month by the exchange and checked, number by number, by the Registrar himself, would inevitably register the clandestine call, What call is this, made on a Sunday, the Registrar would ask his deputies, and then, without waiting for a reply, he would say, Set up an inquiry into this at once. Resolving the mystery of the secret phone call would be the easiest thing in the world, he would just have to dial the suspect number and be told, Yes, sir, someone from the Central Registry did phone us on that day, and he didn't just phone, he came here in person, he wanted to know why our daughter had committed suicide, he said it was for your statistics, Statistics, Yes, statistics, at least that's what he said, Fine, now listen very carefully, Go on, In order to clear this matter up completely, I must be able to rely on your and your husband's collaboration with the Central Registry, What do we have to do, Come to the Central Registry and identify the member of staff who came to visit you, We'll be there, A car will come and pick you up. Senhor José's imagination did not stop at creating this troubling dialogue, once it was over, he went on to enact in his mind what would happen afterwards, the unknown woman's parents coming into the Central Registry and pointing, That's the man, or else, stall in the car that had been sent to fetch them, seeing the members of staff going in and suddenly pointing, That's the man. Senhor José murmured, I'm lost, there's no way out. Yes there was, one that was simple and definitive, he could either give up the idea of going to see the unknown woman's parents, or he could go there without warning and simply knock on the door and say, Good afternoon, I work for the Central Registry, I'm sorry to bother you on a Sunday, but work has piled up so much lately at the Central Registry, with so many people being born and dying, that we've had to adopt a system of permanent overtime. That, without a doubt, would be the most intelligent way of going about it, affording Senhor José the maximum number of guarantees as regards his future safety, but it seemed that the last few hours he had lived through, the enormous cemetery with its outstretched octopus tentacles, the night of dull moonlight and shifting shadows, the convulsive dance of the will-o'-the-wisps, the old shepherd and his sheep, the dog, as silent as if it had had its vocal cords removed, the graves with the numbers changed, it seemed that all this had scrambled his mind, in

general sufficiently clear and lucid for him to cope with life, otherwise, how can one understand why he continued to cling stubbornly to the idea of phoning, still less when he tries to justify it to himself with the puerile argument that a phone call would make it easier for him to gather information. He even thinks he has a formula that will immediately dispel any distrust, he will say, as indeed he is already saying, sitting in the Registrar's chair, I'm speaking on behalf of the special branch of the Central Registry, those words special branch, he thinks, are the skeleton key that will open all doors to him, and it seems that he was right, at the other end a voice is saying, Certainly, sir, come whenever you like, we'll be in all day. A last vestige of common sense prompted the fleeting thought that he had probably just tied the knot in the rope that would hang him, but his madness calmed him, it told him that the exchange would not submit the list of telephone calls for some weeks, and, who knows, the Registrar might be on holiday then, or he might be ill at home, or he might merely ask one of his deputies to confirm the numbers, it wouldn't be the first time, which would mean that the crime would almost certainly go undiscovered, bearing in mind that none of the deputies liked the task, so, before the lash falls again, the prisoner's back can rest, murmured Senhor José in conclusion, resigned to whatever fate might bring him. He replaced the telephone book in its precise place, aligning it carefully with the corner of the desk, he wiped the receiver with his handkerchief to remove any fingerprints and went back into his house. He began by polishing his shoes, then he brushed down his suit, put on a clean shirt, his best tie, and he was just about to open the door when he remembered his letter of authority. Going to the house of the unknown woman's parents and simply saying, I'm the person who phoned from the Central Registry, would certainly not have as much force of conviction and authority as slipping under their noses a piece of paper stamped, sealed and signed, giving the bearer full rights and powers in the exercise of his functions and for the proper fulfilment of the mission with which he had been charged. He opened the cabinet, took out the bishop's file and removed the letter, however, when he glanced over it, he realised that it wouldn't do. In the first place, because it was dated before the suicide, and in the second place, because of the actual terms in which it was written, for example, that he was ordered and charged to find out and clarify everything about the past, present and future life of the unknown woman, I don't even know where she is now, thought Senhor José, and as for a future life, at that moment, he remembered a popular verse that went, What lies beyond death, no one has seen nor ever will, of all those who climbed that hill, never a one came back. He was just about to return the letter to its place, when, at the last moment, he again felt obliged to obey the state of mind forcing him to concentrate in an obsessive manner on one idea and to see it through to the end. Now that he had thought of the letter, he would have to take one with him. He went straight back into the Central Registry to the cabinet containing the forms, but he had forgotten that, ever since the inquiry, the cabinet was always locked. For the first time in his tranquil life, he felt a rush of anger, he even considered smashing the glass and to hell with the consequences. Fortunately, he remembered just in time that the deputy charged with keeping an eye on the number of forms used, kept the key to the cabinet in a drawer in his desk, and, as was the strict rule in the Central Registry, deputies could not

keep their desk drawers locked, The only one here who has a right to secrets is me, the Registrar had said, and his word was law, which, at least this time, did not apply to officials and clerks for the simple reason that they, as we have seen, worked at plain desks, with no drawers. Senhor José wrapped his right hand in his handkerchief in order not to leave the slightest trace of fingerprints that might betray him, picked up the key and opened the cabinet. He removed a piece of paper bearing the Central Registry stamp, locked the cabinet and replaced the key in the deputy's desk drawer, at that moment, the lock on the outer door of the building creaked, he heard the bolt slide back once, for a second, Senhor José remained paralysed, but then, as he had in those ancient childhood dreams, in which he flew weightlessly above gardens and rooftops, he crept lightly away on tiptoe, and by the time the bolt was drawn completely back, Senhor José was safe in his house again, breathing hard, his heart in his mouth. A long minute passed until, on the other side of the door, he heard someone cough, It's the Registrar, thought Senhor José, feeling his legs go weak, I just escaped, by the skin of my teeth. Then he heard the cough again, louder this time, perhaps nearer but this time it seemed deliberate, intentional, as if the person who had come into the Central Registry were announcing his presence. Terrified, Senhor José stared at the lock on the flimsy door separating him from the Central Registry. He hadn't had time to turn the key, the door was only on the latch, If he comes in, if he turns the handle, if he comes in here, a voice was screaming inside Senhor José's head, he'll catch you in flagrante with that piece of paper in your hand and the letter of authority on the table, that was all the voice said, for it felt sorry for the clerk and did not speak to him of the consequences. Senhor José walked slowly over to the table, picked up the letter and went and hid it among his still-rumpled bedclothes, along with the piece of paper stolen from the cabinet. Then he sat down and waited. If he had been asked what he was waiting for, he would not have known what to reply. An hour passed and Senhor José began to grow impatient. There were no further sounds from the other side of the door. The unknown woman's parents would be wondering what was keeping the man from the Central Registry, given that urgency is one of the principal characteristics of matters being dealt with by a special branch, whatever its nature, water, gas, electricity or suicide. Senhor José waited another quarter of an hour without moving from his chair. After that time had passed, he realised that he had made a decision, and it wasn't just his usual decision to follow up an obsession, it really was a decision, although he couldn't have explained how he came to make it. He said almost out loud, What has to happen, will happen, fear doesn't solve anything. With a serenity which no longer surprised him, he fetched the letter of authority and the blank piece of paper, sat down at the table, placed the inkwell before him and, copying, abbreviating and adapting, devised a new document, As Registrar of the Central Registry, I make it known to all those, civil or military, private or public, who see, read or peruse this document, that X is under direct orders from me to find out and ascertain all the facts surrounding the suicide of Y, in particular its causes, both immediate and remote, the ensuing text went on the same way, right down to the resounding final imperative, So be it. Unfortunately, the paper would not bear the correct seal, since that had become inaccessible with the arrival of the Registrar, but the important thing was the

authority evident in every word. Senhor José put away the first letter among the bishops clippings, put the one he had just written in his inside jacket pocket and looked defiantly at the communicating door. The silence on the other side continued. Then Senhor José murmured, I don't care if you're in there or not. He went over to the door and locked it, briskly, with two sharp turns of the wrist, click, clack.

A taxi carried him to the house of the unknown woman's parents. He rang the bell, it was answered by a woman who looked about sixty or so, younger than the woman in the ground-floor apartment, with whom her husband had deceived her thirty years before, I'm the person who phoned from the Central Registry, said Senhor José, Come in, we were expecting you, I'm sorry I couldn't come at once, but I had to handle another very urgent matter, That's all right, come this way. The house had a sombre air, there were curtains covering the windows and the doors, the furniture was heavy, the walls were hung with ominous paintings of landscapes that had probably never existed. The lady of the house ushered Senhor José into what appeared to be a study, where a man, quite a bit older than she, was waiting, It's the gentleman from the Central Registry, said the woman, Sit down, said the man, pointing to a chair. Senhor José took the letter from his pocket, holding it in his hand as he said, I'm terribly sorry to bother you at this sad time, but that's what my job demands, this document will tell you the exact nature of my mission. He handed the piece of paper to the man, who read it, holding it very close to his eyes, saying when he had done so, Your mission must be extremely important to justify a document written in these terms, It's the usual Central Registry style, even when it's a simple thing like this, an investigation into the causes of a suicide, That's hardly unimportant, No, don't misunderstand me, what I meant was that whatever mission they charge us with and for which a letter of authority is deemed necessary, it's always written in the same style, The rhetoric of authority, You could call it that. The woman intervened to ask, And what does the Central Registry want to know, First, the immediate cause of the suicide, And second, asked the man, The antecedents, the circumstances, the signs, anything that can help us towards a better understanding of what happened, Isn't it enough for the Central Registry to know that my daughter killed herself, When I said I needed to talk to you about a statistical question, I was simplifying matters, Now's your chance to explain, It's no longer enough for us to be content with numbers, what we're trying to do now is to find out as much as possible about the psychological background against which the suicidal process takes place, Why, asked the woman, that won't bring my daughter back to life, The idea is to set up parameters for intervention, I don't understand, said the man, Senhor José was sweating, it was proving far more complicated than he had thought, It's terribly hot, isn't it, he said, Would you like a glass of water, asked the woman, If it's not too much trouble, Of course not, the woman got up and went out, in a minute she was back. While he was drinking the water, Senhor José decided to change tactics. He placed the glass on the tray the woman was holding and said, Imagine that your daughter had not yet committed suicide, imagine that the investigation which the Central Registry is currently undertaking had managed to draw up certain guidelines and recommendations, capable eventually, if applied in time, of halting

what I earlier referred to as the suicidal process, That was what you meant by parameters for intervention, asked the man, Exactly, said Senhor José, and without leaving room for any further remarks, he delivered the first thrust, We may not have been able to stop your daughter from committing suicide, but perhaps we can, with your collaboration and with that of other people in the same situation, avoid a great deal of grief and many tears. The woman was crying, murmuring, My dear daughter, while the man was roughly wiping away his tears with the back of his hand. Senhor José hoped he would not be forced to resort to his final expedient, which would, he thought, be a reading of the letter of authority in a loud, severe voice, word by word, like doors being closed one after the other, until they left only one possible way out for the person listening, to do as they were asked and to speak. If this failed, he would have no option but to come up with some excuse to withdraw as gracefully as possible. And just pray that it would not occur to the unknown woman's stubborn father to phone the Central Registry demanding an explanation for that visit by a member of their staff called Senhor José something or other, I can't remember the rest of his name. It wasn't necessary. The man folded up the letter and gave it back. Then he said, What can we do for you. Senhor José gave a sigh of relief, the way was now open for him to get down to business, Did your daughter leave a letter, No letter, no word, Do you mean she committed suicide just like that, It wouldn't have happened just like that, she obviously had her reasons, but we don't know what they were, My daughter was unhappy, said the woman, No one happy commits suicide, said her impatient husband, And why was she unhappy, asked Senhor José, I don't know, she was sad even as a little girl, I used to ask her what was wrong and she would always say the same thing, I'm fine, Mom, So the cause of the suicide wasn't her divorce, On the contrary, the only time I saw my daughter happy was when she separated from her husband, They didn't get on well, then, They didn't get on well or badly really, it was just a rather average marriage, Who asked for the divorce, She did, Was there some concrete reason, Not that we know of, no, it was as if they'd both reached the end of the road, What's he like, Fairly ordinary, a decent man, he never gave us any reason for complaint, And he loved her, Yes, I think so, And what about her, did she love him, Yes, she did, I believe, And despite that they weren't happy, They never were, How strange, Life is strange, said the man. There was a silence, the woman got up and went out. Senhor José stopped, he didn't know whether it would be better to wait for her to return or to continue the conversation. He was afraid that the interruption might have set the interrogation on the wrong track, you could almost feel the tension in the room. Senhor José wondered if the man's words, Life is strange, were not an echo of his former relationship with the lady in the ground-floor apartment and if his wife's sudden exit were not the reply of someone who, at that moment, could give no other. Senhor José picked up the glass, drank a little water to gain time, then asked a random question, Did your daughter work, Yes, she taught mathematics, Where, In the same school where she studied before going to university. Senhor José again picked up the glass, almost dropping it in his haste, he stammered ridiculously, S-s-sorry, and suddenly his voice failed him, while Senhor José drank, the man was looking at him with an expression of scornful curiosity, it seemed to him that the Central Registry was pretty ill served by its

staff, at least judging by this example, there was no point turning up armed with a letter of authority like that and then behaving like an imbecile. The woman came in at the point where her husband was asking ironically, Would you like me to give you the name of the school, it might be of some use to you for the success of your mission, That would be most kind of you. The man bent over the desk, wrote down the name and address of the school on a piece of paper and handed it brusquely to Senhor José, but the man who was sitting before him now was not the same man of a few moments ago, Senhor José had regained sufficient control of himself to remember that he knew a secret about this family, an old secret that neither of them could possibly imagine he knew. This thought lay behind his next question, Do you know if your daughter kept a diary, I don't think so, at least we didn't find anything like that, said the mother, But there must be papers, notes, jottings, there always are, if you could perhaps give me permission to glance over them, I might find something of interest, We haven't removed anything from her apartment yet, said the father, and I've no idea when we'll get around to it, Your daughter's apartment was rented, No, she owned it, I see. There was a pause, Senhor José slowly unfolded the letter of authority, he looked at it from top to bottom as if he were checking to see if there were any powers he had left undeployed, then he said, Would you allow me to go to the apartment, in your presence, of course, No, the reply was sharp, cutting, My letter of authority, began Senhor José, Your letter of authority will have to make do for now with the information you've got, said the man, adding, We can, if you like, continue our conversation tomorrow at the Central Registry, now, if you'll forgive me, I have other matters to resolve, There's no need to go to the Central Registry, what you've told me about the situation before the suicide seems quite adequate, said Senhor José, but I still have three questions to ask, Go on, How did your daughter die, She took an overdose of sleeping tablets, Was she alone in the house, Yes, And have you already arranged for a gravestone, We're dealing with that now, why do you ask, Oh nothing, just simple curiosity. Senhor José stood up. I'll show you out, said the woman. When they reached the corridor, she raised a finger to her lips and indicated to him to wait. She noiselessly removed a small bunch of keys from the drawer of a small table placed against the wall. Then, as she was opening the door, she pressed them into Senhor José's hand. They're hers, she whispered, one of these days I'll stop by the Central Registry to pick them up, and coming closer still, almost in a whisper, she told him the address.

Senhor José slept like a log. After returning from his dangerous but successful visit to the unknown woman's parents, he wanted to set down the weekend's extraordinary events in his notebook, but he was so tired that he didn't get any further than his conversation with the clerk at the General Cemetery. He went to bed without any supper, fell asleep in less than two minutes and when he opened his eyes, at the first light of dawn, he discovered that, without knowing how or when, he had made the decision not to go in to work. It was Monday, the very worst day to miss work, especially if you were a clerk. Whatever the alleged reason, and however convincing it might have been on any other occasion, it was always suspected of being merely an excuse, a way of justifying prolonging the indolence of Sunday into a day that was legally and customarily devoted to work. After the repeated and increasingly serious irregularities in his behaviour since he had started looking for the unknown woman, Senhor José is aware that not going to work could be the last straw as far as his boss's patience was concerned. This frightening prospect, however, was not enough to shake the firmness of his decision. There are two important reasons why Senhor José cannot postpone what he has to do until he has an afternoon off. The first of these is that, one day, the mother of the unknown woman will come to the Central Registry in order to recover the keys, the second is that the school, as Senhor José knows all too well, from harsh experience, is closed on the weekend.

Despite his decision not to go to work, Senhor José got up very early. He wanted to be as far away as possible before the Central Registry opened, he didn't want his immediate superior to come knocking at the door to find out if he was ill again. While he was shaving, he wondered whether it would be best to begin by going to the unknown woman's apartment, or to the school, but he opted for the school, he is one of the many who always leave the most important till last. He also wondered if he should take the letter of authority with him, or if, on the contrary, it would be dangerous to show it, bearing in mind that a headmaster, given his job, was likely to be a knowledgeable, well-read, educated person, what if the terms in which the document was written struck him as unusual, extravagant, hyperbolic, he might demand to know why there was no official stamp, prudence tells Senhor José to leave both letters of authority behind with the innocent clippings about the bishop, My identity card proving that I work for the Central Registry should be more than enough, concluded Senhor José, after all, I'm only going to confirm something concrete, objective, factual, that a woman who committed suicide was a teacher of mathematics at the school. It was still very early when he left the house, the shops were closed, with no lights on and the shutters down, there were scarcely any cars, probably even the earliest risers among the Central Registry staff would only just be getting out of bed. In order not to be seen in the vicinity, Senhor José went and hid in a park two blocks away from the main avenue, along which the bus had taken him to visit the lady in the ground-floor apartment, late one afternoon when he saw his boss going into the Central Registry. Unless you actually knew he was there, he was invisible among the bushes and the low branches of the trees. The benches were all wet with the night dew, so Senhor José did not sit down, instead, he passed the time walking along the garden paths, enjoying himself looking at the flowers and wondering what their names

were, it's not surprising that he knows so little about botanical matters, since he's spent his whole life between four walls, breathing the pungent smell of old papers, still more pungent when the air is filled by that smell of chrysanthemums and roses mentioned on the very first page of this story. When the clock marked the opening time for the Central Registry to the public, Senhor José, now safe from any possible unfortunate encounters, set off for the school. He was in no hurry, today was his, which is why he decided to go on foot. As he left the garden, he was doubtful which direction to take, if he had bought a map of the city, as he had intended, he would not now have to be asking a policeman the way, but the fact is that the situation, the law giving advice to the criminal, gave him a certain subversive pleasure. The affair of the unknown woman had reached its end, all that was needed now was the inquiry at the school, then the inspection of the apartment, and, if he had time, he would drop in on the lady in the ground-floor apartment to tell her about the latest developments, and then nothing. He wondered how he would live his life from then on, if he would go back to his collections of famous people, for a few brief seconds he imagined himself sitting at the table in the evening, with a pile of newspapers and magazines beside him, cutting out articles and photographs and trying to guess whether a celebrity was on the rise or, alternatively, on the wane, occasionally in the past he had foreseen the fate of certain people who later became important, occasionally he had been the first to suspect that the laurels of this man or that woman were beginning to fade, to wrinkle, to crumble into dust, It all ends up in the rubbish bin, said Senhor José, without quite knowing, at that precise moment, if he meant lost reputations or his clippings collection.

With the sun beating down on the facade, the trees in the playground looking green and leafy and the flower beds blooming, there was nothing about the appearance of the school that recalled the gloomy edifice into which Senhor José had entered one rainy night, by scaling its walls and breaking in. Now he was going in through the main door, he was saying to a member of the staff, I need to talk to the headmaster, no, I'm not a parent and I'm not a supplier of school materials, I work for the Central Registry, it's an official matter. The woman rang an internal number, she told someone about the visitor's arrival, then she said, Please go up, the headmaster's in the secretary's office on the second floor, Thank you, said Senhor José, and began going calmly up the stairs, he already knew that the secretary's office was on the second floor. The headmaster was talking to a woman who presumably was in charge, he was saying to her, I need that chart tomorrow without fail, and she was saying, I'll make sure you get it, Senhor José had stopped in the doorway, waiting for them to notice him. The headmaster finished his conversation and looked at him, only then did Senhor José say, Good morning, headmaster, then, with his identity card in his hand, he took three steps forward, As you can see, I work for the Central Registry, I've come on an official matter. The headmaster made as if to brush aside the identity card, then asked, What's it about, It's about one of your teachers, And what has the Central Registry got to do with the teachers at this school, Not as teachers, but as the people they are or were, Could you explain what you mean, We're carrying out an investigation into the phenomenon of suicide, both its

psychological aspects and its sociological implications, and I've been put in charge of the case of a lady who taught mathematics at this school and who recently committed suicide. The headmaster put on a sorrowful face, Poor woman, he said, it's a very sad story that I don't think any of us has as yet really understood. My first action said Senhor José using the most official language he could, would be to compare the identifying data that we have in the archives in the Central Registry with the lady's professional registration, I suppose you mean the staff list, I do, sir. The headmaster turned to the woman in charge of the secretary's office, Find me her record card, will you, We still haven't taken it out of the drawer, the woman said in an apologetic tone, at the same time running her fingers across the cards in a drawer, Here it is, she said. Senhor José felt a sharp contraction in the pit of his stomach, a feeling of dizziness swept through his brain, but, fortunately, it came to nothing more, this man's nervous system really is in a terrible state, not that we can blame him in the circumstances, we have only to remember that the card being shown to him now was within his grasp that night, it would have been just a matter of opening that drawer, the one with the label that says Teachers, but how could he have imagined that the young girl he was looking for would be teaching mathematics in the very school she had studied at. Disguising his agitation, but not the tremor in his hands, Senhor José pretended to compare the card from the school with the copy of the card from the Central Registry, then he said, It's the same person. The headmaster looked at him with interest, Don't you feel well, he asked, and he replied simply, It's just that I'm not as young as I used to be, Right, I imagine you'll want to ask me a few questions, I will, Come with me then, we'll go to my study. Senhor José smiled to himself as he followed the headmaster, I didn't know that her card was right there in that drawer, and you don't know that I spent the night on your sofa. They went into the study, the headmaster said, I haven't got much time, but I'll do all I can to help you, do sit down, and he indicated the sofa that had served as a bed to the visitor, I'd like to know, said Senhor José, if anyone noticed any change in her normal state of mind in the days before the suicide, None, she was always a very private person, very quiet, Was she a good teacher, One of the best the school has had, Was she friends with any particular colleague, Friends in what sense, Just friends, She was friendly, polite to everyone, but I don't think anyone here could say that they were friends with her, And did her students respect her, Very much, Was she in good health, As far as I can judge, yes, Its strange, What's strange, I've already spoken to her parents, and everything they said and everything I'm hearing now seems to point to there being no explanation for this suicide, I wonder, said the headmaster, if suicide can be explained, Do you mean this particular suicide, I mean suicide in general, Sometimes people leave letters, That's true, but I'm not sure you could describe the contents of those letters as an explanation, there's no shortage of things to explain in life, That's true, For example, what explanation could there be for what happened here a few days before the suicide, What was that, The school was burgled, Yes, How do you know, I'm sorry, my yes was intended to be interrogative, perhaps I didn't give it the right intonation, but, anyway, burglaries are usually fairly easy to explain, Except when the burglar climbs up onto the roof, breaks a window and then climbs in, wanders all over the place, sleeps on my sofa, eats what

there is in the fridge, uses the first-aid box and then leaves without taking anything, What makes you think he slept on your sofa, Because on the floor was the blanket I usually cover my knees with so as not to get cold, as you said of yourself, I'm not as young as I used to be, Did you report it to the police, What for, since nothing had been stolen, it didn't seem worth it, the police would tell me that they were there in order to investigate crimes, not to explain mysteries, It's certainly strange, there's no doubt about it, We checked everywhere, all the equipment was there, the safe was intact, everything was in its proper place, Except the blanket, Yes, except the blanket, now what explanation can you find for that, You'd have to ask the burglar, he must know, having said those words, Senhor José got up, I won't rob you of any more of your time, I'm very grateful for your help in the unfortunate matter that brought me here, I don't know that I've been of much help, You were probably right when you said that perhaps no suicide can be explained, Rationally explained, you understand, It was as if she had just opened a door and gone out, Or gone in, Yes, or gone in, depending on your point of view, Well, there you have an excellent explanation, It was a metaphor, Metaphors have always been the best way of explaining things, Goodbye, sir, and my heartfelt thanks, Goodbye, it was a pleasure talking to you, I don't mean the sad matter in hand, of course, I mean you yourself, Naturally, it was just a manner of speaking, I'll go with you to the stairs. When Senhor José was going down the second flight of stairs, the headmaster suddenly remembered that he hadn't asked him his name, No matter, he thought, that particular story's over.

The same could not be said of Senhor José, he still had to take the final step, to seek out and find in the unknown woman's apartment a letter, a diary, a simple piece of paper on which she might have set down her feelings, the scream, the I-can't-go-on that every suicide is under strict obligation to leave behind before departing through that door, so that those left on this side can soothe the fears of their own consciences saying, Poor thing, she had her reasons. The human spirit, though, how often do we need to say it, is the favourite home of contradictions, indeed they do not seem to prosper or even find viable living conditions outside it, and that must be why Senhor José wanders the city, from one side to the other, up and down, as if lost without a map or a guide, for he knows perfectly well what he has to do on this last day, he knows that tomorrow will be a different time, or that he will be the one who will be different in a time exactly like this one, and the proof that he knows this to be so is the fact that he thought, Who will I be tomorrow when this is all over, what kind of clerk is the Central Registry going to have. Twice he passed by the unknown woman's apartment building, twice he did not stop, he was afraid, don't ask why, this is the most common of contradictions, Senhor José both wants and doesn't want, he both desires and fears what he desires, that is what his whole life has been like. Now, to gain time, to postpone what he knows to be inevitable, he has decided that first, he will have to have lunch, in a cheap restaurant, as his modest pocket dictates, but above all somewhere far from here, he doesn't want some curious neighbour to suspect the intentions of a man who has already passed by twice. Although there's nothing about his appearance to distinguish him from other supposedly honest

people, the truth is that there are never any solid guarantees about what you see, appearances are very deceptive, that's why they're called appearances, although in the case in point, taking into account his age and fragile physical constitution, no one would think, for example, that Senhor José made his living breaking into houses at night. He took as long as he could over the frugal lunch, got up from the table long after three o'clock and, unhurriedly, as if he were dragging his feet, he went back to the street where the unknown woman had lived. Before turning the last corner, he stopped and took a deep breath, I'm not a coward, he thought to give himself courage, but as so often happens with so many brave people, he was valiant about some things, cowardly about others, the fact that he spent a night in the cemetery won't stop his legs shaking now. He put his hand into his jacket pocket, felt the keys, one, small and narrow, was for the postbox, and so was naturally excluded, the remaining two were almost the same, but one was the street door, the other the door to the apartment, he hoped he got it right the first time, if the building has a concierge and she's the sort who pokes her nose out at the slightest noise, what explanation would he give, he could say he was there with the authorisation of the parents of the woman who committed suicide, that he's come to make an inventory of her possessions, I work for the Central Registry, madam, here's my card, and as you see, they've given me the keys to the apartment. Senhor José chose the right key on the first try, the guardian of the door, if the building had one, did not appear and ask him, Excuse me, where are you going, there's a lot of truth in the saying that fear of the guard is the best guard against theft, so he tells himself to begin by conquering his fear, then see if the guard appears. It's an old building but it has a lift, which is just as well, because Senhor José's legs are so heavy now that he would never have made it to the sixth floor, where the mathematics teacher lived. The door creaked as it opened, startling the visitor, who suddenly doubted the efficacy of the excuse he had thought he would give to the concierge should she intervene. He slipped quickly into the apartment, very carefully closed the door, and found himself in the midst of a dense, almost pitch-black darkness. He felt the wall next to the door frame, found a switch, but prudently didn't turn it on, it might be dangerous to put on the lights. Gradually, Senhor José's eyes became used to the shadows, you might say that in a similar situation the same would happen with anyone, but it is not generally known that, after a certain time, the clerks in the Central Registry, given their obligatory regular visits to the archive of the dead, acquire a remarkable talent for optical adaptation. They would all have cat's eyes if they didn't reach retirement age first.

Although the floor was carpeted, Senhor José thought it best to take off his shoes to avoid any shock or vibration that might betray his presence to the tenants on the floor below. With enormous care he slid back the bolts on the inner shutters of one of the windows that opened onto the street, but only enough to let in a little light. He was in a bedroom. There was a dressing table, a wardrobe, a bedside table. A narrow bed, a single, as they are called. The furniture had light, simple lines, the opposite of the dull, heavy furniture in her parents' house. Senhor José walked through the other rooms in the apartment, which comprised a living room furnished with the usual sofas and a bookshelf

that took up the whole of one wall, a much smaller room that served as a study, a tiny kitchen and a small bathroom. Here lived a woman who committed suicide for unknown reasons, who had been married and got divorced, who could have gone to live with her parents after the divorce, but had preferred to live alone, a woman who, like all women, was once a child and a girl, but who even then, in a certain indefinable way, was already the woman she was going to be, a mathematics teacher whose name while she was alive was in the Central Registry, along with the names of all the people alive in this city, a woman whose dead name returned to the living world because Senhor José went to rescue her from the dead world, just her name, not her, a clerk can only do so much. With the inner doors all open, there is enough light from outside to be able to see the whole apartment, but Senhor José will have to get his search under way quickly if he doesn't want to have to leave it half done. He opened a drawer in a desk, glanced at its contents, they seemed to be math problems for school, calculations, equations, nothing that could explain the reasons for the life and death of the woman who used to sit in this chair, who used to switch on this lamp, who used to hold this pencil and write with it. Senhor José slowly closed the drawer, he even started to open another but did not complete the movement, he stopped to think for a long minute, or perhaps it was only a few seconds that seemed like hours, then he firmly pushed the drawer shut, left the study and went and sat on one of the small sofas in the living room, where he remained. He looked at his old darned socks, the trousers that had lost their crease and had ridden up a little, his bony white shins with a few sparse hairs on them. He felt his body sinking into the soft concavity left by another body in the upholstery and the springs, She'll never sit here again, he murmured. The silence, which had seemed to him absolute, was interrupted now by noises from the street, especially, from time to time, by the passing of a car, but in the air too there was a slow breathing, a slow pulse, perhaps it was the way houses breathe when they are left alone, this one has probably not even realised yet that there is someone here now. Senhor José tells himself that there are still drawers to go through, the ones in the dresser, where people usually keep their more intimate garments, the ones in the bedside table, where intimate things of a different nature are generally stored, the wardrobe, he thinks that if he went to open the wardrobe he would be unable to resist the desire to run his fingers over the clothes hanging there, like that, as if he were stroking the keys of a silent piano, he thinks that he would lift up the skirt of one of those dresses to breathe in the aroma, the perfume, the smell. And then there are the drawers in the desk that he hasn't even looked in yet, and the small cupboards in the bookcase, what he is looking for, the letter, the diary, the word of farewell, the trace of the last tear, must be hidden somewhere. Why, he asked, supposing such a piece of paper does exist, supposing I find it, read it, just because I read it doesn't mean that her dresses will cease to be empty, from now on all those math problems will remain unsolved, no one will discover the value of the unknown factors in the equations, the bedspread won't be pulled back, the sheet won't be pulled up snugly to the chest, the bedside lamp will not light the page of a book, what is over is over. Senhor José bent forward, rested his head in his hands, as if he wanted to go on thinking, but that wasn't the case, he had run out of thoughts. The light dimmed for a moment, some cloud

passing over the sun. At that moment, the telephone rang. He hadn't noticed it before, but there it was, on a small table in a corner, like a rarely used object. The answering machine came on, a female voice said the telephone number, then added, I'm not at home right now, but please leave a message after the tone. Whoever had called had hung up, some people hate talking to a machine, or in this case perhaps it was a wrong number, well, if you don't recognise the voice on the answering machine, there's no point leaving a message. This would have to be explained to Senhor José, who had never in his life seen one of these machines close up, but he would probably not have paid any attention to the explanations, he is so troubled by the few words he heard, I'm not at home right now, but please leave a message after the tone, no, she's not at home, she'll never be at home again, only her voice remained, grave, veiled, as if distracted, as if she had been thinking of something else when she made the recording. Senhor José said, They might ring again, and nurturing that hope, he did not move from the sofa for another hour, the darkness in the house grew gradually thicker and the telephone did not ring again. Then Senhor José got up, I must go, he murmured, but before leaving, he took another turn about the house, he went into the bedroom, where there was more light, he sat for a moment on the edge of the bed, again and again he ran his hands slowly over the embroidered top fold of the sheet, then he opened the wardrobe, there were the dresses of the woman who had spoken the definitive words, I'm not at home. He bent towards them until he touched them with his face, the smell they gave off could be described as a smell of absence, or perhaps it was that mingled perfume of rose and chrysanthemum that sometimes wafts through the Central Registry.

The concierge hadn't come and asked him where he had sprung from, the building is silent, it seems uninhabited. It was this silence that provoked an idea, the most daring he had ever had, What if I were to stay here tonight, what if I were to sleep in her bed, no one would ever know. Tell Senhor José that nothing could be easier, he just has to go up in the lift again, go into the apartment, take off his shoes, maybe another wrong number will ring, if they do, then you'll have the pleasure of hearing again the grave, veiled voice of the mathematics teacher, I'm not at home, she'll say, and if, during the night, lying in her bed, some pleasant dream excites your old body, as you know, the remedy is to hand, but you'll have to be careful not to mess up the sheets. These are sarcasms and vulgarities that Senhor José does not deserve, his daring idea, rather more romantic than daring, goes just as it came, and he is no longer inside the building, but outside, what helped him to leave, apparently, was the painful memory of his old, darned socks and his bony, white shins with their sparse hairs. Nothing in the world makes any sense, murmured Senhor José, and set off for the road where the lady in the ground-floor apartment lives. The afternoon is at an end, the Central Registry will already have closed, the clerk does not have many hours in which to invent an excuse to justify having missed a whole day's work. Everyone knows he has no family that would require him to rush to them in an emergency, and even if he did, there can be no excuse in his case, living as he does right next to the Central Registry, all he had to do was go in and stand at the door and say, I'll be back tomorrow, one of my cousins is dying. Senhor José decides he's

ready for anything, that they can dismiss him if they want, expel him from the civil service, perhaps the shepherd needs an assistant to help him change the numbers on the graves, especially if he's considering widening his field of activity, there's really no reason why he should limit himself to the suicides, the dead are all equal, what you can do to some you can do to all, jumble them up, confuse them, it doesn't matter, the world doesn't make sense anyway.

When Senhor José knocked at the door of the lady in the ground-floor apartment he was thinking only of the cup of tea he would have. He rang once, twice, but no one answered. Perplexed, worried, he rang the doorbell of the apartment opposite. A woman appeared who asked him sharply, What do you want, No one's answering across the way, So what, Has anything happened to her, do you know, What do you mean, An accident, an illness, for example, It's possible, an ambulance came to get her, And when was that, Three days ago, And you've heard nothing since, do you happen to know where she is, No, I don't, now if you'll excuse me. The woman slammed the door, leaving Senhor José in the dark. Tomorrow I'll have to go to all the hospitals, he thought. He felt exhausted, he had spent all day walking from one place to another, bombarded by emotions all day, and now this shock on top of everything else. He left the building and stood on the sidewalk wondering if he should do something more, go and ask one of the other tenants, they couldn't all be as unpleasant as the woman opposite, Senhor José went back into the building, went up the stairs to the second floor and rang at the door of the mother with the child and the jealous husband, who by now would be back from work, not that it matters, Senhor José is only going to ask if they know anything about the lady in the ground-floor apartment. The stair light is on. The door opens, the woman isn't carrying her baby and doesn't recognise Senhor José, Can I help you, she asks, I'm sorry to trouble you, I came to visit the lady in the ground-floor apartment, but she's not there and the woman opposite told me that an ambulance took her away three days ago, Yes, that's right, You don't happen to know where she is, do you, in which hospital, or if she's with some member of her family. Before the woman had time to reply, a male voice asked from inside, What is it, she turned her head, It's someone asking about the lady in the ground-floor apartment, then she looked at Senhor José and said, No, we don't know anything. Senhor José lowered his voice and asked, Don't you recognise me, she hesitated, Oh, yes, I do now, she said in a whisper and slowly closed the door.

Out in the street, Senhor José hailed a taxi, Take me to the Central Registry, he said distractedly to the driver. He would have preferred to walk, in order to save what little money he had and to end the day as he had begun it, but weariness would not allow him to take another step. Or so he thought. When the driver announced, Here we are, Senhor José discovered that he wasn't outside his house, but at the door of the Central Registry. It wasn't worth explaining to the man that he should go around the square and up the side street, he'd only have to walk about fifty yards, not even that. He paid with his last few coins, got out and when he put his feet on the pavement and looked up, he saw that the lights in the Central Registry were on, Not again, he thought, and he immediately

forgot his concern for the fate of the lady in the ground-floor apartment and the fact that the mother with the child had remembered him, the problem now is finding an excuse for the following day. He went around the corner, there was his house, squat, almost a ruin really, clinging to the high wall of the building that seemed about to crush it. It was then that brutal fingers clutched at Senhor José's heart. The light was on in his house. He was sure he'd turned it off when he went out, but, bearing in mind the confusion that has reigned for days now inside his head, he admits that he might have forgotten, if it weren't for that other light, the one in the Central Registry, the five windows brilliantly lit. He put his key in the door, he knew what he was going to see, but he paused on the threshold as if social convention required him to be surprised. His boss was sitting at the table, before him were a few papers carefully lined up. Senhor José did not need to approach in order to find out what they were, the two forged letters of authority, the unknown woman's report cards, his notebook, the cover from the Central Registry file containing official documents. Come in, said his boss, it's your house. The clerk closed the door, went over to the table and stopped. He didn't speak, he felt his head become a whirlpool in which all his thoughts were dissolving. Sit down, as I said, it's your house. Senhor José noticed that on top of the report cards there was a key the same as his. Are you looking at the key, asked the Registrar, and continued calmly, don't imagine it's some fraudulent copy, the houses of staff members, when there were houses, always had two keys to the communicating door, one, of course, for the use of the owner, and another which remained in the possession of the Central Registry, everything's fine, as you see, Apart from your having come in here without my permission, Senhor José managed to say, I didn't need your permission, the master of the key is the master of the house, let's say we're both the masters of this house, just as you seem to have considered yourself master enough of the Central Registry to remove official documents from the archive, I can explain, There's no need, I've been keeping regular track of your activities, and, besides, your notebook has been a great help to me, may I take the opportunity to congratulate you on the excellent style and the appropriateness of the language, I'll hand in my resignation tomorrow, I won't accept it. Senhor José looked surprised, You won't accept it, No, I won't, Why, if you don't mind my asking, Feel free, since I am an accomplice to your irregular activities, I don't understand. The Registrar picked up the file of the unknown woman, then said, You will understand, first, though, tell me what happened in the cemetery, your narrative ends with the conversation you had with the clerk over there, It'll take a long time, Just tell me in a few words, so that I get the complete picture, I walked through the General Cemetery to the section for suicides, I went to sleep under an olive tree, and the following morning, when I woke up, I was in the middle of a flock of sheep, and then I found out that the shepherd amuses himself by swapping around the numbers on the graves before the tombstones are put in place, Why, It's hard to explain, it's all to do with knowing where the people we're looking for really are, he thinks we'll never know, Like the woman you call the unknown woman, Yes, sir, What did you do today, I went to the school where she was a teacher and I went to her apartment, Did you find anything out, No, sir, and I don't think I wanted to. The Registrar opened the file, took out the record card that had got stuck to the cards of the

last five famous people in whom Senhor José had taken an interest, Do you know what I would do in your position, he asked, No, sir, Do you know what is the only logical conclusion to everything that has happened up until now, No, sir, Make up a new card for this woman, the same as the old one, with all the correct information, but without a date for her death, And then, Then go and put it in the archive of the living, as if she hadn't died, That would be a fraud, Yes, it would, but nothing that we have done or said, you and I, would make any sense if we don't, I still don't understand. The Registrar leaned back in the chair, drew his hands slowly over his face, then asked, Do you remember what I said inside there on Friday, when you turned up for work without having shaved, Yes, sir, Everything, Everything, Then you'll remember that I referred to certain facts without which I would never have realised the absurdity of separating the dead from the living, Yes sir, Do I need to tell you which facts I was referring to, No, sir.

The Registrar got up, I'll leave the key here, I have no intention of using it again, and he added, before Senhor José could say anything, There is still one last thing to resolve, What's that, sir, There's no death certificate in the unknown woman's file, I didn't manage to find it, it must be somewhere back there in the archive, or perhaps I dropped it on the way, As long as it remains lost, that woman will be dead, She'll be dead whether I find it or not, Unless you destroy it, said the Registrar. Having said that, he turned his back, and shortly afterwards came the sound of the door to the Central Registry closing. Senhor José stood in the middle of the room. There was no need to fill in a new card because he already had a copy in the file. He would, however, have to tear up or burn the original, where the date of death was registered. And there was still the death certificate. Senhor José went into the Central Registry, walked over to the Registrar's desk, opened the drawer where the flashlight and Ariadne's thread were waiting for him. He tied the end of the thread around his ankle and set off into the darkness.

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Reading Group Guide

1. How do the Central Registry's hierarchy of authority and the operating procedures reflect those of institutions, groups, and other bureaucracies with which you are familiar? In what ways might they be said to represent the structure and workings of society itself?
2. Including "the labyrinthine catacombs of the archive of the dead," (5) what labyrinths and mazes—external and internal—appear in the novel? What purpose do they serve? How do Senhor José and others navigate them? What perils and rewards are associated with them?
3. In what way does Senhor José's accidental possession and examination of the card belonging to a woman of thirty-six bring him "face-to-face with destiny"? (25) What attracts him to this specific card and its person? How does that "destiny" subsequently unfold? How might he have changed his destiny in this regard?
4. Senior José's ceiling—"the multiple eye of God"—doesn't believe his claim that he paid a nighttime visit to the street where the unknown woman was born, "Because what you say you did doesn't fit with my reality and what doesn't fit with my reality doesn't exist." (31) How does this notion that objective reality depends on conformity to an individual's perceived reality recur through All the Names?
5. How do fear, timidity, and anxiety affect Senhor José's thinking and behavior? What enables him to overcome his mild manners, timidity, and anxieties and act deceptively and—in some instances—with despotic authority, much like the Registrar?
6. What roles do chance and coincidence play in Senhor José's endeavors? To what degree is he aware of the importance of chance and coincidence? What does the narrator have to say about the part they play in all our lives?
7. In what ways, and why, do Senhor José's endeavors soil and bruise both his body and his spirit? Why might the sully and bruise be necessary stages in his progress? When he looks at himself in the school bathroom mirror, Senhor José is surprised at his filthy state. "It doesn't even look like me, he thought, and yet he had probably never looked more like himself." (91–92) In what ways might this be so?
8. The narrator refers to Senhor José's "highly efficient deductive mechanism." (84) What instances are there of that mechanism at work? How do Senhor José's powers of deduction serve him well, especially in light of his physical and emotional frailties? In what instances do those powers fail him, and why?
9. What comprises the "knowledge of the night, of shadows, obscurity and darkness" that Senhor José has acquired over the years and "that makes up for his natural timidity"? (87) What kinds of obscurity and darkness occur in All the Names, and how does Senhor

José deal with them? What internal and external darknesses must he cope with? What sources of light can he draw on to illuminate the internal darkness, on the one hand, and the external darkness, on the other?

10. Why does the Registrar suddenly begin to show concern for, and act on behalf of, Senhor José's well-being, and subsequently take unprecedented actions to transform the hidebound structure and operations of the Central Registry? To what extent is Senhor José responsible for this shocking transformation in the Registrar himself?

11. "Meaning and sense were never the same thing," writes Saramago; "meaning shows itself at once, direct, literal, explicit, ... while sense cannot stay still, it seethes with second, third and fourth senses, radiating out in different directions that divide and subdivide...." (112) How might this digression on meaning and sense characterize both Senhor José's experience and Saramago's technique as a novelist? What shifting patterns of meaning and sense occur throughout *All the Names*?

12. When Senhor José returns to work after recovering from the flu, the Registrar solemnly declares, "Loneliness, Senhor José, ...never made for good company, all the great sadnesses, great temptations and great mistakes are almost always the result of being alone in life..." (117) What sadnesses, temptations, and mistakes has Senhor José's loneliness occasioned? In what way are they transformed or reinforced by his quest? How does Saramago present the conflict between withdrawal, isolation, and loneliness, on the one hand, and connection and relationship, on the other?

13. How does the Registrar interpret what he calls "the double absurdity of separating the dead from the living," (176) and what are the implications of his explanation of the two absurdities? What other interpretations of that double absurdity are possible?

14. What is the significance that the General Cemetery is entered "via an old building with a facade which is the twin sister of the Central Registry facade"? (180) In what way do other historical, organizational, and administrative details establish a correspondence between the General Cemetery and the Central Registry? In what ways do the two institutions differ?

15. What would you say is, finally, "the essence of the strange adventure into which chance" has plunged Senhor José? (200)

16. In what instances and in what ways do truths become lies and lies become truths, in *All the Names*? Why does the distinction between truth and lie seem at times so insubstantial? How might the transformations between truth and lie be related to the transformations between life and death?

17. What is the significance of Senhor José's dream in which he finds himself in the cemetery, where sheep continually change numbers, a voice repeatedly calls, "I'm here,"

and the sheep disappear leaving the ground strewn with numbers "all attached end to end in an uninterrupted spiral of which he himself was the centre"? (208–209) In what ways is Senhor José himself the center and the objective of his search? In his search for the unknown woman, how does Senhor José come closer and closer to finding his own true self?

18. We are told that Senhor José, as he postpones entering the unknown woman's apartment building, "both wants and doesn't want, he both desires and fears what he desires, that is what his whole life has been like." (228–229) What patterns of wanting and not wanting, of desiring and fearing have emerged during the several days through which we have followed Senhor José in his quest? What other personal contradictions has he exhibited?

19. What does the unknown woman ultimately represent for Senhor José, for Saramago, and for us? Why, even when Senhor José has her faculty card before him, have we not learned her name?

20. What interpretations might be given of our final view of Senhor José, tying the end of Ariadne's thread around his ankle and setting off into the darkness?

The discussion questions were prepared by
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THE CAVE

Translated from the Portuguese
by Margaret Jull Costa

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A C E G I K J H F D B

For Pilar

What a strange scene you describe
and what strange prisoners,
They are just like us.

—Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII

The man driving the truck is called Cipriano Algor, he is a potter by profession and is sixty-four years old, although he certainly does not look his age. The man sitting beside him is his son-in-law, Marçal Gacho, and he is not yet thirty. Nevertheless, from his face too, you would think him much younger. As you will have noticed, attached to their first names both these men have unusual family names, whose origin, meaning, and reason they do not know. They would probably be most put out to learn that "algor" means the intense cold one feels in one's body before a fever sets in, and that "gacho" is neither more nor less than the part of an ox's neck on which the yoke rests. The younger man is wearing a uniform, but is unarmed. The older man has on an ordinary jacket and a pair of more or less matching trousers, and his shirt is soberly buttoned up to the neck, with no tie. The hands grasping the wheel are large and strong, peasant's hands, and yet, perhaps because of the daily contact with soft clay inevitable in his profession, they also suggest sensitivity. There is nothing unusual about Marçal Gacho's right hand, but there is a scar on the back of his left hand that looks like the mark left by a burn, a diagonal line that goes from the base of his thumb to the base of his little finger. The truck does not really deserve the name of truck, since it is really only a medium-sized van, of a kind now out of date, and it is laden with crockery. When the two men left home, twenty kilometers back, the day had barely begun to dawn, but now the morning has filled the world with sufficient light for one to notice Marçal Gacho's scar and to speculate about the sensitivity of Cipriano Algor's hands. The two men are traveling slowly because of the fragile nature of the load and also because of the uneven road surface. The delivery of merchandise not considered to be of primary or even secondary importance, as is the case with plain ordinary crockery, is carried out, in accordance with the official timetables, at mid-morning, and the only reason these two men got up so early is that Marçal Gacho has to clock in at least half an hour before the doors of the Center open to the public. On the days when he does not have to give his son-in-law a lift but still has crockery to deliver, Cipriano Algor does not have to get up quite so early. However, every ten days, he is the one who goes to fetch Marçal Gacho from work so that the latter can spend the forty hours with his family to which he is entitled, and, afterward, Cipriano Algor is also the one who, with or without crockery in the back of the van, punctually returns him to his responsibilities and duties as a security guard. Cipriano Algor's daughter, who is called Marta and bears the family names of Isasca, from her late mother, and Algor, from her father, only enjoys the presence of her husband at home and in bed for six nights and three days every month. On the previous night, she became pregnant, although she does not know this yet.

The area they are driving through is dull and dirty, not worth a second glance. Someone gave these vast and decidedly unrural expanses the technical name of the Agricultural Belt and also, by poetic analogy, the Green Belt, but the only landscape the eyes can see on either side of the road, covering many thousands of apparently uninterrupted hectares, are vast, rectangular, flat-roofed structures, made of neutral-colored plastic which time and dust have gradually turned gray or brown. Beneath them, where the eyes of passersby cannot reach, plants are growing. Now and then, trucks and

tractors with trailers laden with vegetables emerge from side roads onto the main road, but most of these deliveries are done at night, and those appearing now either have express and exceptional permission to deliver late or else they must have overslept. Marçal Gacho discreetly pushed back the left sleeve of his jacket to look at his watch, he is worried because the traffic is gradually becoming denser and because he knows that, from now on, once they enter the Industrial Belt, things will only get worse. His father-in-law saw the gesture, but said nothing, this son-in-law of his is a nice fellow, but very nervous, one of those people who was born anxious, always fretting about the passage of time, even if he has more than enough, in which case he never seems to know quite how to fill it, time, that is. What will he be like when he's my age, he thought. They left the Agricultural Belt behind them, and the road, which grows dirtier now, crosses the Industrial Belt, cutting a swath through not only factory buildings of every size, shape, and type, but also fuel tanks, both spherical and cylindrical, electricity substations, networks of pipes, air ducts, suspension bridges, tubes of every thickness, some red, some black, chimneys belching out pillars of toxic fumes into the atmosphere, long-armed cranes, chemical laboratories, oil refineries, fetid, bitter, sickly odors, the strident noise of drilling, the buzz of mechanical saws, the brutal thud of steam hammers and, very occasionally, a zone of silence, where no one knows exactly what is being produced. That was when Cipriano Algor said, Don't worry, we'll get there on time, I'm not worried, replied his son-in-law, only just managing to conceal his anxiety, Of course you're not, but you know what I mean, said Cipriano Algor. He turned the van into a side road reserved for local traffic, Let's take a shortcut down here, he said, if the police ask us why we're here, just remember what we agreed, we had some business to deal with at one of these factories before we went into town. Marçal Gacho took a deep breath, whenever the traffic on the main road got bad, his father-in-law would always, sooner or later, take a detour. What worried him was that he might get distracted and decide to make the turn too late. Fortunately, despite all his fears and his father-in-law's warnings, they had never yet been stopped by the police, One day, he'll realize that I'm not a little boy any more, thought Marçal, and that he doesn't have to remind me every time about how we have business to deal with at one of the factories. It did not occur to either of them that the real reason behind the continued tolerance or benevolent indifference of the traffic police was Marçal Gacho's uniform, that of a security guard working at the Center, rather than the result of multiple random lucky breaks or of stubborn fate, as they would doubtless have said if asked why they thought they had so far escaped being fined. Had Marçal Gacho known this, he might have made more of the weight of authority conferred on him by his uniform, and had Cipriano Algor known this, he might have spoken to his son-in-law with less ironic condescension. It is true what people say, the young have the ability, but lack the wisdom, and the old have the wisdom, but lack the ability.

Once past the Industrial Belt, the city finally begins, not the city proper, for that can be seen beyond, touched by the caress of the first, rosy light of the sun, and what greets one are chaotic conglomerations of shacks made by their ill-housed inhabitants out of whatever mostly flimsy materials might help to keep out the elements, especially the rain

and the cold. It is, as the inhabitants of the city put it, a frightening place. Here, every now and then, and in the name of the classical axiom which says that necessity knows no law, a truck laden with food is held up and emptied of its contents before you can say knife. The *modus operandi*, which is extremely efficient, was devised and developed after a prolonged period of collective reflection on the results of earlier attempts whose failure, as immediately became apparent, was due to a total lack of strategy, to antiquated tactics, if one could glorify them with that name, and, lastly, to a poor and erratic coordination of forces, which amounted, in practice, to a system of every man for himself. Since the flow of traffic was almost continuous throughout the night, blocking the road in order to stop one truck, which was their first plan of action, meant that the assailants fell into their own trap, for behind that truck came others, bringing reinforcements and immediate help for the driver in distress. The solution to the problem, quite brilliant, as the police themselves privately acknowledged, consisted in dividing the assailants into two groups, one tactical, the other strategic, and in erecting two barriers instead of one, the tactical group swiftly blocking the road after one sufficiently isolated truck had passed, and the strategic group, a few hundred meters farther up the road and informed of this action by the predetermined signal of a flashing light, equally rapidly setting up a second barrier where the ill-fated vehicle would have no alternative but to stop and allow itself to be robbed. No roadblock was required for the vehicles traveling in the opposite direction, the drivers themselves would stop when they saw what was going on up ahead. A third group, the rapid intervention force, was responsible for dissuading any bold attempt at solidarity with a rain of stones. The barriers were built out of large boulders transported on stretchers, and, afterward, some of the actual assailants, swearing blind that they had had nothing to do with the robbery, would help to move the boulders onto the hard shoulder, It's people like them that give our area a bad name, we're honest folk, they would say, and the drivers of the other trucks, anxious to have the road cleared so that they would not arrive late at the Center, merely responded, Yeah, sure. Cipriano Algor's van has been saved from such incidents en route mainly because he nearly always travels through these areas by day. At least, up until now. Indeed, since earthenware crockery usually appears on poor tables and tends to break fairly easily, the potter is not entirely safe, for, who knows, some woman, one of the many who struggle to make ends meet in these shantytowns, might one day say to the head of the household, We need some new plates, to which he will doubtless respond, No problem, I sometimes see a van driving past with Pottery written on the side, it's bound to have some plates on board, And some mugs too, the woman will add, making the most of the favorable tide, All right, some mugs as well, I won't forget.

Between the shacks and the first city buildings, like a no-man's-land separating two warring factions, is a large empty space as yet unbuilt on, although a closer look reveals on the ground a crisscrossing network of tractor trails and areas of flattened earth that can only have been created by large mechanical diggers, whose implacable curved blades pitilessly sweep everything away, the ancient house, the new root, the sheltering wall, the place where a shadow once fell and where it will never fall again. However, just as

happens in our own lives when we think that everything has been taken away from us, only to notice later that something does, in fact, still remain, so here too a few scattered fragments, some filthy rags, some bits of recycled rubbish, some rusty cans, some rotten planks, a piece of plastic sheeting blown hither and thither by the wind, reveal to us that this territory was once occupied by the homes of the excluded. It will not be long before the city buildings advance like a line of riflemen and take over this plot, leaving only a thin strip of land between the outermost buildings and the first shacks, a new no-man's-land that will remain until it is time to move on to the third phase.

The main road, to which they had now returned, had grown wider, with one lane reserved exclusively for heavy vehicles, and although the van could only by some flight of fancy be included in that superior category, the fact that it is undoubtedly a vehicle transporting goods gives its driver the right to compete on equal terms with the slow, mastodonic machines that roar and groan and spew out choking clouds of smoke from their exhausts, and to overtake them with a swift, sinuous agility that sets the crockery in the back rattling. Marçal Gacho glanced at his watch again and breathed more easily. He would arrive on time. They were already on the outskirts of the city, and although they still had to drive down a few winding streets, take a left, take a right, another left, another right, right again, right, left, left, right, and straight ahead, they would finally emerge into a square and, from then on, all their difficulties would be over, for a straight avenue would carry them to their destinations, to where the security guard, Marçal Gacho, was expected and to where the potter, Cipriano Algor, would leave his cargo. At the far end, an extremely high wall, much higher than the highest of the buildings on either side of the avenue, abruptly blocked the road. It did not actually block the road, this was just an optical illusion, there were streets that ran alongside the wall, which, in turn, was not a freestanding wall, as such, but the outer wall of a huge building, a gigantic quadrangular edifice, with no windows on its smooth, featureless facade. Here we are, said Cipriano Algor, we made it and with ten minutes to spare before you have to go in, You know very well why I can't be late, it could affect my position on the list of candidates for resident guard, Your wife isn't exactly wild about the idea of you becoming a resident guard, It would be better for us, it would make life easier, we'd have a better standard of living. Cipriano stopped the van opposite the corner of the building, it seemed that he was about to respond to his son-in-law's remark, but instead he asked, Why are they demolishing that block of buildings, They must have finally got the go-ahead, What for, They've been talking for weeks now about a new extension, said Marçal Gacho as he got out of the van. They had stopped by a door above which hung a notice bearing the words No Entry Except for Security Personnel. Cipriano Algor said, Maybe, There's no maybe about it, the proof is there, the demolition work has started, Sorry, I didn't mean the extension, but what you said before about living conditions, now I won't argue with you about it making your life easier, not that we have much to complain about, since we could hardly be classed among the unfortunate, Look, I respect your opinion, but I have my own views too, and when it comes to it, you'll see, Marta will agree with me. He took a couple of steps and then stopped, doubtless realizing that this was not the correct way

for a son-in-law to say goodbye to a father-in-law who had just given him a lift in to work, and he said, Thanks, and have a good trip back, See you in ten days' time, said the potter, Yes, see you then, said the security guard, at the same time waving to a colleague who was also just arriving for work. They went in together and the door closed.

Cipriano Algor started the engine, but did not immediately drive off. He looked at the buildings that were being pulled down. This time, probably because the buildings to be demolished were not particularly tall, they were not using explosives, that swift, modern and highly spectacular process that, in a matter of seconds, can transform a solid, organized structure into a chaotic heap of rubble. As one would expect, the street at right angles to this one was closed to traffic. In order to deliver his merchandise, Cipriano Algor would have to go behind the back of the block under demolition, drive around it, and then straight ahead, the door at which he would have to knock was on the corner farthest from where he was now, at the other end of an imaginary straight line that cut obliquely through the building Marçal Gacho had just entered. Diagonally across, the potter thought to himself to make the explanation shorter. When he comes to pick up his son-in-law in ten days' time, there will be no trace left of these buildings, the dust of destruction now hovering in the air will have settled, they may even have excavated the great pit in which they will dig the trenches for the foundations of the new building. Then they will erect the three walls, one of which will run parallel with the street along which Cipriano Algor will shortly have to drive, the other two will seal off on either side the land gained at the cost of the street running through it and of the demolished buildings, obliterating the facade of the building he can see now, the door for the security personnel will have to be moved, and, after a matter of days, not even the most keen-eyed observer, viewing it from the outside, still less from the inside, will be able to distinguish between new and old. The potter looked at his watch, it was still early, on the days when he drove in with his son-in-law he always had a two-hour wait before they opened the reception area he was heading for, plus all the time he would have to wait before it was his turn, But at least I have the advantage of getting a good place in the line, I might even be first, he thought. Not that he ever had been, there were always people who got up earlier than he did, some of them had probably spent part of the night in the cabins of their trucks. They would go up onto the street when it was growing light and have a cup of coffee, a sandwich, even, on cold, damp mornings, a drop of brandy, then they would stand around talking, until about ten minutes before the doors opened, when the younger drivers, as nervous as apprentices, would rush down the ramp to take up their positions, while the older ones, especially if they were parked toward the rear of the line, would saunter back, chatting quietly, taking one last drag of their cigarette, because underground, if any engines were running, smoking was forbidden. It wasn't quite the end of the world, they judged, so there was no point in rushing.

Cipriano Algor started up the van. He had got distracted by the buildings under demolition and now wanted to make up for lost time, a ridiculous expression if ever there was one, an absurd idiom with which we hope to disguise the harsh fact that no time

once lost can ever be made up or recovered, as if we believed, contrary to this evident truth, that the time we thought forever lost might, after all, have decided to hang back and wait, with the patience of one who has all the time in the world, for us to notice its absence. Stimulated by the sense of urgency born of these thoughts about who would arrive first and who would arrive later, the potter quickly drove around the block and straight down the street that ran parallel with the other façade of the building. As invariably happened, there were already people waiting outside for the doors to be opened to the public. He pulled over into the left-hand lane, into the access road for the ramp that led down to the basement, he showed the guard his supplier's identity card and joined the line of vehicles, behind a truck loaded with boxes which, to judge by the labels on the packages, contained objects made of glass. He got out of the van to see how many other suppliers were ahead of him and thus calculate, more or less accurately, how long he would have to wait. He was number thirteen. He counted again, no, there was no doubt about it. Although he was not a superstitious person, he knew about that number's bad reputation, in any conversation about chance, fate, or destiny, someone always chips in with some real-life experience of the negative, even fatal influence of the number thirteen. He tried to remember if he had ever been in this place in the line before, but the long and the short of it was that either it had never happened or else he had simply forgotten. He got annoyed with himself, it was nonsense, utterly absurd to worry about something that has no real existence, yes, that was right, he had never thought of that before, numbers don't really exist, things couldn't care less what number we give them, it's all the same to them if we say they're number thirteen or number forty-four, we can conclude, at the very least, that they do not even notice the position they happen to end up in. People aren't things, people always want to be in first place, thought the potter. And it isn't enough simply to be there either, they want the fact to be known and want other people to notice, he muttered. The basement was deserted apart from the two guards who were posted at either end, watching the entrance and the exit. It was always the same, the drivers left their vehicle in the line as soon as they arrived and went up to the street to have a coffee. Well, if they think I'm going to stay here, said Cipriano Algor out loud, they're very much mistaken. And as if he did not after all have anything to unload, he put the van into reverse and left the line, That way I won't be number thirteen, he thought. A few moments later, a truck came down the ramp and stopped in the place that his van had vacated. The driver got out of his cabin, looked at his watch, I've still got time, he must have thought. And as he disappeared up the ramp, the potter, after some rapid maneuvering, parked behind the truck, Now I'm number fourteen, he said, pleased with his own cunning. He leaned back in the seat and sighed, he could hear the hum of traffic in the street above, usually he joined the other drivers to have a cup of coffee and buy the newspaper, but he didn't feel like it today. He closed his eyes as if withdrawing into himself and immediately began to dream, it was his son-in-law explaining to him that when he was appointed resident guard the whole situation would change overnight, he and Marta would no longer live at the pottery, it was time to start a family life of their own, Try to understand, what will be, as the saying goes, will be, the world doesn't stop turning, and if the people you depend on for your living

promote you, you should raise your hands to heaven in gratitude, it would be silly to turn our backs on fate when fate is on our side, besides, I'm sure that your greatest wish is for Marta to be happy, so you should be pleased. Cipriano Algor was listening to his son-in-law and smiling to himself, You're just saying all this because you think I'm number thirteen, you don't know that now I'm number fourteen. He woke up with a start to the sound of car doors slamming, the signal that unloading was about to begin. Then, still not fully emerged from his dream, he thought, I haven't changed numbers at all, I'm still number thirteen, I just happen to be parked in the place of number fourteen.

So it was. Almost an hour later, his turn came. He got out of the van and went over to the reception desk with the usual papers, the delivery note in triplicate, the invoice for the actual sales from the last delivery, the quality statement that accompanied each shipment and in which the potter took responsibility for any production defect found during the inspection to which the crockery would be submitted, the confirmation of exclusivity, again obligatory with every shipment, in which the potter undertook, subject to sanctions in the event of any infraction, to have no commercial relations with any other establishment regarding the sale of goods. As was customary, a clerk came over to help him unload, but the assistant head of department in charge of reception called to him and said, Just unload half the shipment and check it against the delivery note. Surprised and alarmed, Cipriano Algor asked Half, why, Sales have fallen off a lot in the last few weeks, we'll probably have to return anything of yours that we've got in the warehouse too because of lack of demand, Return what's in the warehouse, Yes, it's in your contract, Oh, I know it's in the contract, but since the contract also forbids me to have any other customers, would you mind telling me where I'm supposed to sell the other half of the shipment, That's not my problem, I'm just carrying out orders, Can I speak to the manager, No, it's not worth it, he wouldn't see you. Cipriano Algor's hands were shaking, he looked around him in bewilderment, to ask for help, but he saw only indifference on the faces of the three drivers who had arrived after him. Despite this, he made an appeal to class solidarity, Can you believe it, a man brings along the fruits of his labor, having dug the clay, mixed it, and shaped the crockery that they ordered from him, then fired it all in the kiln, and now they tell him they're only going to take half of what he's made and are going to return everything of his that's in the warehouse, I mean, where's the justice in that. The drivers looked at each other and shrugged, they weren't sure how best to respond nor to whom they should respond, one of them even got out a cigarette to make it clear that he was having nothing to do with it, then remembered that he couldn't smoke down there and, instead, turned his back and removed himself from events by taking refuge in the cabin of his truck. The potter realized that he could lose everything if he continued to protest, he tried to pour oil on the troubled waters that he himself had churned up, after all, selling half was better than selling nothing, things would probably sort themselves out, he thought. He turned submissively to the assistant head of department at the reception desk, Could you just tell me why sales have dropped so sharply, Yes, I think it was the launch of some imitation crockery made out of plastic, it's so good that it looks like the real thing, with the added advantage that it's much lighter

and much cheaper, But that's no reason for people to stop buying mine, earthenware's earthenware, it's authentic, it's natural, Tell that to the customers, look, I don't want to worry you, but I think that from now on your earthenware products will be of interest to collectors only, and there are fewer and fewer of them nowadays. The counting was done, the assistant head of department wrote on the delivery note, Received half, and said, Don't bring in any more until you hear from us, Do you think I should go on making things, asked the potter, That's up to you, I really couldn't say, And what about the returns, you've still got to return to me what you've got here, his words were so full of despair and bitterness that the assistant head of department made an attempt to sound conciliatory, We'll see. The potter got into the van and set off so abruptly that some boxes, no longer secured now that half the load had been taken out, slithered across the floor and slammed into the rear door, Oh, let it all break, who cares, he shouted angrily. He had to stop at the bottom of the exit ramp, regulations demanded that he show his card to that guard too, pure bureaucracy, no one knows why, after all, someone who enters as a supplier will leave as a supplier, but there are apparently exceptions, a case in point being Cipriano Algor, who was a supplier when he came in and now, if those threats are carried out, is just about to cease being one. It must all have been the fault of the number thirteen, destiny isn't taken in by people trying to make what came first come afterward. The van went up the ramp into the light of day, there's nothing to be done now but to go home. The potter smiled sadly, It wasn't the number thirteen, the number thirteen doesn't exist, if I had been the first to arrive, the sentence passed would have been just the same, give us half now and then we'll see.

The woman in the shantytown, the one who needed new plates and mugs, asked her husband, So did you see that pottery van, and her husband replied, Yes, I made him stop, but then I let him go, Why, If you'd seen that driver's face, you would have done the same.

The potter stopped the van, rolled down the windows on both sides and waited for someone to come and rob him. It is not uncommon for certain states of despair, certain of life's blows, to force their victim into dramatic decisions like this, if not worse ones. There comes a point when the confused or abused person hears a voice saying in his head, Oh well, might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, and, depending on the particular situation in which he finds himself and the place where the situation finds him, he either spends his last bit of money on a lottery ticket, or places on the gaming table the watch he inherited from his father and the silver cigarette case that was a gift from his mother, or bets everything he has on red even though he knows that red has come up five times in a row, or he climbs alone out of the trenches and runs with his bayonet fixed toward the enemy's machine guns, or he stops this van, rolls down the windows, opens the doors, and waits for the people from the shantytown to attack with their customary clubs, their usual knives, and anything else they deem appropriate to the occasion, If the people at the Center don't want them, then the robbers might as well have them, was Cipriano Algor's last thought. Ten minutes passed without anyone approaching to commit the desired armed robbery, a quarter of an hour went by without even a stray dog wandering onto the road to pee against a tire or sniff the van's contents, and a whole half hour had elapsed before a dirty, evillooking individual came over and asked the potter, Have you got a problem, do you want some help, I can give you a push if you like, it might be the battery. Now given that even the strongest spirits have moments of irresistible weakness, which is when the body fails to behave with the reserve and discretion which the spirit has spent long years teaching it, we should not be surprised that this offer of help, especially coming from a man with every appearance of being a common thief, should so have touched Cipriano Algor's heart that it brought a tear to his eye, No, thanks very much, he said, but then, just as the helpful Cyrenian was moving off, he jumped out of the van, ran to open the rear door, at the same time shouting, Sir, sir, excuse me, come back. The man stopped, So you do want some help, he asked, No, no, it's not that, What is it, then, Will you do me a favor. The man came over and Cipriano Algor said, Take these six plates and give them to your wife, it's a present, and take these six soup plates too, But I didn't do anything, said the man doubtfully, It doesn't matter, it's as if you had, and if you need a water jug, have this one, Well, I could actually do with a water jug at home, Then take it, take it. The potter piled up the plates, the flat ones, then the bowls, then put the latter on top of the former, placed them in the curve of the man's left arm, and since he was already holding the water jug in his right hand, the beneficiary had no other way of showing his gratitude than proffering the commonplace words thank you, which are as often sincere as they are not, and the surprise of a little bow of the head not at all in keeping with the social class to which he belongs, which just goes to show that we would know far more about life's complexities if we applied ourselves to the close study of its contradictions instead of wasting so much time on similarities and connections, which should, anyway, be selfexplanatory.

When the man who looked like a highwayman but turned out not to be, or had simply chosen not to be on this occasion, had vanished, somewhat perplexed, back into

the shantytown, Cipriano Algor set off again in his van. Not even the sharpest eyes would have noticed any difference in the pressure exerted on the van's suspension and tires, for, in matters of weight, twelve plates and one earthenware water jug mean about as much to a goods vehicle, even only a medium-sized one, as twelve white rose petals and one red rose petal would mean falling on the head of a happy bride. It was not by chance that the word happy emerged just now, indeed that is the least we can say about the expression on Cipriano Algor's face, for looking at him, no one would think that the Center had bought only half of his delivery. Unfortunately, two kilometers later, when he entered the Industrial Belt, the memory of that cruel commercial setback returned. The ominous sight of those chimneys vomiting out columns of smoke made him wonder which one of those hideous factories would be producing those hideous plastic lies, cunningly fashioned to look like earthenware, It's just not possible, he murmured, you can't copy the sound of it or the weight, and then there's the relationship between sight and touch which I read about somewhere or other, something about eyes being able to see through the fingers touching the clay, about fingers being able to feel what the eyes are seeing without the fingers actually touching it. And as if that were not torment enough, Cipriano Algor went on to ask himself, thinking of his old kiln at the pottery, how many plates, jars, mugs, and jugs could those wretched machines produce per minute, how many things could they make to replace pitchers and quart pots. The result of these and other questions that remain unrecorded was that the potter's face once more grew sad and dark, and the whole of the rest of the journey was one long cogitation on the difficult future awaiting the Algor family if the Center were to persist in its new evaluation of products of which the pottery was perhaps only the first victim. All honor to him, though, for he richly deserves it, at no point did Cipriano Algor allow his spirit to be filled with remorse for having been generous to the man who, by rights, if all that has been said about the people in the shantytowns is true, should have robbed him. On the fringe of the Industrial Belt stood a few small, very low-tech factories, which had somehow survived the giant modern factories' hunger for space and their multiplicity of products, but there they were, and seeing them as he passed by had always been a consolation to Cipriano Algor when, at certain anxious moments of his life, he had started to ponder the future of his profession. They won't last long, he thought, and this time he meant the small factories, not the pottery profession, but that was only because he had not taken the trouble to reflect for long enough, as often happens, we confidently say that it's not worth trying to reach any conclusions merely because we decide to stop halfway along the path that would lead us straight to them.

Cipriano Algor drove swiftly through the Green Belt, not glancing even once at the fields, the monotonous sight of those vast expanses of plastic, dull by nature and made dingier by dirt, always had a depressing effect on him, so imagine how it would be today, in his current state of mind, if he were to turn his gaze on that desert. Like someone who had once lifted the blessed tunic of some altar saint in order to find out if it had legs like you and me or was supported by a pair of rough-hewn posts, it had been a long time since the potter had felt tempted to stop his van and go and see for himself if there were

real plants growing beneath the coverings and panels, plants that bore fruits one could smell, touch, and bite into, with leaves, tubers, and shoots that one could cook, season, and put on a plate, or if the overwhelming melancholy of what lay outside had contaminated with incurable artificiality what was growing inside, whatever that might be. After the Green Belt, the potter turned off along a secondary road, where there were the few spindly remains of a wood, a few poorly cultivated fields, a large stream containing dark and fetid water and, around a corner, the ruins of three houses with no windows now or doors, their roofs half fallen in and the rooms inside almost devoured by the vegetation that always irrupts out of the rubble as if it had been there, just waiting for that moment, ever since the first trenches were dug for the foundations. The village began a few hundred meters beyond, it consisted of little more than the road that passed through it, the few streets that flowed into it and an irregularly shaped main square slightly to one side, where a disused well, with its water pump and its great iron wheel, stood in the shade of two tall plane trees. Cipriano Algor waved to some men who were standing there talking, but, contrary to his custom when he came back from delivering goods to the Center, he did not stop, he had no idea what he wanted to do at that moment, but he certainly didn't want to have a chat, even with people he knew. The pottery and the house where he lived with his daughter and his son-in-law were at the other end of the village, out in the country, some distance from the other buildings. When he drove into the village, Cipriano Algor had slowed down, but now he was driving even more slowly, his daughter would just be putting the finishing touches to lunch, it was about that time, What shall I do, shall I tell her now or after we've eaten, he was asking himself, Best to do it afterward, I'll leave the van by the woodshed, since I wasn't going to do any shopping today, it won't occur to her to go and see if I've brought anything back with me, that way we can eat in peace or, at least, she can eat in peace, I won't, and then I'll tell her what happened, or perhaps later on this afternoon, when we're working, it would be just as bad to find out before lunch as immediately after. The road curved around where the village ended, some way beyond the last building you could see a large mulberry tree, at least ten meters high, and that was where the pottery was. The wine has been poured and we must drink it, said Cipriano Algor with a weary smile, and thought how much better it would be if he could just vomit it up. He swung the van toward the left, up the slight slope that led to the house, and halfway up he sounded the horn three times to announce his arrival, he always did this, and his daughter would think it odd if he failed to do so today.

The house and the pottery had been built on this large plot of land, doubtless once a floor for threshing or treading, in the middle of which Cipriano Algor's potter grandfather, who bore the same name as he did, decided, on some distant day of which there remains neither record nor memory, to plant the mulberry tree. The kiln, set slightly apart from the house, had been an attempt at modernization by Cipriano Algor's father, who had also been given the same name, and had replaced another ancient, not to say archaic, kiln, which, seen from outside, looked like two cone-shaped logs placed one on top of the other, the smaller one on top, and of whose origins there was no memory either. The

present-day kiln had been built on those antique foundations, the same kiln that fired the batch of crockery of which the Center took only half, and which, cold now, waits to be loaded up again. With exaggerated care Cipriano Algor parked the van beneath the wooden lean-to, between two piles of dry firewood, then he thought that he might just go and have a look at the kiln and thus gain a few minutes, but he couldn't really justify doing this, there was no real reason to do so, it was not like on other occasions when he came back from the city and the kiln was working, on those days he would go and peer inside the muffle and estimate the temperature by the color of the incandescent pots, to see if the dark red had changed to cherry red, or the cherry red to orange. He stood stock-still, as if the courage he needed had got left behind somewhere en route, but it was his daughter's voice that obliged him to move, Aren't you coming in, lunch is ready. Intrigued to know what was keeping him, Marta had appeared at the door, Come on, the food's getting cold. Cipriano Algor went in, gave his daughter a kiss and then locked himself in the bathroom, a domestic utility that had been installed when he was still an adolescent and which had long been in need of enlargement and improvement. He looked at himself in the mirror, but found no new line or wrinkle on his face, It's probably somewhere inside me, he thought, then he ran the tap, washed his hands and went out. They ate in the kitchen, sitting at a large table that had known happier days and more numerous gatherings. Now, since the death of the mother, Justa Isasca, of whom we will perhaps have little more to say in this story, but whose first name we give here, since we already know her surname, the two of them sit at one end of the table, the father at the head, Marta in the place vacated by her mother and, opposite her, Marçal, when he's home. How did your morning go, asked Marta, Oh, the usual, replied her father, bending over his plate, Marçal phoned, Oh, yes, and what did he want, He said that he'd been talking to you about us going to live at the Center when he's promoted to resident guard, Yes, we did talk about that, He was annoyed because you said yet again that you didn't think it was a good idea, Well, I've had a change of heart since then and I think it will be a good thing for both of you, And what brought about this sudden change of heart, You don't want to work in the pottery all your life, No, although I enjoy what I do, You should be with your husband, one of these days you'll have children, and three generations of clay-eaters is quite enough, And you're willing to go with us to the Center, to leave the pottery, asked Marta, Leave, no, never, that's out of the question, So you're going to do everything yourself, are you, dig the clay, knead it, work at the bench and the wheel, fire the kiln, load it, unload it, clean it, then put everything in the van and go off and sell it, may I remind you that things have been difficult enough even with the help Marçal gives us on the few days he's here, Oh, I'll find someone to help me, there are plenty of lads in the village, You know perfectly well that no one wants to be a potter any more, the ones who get fed up with the country go to the factories in the Industrial Belt, they don't leave the land in order to work with clay, Yet another reason for you to leave, You don't think I'm going to leave you alone here, do you, You can come and see me now and then, Oh, Pa, please, I'm being serious, So am I, love.

Marta got up to clear away the plates and serve the soup, which it was the custom in

their family to eat after the main course. Her father watched her and thought, I'm just complicating matters with this conversation, I'd better tell her now. He didn't, his daughter was suddenly eight years old, and he was saying to her, Look, it's just like when your mother kneads the bread. He rolled the block of clay backwards and forwards, pressing it and stretching it out with the heels of his hands, then he slapped it down hard on the table, squashing and squeezing, then started all over, repeating the whole operation, again and again and again, Why do you do that, his daughter asked him, So that there aren't any lumps or air bubbles left inside, that would be bad for the work, Is it the same with bread too, With bread you just have to get rid of the lumps, the air bubbles don't matter. He put to one side the compact cylinder into which the clay had been transformed and began kneading another lump, It's high time you learned, he said, but immediately regretted his words, Don't be ridiculous, she's only eight, and so he said instead, Go outside and play, go on, it's cold in here, but his daughter said that she wanted to stay, she was trying to make a doll out of a scrap of clay that kept sticking to her fingers because it was too soft, That clay's no good, try this piece, that way you'll be able to make something, said her father. Marta was looking at him anxiously, it wasn't like him to sit with his head bent over his plate to eat, as if, by hiding his face, he was also trying to hide his worries, perhaps it was the conversation he'd had with Marçal, but we talked about that and he didn't look like he does now, or perhaps he's ill, he seems worn out, drained, that day my mother said to me, Be careful, don't push yourself too hard, and I said, The only strength you need is in your arms, the technique's all in your shoulders, the rest of your body doesn't have to do anything, Oh, don't give me that, even the hairs on my head start to ache after an hour of kneading, That's just because you've been feeling a bit tired lately, Or perhaps it's because I'm getting old, Don't say things like that, Mama, you're not old, who would have thought it, though, only two weeks after that conversation, she was dead and buried, such are the surprises that death springs on life, What are you thinking about, Pa. Cipriano Algor wiped his mouth with his napkin, picked up his glass as if he were about to drink, only to set it down again without raising it to his lips. Tell me, go on, said his daughter, and in order to make it easier for him to get things off his chest, she asked, Are you still worried about Marçal or is something else bothering you. Cipriano Algor picked up his glass, drank down the rest of the wine in one gulp and replied quickly, as if the words were burning his tongue, They only took half of the shipment today, they say that fewer people are buying earthenware crockery, that some new imitation plastic stuff has come onto the market and that the customers prefer it, Well, that's hardly unexpected, it was bound to happen sooner or later, earthenware cracks and chips, it breaks easily, whereas plastic is more resistant, more resilient, The difference is that earthenware is like people, it needs to be well treated, So does plastic, but you're right, not nearly as much, And the worst thing is that they've told me not to deliver any more crockery until they ask for it, So we'll have to stop work, No, we can't stop, because when the order comes, we'll have to have the plates ready to deliver that same day, we can't just fire the kiln up after we get the order, And what do we do meanwhile, We'll have to wait, be patient, but I'll go for a drive around tomorrow and see if I can sell anything, Don't forget you did that only two months

ago, so you won't find many buyers, You're not trying to discourage me, are you, No, I'm just trying to see things as they are, you yourself just said that three generations of potters in a family is quite enough, You won't make a fourth generation anyway because you're going to live at the Center with your husband, Yes, I should go, but you must come with me, Look, I've already told you that I'll never go and live at the Center, Up until now, it's been the Center that has fed us by buying the fruits of our labor, and it will go on feeding us when we live there and have nothing more to sell, Thanks to marçal's salary, There's nothing wrong with a son-in-law supporting his father-in-law, It depends on the father-in-law, Oh, Pa, there's no point being proud at a time like this, It's not pride, What is it then, Something I can't explain, it's more complicated than mere pride, it's something else, a kind of shame, but I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said what I did, It's just that I don't want to see you go without, What if I started selling to shops in the city, it's just a matter of getting authorization from the Center, after all, if they're buying less from me, they can't really stop me selling to someone else, You know as well as I do that the shops in the city are having a real struggle just to keep their heads above water, everyone does their shopping at the Center, more and more people want to live at the Center, Well, I don't, What are you going to do if the Center stops buying our crockery altogether and the people around here start using plastic utensils, Let's hope I die before that happens, What, like Mama, She died at the potter's wheel, working, if only I was lucky enough to do the same, Don't talk about dying, Pa, The only time we can talk about death is while we're alive, not afterward. Cipriano Algor poured himself a little more wine, got up, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as if the rules governing good table manners no longer applied once you had left the table, and said, I've got to go and break up some clay, we're running out. He was just about to leave when his daughter called to him, Pa, I've just had an idea, An idea, Yes, I'll phone marçal and ask him to talk to the head of the buying department and try to find out what the Center's plans are, whether the reduction in demand is just a temporary thing or if it's here to stay, you know how well his bosses think of marçal, So he says, If he says so, it's because they do, retorted Marta impatiently, adding, But if you don't want me to, I won't phone, No, go on, phone him, it's a good idea, besides, it's the only one we've got at the moment, although I doubt that a head of department at the Center will be prepared, just like that, to discuss his plans with a second-rank security guard, I know them better than he does, you don't have to work there to know what kind of stuff these people are made of, they're so full of themselves, besides, a department head is just another minion carrying out orders from above, he might even try to fool us with explanations that aren't true, just to make out how important he is. Marta listened to this whole long tirade, but did not respond. If, as seemed obvious, her father was intent on having the last word, she wasn't going to rob him of that pleasure. When he went out, she thought only, I must try to be more understanding, I must put myself in his place and imagine what it must be like suddenly to have no work, and to have to leave his home, his pottery, his kiln, his life. She repeated the last words out loud, His life, and her eyes immediately filled with tears, she had put herself in her father's place and was suffering what he was suffering. She glanced around her and noticed for the first time how everything looked as if it were covered in

clay, not with clay dust, but with the color of clay, with all the many colors of the clay dug from the clay pit, a color left behind by three generations who, every day, had stained their hands with the dust and water of the clay, and she glanced outside too, at the bright ash gray of the kiln, the last, fading warmth that lingered from when they had last emptied it, like a house abandoned by its owners, but which waits patiently, and tomorrow, if all this is not over with once and for all, there will again be the first flame from the wood, the first hot breath of air that encircles the dry clay like a caress, and then, very gradually, the slight tremor in the air, the rapidly increasing glow, the dawning splendor, the dazzling irruption into flames. I will never see that again when we leave here, said Marta, and her heart contracted as if she were saying good-bye to the person she loved most in the world, although at that moment she could not have said which of them she meant, whether her dead mother, her suffering father, or even her husband, yes, it must be her husband, that would be logical, since she is his wife. Then she heard the dull thud of the mallet breaking up the clay, as if the sound were rising up from beneath the floor, but those blows sounded different today, perhaps because they were driven not by the simple need to work, but by impotent rage at losing that work. I'm going to phone marçal, muttered Marta to herself, if I carry on thinking like this, I'll end up as sad as Pa. She left the kitchen and went into her father's bedroom. There, on top of the small table on which Cipriano Algor kept an account of income and expenses, was an antiquated-looking telephone. She dialed one of the numbers for the switchboard and asked to be put through to se curity. Almost at the same moment, a man's voice said abruptly, Security, the speed with which he had answered did not surprise her, everyone knows that in matters of security even the most insignificant of seconds counts, May I speak to security guard marçal Gacho, Marta said, Who's speaking, It's his wife, I'm calling from home, Security guard marçal Gacho is on duty at the moment, he can't come to the phone, In that case, could you give him a message, You're his wife, Yes, my name's Marta Algor Gacho, you can check in your records, Then you should know that we don't take messages, we merely make a note of who called, Could you just tell him to phone home as soon as possible, Is it urgent, asked the voice. Marta thought for a moment, was it urgent, no, it wasn't, it certainly wasn't a matter of life and death, there were no serious problems with the kiln, still less a premature birth, but in the end she said, Yes, it is rather urgent, I'll make a note, said the man, and hung up. With a sigh of weary resignation, Marta replaced the phone on the rest, there was nothing more to be done, it was out of their hands, security could not survive without thrusting their authority in other people's faces, even in a trivial case like this, so banal, so mundane, a wife phoning the Center because she needs to talk to her husband, she wasn't the first and she certainly wouldn't be the last. When Marta went out into the yard, the thud of the mallet no longer sounded as if it were coming from under the ground, it came from where it came, from the dark corner in the pottery where they kept the clay extracted from the clay pit. She went over to the door, but did not go in, I phoned, she said, they'll pass the message on, Let's see if they do, replied her father, and without another word, he began laying into the largest block of clay in front of him with the mallet. Marta withdrew because she knew that she should not go into a place deliberately chosen by her father in

order to be alone, but also because she too had work to do, a few dozen jugs, large and small, waiting to have handles attached to them. She entered by the side door.

Marçal Gacho phoned back later that afternoon, after finishing his shift. He replied to his wife's comments with a few disconnected phrases, with no show of sadness, concern, or anger at the commercial lack of courtesy of which his father-in-law had been the victim. He spoke in an absent voice, a voice that seemed to be thinking about something else, he said, Yes, hm, yes, I understand, maybe, I suppose that's to be expected, I'll go as soon as I can, not always, absolutely, yes, I understand, no need to repeat it, and he finished the conversation with his only complete sentence, which bore no relation to what they had been talking about, Don't worry, I won't forget the shopping. Marta realized that her husband must have been speaking in front of witnesses, work colleagues, possibly a superior come to inspect the dormitory, which was why he had to put on an act, in order to avoid arousing any awkward or even dangerous curiosity. The organization of the Center had been conceived and set up according to a model of strict compartmentalization of its various activities and functions, which, although they were not and could not be entirely separate, were only able to communicate with each other via particular channels that were often hard to disentangle and identify. Obviously a mere second-rank security guard, both by virtue of the specific nature of his job as well as by virtue of his infinitesimal importance in the ranks of minor personnel, one being an unavoidable consequence of the other, is not, generally speaking, equipped with the necessary discernment and perspicacity to notice such subtleties and nuances, which are, in deed, almost volatile in their nature, but marçal Gacho, despite not being among the most astute of his colleagues, has in his favor a certain ferment of ambition, with, as its known goal, promotion to resident guard and, eventually, of course, to first-rank security guard, and we do not know where that ambition might lead him in the near future, still less, in the distant future, if he has one. By keeping his eyes and ears open since the day he began working at the Center he soon learned when and how it was best to speak, or not speak, or simply to dissemble. After two years of marriage, Marta thought she had a pretty thorough knowledge of the husband she had ended up with in the game of give and take which is what married life almost always comes down to, she bestows all her wifely affection on him, and were it in the interests of the story to delve more deeply into their private life, she would be quite prepared to declare vehemently that she loves him, but she is not given to self-deception, and, were we to insist, it is even likely that she would ultimately admit that he sometimes seemed to her too prudent, not to say calculating, always assuming that we wanted to take our investigations into such negative areas of the personality. She was sure that her husband would have been annoyed by their conversation, that he would already have started worrying about the prospect of meeting the head of the buying department, and not out of an inferior's timidity or modesty, the fact is that marçal Gacho has always prided himself on his declared dislike of drawing attention to himself except in the line of duty, especially, as someone who thinks he knows him well might add, when such attention will not be to his advantage. In the end, Marta's good idea had only seemed good because, at that particular moment, as her father had said, it was the only idea available. Cipriano Algor was in the kitchen, he could not possibly have heard the isolated, disconnected fragments of conversation spoken by his son-in-law, but it was as if he had read them all, and filled

in the gaps, in his daughter's weary face, when one long minute later, she emerged from the bedroom. And since it wasn't worth putting his tongue to work over such a small matter, he did not waste any time and asked simply, So, and she was the one who was forced to state the obvious, He'll talk to the head of department, although Marta needn't have bothered to say that either, a shared glance would have been enough. Life is like that, full of words that are not worth saying or that were worth saying once but not any more, each word that we utter will take up the space of another more deserving word, not deserving in its own right, but because of the possible consequences of saying it. Supper passed in silence, as did the two hours spent in front of the indifferent television, and at some point, as has often happened in the last few months, Cipriano Algor fell asleep. He was frowning angrily, as if he were admonishing himself even as he drifted off for having given in so easily to sleep, when, in all fairness and justice, his feelings of annoyance and upset should have kept him awake day and night, the former so that he could absorb the full impact of the offense, the latter so as to make his suffering bearable. Exposed like that, disarmed, his head lolling back, his mouth half open, lost to himself, he presented a poignant image of hopeless abandon, like a bag that has broken and spilled its contents all over the road. Marta was staring fervently at her father, with passionate intensity, and she was thinking, This is my old father, the forgivable overstatement of someone still in the early dawn of adulthood, one should not refer to a man of sixty-four, albeit rather low in spirits like the man in question, as old, that might have been the custom in the days when teeth began to fall out at thirty and the first wrinkles to appear at twenty-five, but nowadays, it is only from eighty years onward that old age, authentic and unambiguous and from which there can be no return, nor even any pretense at a return, begins, de facto and unapologetically, to deserve the name by which we designate our last days. What will become of us if the Center stops buying our products, who will we make crockery for if it is the Center's tastes that determine everyone else's tastes, Marta was wondering, it wasn't the department head who decided to buy only half our goods, the order came down to him from above, from his superiors, from someone who cares not a jot if there is one potter more or less in the world, what happened might well be just the first step, the second step will be to stop buying altogether, we'll have to be prepared for that disaster, yes, prepared, although I'd like to know quite how one prepares oneself to be hit over the head with a hammer, and when marçal gets promoted to resident guard, what will I do with my father, I can't possibly leave him here all alone in this house with no work to do, I just couldn't do that, cruel child, the neighbors would say, or worse, I would say the same myself, things would be different if Mama was still alive, because contrary to what people say, two weaknesses don't make for a still greater weakness, but for renewed strength, well, that's probably not true and never has been, but there are occasions when it would be nice if it was, no, Pa, no, Cipriano Algor, when I leave here, you will come with me, even if I have to use force, I don't doubt that a man can live perfectly well on his own, but I'm convinced that he begins to die as soon as he closes the door of his house behind him. As if someone had shaken him brusquely by the arm, or as if he sensed he was being talked about, Cipriano Algor suddenly opened his eyes and sat up properly in his chair. He

rubbed his face with his hands and, with the slightly confused look of a child caught in flagrante, he muttered, I must have dropped off. Whenever he woke up from one of his brief naps in front of the television, he always said the same thing, I must have dropped off. But tonight is not like every other night, which is why he added in a murmur, It would have been far better if I hadn't woken up at all, at least while I was asleep, I was a potter with work to do, With one major difference, that any work you do while you're dreaming doesn't produce any real results, said Marta, So it's exactly the same as when you're awake, then, you work and work and work, and one day, you emerge from that dream or that nightmare only to be told that what you did was worthless, But it wasn't worthless, Pa, It feels as if it was, Today was a bad day, tomorrow we'll be able to think more calmly, and we'll see if we can find a way out of this problem they've created for us, Yes, we'll see, and yes, we'll think about it. Marta went over to her father and kissed him fondly, Go to bed, go on, and sleep well and rest that head of yours. At the door of his room, Cipriano Algor stopped and turned around, he seemed to hesitate for a moment, then said, as if trying to convince himself, Perhaps marçal will phone tomorrow, perhaps he'll have some good news for us, Who knows, Pa, who knows, said Marta, he certainly seemed very keen to help.

marçal did not phone the next day. That day, which was Wednesday, passed, Thursday and Friday passed, Saturday and Sunday passed, and only on Monday, almost a week after the incident with the shipment of crockery, did the phone ring again in Cipriano Algor's house. Despite what he had said, the potter had not gone out and about looking for buyers. He occupied the slow hours with small tasks, some of them unnecessary, like meticulously inspecting and cleaning the kiln, from top to bottom, inside and out, joint by joint, tile by tile, as if he were preparing it for the biggest firing in its history. He kneaded a lump of clay for his daughter, but he did not give the task the scrupulous attention he had lavished on the kiln, in fact, he made such a botched job of it that Marta, behind his back, had to knead it again to get rid of the lumps. He chopped firewood, swept the courtyard, and on one afternoon, during a three-hour interlude of fine, monotonous rain of the sort people used to call mizzle, he spent the whole time sitting on a log in the woodshed, sometimes staring straight ahead with the fixity of a blind man who knows that even if he turns his head in the other direction he will still not see anything, at other times studying his open palms, as if looking for a route in those lines and crossroads, either the shortest or the longest, generally speaking, choosing one or the other depends on how much or how little of a rush you are in, not forgetting, of course, those cases when someone or something is pushing you from behind, and you don't know why or where they are pushing you. On that afternoon, when the rain stopped, Cipriano Algor walked down the street to the main road, unaware that his daughter was watching him from the door of the pottery, but he did not need to say where he was going, nor did she need to ask. Stubborn creature, Marta thought, he should have gone in the van, it could start raining again at any moment. Marta's concern was only natural, it was what one would expect from a daughter, because the truth is that, no matter how often people in the past may have made statements to the contrary,

the heavens never were to be trusted. This time, though, even if the drizzle does slither down again from the uniform grayness covering and encircling the earth, it won't be one of those drenching rains, the village cemetery is very close, just at the end of one of those streets leading off the main road, and Cipriano Algor, despite being of a certain age, still has the long, rapid stride that younger people use when they're in a hurry. But be they old or young, let no one ask him to hurry today Nor would it have been wise of Marta to suggest that he take the van, because we should always visit cemeteries, especially bucolic, rural, village cemeteries on foot, not in accordance with any categorical imperative or with some ruling from above, but out of respect for mere human decency, after all, so many people have gone on walking pilgrimages to worship the shinbone of some saint that it would be inexplicable if we were to choose any other mode of transport to go to a place where we know beforehand that what awaits us is our own memory and perhaps a tear. Cipriano Algor will spend a few minutes beside his wife's grave, not in order to pray prayers he long ago forgot, nor to ask her to intercede for him up there in the empyrean, always assuming that her virtues carried her to such high places, with the one who some say can do anything, he will merely protest that what they did to me is simply unjust, Justa, they mocked my work and the work of our daughter, they say there's no interest any more in earthenware crockery, that no one wants it, and therefore we too are no longer needed, we are a cracked bowl which there is no point in clamping together, you had better luck while you were alive. There are small puddles along the narrow gravel cemetery paths, the grass grows everywhere, and in less than a hundred years' time, it will be impossible to know who was buried beneath these mounds of mud, and even if people do still know, it's unlikely it will be of any real interest to them, the dead, as someone has already said, are like broken plates on which it is no longer worth placing one of those equally outmoded iron clamps that were used to hold together what had become broken or separated, or, as in the case in question, and using different words to explain the simile, the iron clamps of memory and regret. Cipriano Algor approached his wife's grave, she has been under there for three years now, three years during which she has appeared nowhere, not in the house, not in the pottery, not in bed, not beneath the shade of the mulberry tree, nor at the clay pit beneath the scorching sun, she has not sat down again at the table or at the potter's wheel, nor has she cleared out the ashes fallen from the grate, nor seen the earthenware pots and plates set out to dry, she does not peel the potatoes, knead the clay, or say, That's the way things are, Cipriano, life only gives you two days, and given the number of people who only get to live for a day and a half, and others even less, we can't really complain. Cipriano Algor stayed no longer than three minutes, he was intelligent enough to know that the important thing was not to stand there, with prayers or without, looking at the grave, the important thing was to have come, the important thing is the road you walked, the journey you made, if you are aware of prolonging your contemplation of the grave it is because you are watching yourself or, worse still, it is because you hope others are watching you. Compared with the instantaneous speed of thought, which heads off in a straight line even when it seems to us to have lost its way, because what we fail to realize is that, as it races off in one direction, it is in fact advancing in all directions at

once, anyway, as we were saying, compared with that, the poor word is constantly having to ask permission from one foot to lift the other foot, and even then it is always stumbling, hesitating and dithering over an adjective or a verb that turns up unannounced by its subject, and that must be why Cipriano did not have time to tell his wife everything that was on his mind, apart from that business about it being unjust, Justa, but it may well be that the murmurings we can hear coming from him now, as he walks toward the gate leading out of the cemetery, are precisely what he had meant to say. He had stopped muttering to himself by the time he passed a woman dressed all in black who was coming in through the gate, that's how it has always been, some arrive and others leave, she said, Good afternoon, Senhor Cipriano, the respectful form of address is justified both by the age difference and because that is the custom in the country, and he replies, Good afternoon, the only reason he does not say her name is not because he does not know it, but because he thinks that this woman, dressed in heavy mourning for her husband, will play no part in the somber future events about to unfold nor in any account of them, although she, for her part, intends going to the pottery tomorrow to buy a water jug, as she is telling him now, I'll be around tomorrow to buy a water jug, I just hope it's better than the last one, the handle came off when I picked it up, it smashed to smithereens and the water went all over my kitchen floor, you can imagine the mess, although, truth be told, the poor thing was getting on a bit, and Cipriano Algor replied, There's no need to come to the pottery, I'll bring you a new jug to replace the one that broke, absolutely free, as a present from the manufacturers, Are you just saying that because I'm a widow, asked the woman, No, certainly not, just think of it as a gift, we've got a number of water jugs in stock which we might never sell, Well, in that case, Senhor Cipriano, I gratefully accept, Don't mention it, Getting a new water jug for free is quite something, Yes, but that's all it is, something, Right, then, I'll expect you tomorrow, and thank you again, See you tomorrow. Now, given that thought, as explained above, was now running simultaneously in all directions and given that feeling was keeping pace with thought, it should come as no surprise to us that the widow's pleasure at receiving a new water jug without having to pay for it should, from one moment to the next, have eased the un-happiness that had forced her out of the house on such a grim afternoon in order to visit her husband's final resting place. Of course, despite the fact that we can see her still standing at the entrance to the cemetery, doubtless rejoicing in her housewife's heart at that unexpected gift, she will still go where grief and duty called her, but once there, she will not perhaps weep as much as she thought she would. The afternoon is slowly growing dark, dim lights are beginning to come on in the houses next to the cemetery, but twilight will nevertheless last long enough for the woman, without fear of will-o'-the-wisps or of ghosts, to be able to say her Our Father and her Hail Mary, may peace be with him, may he rest in peace.

When Cipriano Algor had left the last building in the village behind him and looked toward the pottery, he saw the outside light come on, an ancient lantern in a metal case hanging above the house door, and although not a night passed without its being lit, this time he felt his heart lift and his spirits soften, as if the house were saying to him, I'm

waiting for you. Barely palpable, pushed hither and thither at the whim of the invisible waves that drive the air, a few tiny drops of rain touched his face, it will not be long before the mill of the clouds begins sieving out its watery flour again, with all this rain I don't know when the pots will dry. Whether under the influence of that twilight calm or of his brief evocative visit to the cemetery, or even, which would be an appropriate reward for his generosity, because he told the woman in black that he would give her a new water jug, Cipriano Algor is not, at that moment, thinking about the disappointment of not getting something or about fears of losing something. At such a time, when you are walking over the damp ground and the outermost skin of the sky is so close to your head, no one could possibly say anything as absurd as Go back home with half your shipment unsold or Your daughter will one day leave you all alone. The potter reached the top of the road and took a deep breath. Silhouetted against the dull curtain of gray clouds, the black mulberry tree looks as black as its name suggests. The light from the lantern does not reach its crown, it does not even touch its lowest branches, only a very feeble light carpets the ground as far as the tree's thick trunk. The old kennel is there, it has been empty for years now, ever since its last inhabitant died in Justa's arms and she said to her husband, I never want another animal in my house. Something glitters in the dark entrance to the kennel, only to vanish at once. To find out what it was, Cipriano Algor crouched down to peer inside, having first walked up and down in front of it. The darkness inside is total. He realized then that his body was blocking the light from the lantern and so he moved slightly to one side. There were two glittering objects, two eyes, a dog, Or a genet, but it's more likely to be a dog, thought the potter, and he's probably right, there is no credible record of wolves in this area, and the eyes of cats, whether domestic or wild, as everyone knows, are just that, cats' eyes, or, at worst, one might think they were those of a small tiger, but an adult tiger would never fit inside a kennel that size. Cipriano did not mention cats or tigers when he went into the house, nor did he say a word about his visit to the cemetery, and, as for the jug he is going to give to the woman in black, he realizes that this is not a matter to be dealt with now, so what he said to his daughter was this, There's a dog outside, then he paused, as if expecting a response, and added, Underneath the mulberry tree, in the kennel. Marta had just had a wash, changed her clothes and sat down to rest for a moment before beginning to prepare supper, she is not, therefore, in the most receptive frame of mind to consider the places that lost or stray dogs might pass through or stop off in, You'd better just leave him, if he's the kind of animal who simply dislikes traveling at night, he'll be gone by morning, she said, Have you got something there I can give him to eat, asked her father, A few leftovers from lunch, a bit of bread, he won't need water, plenty of that fell from the sky, Fine, I'll take it out to him, If that's what you want, Pa, but you know he'll never leave our door again if you do, You're probably right, and if I was in his position, I'd do exactly the same. Marta put the leftover food on an old plate that she kept on the ledge by the fireplace and poured a bit of soup over it, Here you are, and mark my words, this is just the beginning. Cipriano Algor took the plate and was already halfway out of the kitchen when his daughter asked him, Do you remember what Mama said when Constante died, that she didn't want any more dogs in the house, Yes, I remember, but

I'm sure that if she was still alive, I wouldn't be the one taking this plate of food out to that dog she didn't want, replied Cipriano Algor, and he left without hearing his daughter's murmured comment, You may be right. The rain was falling again, it was the same deceptive drizzle, the same fine dancing dust of water that masks distances, even the whitish figure of the kiln seemed ready to up and leave, and the van looked more like a phantom coach than a modern vehicle with an internal combustion engine, even though it is not, as we know, of recent make. Beneath the mulberry tree, the water was sliding off the leaves in large, infrequent drops, now one, now another, at random, as if the laws of hydraulics and of hydrodynamics, still in operation outside the precarious umbrella of the tree, did not apply there. Cipriano Algor put the plate of food down on the ground and took a few steps back, but the dog did not leave its shelter, You must be hungry, said the potter, or perhaps you're one of those dogs with too much self-respect, perhaps you don't want me to see how hungry you are. He waited another minute, then withdrew and went back into the house, but he did not completely close the door. He could not see much through the crack, but he managed to make out a black shape emerging from the kennel and going over to the plate, and he noticed too that the dog, for it was a dog and not a wolf or a cat, glanced first at the house and only then lowered its head to the food, as if it felt that it owed this degree of consideration to the person who had come out in the rain, defying the elements, to satisfy its hunger. Cipriano closed the door properly and went into the kitchen, He's eating, he said, If he was that hungry, he'll have finished by now, said Marta, smiling, Yes, you're right, her father smiled back, always assuming that the dogs of today are the same as the dogs of yesteryear. Theirs was a simple supper and quickly served. When they had finished, Marta said, Another day with no news from marçal, I can't understand why he doesn't phone, just to say something, a word would do, it's not as if I was expecting a long speech, Perhaps he hasn't had time to talk to the head of the buying department, Then why doesn't he at least tell us that, You know perfectly well that things aren't easy over there, said the potter, in unexpectedly conciliatory mode. The daughter looked at him, surprised more by the tone of voice than by the meaning of the words, It's not like you to make excuses to justify marçal's actions, she said, Well, I like him, You may like him, but you don't really take him seriously, The person I can't take seriously is the security guard that the nice, friendly lad I used to know has turned into, Now he's a nice, friendly man, and working as a security guard is no less dignified or honest than working at any other equally dignified, honest job, But it isn't just any other job, What's the difference, The difference is that your marçal, as we know him today, is all security guard, he's a security guard from his head to toes, and I suspect that he's even a security guard in his heart, Pa, please, you shouldn't talk like that about your daughter's husband, You're right, forgive me, today shouldn't be a day for criticism and recrimination, Why not, Because I went to the cemetery and because I gave a water jug to a woman in the village and because we have a dog outside, all of which are events of great importance, What's all this about a water jug, The handle came off in her hand and the jug was smashed to smithereens, These things happen, nothing lasts forever, But she had the decency to admit that the jug was old, and that's why I thought I should give her a new one and pretend that the other one was flawed, well, why pretend,

I'll just give it to her anyway, there's no need for explanations, Who is this woman, She's Isaura Estudiosa, the one who was widowed a few months back, She's still a young woman, Now, look, I'm not considering getting married again if that's what you're thinking, If I did think that, I wasn't aware of it, though perhaps I should have, then you wouldn't have to stay here all alone, since you refuse to come and live with us at the Center, Really, I have no intention of getting married again, still less to the first woman I meet, as for the rest, I would be grateful to you not to spoil my evening, Sorry, I didn't mean to. Marta got up, cleared away the plates and the knives and forks, folded up the tablecloth and the napkins, it would be a great mistake to assume that the craft of potter, even, as in this case, when the pottery produced is fairly crude stuff, even when carried out in a small, graceless village, as you may already have deduced this one to be, is incompatible with the delicacy and good manners that distinguish the present-day upper classes, who have forgotten or been ignorant since birth of the brute nature of their own great-great-great-grandparents and of the bestial nature of their great-great-great-grandparents. These Algors are quick to learn what they are taught and are capable of putting it into practice in order to drive it home, and Marta, who belongs to the latest generation and is, therefore, more favored by developmental aids, already had the great good fortune of going to study in the city, well, those large centers of population have to have some advantages over villages. And if she ended up being a potter, it was because of her conscious and manifest vocation as a modeler, although her decision was also influenced by the fact that she had no brothers who could carry on the family tradition, not forgetting the last and most important reason, the powerful bonds of filial love that would never allow her to adopt some kind of God-will-provide-if-you're-lucky attitude toward her parents in their old age. Cipriano Algor had turned on the television, only to switch it off again shortly afterward. If anyone had asked him what he had seen or heard between turning the television on and switching it off, he would not have known what to say, but he would simply have refused outright to answer if asked a different question, You seem very distracted, what are you thinking about. He would say, What do you mean, I'm not distracted, merely in order not to confess his childish concern for the dog, whether it would still be safe in the kennel or if, hunger satisfied and energies restored, it would have continued on its way, in search of better food or of a master who lived in a place less exposed to gales and fine rain. I'm going to my room, Marta said, I've been putting off doing some sewing for ages now, but I really must get it done tonight, No, I won't be staying up much longer either, said her father, I feel worn out, even though I haven't done a thing, You did, you kneaded some clay and you serviced the kiln, You know perfectly well that that piece of clay will have to be kneaded again and that the kiln hardly needed a stonemason to work on it, still less a wet nurse to take care of it, The days are all the same, it's the hours that are different, when a day comes to an end it always does so with its twenty-four hours all present and correct, even when those hours contained nothing, but that's not the case with either your days or your hours, Ah, Marta, philosopher of time, said her father and kissed her on the head. His daughter returned the kiss and said, smiling, Don't forget to go and see how your dog is, For the moment, he's just a dog who happened to turn up here and who decided that the kennel would

provide a good shelter from the rain, he might be ill or injured, he might perhaps have a collar with the phone number of the person we should call, he might belong to someone in the village, they probably beat him and he ran away, and if that's the case, he won't still be here tomorrow morning, you know what dogs are like, their master is still their master even when he punishes them, so don't go calling him my dog just yet, I haven't even seen him, I don't even know if I like him, Ah, but you know that you want to like him, and that's a start, So now you're a philosopher of feelings too, are you, said her father, Assuming you do keep the dog, what will you call him, asked Marta, It's too early to think about that, If he's still here tomorrow, that name should be the first word he hears from your mouth, Well, I won't call him Constante, that was the name of a dog who won't be coming back to his mistress and who wouldn't find her if he did, so perhaps it would be appropriate to call this one Lost, There's another even more appropriate name, What's that, Found, That's no name for a dog, Neither is Lost, Yes, you're right, he was lost and now he is found, that's what we'll call him then, See you in the morning, Pa, sleep well, Yes, see you in the morning, and don't sit up too late sewing, you'll strain your eyes. When his daughter had gone to bed, Cipriano Algor opened the door into the yard and looked over at the mulberry tree. A steady drizzle was still falling and there was no sign of life inside the kennel. I wonder if he's in there, thought the potter. He provided himself with a false excuse not to go and look, That's all I need, getting soaked to the skin for the sake of a stray dog, once was enough. He went to his room and lay down, read for half an hour, and then fell asleep. In the middle of the night, he woke up and turned on the light, the clock on his bedside table said half past four. He got out of bed, picked up the flashlight he kept in a drawer and opened the window. It had stopped raining, he could see stars in the dark sky. Cipriano Algor switched on the flashlight and pointed the beam at the kennel. The light was not strong enough to be able to see inside, but Cipriano Algor did not need to, two glittering lights would do, two eyes, and there they were.

Ever since they sent him back with half the load of crockery, which, it should be said, has not yet been unloaded from the van, Cipriano Algor has, from one moment to the next, ceased to deserve his reputation, gained over a lifetime of much work and few holidays, as an early-rising worker. Now he gets up when the sun has already risen, he washes and shaves more slowly than is strictly necessary for an already closely shaven face and for a body accustomed to cleanliness, he has a light breakfast but takes his time over it, and finally, with no visible lifting of the low spirits with which he got out of bed, he goes to work. Today, however, having spent what remained of the night dreaming about a tiger that came and ate from his hand, he threw off his blankets as soon as the sun had begun to paint the sky with light. He did not open the window, merely opened the shutter door just a crack to see what the weather was like, at least that is what he thought, or what he wanted to think that he thought, but the fact is that he was not in the habit of doing so, for this man has lived long enough to know that the weather is always there, sunny, as today promises to be, or rainy, as it was yesterday, indeed, when we open the window and raise our nose to the air above, it is merely to find out if the weather is doing what we want it to do. To cut a long story short, when he peered outside, what Cipriano Algor wanted to know was if the dog was still there waiting for them to give him another name or if, tired of waiting fruitlessly, it had gone off in search of a more diligent master. All that could be seen of the dog was a pair of floppy ears and a snout resting on its crossed front paws, but there was no reason to suspect that the rest of its body was not inside the kennel. He's black, said Cipriano Algor. When he had taken the dog the food last night, it had seemed to him that the dog was indeed that color, or, as someone will doubtless remark, that absence of color, but it had been dark, and if in the dark even white cats are gray, the same, in even darker circumstances, could be said of a dog seen for the first time beneath a mulberry tree when a fine, nocturnal drizzle was dissolving the line separating beings from things, making those beings more like the things which, sooner or later, they will all become. The dog is not really black, although his snout and ears almost are, the rest of his body is a more general gray, with an admixture of other tones from dark to solid black. Given that the potter is sixty-four years old with all the usual visual problems that age brings with it, and that he stopped wearing glasses because of the heat of the kiln, one cannot really blame him for saying, He's black, since the first time he saw the dog was at night and in the rain, and, now, distance makes the early-morning light seem misty. When Cipriano Algor finally goes over to the dog, he will see that he will never again be able to say, He's black, but that he would be guilty of grave misrepresentation were he to say, He's gray, especially when he discovers that the dog has a thin white blaze, like a delicate cravat, that goes from his chest to his belly. Marta's voice rings out from the other side of the door, Pa, wake up, the dog's waiting for you. I am awake, I'm just coming, replied Cipriano Algor, immediately regretting those last few words, it was puerile, almost ridiculous, for a man his age to get as excited as a child who has been brought a long-dreamed-of present, when we all know that, on the contrary, in places like this, the more useful a dog is, the more it is valued, an unnecessary virtue in toys, and as far as dreams and their fulfillment are concerned, a dog could not possibly satisfy someone who, that same night, had dreamed of a tiger.

Despite this self-administered dressing-down, Cipriano Algor did not take excessive care this morning when getting washed and dressed, he merely pulled on his clothes and left the bedroom. Marta asked him, Shall I make him something to eat, No, afterward, food would only distract him at the moment, Go on, then, off you go and tame your wild beast, He's not a wild beast, poor thing, I've been watching him from the window, Yes, I had a look at him too, What do you think, Well, I don't think he belongs to anyone around here, Some dogs never leave their backyards, they live and die there, apart from those cases where they're taken out into the country to be hanged from the branch of a tree or finished off with a bullet in the head, That's hardly the kind of thing I want to start the day with, thank you, No, you're right, it isn't, so let's start the day in a less human but more compassionate way, said Cipriano Algor, going out into the yard. His daughter did not follow him, she stood in the doorway, watching, It's his party, she thought. The potter took a few steps and, then, in a clear, firm voice, although not too loud, he pronounced the chosen name, Found. The dog had already looked up when he saw him, and now, hearing the name he had been waiting for, he emerged fully from the kennel, a slim young dog, neither big nor small, with a curly coat, he really was gray, gray tending to black, with that narrow white blaze, like a cravat, dividing his chest in two. Found, the potter said again, advancing a few more steps, Found, come here. The dog stayed where he was, he had his head up and was slowly wagging his tail, but he did not move. Then the potter crouched down so that his eyes were on the same level as the dog's, and this time he said in an intense, urgent tone of voice, as if giving expression to some deep personal need of his, Found. The dog took one step forward, then another, not stopping this time, until he was within reach of the arm of the person calling him. Cipriano Algor held out his right hand, almost touching the dog's nostrils, and waited. The dog sniffed a few times, then stretched out his neck so that his cold nose brushed the tips of the fingers held out to him. The potter slowly moved his hand toward the dog's nearest ear and stroked it. The dog took the final step, Found, Found, said Cipriano Algor, I don't know what your name was before, but from now on your name is Found. It was only then that he noticed that the dog had no collar and that his fur was not just gray, it was covered in mud and bits of vegetation, especially his legs and belly, a clear sign that he had taken a difficult route across fields and open countryside, rather than traveling comfortably by road. Marta had joined them, she brought a plate with a little food on it for the dog, nothing too substantial, just enough to confirm the meeting and to celebrate the baptism, You give it to him, said her father, but she said, No, you give it to him, I'll have plenty of other opportunities to feed him. Cipriano Algor put the plate down on the ground, then got up with some difficulty, Oh, my knees, what I wouldn't give to have even the knees I had last year, Does it make that much difference, asked his daughter, At this time of life even a day makes a difference, the only saving grace is that sometimes things improve. The dog Found, and now that he has a name, we really shouldn't use any other, not dog, which we slipped in just now out of force of habit, nor animal nor creature, which serve to describe anything that does not form part of the mineral and vegetable kingdoms, although now and again we might still have to resort to these variants in order to avoid boring repetition, which is the only reason why, instead of

Cipriano Algor, we have sometimes written potter, or man, old man, and Marta's father. Anyway, as we were saying, the dog Found, having cleaned the food off the plate with two licks of his tongue, providing clear proof that yesterday's hunger had still not been satisfied, raised his head like someone waiting for a second helping, at least that was how Marta interpreted the gesture, which is why she said, Be patient, lunch comes later, make do with what you've got in your stomach, but it was a hasty judgment, the kind that so often emerges from the human brain, for despite his continuing hunger, which he would be the last to deny, it was not food that was preoccupying Found at that moment, what he wanted was to be given some sign as to what he should do next. He was thirsty, but he could obviously go and quench his thirst in one of the many puddles of water left around the house by the rain, yet something held him back, something which, if we were talking about human feelings, we would not hesitate to call scrupulousness or good manners. Since they had put his food on a plate rather than making him grub for it in the mud, then surely the water should be drunk from some special receptacle too. He must be thirsty, said Marta, dogs need a lot of water, There are plenty of puddles over there, said her father, he's not drinking from them because he doesn't want to, If we're going to keep him, we can't let him go drinking water from puddles as if he had neither house nor home, obligations are obligations. While Cipriano Algor occupied himself making various seminonsensical utterances, the sole aim of which was to accustom the dog to the sound of his voice, but in which deliberately, and as insistently as a refrain, the word Found was repeated several times, Marta brought a large, earthenware bowl full of clean water, which she placed beside the kennel. In defiance of all skepticism, which is more than justified after the thousands of stories one has read and heard about dogs and their exemplary lives and sundry miracles, we must, nevertheless, point out that Found again surprised his new owners by remaining exactly where he was, face to face with Cipriano Algor, apparently waiting until he had finished what he had to say Only when the potter had stopped speaking and made a gesture as if to dismiss him did the dog turn around and take a drink. I've never known a dog behave like that before, Marta remarked, The worst thing, after all this, replied her father, would be for someone around here to tell me that the dog belongs to him, Oh, I don't think that will happen, I'd guarantee that Found doesn't come from these parts, sheepdogs and watchdogs don't do what he did, After lunch, I'll go and ask around, You could deliver Isaura's water jug too, said Marta not even bothering to hide a smile, Yes, I'd already thought of that, as my grandfather always said, never put off till tomorrow what you can do today, replied Cipriano Algor, his gaze elsewhere. Found had finished drinking his water and, since neither the potter nor his daughter seemed to want to pay him any attention, he decided to lie down at the entrance of the kennel where the ground was not so wet.

After breakfast, Cipriano Algor went to choose a water jug from the store, placed it carefully in the van, among the boxes of plates, so that it wouldn't fall over, and then he got in, sat down and started the engine. Found looked up, he obviously knew that such a noise always precedes a departure, which is immediately followed by a disappearance, but previous experience must have taught him that there is a way of preventing such

calamities from happening, at least sometimes. He got up on his long legs, frantically wagging his tail, as if he were wielding a whip, and, for the first time since he had come seeking asylum, Found barked. Cipriano Algor drove the van slowly toward the mulberry tree and stopped a little way from the kennel. He thought he understood what Found wanted. He opened the door on the passenger side and held it open, and before he'd had time to issue an invitation, the dog was already in. Cipriano Algor had not intended taking him along, he had simply thought he would go from house to house asking if anyone knew such and such a dog, with this color coat and this appearance, with this cravat and these moral virtues, and while he was describing these various characteristics, he would pray to all the saints in heaven and to all the devils on earth, please, by fair means or foul, to make whoever he asked say that they had never in their life owned or heard of such a dog. Having Found there in the cab with him would eliminate the monotony of describing him and save him repeating himself, he would just have to ask, Is this dog yours, or is it yours, my friend, depending on the degree of intimacy with his interlocutor, and await the response, No, or Yes, if the former, he would pass rapidly on to the next house in order not to allow time for emendation, if the latter, he would carefully observe Found's reactions, because he wasn't the kind of dog to allow himself to be taken away on false pretenses by the mendacious demands of some would-be master. Marta, who, at the sound of the engine starting up, had appeared at the door of the pottery, her hands covered in clay, wanted to know if the dog was going too. Her father said, Yes, he is, and a moment later the courtyard was as deserted and Marta as alone as if this were the first time this had happened to either of them.

Before going to see Isaura Estudiosa, the origin and provenance of whose surname, by the way, as with those of Gacho and Algor, remains a mystery, the potter knocked on the doors of twelve neighbors and had the satisfaction of hearing all of them give the same answer, It's not mine, No, I don't know whose it could be. A tradesman's wife took such a liking to Found that she made a generous offer to buy him, an offer immediately rejected by Cipriano Algor, and in the three houses where no one replied he could hear the violent barking of canine guards, which allowed the potter, by some tortuous reasoning, to conclude that Found could not possibly belong there, as if, according to some universal law for domestic animals, it was written that where there is one dog there cannot be another. Cipriano Algor finally stopped the van outside the house of the woman in black and knocked on the door, and when she opened it, he said good morning rather more loudly than was natural, the person to blame for this sudden vocal confusion being Marta with her preposterous idea of marrying off two old widowed people, a description deserving of the severest censure, it must be said, at least as far as Isaura Estudiosa is concerned, for she can be only forty-five at most, and if, for the sake of accuracy, one had to add a few more years, you would never think it to look at her. Oh, good morning, Senhor Cipriano, she said, I've come to keep my promise and bring you your water jug, Thank you so much, but you really shouldn't have bothered, after our conversation in the cemetery yesterday, it struck me that people and things are much the same, they have a certain life span, they last for a while, then, like everything else in the world, they come

to a sudden end, On the other hand, one water jug can be replaced by another water jug just by discarding the shattered remains of the old one and filling the new one with water, but that's not the case with people, it's as if with the birth of each new person, the mold they emerged from was broken, which is why everyone is different, Well, people don't emerge from molds, of course, but I think I know what you mean, That was just the potter in me talking, pay no attention, here you are, and I hope the handle of this one doesn't fall off quite so soon. The woman put out her hands to take hold of the body of the water jug, then clutched it to her and thanked him again, Thank you so much, Senhor Cipriano, and it was then that she saw the dog in the van, That dog, she said. Cipriano Algor felt a shock go through him, it had never occurred to him that Isaura Estudiosa might be the dog's owner, and yet she had said That dog as if she had recognized him, with a look of surprise on her face that could have belonged to someone who has at last found what they were looking for, you can imagine with what reluctance Cipriano Algor asked, Is he yours, hoping that she would say no, and you can imagine too his relief when he heard her answer, No, he's not mine, but I remember seeing him wandering around a couple of days ago, I even called to him, but he pretended not to hear me, he's a lovely dog, When I got home yesterday after visiting the cemetery, I found him huddled inside the kennel we've got under the mulberry tree, the one that belonged to another dog we had, Constante, anyway, it was getting dark and all I could see were these two eyes shining, He was obviously looking for the right master, Well, I don't know if I'm the right master for him, he may already have one, that's what I've been trying to find out, Where, here, asked Isaura Estudiosa, and without waiting for an answer, she went on, I wouldn't bother if I were you, that dog isn't from around here, he came from a long way away, from another place, from another world, Why do you say another world, Oh, I don't know, perhaps because he seems so different from other dogs nowadays, You've hardly seen him, What I saw was enough, in fact, if you don't want him, I'll have him, If it was any other dog, I might let you, but we've already decided to take him in, assuming we don't find his owner, of course, So you really want him, We've even given him a name, What's he called, then, Found, A good name for a lost dog, That's exactly what my daughter said, Well, if you want to keep him, don't go looking for an owner, But I have a duty to return him to his owner, that's what I'd like someone to do if I lost a dog, If you do, though, you'll be going against the wishes of the dog, after all, he was obviously looking for somewhere else to live, Seen from that point of view, you might be right, but there are laws and customs to take into account, Oh, forget about laws and customs, Senhor Cipriano, just take what is already yours, Isn't that a bit selfish, Sometimes you have to be a bit selfish, Do you think so, I do, Well, I've really enjoyed talking to you, So have I, Senhor Cipriano, See you again sometime, Yes, see you again. With the jug clutched to her breast, Isaura Estudiosa watched from her door as the van turned around to retrace its route, she looked at the dog and at the man who was driving, the man waved good-bye with his left hand, the dog must have been thinking about home and about the mulberry tree that served as his sky.

Thus Cipriano Algor returned to the pottery much sooner than he had anticipated.

The advice given by Isaura Estudiosa, or Isaura, for short, had been sensible, reasonable, and absolutely appropriate to the situation, and, if it were ever applied to the general functioning of the world, there would be no difficulty whatsoever in fitting it into the plan for an order of things that would prove little less than perfect. The truly admirable thing about it, though, was the fact that she had said it all so naturally, without even thinking, just as someone wanting to say that two and two are four doesn't waste time thinking that two and one are three, and then that three and one are four, Isaura is right, the main thing is to respect the animal's wishes and the will that transformed those wishes into action. Whoever the owner is, or, prudent correction, whoever the owner was, will have no right now to turn up here and declare, That dog is mine, when all the appearances and all the evidence show that if Found had the human gift of speech, he would have only one answer to give, Well, I don't want him as my master. Meanwhile, a thousand blessings on that broken water jug, blessings on the idea of giving the woman in black a new jug, and let us add, in anticipation of what is to come, blessings on the encounter that took place on that damp, drizzly afternoon, all dripping water, all material and spiritual discomfort, which, as we know, apart from those who have suffered a recent loss, is not the kind of weather that encourages the grief-stricken to go to a cemetery to mourn for their dead. There is no doubt about it, Found is a most favored dog, he can stay where he wants for as long as he wants. And there is another reason that only redoubles Cipriano Algor's relief and satisfaction, which is that he will not now have to knock at the door of marçal's parents, who also live in the village and with whom he is not on the best of terms, and relations would certainly not have been helped if he had passed by their door and ignored them. Besides, he is sure that Found does not belong to them, as long as he has known them, their taste in matters canine has always inclined them to bulldogs or to some other kind of guard dog. We've had a good morning, Cipriano Algor said to the dog.

A few minutes later, they were back at the house. Once the van was parked, Found looked hard at his master, realized that, for the moment, he was relieved of his duties as navigator, and so off he went in the direction of the kennel, but with the unmistakable air of someone who has just decided that now is the moment to reconnoiter the surrounding area. Should I put him on a chain, the potter wondered anxiously, and then, when he saw what the dog was doing, sniffing around and here and there marking his territory with urine, No, I don't think I need to keep him chained up, if he had wanted to run away, he could have done so already. He went into the house and heard his daughter's voice, she was talking on the phone, Hang on, hang on, Pa's just got back. Cipriano Algor took the receiver and immediately asked, Any news. At the other end of the line, after a moment's silence, marçal Gacho proceeded like someone who considers that this is no way to begin a conversation between two people, father-in-law and son-in-law, who have not spoken to each other for a whole week, which is why he calmly said good morning and asked how Cipriano was, to which Cipriano Algor responded with his own brusque good morning and then without a pause or without any kind of transitional phrase, I've been waiting, I've been waiting a whole week, how would you feel in my place, Sorry, but

I only managed to talk to the head of the buying department this morning, marçal explained, refraining from pointing out to his father-in-law, even indirectly, the unnecessary brusqueness of his tone, And what did he say, That they haven't come to a decision yet, but that you are not the only person affected, and that merchandise falling in and out of favor is an almost daily occurrence at the Center, that's what he said, an almost daily occurrence, And what was your impression, What was my impression, Yes, judging by his tone of voice, his way of looking at you, did you get the feeling that he was trying to be helpful, You know from your own experience that they always give the impression that their minds are on other things, Yes, you're right, And to be absolutely frank, I don't think they'll buy any more crockery from you, it's all very simple for them, either the product sells or it doesn't, they don't care about anything else, there's no halfway house for them, And what about me, what about us, is it that simple for us, is it a matter of indifference to us, is there no halfway house for us either, asked Cipriano Algor, Look, I did what I could, I am just a security guard, after all, No, you couldn't really have done much more, said the potter, and his voice faltered on that last word. marçal Gacho felt sorry for his father-in-law when he noticed that change of tone and he tried to amend that somber prognostication, He didn't close the door entirely, he just said that they were reviewing the situation, and so we shouldn't lose hope, I'm too old for hopes, marçal, I need certainties, immediate certainties, ones that don't pin their hopes on a tomorrow that might not even be mine, Yes, I understand, Pa, life's full of ups and downs, everything changes, but don't despair, you've got us, Marta and me, with the pottery or without it. It was easy to see where marçal was going with this speech on family solidarity, in his view, all their problems, present or future, would be resolved on the day that the three of them moved to the Center. In different circumstances and in a different mood, Cipriano Algor would have responded sharply, but now, either because resignation had touched him with its melancholy wing, or because he had definitely not lost the dog Found, or even, who knows, because of a brief conversation between two people objectively separated by a water jug, the potter replied gently, I'll pick you up on Thursday at the usual time, and if you hear anything meanwhile, give us a call, and without leaving space for marçal to respond, he brought the dialogue to a close, I'll pass you back to your wife. Marta exchanged a few more words with marçal, said We'll just have to see what happens, then said good-bye until Thursday and hung up. Cipriano Algor had gone outside, he was in the pottery, sitting at one of the wheels, his head bowed. It was there that a massive heart attack had cut short the life of Justa Isasca. Marta went and sat at the other wheel and waited. After a long minute, her father looked at her, then looked away. Marta said, You didn't spend much time in the village, No, I didn't, Did you ask at all the houses to see if anyone knew the dog, if he had an owner, I asked at a few, then decided it wasn't worthwhile continuing, Why, Is this an interrogation, No, Pa, it's just me trying to take your mind off things, I hate to see you sad, I'm not sad, Well, a bit low then, I'm not low either, All right, whatever, but now tell me why you thought it wasn't worthwhile asking, I decided that if the dog did have an owner in the village and had run away, and having had the opportunity to go back, had decided not to, it was because he wanted to be free to find another owner, Seen from

that point of view, you might be right, That's exactly what I said, To whom. Cipriano Algor did not answer. Then, since his daughter merely sat there calmly looking at him, he added, To that woman in the village, What woman, The one with the water jug, Oh, of course, you went to give her the water jug, That's why I put it in the van, Of course, Right, So, if I understand you correctly, she was the one who explained that it wasn't worth going looking for Found's owner, Yes, she was, She's obviously an intelligent woman, She seems to be, And she kept the water jug, Is there something wrong with that, Don't get angry, Pa, we're only talking, what on earth could be wrong about something as simple as giving someone a water jug, Exactly, anyway, we've got more important matters to deal with, and there you are trying to pretend that everything's going swimmingly, That's precisely what I want to talk to you about, Then why all this beating around the bush, Because I like talking to you as if you weren't my father, I like to pretend, if you want, that we are just two people who love each other very much, father and daughter who love each other because they are father and daughter, but who would love each other as friends even if they weren't, You'll have me crying soon, you know how treacherous tears can be at my age, You know I'd do anything to see you happy, Yet you're trying to convince me to go and live at the Center, knowing that it would be the worst thing that could possibly happen to me, Oh, I thought the worst thing that could possibly happen to you was to be separated from your daughter, That's not fair, perhaps you should apologize, You're right, it wasn't fair, forgive me. Marta got up and embraced her father, Forgive me, she said again, It doesn't matter, said the potter, if we weren't in this unfortunate situation, we wouldn't be talking like this. Marta drew her bench nearer to her father, sat down and, taking his hand, said, I had an idea while you were out with the dog, What's that, Let's just put to one side the question of the Center, that is, whether you decide to come with us or not, Agreed, It's not going to happen tomorrow or even next month, and when the time comes you can decide whether to go or whether to stay, it's your life, Thanks for the breathing space, I'm not giving you breathing space, What else have we got to deal with then, After you'd gone out, I came in here to work, I'd gone into the storeroom to have a look around and I noticed that we were very low on small flower vases, so I came in here to make a few, when suddenly, with the clay already on the wheel, I realized how absurd it was just to continue carrying blindly on, What do you mean blindly, Well, no one has ordered any flower vases, small or large, no one is waiting impatiently for me to finish them so that they can rush out and buy them, and when I say vases I could as easily say any of the other things we make, large or small, useful or useless, Yes, I understand, but, even so, we ought to be prepared, Prepared for what, For when the new orders come in, And what shall we do until that happens, what shall we do if the Center stops buying altogether, how are we going to live and on what, are we just going to wait until the mulberries ripen and Found manages to catch the odd decrepit rabbit, That won't be a problem for you and marçal, Look, Pa, we agreed that we wouldn't talk about the Center, All right, go on, Now, just supposing that, by some miracle, the Center changes its mind, which I don't believe it will, and neither do you if you're honest, how long are we going to sit here with our arms folded or else making things for no reason and for no one, In our situation, I don't really

see what else we can do, Well, I'm of a different opinion, And what different opinion is that, what marvelous idea have you come up with, That we should make other things, If the Center is going to stop buying some things, it's highly unlikely that they're going to buy anything else, They might and they might not, What are you talking about, woman, I think we should start making dolls, Dolls, exclaimed Cipriano Algor in a tone of scandalized surprise, I've never heard such a ridiculous idea, Yes, Father dear, dolls, statuettes, effigies, figurines, mannequins, knickknacks, or whatever you want to call them, but don't go telling me it's a ridiculous idea until you've seen the result, You talk as if you were sure the Center was going buy these dolls of yours, The only thing I'm sure about is that we can't just sit around here waiting for the world to fall in on us, It's already fallen in on me, Everything that falls on you, falls on me, so you help me and I'll help you, After all this time making crockery, I've probably lost my touch when it comes to modeling, The same goes for me, but if our dog got lost in order to be found, as Isaura Estudiosa so intelligently explained, who knows, we might find our lost touch, yours and mine, in the clay, It's a risky venture and it could end badly, But, as we've seen, even things that aren't risky ventures can end badly. Cipriano looked at his daughter in silence, then he picked up a piece of clay and shaped it roughly into a human figure. Where do we begin, he asked, Where you always have to begin, at the beginning, replied Marta.

Authoritarian, paralyzing, circular, occasionally elliptical stock phrases, also jocularly referred to as nuggets of wisdom, are a malignant plague, one of the very worst ever to ravage the earth. We say to the confused, Know thyself, as if knowing yourself was not the fifth and most difficult of human arithmetical operations, we say to the apathetic, Where there's a will, there's a way, as if the brute realities of the world did not amuse themselves each day by turning that phrase on its head, we say to the indecisive, Begin at the beginning, as if beginning were the clearly visible point of a loosely wound thread and all we had to do was to keep pulling until we reached the other end, and as if, between the former and the latter, we had held in our hands a smooth, continuous thread with no knots to untie, no snarls to untangle, a complete impossibility in the life of a skein, or indeed, if we may be permitted one more stock phrase, in the skein of life. Marta said to her father, Let's begin at the beginning, and it was as if all they needed to do was to sit down at the table and start making dolls with fingers grown suddenly agile and exact, having regained their former skill after a long period of inactivity. These are the delusions of the pure and the unprepared, the beginning is never the clear, precise end of a thread, the beginning is a long, painfully slow process that requires time and patience in order to find out in which direction it is heading, a process that feels its way along the path ahead like a blind man, the beginning is just the beginning, what came before is nigh on worthless. Which is why what Marta said next was less categorical, We have only three days to prepare our presentation, I think that's what businessmen and executives call it, Sorry, I don't quite follow, said her father, Today is Monday, you'll be picking marçal up on Thursday afternoon, so that's the day when you'll have to show the head of the buying department our proposals for making the dolls, complete with drawings, models, prices, in short, everything we can think of that might persuade them to buy the dolls and help them come to a decision now rather than next year. Without noticing that he was repeating what he had already said, Cipriano Algor asked, Where do we begin, but Marta's answer this time was different, We'll have to choose half a dozen types, possibly fewer, we don't want to make things too complicated for ourselves, then work out how many dolls we can make each day, though that depends on our approach, whether we model the clay like sculptors or make identical male and female figures and then dress them according to their professions, they'll all be standing figures, of course, in my experience, they're so much easier, What do you mean by dress them, Well, dress them, by attaching to the naked figurine the clothes and accessories that characterize them and give them their individuality, I reckon that two people working like that would make faster progress, then it's just a matter of taking care with the painting, there can't be any smudges, You've obviously given this a lot of thought, said Cipriano Algor, Not really, I just thought quickly, And well, Now don't make me blush, And a lot, even though you deny it, Look, I'm blushing already, Fortunately for me, you're capable of thinking quickly, thinking a lot and thinking well all at the same time, You know what they say, naught so blind as a father's love, And what figures do you think we should make, Nothing very antiquated, a lot of professions have completely disappeared, and no one nowadays has a clue what those people did, what purpose they served, on the other hand, I don't think they should be too modern either, that's what plastic dolls are for, with

their heroes, their Rambos, their astronauts, their mutants, their monsters, their superpolice and their superbandits, and, of course, their weapons, we mustn't forget their weapons, Hm, I was just thinking, because every now and then I too manage to squeeze a few ideas out of my brain, although not as good as yours, Now, now, no false modesty, it doesn't suit you, How about taking a look at the illustrated books we've got, for example, that old encyclopedia your grandfather bought, if we can find some models for the dolls in there, then we'll also have solved the problem of which drawings I should take with me to show the head of the buying department, he won't know that we've copied them and even if he did he wouldn't care, That idea would have gotten an A+ on the old scale of school marks, No, a B would do me fine, it attracts less attention, Let's get down to work then.

As you might imagine, the Algor family library is neither extensive nor of exceptional quality. You wouldn't expect great erudition in ordinary people and in a place like this, far from civilization, but even so, there are some two or three hundred books on the shelves, some old, some, the majority, middle-aged, the rest more or less recent, although only a few are brand new. The village does not have a shop that would do justice to the old and noble name of bookshop, there is only a small stationer's that will order any textbooks needed from publishers in the city, and, very rarely, some literary work that has been touted a lot on the radio or the television and whose content, style, and intentions correspond satisfactorily to the average interests of the inhabitants. Although marçal Gacho is not himself a keen and conscientious reader, when he turns up at the pottery with a book as a gift for Marta, it must be said that he knows the difference between what is good and what is merely mediocre, although good and mediocre are such slippery terms that they always give rise to discussion and disagreement. The encyclopedia that father and daughter have just opened on the kitchen table was considered the best of its kind at the time of publication, whereas today its only use would be to find out about areas of knowledge no longer considered useful or which, at the time, were still only articulating their first, hesitant syllables. Placed in a line, one after another, the encyclopedias of today, yesterday, and the-day-before-the-day-before-yesterday represent successive images of frozen worlds, interrupted gestures, words in search of their ultimate or penultimate meaning. Encyclopedias are like immutable cycloramas, prodigious projectors whose reels have gotten stuck and which show, with a kind of maniacal fixity, a landscape which, because it is condemned to be only and for all eternity what it was, will at the same time grow older, more decrepit and more unnecessary. The encyclopedia purchased by Cipriano Algor's father is as magnificent and as useless as a line of poetry we cannot quite remember. However, let us not be too proud and ungrateful, let us remember the sensible advice of our elders who counseled us to keep what was no longer necessary because, sooner or later, although we might not think so, it could turn out to be just the thing we needed. Today, bent over the old, yellowing pages, breathing in the smell of damp, untouched by the air, unstirred by the light, and that has been contained for years in the smooth thickness of the paper, father and daughter are learning the value of that lesson, looking for what they need in something they had

thought to be useless. They found along the way a member of the academy wearing a plumed bicorn hat, rapier, and lace ruffles on his shirt, they found a clown and a tightrope walker, they found a skeleton with a scythe and immediately moved on, they found a horsewoman astride a horse and an admiral without a ship, they found a bullfighter and a man in a smock, they found a boxer and his opponent, they found a carabineer and a cardinal, they found a hunter and his hound, they found a sailor on leave and a magistrate, a jester and a Roman in a toga, they found a dervish and a halberdier, they found a customs officer and a seated scribe, they found a postman and a fakir, they also found a gladiator and a hoplite, a nurse and a juggler, a lord and a minstrel, they found a fencer and an apiarist, a miner and a fisherman, a fireman and a flautist, they found two puppets, they found a boatman, they found a navvy, they found saints of both sexes, they found a demon, they found the holy trinity, they found soldiers and military men of every rank, they found a deep-sea diver and a skater, they saw a sentinel and a woodcutter, they saw a cobbler wearing glasses, they found a man playing a drum and another playing a cornet, they found an old lady in a shawl and head scarf, they found an old man smoking a pipe, they found a venus and an apollo, they found a gentleman in a top hat, they found a bishop in a miter, they found a caryatid and an Atlas, they found one lancer mounted and another on foot, they found an Arab wearing a turban, they found a Chinese mandarin, they found an aviator, they found a condottiere and a baker, they found a musketeer, they found a maid in an apron and an Eskimo, they found a bearded Assyrian, they found a pointsman, they found a gardener, they found a naked man with all his muscles exposed and a map of the nervous and circulatory systems, they also found a naked woman, although she was covering her pubis with her right hand and her breasts with her left. They found many more, but they were not suited to the ends they had in sight, either because making the figures would be too complicated in clay, or because overuse of celebrities past and present with whose portraits, accurate, plausible or imagined, the encyclopedia was filled, might be misinterpreted as a lack of respect and even give rise, in the case of famous people still alive, or of famous people now deceased but with greedy and vigilant heirs, to ruinous court cases for offence caused, moral damage and defamation of character. Who are we going to choose from this lot, then, asked Cipriano Algor, we can't possibly cope with more than three or four, you have to remember that, between now and then, while the Center is making up its mind whether to buy them, we're going to have to practice a lot if we want to deliver good-quality, presentable work, Yes, I know, Pa, but I think it would be best if we proposed six different figures, said Marta, then they'll either accept and we can divide production into two phases, in which case it will be a question of agreeing to deadlines, or, and, initially, this is much more likely, they themselves will choose two or three dolls to start with just to see if their customers would be interested and to test out their possible response, And it might go no farther than that, That's true, but I think we'll have more chance of persuading them if we show them six designs, numbers count, numbers influence people, it's a question of psychology, Psychology never was my strong point, Nor mine, but even in our ignorance we sometimes have prophetic flashes of intuition, Well, don't aim those prophetic flashes at your father's future, he has always preferred to find out each day

what that day decides to bring him, good or ill, What the day brings is one thing, what we ourselves contribute to the day is quite another, The day before, Sorry, I don't know what you mean, The day before is what we bring to the day we're actually living through, life is a matter of carrying along all those days-before just as someone might carry stones, and when we can no longer cope with the load, the work is done, the last day is the only one that is not the day before another day, Now you're just trying to depress me, No, I'm not, but if I am, perhaps you're to blame for that, To blame for what, With you I always end up talking about serious things, All right, let's talk about something even more serious, let's select our dolls. Cipriano Algor is not a man much given to laughter, and even frank smiles are rare on his lips, at most one might notice a brief change in his eyes as if the gleam there had suddenly shifted slightly, sometimes one might glimpse a slight compression of the lips as if they had been forced to smile in order to stop themselves from smiling. No, Cipriano Algor is not a man much given to laughter, but, as we have just seen, today there was a smile awaiting its chance to appear. Right then, he said, I'll choose one and then you choose one, until we've got six, but remember we have to bear in mind the ease of the work and the known or presumed taste of our customers, OK, you begin, The jester, said the father, The clown, said the daughter, The nurse, said the father, The Eskimo, said the daughter, The mandarin, said the father, The naked man, said the daughter, No, you can't choose the naked man, you'll have to choose another one, the Center won't want a naked man, Why not, Well, because he's naked, The naked woman then, That's even worse, But she's covering herself up, Covering yourself up like that is worse than showing everything, How come you know so much about the subject, Because I've lived, I've looked, I've read, and I've felt, What does reading do, You can learn almost everything from reading, But I read too, So you must know something, Now I'm not so sure, You'll have to read differently then, How, The same method doesn't work for everyone, each person has to invent his or her own, whichever suits them best, some people spend their entire lives reading but never get beyond reading the words on the page, they don't understand that the words are merely stepping stones placed across a fast-flowing river, and the reason they're there is so that we can reach the farther shore, it's the other side that matters, Unless, Unless what, Unless those rivers don't have just two shores but many, unless each reader is his or her own shore, and that shore is the only shore worth reaching, Well observed, said Cipriano Algor, you have shown yet again that old people should never argue with the younger generations, we always end up losing, although we do learn a thing or two on the way, Glad to have been of help, Now let's get back to the sixth doll, It can't be the naked man, No, Or the naked woman, No, Then let's have the fakir, In general, fakirs, like scribes and potters, are sitting down, when he's standing up, a fakir is just like any other man, and sitting down, he'll be smaller than the others, In that case, what about the musketeer, The musketeer would do, but we'd have to find a solution to the problem of the sword and the feathers on his hat, we could probably manage the feathers, but the sword would have to be fixed to his leg and then it would look more like a splint, All right then, the bearded Assyrian, Suggestion accepted, let's have the bearded Assyrian, he's easy and compact, And I did consider the hunter and his hound, but the dog would cause even more difficulties than

the musketeer's sword, Not to mention the shotgun, said Cipriano Algor, and speaking of dogs, I wonder what Found is up to, we've forgotten all about him, He's probably sleeping. The potter got up and drew back the curtain, I can't see him in his kennel, he said, He'll be going about his business, fulfilling his duties as guardian of the house, keeping an eye on the neighborhood, Unless he's escaped, Stranger things have happened, but I doubt it. Anxious and fearful, Cipriano pulled open the door and almost tripped over the dog. Found was stretched out on the mat, lying diagonally across the sill, his nose pointing toward the door. When he saw his master appear, he got up and waited. Here he is, announced the potter, So I see, replied Marta from inside. Cipriano Algor was about to close the door, He's looking at me, he said, Well, he's looked at you before, But what shall I do, Either close the door and leave him outside or invite him in and then close the door, Don't be funny, I'm not being funny, you'll have to decide today whether you want Found in the house, but, you know, if he comes in now, that will be it, Old Constante used to come in whenever he wanted to, Yes, I know, but normally he preferred the independence of the kennel, whereas, unless I'm very much mistaken, this dog needs company as much as it needs food, That seems a good enough reason, said the potter. He opened the door wide and made a gesture, Come in. Without taking his eyes off his master, Found took one timid step, then, as if to indicate that he wasn't quite sure he had understood the order, he stopped. Come in, said the potter again. The dog advanced slowly and came to a halt in the middle of the kitchen. Welcome to our house, said Marta, but you had better know the house rules right away, a dog's necessities, both solid and liquid, should be taken care of outside, the same goes for food, now, during the day, you can come and go as much as you like, but at night, you go to your kennel, so as to guard the house, and I don't want you thinking I'm less well-disposed toward you than your master is, and to prove it I was the one who told him that you are a dog who needs company. During the time this lecture lasted, Found didn't take his eyes off her for a moment. He couldn't understand what Marta wanted of him, but his small dog's brain knew that in order to learn, one must look and listen. He waited for a few moments after Marta had finished speaking, then he curled up in a corner of the kitchen, although he did not even have time to warm the spot up, for as soon as Cipriano Algor had sat down, Found got to his feet again and went and lay by his chair. And just so that there should be no doubts in the minds of his owners that he had a clear understanding of his duties and responsibilities, barely a quarter of an hour had passed before he got up from there and went and lay down beside Marta. A dog knows when someone needs his company.

The next three days were a time of intense activity, nervous excitement and a continual making and unmaking of things on paper and in clay. Neither of them wanted to admit that the end result of the idea, and of the work they were having to do in order to give the idea some solidity, would be a blunt refusal, with no explanation other than, The fashion for dolls like that has passed. Shipwrecked, they were rowing toward an island not knowing if it was a real island or only the ghost of an island. Marta was the better of the two at drawing and so she was the one charged with transferring to paper their six chosen types, using the classic grid method to enlarge them to the exact size the dolls

would be once they had been fired, a hand span tall, not the span of her hand, which is small, but of her father's. Then came the business of coloring the drawings, this was complicated not because of any excessive care taken in the execution, but because they had to choose and combine colors which they did not know for certain would be right for the figures since the encyclopedia, illustrated in accordance with the printing technology of the time, contained minutely detailed copperplate engravings, but the only chromatic effects were apparent shades of gray achieved by printing black lines on the unvarying white of the paper. The easiest of all was, of course, the nurse. White hat, white blouse, white skirt, white shoes, all white white white, impeccably white, as if she were an angel of charity come down to earth with the mission of relieving suffering and mitigating pain until, eventually, another identically dressed angel had to be summoned urgently in order to mitigate and relieve her own pain and suffering. The Eskimo did not present any great problems either, the skins he wore could be painted half beige half gray, with a few whitish patches to imitate the skin of a bear turned inside out, the main thing was that the Eskimo should have the face of a real Eskimo, which is what he came into the world to be. As for the clown, the problems would be far greater, simply because he was poor. If, instead of being the miserable ragamuffin he is, he were a rich clown, any bright, cheerful color would do, with a random scattering of sequins on his conical hat, his shirt, and his trousers. But he is a poor clown, really poor, and wears a heterogeneous collection of rags showing neither taste nor judgment and patched from head to toe, a waistcoat that comes down to his knees, baggy trousers, a collar large enough to accommodate three necks, a bow tie that looks like a ceiling fan, a lurid shirt, and shoes as big as barges. All of this can be painted in whatever colors one chooses, because, since he is only a poor clown, no one is going to waste their time checking to see if the colors of this clay creation have the decency to respect the colors the poor man would have worn even when he was not working as a clown. The trouble is that this jack-of-all-trades is not actually going to be any easier to model than the hunter or the musketeer, which had seemed so problematic at the start. Moving from the clown to the jester will mean moving from similar to same, from alike to identical, from comparable to analogous. Though applied differently, the colors used on one can be used on another, and a couple of changes of costume will rapidly transform the jester into a clown and the clown into a jester. Strictly speaking, they almost duplicate each other as regards clothes and function, the only difference between them, from the social point of view, is that clowns do not usually visit the palaces of kings. The mandarin in his long gown and the Assyrian in his tunic will require no special attention either, a few touches to the Eskimo's eyes and he can serve as a Chinaman, and the Assyrian's long, curly beard will make it easier to work on the lower part of the face. Marta made three series of drawings, the first totally faithful to the originals, the second stripped of all accessories, the third free of any superfluous detail. This would facilitate any examination of them by whichever Center official has the last word on the fate of the proposal, and, if the proposal is approved, it will perhaps make less likely, or so they hope, the possibility of any future complaints about a discrepancy between the drawing and the actual clay figure. Until Marta had moved on to the third series of drawings, Cipriano Algor had merely watched

what was happening, frustrated because he could not help, all the more because he was aware that any intervention on his part would only slow up the work and make it more difficult. However, as soon as Marta had placed before her the piece of paper on which she would set down the last series of drawings, he rapidly gathered together the initial copies and went out to the pottery. She just had time to say, Don't get annoyed if it doesn't come out right the first time. Hour after hour, during the rest of that day and part of the following day, until it was time for him to go and fetch marçal from the Center, the potter made, unmade and remade dolls in the form of nurses and mandarins, jesters and Assyrians, Eskimos and clowns, almost unrecognizable at the first attempt, but gradually gaining form and meaning as his fingers began to interpret for themselves and in accordance with their own laws the instructions transmitted to them by the brain. Indeed, very few people are aware that in each of our fingers, located somewhere between the first phalange, the mesophalange, and the metaphalange, there is a tiny brain. The fact is that the other organ which we call the brain, the one with which we came into the world, the one which we transport around in our head and which transports us so that we can transport it, has only ever had very general, vague, diffuse and, above all, unimaginative ideas about what the hands and fingers should do. For example, if the brain-in-our-head suddenly gets an idea for a painting, a sculpture, a piece of music or literature, or a clay figurine, it simply sends a signal to that effect and then waits to see what will happen. Having sent an order to the hands and fingers, it believes, or pretends to believe, that the task will then be completed, once the extremities of the arms have done their work. The brain has never been curious enough to ask itself why the end result of this manipulative process, which is complex even in its simplest forms, bears so little resemblance to what the brain had imagined before it issued its instructions to the hands. It should be noted that the fingers are not born with brains, these develop gradually with the passage of time and with the help of what the eyes see. The help of the eyes is important, as important as what is seen through them. That is why the fingers have always excelled at uncovering what is concealed. Anything in the brain-in-our-head that appears to have an instinctive, magical, or supernatural quality—whatever that may mean—is taught to it by the small brains in our fingers. In order for the brain-in-the-head to know what a stone is, the fingers first have to touch it, to feel its rough surface, its weight and density, to cut themselves on it. Only long afterward does the brain realize that from a fragment of that rock one could make something which the brain will call a knife or something it will call an idol. The brain-in-the-head has always lagged behind the hands, and even now, when it seems to have overtaken them, the fingers still have to summarize for it the results of their tactile investigations, the shiver that runs across the epidermis when it touches clay, the lacerating sharpness of the graver, the acid biting into the plate, the faint vibration of a piece of paper laid flat, the orography of textures, the crosshatching of fibers, the alphabet of the world in relief. And then there are colors. The truth is that the brain knows far less about colors than one might suppose. It sees more or less clearly what the eyes show it, but when it comes to converting what it has seen into knowledge, it often suffers from what one might call difficulties in orientation. Thanks to the unconscious confidence of a lifetime's experience, it unhesitatingly utters

the names of the colors it calls elementary and complementary, but is immediately lost, perplexed and uncertain when it tries to formulate words that might serve as labels or explanatory markers for the things that verge on the ineffable, that border on the incommunicable, for the still nascent color which, with the eyes' often bemused approval and complicity, the hands and fingers are in the process of inventing and which will probably never even have its own name. Or perhaps it already does—a name known only to the hands, because they mixed the paint as if they were dismantling the constituent parts of a note of music, because they became smeared with the color and kept the stain deep inside the dermis, and because only with the invisible knowledge of the fingers will one ever be able to paint the infinite fabric of dreams. Trusting in what the eyes believe they have seen, the brain-in-the-head states that, depending on conditions of light and shade, on the presence or absence of a wind, on whether it is wet or dry, the beach is white or yellow or golden or gray or purple or any other shade in between, but then along come the fingers and, with a gesture of gathering in, as if harvesting a wheat field, they pluck from the ground all the colors of the world. What seemed unique was plural, what is plural will become more so. It is equally true, though, that in the exultant flash of a single tone or shade, or in its musical modulation, all the other tones and shades are also present and alive, both the tones or shades of colors that have already been named, as well as those awaiting names, just as an apparently smooth, flat surface can both conceal and display the traces of everything ever experienced in the history of the world. All archaeology of matter is an archaeology of humanity. What this clay hides and shows is the passage of a being through time and space, the marks left by fingers, the scratches left by fingernails, the ashes and the charred logs of burned-out bonfires, our bones and those of others, the endlessly bifurcating paths disappearing off into the distance and merging with each other. This grain on the surface is a memory, this depression the mark left by a recumbent body. The brain asked a question and made a request, the hand answered and acted. Marta put it another way, Now you're getting the hang of it.

I'm off to do men's work now, so this time you'll have to stay at home, Cipriano Algor told the dog, who had run after him when he saw him going over to the van. Obviously Found did not need to be told to get in, they just had to leave the van door open long enough for him to know that they would not immediately shoo him out again, but the real cause of his startled scamper toward the van, strange though this may seem, was that, in his doggy anxiety, he was afraid that they were about to leave him on his own. Marta, who had come out into the yard talking to her father and was walking with him to the van, was holding in her hand the envelope containing the drawings and the proposal, and although Found has no very clear idea what envelopes are or what purpose they serve, he knows from experience that people about to get into cars usually carry with them things which, generally speaking, they throw onto the back seat even before they themselves get in. In the light of these experiences, one can see why Found's memory might lead him to assume that Marta was going to accompany her father on this new trip in the van. Although Found has been here only a few days, he has no doubt that his owners' house is his house, but his incipient sense of property does not yet authorize him to look around him and say, All this is mine. Besides, a dog, whatever his size, breed, or character, would never dare to utter such grossly possessive words, he would say at most, All this is ours, and even then, reverting to the particular case of these potters and their property, movables and immovables, the dog Found, even in ten years' time, will be incapable of thinking of himself as the third owner. The most he might possibly achieve when he is a very old dog is a vague, obscure feeling of being part of something dangerously complex and, so to speak, full of slippery meanings, a whole made up of parts in which each individual is, simultaneously, both one of the parts and the whole of which he is a part. These challenging ideas, which the human brain is more or less capable of conceiving but not, without great difficulty, of explaining, are the daily bread of the various canine nations, both from the merely theoretical point of view and as regards their practical consequences. Don't go thinking, however, that the canine spirit is like a serene cloud floating by, a spring dawn full of gentle light, a lake in a garden with white swans swimming, were that the case, Found would not have suddenly started whimpering pitifully, What about me, he was saying, what about me. In response to the heartrending cries of this soul in torment, Cipriano Algor, weighed down as he was by the responsibility of the mission taking him to the Center, could find nothing better to say than, This time you'll have to stay at home, but what consoled the troubled creature was seeing Marta take two steps back once she had handed the envelope to her father, and thus Found realized that they were not, in fact, going to leave him all alone, for even though each part in itself constitutes the whole to which it belongs, as we hope we demonstrated above with $a + b$, two parts, when put together, make a very different total. Marta waved a weary good-bye to her father and went back into the house. The dog did not follow her at once, but waited until the van, having driven down the hill to the road, had disappeared behind the first house in the village. When, shortly afterward, he went into the kitchen, he saw his mistress sitting in the same chair where she had been working during the last few days. She kept wiping her eyes with her hands as if trying to rid them of some shadow or some pain. Doubtless because he was still green in

years, Found had not yet had time to gain clear, definitive, formed opinions on the importance or meaning of tears in the human being, however, considering that these liquid humors are frequently manifest in the strange soup of sentiment, reason and cruelty of which the said human being is made, he thought it might not be such a very grave mistake to go over to his weeping mistress and gently place his head on her knees. An older dog and, always assuming that age carries with it a double load of guilt, a dog of an unnecessarily cynical turn of mind, would take a sardonic view of such an affectionate gesture, but this would only be because the emptiness of old age had caused him to forget that, in matters of feeling and of the heart, too much is always better than too little. Touched, Marta slowly stroked his head and, since he did not move, but remained there staring up at her, she picked up a piece of charcoal and began sketching out on a piece of paper the first lines of a drawing. At first, her tears prevented her from seeing properly, but, gradually, as her hand grew more confident, her eyes grew clearer, and the dog's head, as if emerging from the depths of a murky pool, appeared to her in all its beauty and strength, all its mystery and probing curiosity. From this moment on, Marta will love the dog Found as much as we know Cipriano already loves him.

The potter had left behind him the village and the three isolated houses that no one now will ever raise from the rubble, he is skirting the stream choked with putrefaction and will cross the abandoned fields, past the neglected wood, he has made this journey so often that he scarcely notices the surrounding desolation, but today he has two things to worry about, both of which justify his air of absorption. One of them, of course, the commercial proposition that is taking him to the Center, requires no particular mention, but the other, and there is no way of knowing how long its effects will last, is the one that most troubles his mind, the impulse, utterly unexpected and inexplicable, to pass by the street where Isaura Estudiosa lives, to find out what has happened to the water jug, to find out if subsequent use has revealed some hidden defect, if it pours well, if it keeps the water cool. Cipriano has known the woman for some time now, indeed it is highly unlikely that there is anyone in the village whom he has not met in the course of his work, and although he had never been on what you might call friendly terms with the family, he and his daughter had gone to the cemetery to attend the funeral of the late Joaquim Estudioso, which is the family name by which Isaura, who, on marrying, had moved from a village far from there, came, as is the custom in villages, to be known. Cipriano Algor can remember giving her his condolences as he left the cemetery, in the same spot where months later they would meet again to exchange impressions and promises regarding a broken water jug. She was just another widow in the village, another woman who would wear deep mourning for six months, to be followed by another mandatory six months of half-mourning, and she was one of the fortunate ones, because there was a time when deep mourning and half-mourning, each in turn, weighed upon the female body and, who knows, upon the soul too, for a whole year of days and nights, not to mention those women who, given their age, the law of custom obliged to live swathed in black until the end of their days. Cipriano Algor was wondering if, in the long interval between those two meetings in the cemetery, he had ever spoken to Isaura Estudiosa,

and the answer surprised him, I've never even seen her, and it was true, except that we should not really be so very surprised by the apparent singularity of that situation, for in matters ruled by fate, it makes no difference whether you live in a city of ten million or in a village of only a few hundred inhabitants, only what has to happen happens. At this point, Cipriano Algor's thoughts tried to divert to Marta, it seemed as if he was about to blame her again for the fantasies going round and round in his head, but what prevailed were his ever-vigilant impartiality and honesty of judgment, Don't try to hide from the facts, leave your daughter out of it, she said only the words you wanted to hear, now all that matters is finding out whether you have anything more to give Isaura Estudiosa than a water jug, and, of course, to find out if she is prepared to receive what you imagine you have to give her, always assuming that you do manage to imagine something. This soliloquy was brought up short by that, for the moment, insuperable obstacle, and this abrupt halt was immediately pounced upon by his second motive for concern, or, rather, three motives in one, the clay figurines, the Center, and the head of the buying department, What, I wonder, if anything, will come of all this, muttered the potter, a syntactically rather contorted sentence which, if looked at closely, could serve equally well to deck out, in the frivolous clothes of distracted, tacit complicity the more exciting topic of Isaura Estudiosa. Too late, we are already driving through the Agricultural Belt, or Green Belt, as it continues to be called by those who simply love to disguise harsh reality with words, this slush color that covers the ground, this endless sea of plastic where the greenhouses, all cut to the same size, look like petrified icebergs, like gigantic dominoes without the spots. Inside, there is no cold, on the contrary, the men who work there suffocate in the heat, they cook in their own sweat, they faint, they are like sodden rags wrung out by violent hands. There are many ways to describe it, but the suffering is the same. Today the van is empty, Cipriano Algor no longer belongs to the guild of sellers for the irrefutable reason that people are no longer interested in buying what he produces, now he has only half a dozen drawings on the seat beside him, which is where Marta left them, and not on the back seat as the dog Found imagined, and those drawings are this journey's sole, fragile compass, fortunately he had already left home when the person who made those drawings felt, for a few moments, that all was lost. They say that landscape is a state of mind, that we see the outer landscape with our inner eye, but is that because those extraordinary inner organs of vision are unable to see these factories and these hangars, this smoke devouring the sky, this toxic dust, this never-ending mud, these layers of soot, yesterday's rubbish swept on top of the rubbish of every other day, tomorrow's rubbish swept on top of today's rubbish, here even the most contented of souls would require only the eyes in his head to make him doubt the good fortune he imagined was his.

Beyond the Industrial Belt, on the road, on the bleak plots occupied by the shacks, lies a burned-out truck. There is no sign of the merchandise it was carrying, merely a few scattered, blackened boxes bearing no clue as to contents or origin. Either the cargo went up in flames along with the truck, or they managed to unload it before the fire took hold. The surrounding area is wet, which indicates that the fire brigade must have attended the

accident, but since the truck has been completely destroyed, it would seem that they arrived too late. Parked in front are two cars belonging to the traffic police, on the other side of the street is a military personnel carrier. The potter slowed down in order to get a better look at what had happened, but the policemen, brusque, blank-faced, immediately ordered him to drive on, he just had time to ask if anyone had died, but they ignored him. Drive on, drive on, they shouted, frantically waving their arms. Just then Cipriano Algor glanced to the side and noticed soldiers moving around among the shacks. Because of the speed he was traveling at he could see no more, except that they seemed to be forcing the inhabitants out of their houses. It was clear that this time the attackers had not been satisfied with merely looting. For some unknown reason, for such a thing had never happened before, they had set fire to the truck, perhaps the driver had responded with equal violence to his attackers or perhaps the organized groups from the shantytowns had decided to change their tactics, although it is hard to see what possible advantage they could hope to gain from such violent actions, which, on the contrary, will only serve to justify the equally violent actions taken by the authorities, As far as I know, thought the potter, this is the first time that the army has gone into the shantytowns, up until now, the police have always dealt with any trouble, in fact, the shantytowns relied on them, the police would arrive, sometimes ask a few questions, sometimes not, arrest a few men, and life would go on, as if nothing had happened, and sooner or later the arrested men would reappear. The potter Cipriano Algor has forgotten all about Isaura Estudiosa, the woman to whom he had given the water jug, and about the head of the Center's buying department, the man whom he will have to convince of the aesthetic appeal of the dolls, his thoughts are focused entirely on the truck so badly damaged by the flames that not a trace of its load remains, if, that is, it was carrying one. If, if. He repeated the conjunction like someone who, having tripped over a stone, turns back in order to trip over it once more, as if by striking it again and again a spark might emerge from within, but the spark seems disinclined to appear, Cipriano Algor had already spent a good three kilometers on this thought and was on the point of giving up, Isaura Estudiosa was preparing to dispute the territory with the head of the buying department, when the spark suddenly leaped up, and illumination came, the truck had not been burned by the people in the shacks, but by the police themselves, it was just an excuse to bring in the army, I'll bet my boots that's what happened, muttered the potter, and then he felt very tired, not from the mental effort, but because he had suddenly seen what the world was like, how there are many lies and no truths, well, there must be some out there, but they are continually changing, and not only does a possible truth give us insufficient time to consider its merits, we also have to check first that this possible truth is not, in fact, a probable lie. Cipriano Algor glanced at his watch, but if he was hoping to find out what time it was, this gesture was of little help, because since it had been made as an immediate consequence of the debate between the probability of lies and the possibility of truths, it was as if he had been hoping to find the answer in the position of the hands, a right angle that would mean yes, an acute angle that would place before him a prudent perhaps, an obtuse angle telling him roundly no, a straight line saying that it would be best not to think about it any more. When he glanced back at the face of the

watch moments later, the hands were indicating only hours, minutes, and seconds, they had reverted to being the real, functional, obedient hands of a watch, I'm on time, he said, and it was true, he was on time, after all, we are always on time, behind time, in time, but never out of time, however often we are told that we are. He had reached the city now and was heading along the avenue that would lead him to his destination, ahead of him, traveling faster than the van, ran his thoughts, head of the buying department, head of department, head of buying, Isaura Estudiosa, poor thing, had been left behind. At the end of the avenue, on the towering gray wall blocking the road he could see an enormous white, rectangular poster on which these words were written in letters of a brilliant intense blue, live in security, live at the center. Underneath, in the right-hand corner, there is another short line, just four words, in black, which Cipriano Algor's myopic eyes cannot manage to decipher at this distance, and yet they deserve no less consideration than the big message, we could, if we wished, describe them as complementary, but never as merely superfluous, ask for more information was their advice. The poster appears there from time to time, repeating the same words, only the colors vary, sometimes they show images of happy families, the thirty-five-year-old husband, the thirty-three-year-old wife, an eleven-year-old son, a nine-year-old daughter, and also, but not always, a grandfather or grandmother of indefinite age, with white hair and few wrinkles, all obliged to smile and reveal their respective sets of teeth, perfect, white, gleaming. Cipriano Algor took the invitation as a bad omen, he could already hear his son-in-law announcing, for the hundredth time, that they would all go and live at the Center as soon as he got his promotion to resident guard, We'll end up on a poster like that, he thought, we've already got Marta and her husband as the couple, I would be the grandfather if they managed to persuade me, there's no grandmother, she died three years ago, and for the moment there are no grandchildren, but in their place in the photo we could put Found, a dog always looks good in advertisements featuring happy families, strange though this may seem, dealing as we are with an irrational being, it confers on the people a subtle, although instantly recognizable, touch of superior humanity. Cipriano Algor turned right into a street that runs parallel with the Center, all the time thinking, no, that would be impossible, the Center doesn't take dogs or cats, at most they take caged birds, parakeets, canaries, goldfinches, waxbills, and, no doubt, aquarium fish, especially if they are of the tropical variety with too many fins, but no cats, far less dogs, that's all we need, to leave poor Found homeless again, once was enough, just then an image slips into Cipriano Algor's thoughts, the image of Isaura Estudiosa standing next to the cemetery wall, then the image of her clutching the water jug to her breast, then her waving to him from the door, but she vanished as quickly as she had appeared, for he has arrived at the entrance to the basement where one leaves one's merchandise and where the head of the buying department checks the delivery note and the invoices and decides what to take and what not to take.

Apart from the truck being unloaded, there were only two others awaiting their turn. The potter reckoned that, logically speaking, since he had not come to deliver any goods, he would not have to take his place in the line of trucks. The matter in hand was the sole

responsibility of the head of the buying department and not to be dealt with by subordinate and, on principle, cautious clerks, therefore he would simply have to go up to the counter and say why he was there. He parked the van, picked up the papers, and, with what he intended to be a firm step, but in which any averagely attentive observer would have spotted the deleterious effect of unsteady legs on the body's equilibrium, he crossed the traffic lane spattered with old and more recent oil stains and approached the reception desk, where he greeted the man on duty with a polite good afternoon and asked to speak to the department head. The clerk carried off his verbal request and returned at once, He's just coming, he said. Ten minutes passed before one of the assistant heads of department appeared, not the head of department, as requested. Cipriano Algor did not like having to tell his story to someone who, generally speaking, serves no purpose other than to act as a screen for the person who is hierarchically his superior. Fortunately, from Cipriano Algor's explanation it quickly became clear to the assistant head of department that taking the matter further would only create work for him, and that, one way or another, the decision would have to be made by the person who had been appointed for that purpose and who, for that very reason, earned what he earned. The assistant head of department, as one can easily conclude from his behavior, is a social malcontent. He cut off the potter in mid-flow, snatched up the proposal and the drawings, and went away. A few minutes later, he reemerged from the door he had gone through, beckoned to Cipriano Algor to approach, we need hardly remind you that, in such situations, legs do tend to become even unsteadier, and having shown the potter in, the assistant head of department returned to his own duties. The head of the buying department was holding the proposal in his right hand, and the drawings were lined up on his desk in front of him, like cards in a game of patience. He gestured to Cipriano Algor to sit down, a stroke of good fortune that allowed the potter to stop thinking about his legs and to launch into an exposition of his subject, Good afternoon, sir, forgive me for coming and disrupting your work like this, but my daughter and I had this idea, well, to be honest, it was more her idea than mine. The head of department interrupted him, Before you go on, Senhor Algor, it is my duty to inform you that the Center has decided not to buy any more goods from your firm, I am referring to the goods you had been supplying us with until the recent suspension, which has now become definitive and irrevocable. Cipriano Algor bowed his head, he would have to watch his words, whatever happened he could not say or do anything that would put at risk a possible deal with the dolls, which is why he merely murmured, I was expecting as much, sir, but, if you'll allow me to say so, it's very hard, after all these years as a supplier, to hear such words from you, That's life, lots of things come to an end, And lots of things begin as well, Never the same ones though. The head of department paused, fiddled with the drawings as if distracted, then said, Your son-in-law came to see me, At my request, sir, at my request, just to help me out of the quandary I was in, not knowing whether to continue production, Well, now you know, Yes, sir, I do, You must also be aware that it has always been a rule at the Center, indeed a point of honor, not to tolerate pressure or interference from third parties in our commercial activities, still less from Center employees, It wasn't pressure, sir, But it was interference, In that case, I'm sorry.

Another pause. How much more of this am I going to have to listen to, thought the potter in some distress. He wouldn't have to wait long to find out, the head of department was opening a register, then leafing through it, consulting one page and then another, he added up several items on a small calculator, and at last said, We have in our warehouse, with little likelihood of getting rid of them even at sale prices, even by offering them for less than cost price, a large number of articles from your pottery, articles of all kinds which are taking up valuable space, which is why I am obliged to ask you to remove them all within two weeks maximum, I was intending to have someone telephone you tomorrow and tell you, My van's only small, so heaven knows how many trips I'll have to make, Hiring a truck for the day should solve the problem, And who am I supposed to sell my crockery to now, asked the potter in despair, That is your problem, not mine, So I am at least authorized to do business with shops in the city, Our contract is canceled, so you can do business with whomever you like, If it's worth the bother, Yes, if it's worth the bother, there's a grave crisis going on out there, although, the head of department stopped speaking, gathered the drawings together, and then went through them one by one, studying them with what seemed like genuine interest, as if he were seeing them for the first time. Cipriano Algor could not ask, Although what, he had to wait, to disguise his anxiety, after all, or indeed before all, it was the head of the buying department who decided the rules of the game, and now he is playing a very unfair game, in which the cards have all been dealt to one player and in which, if necessary, the values of the cards will vary according to the whim of the person holding them, in which case the king will be worth more than the ace and less than the queen, or the jack will be worth as much as the two, and the two worth as much as the whole royal household, although it must be said, for what it's worth, that, since there are six dolls on the table, the potter has the numerical advantage, although only just. The head of the buying department again gathered up the drawings, put them absentmindedly to one side and, after another glance at the register, finished the phrase, Although, of course, leaving aside the catastrophic situation in which the traditional market finds itself, which is highly unfavorable to goods that have failed to stand the tests of time and changing tastes, the pottery will be forbidden to sell its goods elsewhere should the Center decide to commission these new proposed products, Do I understand you to mean that we will not be able to sell the dolls to other tradesmen in the city, You understand me correctly, though incompletely, Sorry, I don't quite know what you mean, Not only will you not be allowed to sell the dolls, you will not be allowed to sell any of your other products either, even if we admit the absurd hypothesis that anyone would commission them, So as soon as you accept me back as a supplier to the Center, I will be unable to supply anyone else, Exactly, though that can hardly come as a surprise, since this has always been the rule, On the other hand, sir, in the current situation, when certain products are no longer of any interest to the Center, it would seem fair to allow the supplier the freedom to find other buyers for them, We are in the world of hard commercial facts here, Senhor Algor, any theories that do not serve to consolidate those facts are irrelevant to the Center, which is not to say that we are incapable of coming up with theories of our own, and some we have even had to release, onto the market I mean, but only those that served

to ratify and, if necessary, absolve those facts when they did not quite work out as planned. Cipriano Algor told himself not to rise to the bait. Falling into the temptation of having a ding-dong argument with the head of the buying department, I say one thing, you say another, I protest, you respond, was bound to end badly, you never can tell what disastrous consequences one wrongly interpreted word might have on even the most subtle and carefully honed dialectic of persuasion, as the wise old saying has it, don't quibble with the king over pears, let him eat the ripe ones and give you the green ones. The head of the buying department looked at him with a half smile and added, I don't honestly know why I'm telling you these things, To be frank, sir, I'm rather surprised too, I'm just a simple potter, the little I have to sell hardly justifies your wasting your patience on me and honoring me with your reflections, replied Cipriano Algor, and immediately bit his tongue, for he had just decided not to throw any more wood onto the fire of a conversation that was already manifestly tense, and there he was issuing another provocation, as direct as it was inopportune. Hoping to avoid the tart response he feared, he got up and said, Forgive me for taking up so much of your time, sir, I'll leave you to study the drawings further, unless, Unless what, Unless you have already come to a decision, What decision, I don't know, sir, I can't know what you're thinking, The decision not to commission the dolls, for example, asked the head of the buying department, Yes, sir, replied the potter, looking straight at him, although mentally he was accusing himself of being both stupid and imprudent, I haven't yet come to a decision, May I ask how long you will take, because, as you know, the situation we find ourselves in, I will be quick, said the head of the buying department, interrupting him, you might even hear as early as tomorrow, Tomorrow, Yes, tomorrow, I don't want you going around saying that the Center refused to give you one last chance, Might I conclude from what you are saying that the decision will be a positive one, It might be, that's all I can tell you at the moment, Thank you, sir, You have no reason to thank me as yet, No, but I'm thanking you for the hope I carry away with me now, that is already something, Never put your trust in hope, Oh, I agree, but what else can we do, we have to hold on to something in our hour of need, Good afternoon, Senhor Algor, Good afternoon, sir. The potter had his hand on the door handle, he was about to leave, but the head of the buying department had not yet finished, Sort out a plan of withdrawal for the crockery with the assistant head of department, the one who showed you in, and remember, you have only two weeks in which to remove everything, down to the last plate, Yes, sir. That expression, plan of withdrawal, does not sit well in the mouth of a civilian, it sounds more like a military operation than a routine return of goods, and if applied to the letter and to the relative positions of the Center and the pottery, either it could result in a providential tactical retreat in order to reunite scattered forces and then, at the propitious moment, that is, when approval for the dolls is given, to launch a renewed attack, or, on the contrary, it could result in the end of everything, outright defeat, a rout, a case of every man for himself. Cipriano Algor was listening to the assistant head of department telling him, without even pausing for breath or looking at him, Every day at four o'clock, and you'll have to do the work yourself or else bring help, the staff here can't be excused not even if you pay them extra, and he wondered if it was worth having to endure this

humiliation, being treated like a fool, like a nobody, and having to accept that they are absolutely right, that for the Center a few rough, glazed earthenware plates or some ridiculous dolls pretending to be nurses, Eskimos, and bearded Assyrians have no importance whatsoever, none, zero, That is what we are for them, zero. He sat down at last in the van and looked at his watch, he would still have to wait nearly an hour before picking up his son-in-law, it occurred to him to go into the Center, it's been ages since he went in through the doors intended for the general public, either to look or buy, marçal always buys anything they need because of the discounts he gets as an employee, and going into the Center just to look around is not, if you'll forgive the apparent tautology, viewed with friendly eyes, anyone caught wandering around inside empty-handed will soon become the object of special attention from the security guards, the comical situation might even arise of his own son-in-law approaching him and saying, Pa, what are you doing here if you've no intention of buying anything, and he would reply, I'm just going to the pottery section to see if they've still got anything from the Algor Pottery on display, to find out how much they charge for that jug inlaid with little bits of marble, to say Goodness, that's a lovely jug, there aren't many craftsmen nowadays who can do really well-finished work like that, the man in charge of the section, impressed by the views of such a knowledgeable expert, might recommend the urgent purchase of another hundred such jugs, the ones inlaid with bits of marble, and then we wouldn't have to take unnecessary risks with clowns, jesters, and mandarins, when we have no idea how they'll be received. Cipriano Algor did not need to say to himself, No, I won't go, for weeks now he has been saying this to his daughter and to his son-in-law, once should be enough. He was absorbed in these pointless cogitations, his head resting on the steering wheel, when the guard who kept watch on the exit came over and said, If you've done what you came to do, please leave, this isn't a garage, you know. The potter said, I know, started the engine and left without another word. The guard noted down the number of the van on a piece of paper, he didn't need to, he's seen the van often enough since he first became a guard in the basement, but the reason he made a point of writing the number down was because he did not like that curt I know, especially when addressed to a guard, guards should be treated with respect and consideration, you don't just say I know, the old man should have said Of course, sir, nice, obedient words, suitable for all occasions, but the guard is, in fact, more disconcerted than annoyed, which is why he thought that perhaps he should not have said This isn't a garage, you know, especially not in that scornful tone, as if he were the king of the world, when he wasn't even the king of the grubby basement where he spends his days. He crossed out the number and returned to his post.

Cipriano Algor looked for a quiet street where he could pass the time until he could go and pick up his son-in-law at the entrance to the security section. He parked the van on a corner from which, three large blocks away, he could see a sliver of one of the vast Center façades, the inhabited part as it happens. With the exception of the doors that open onto the outside, there are no other openings to be seen, just impenetrable stretches of wall and it is not the vast hoardings promising security that are to blame for shutting out the light or stealing the air from those who live inside. In complete contrast

to those smooth façades, this side of the building is peppered with windows, hundreds and hundreds of windows, thousands of windows, all of them closed because of the air-conditioning inside. Normally, when we do not know the exact height of a building, but want to give an approximate idea of its size, we say that it has a certain number of stories, which might be two, or five, or fifteen, or twenty, or thirty, or whatever, either fewer or more, from one to infinity. The Center building is neither that small nor that big, it makes do with the forty-eight stories visible above street level and the ten floors concealed below. And now that Cipriano Algor is parked here, let us ponder some of the numbers that will give an idea of the size of the Center, let us say that the width of the smaller façades is about one hundred and fifty meters, and the larger ones slightly more than three hundred and fifty, not taking into account, of course, the proposed extension to which we referred in detail at the beginning of this story. Proceeding a little further with our calculations and taking the average height of each story to be three meters, including the thickness of the floor separating each one, that would make, including the ten subterranean stories, a total height of one hundred and seventy-four meters. If we multiply that number by the one hundred and fifty meters in width and the three hundred and fifty meters in length, we will get, allowing, of course, for errors, omissions and sheer confusion, a volume of nine million one hundred and thirty-five thousand cubic meters, give or take a centimeter, give or take a comma or two. The Center, and there is no one who does not, with astonishment, recognize this, is really big. And that, muttered Cipriano Algor to himself, is where my dear son-in-law wants me to live, behind one of those windows that can't be opened, they say it's so as not to upset the thermal stability of the air-conditioning, but the truth is quite different, people are free to commit suicide if they choose to, but not by hurling themselves one hundred meters down into the street, such despair would attract too much attention and awaken the morbid curiosity of passersby, who would immediately want to know why. Cipriano Algor has already said, not once but many times, that he will never agree to go and live in the Center, that he will never give up the pottery that belonged to his father and to his grandfather, and even Marta herself, his only daughter, who, poor thing, will have no choice but to accompany her husband when he is promoted to resident guard, had acknowledged two or three days ago with gratifying frankness that only her father could make the final decision, without being submitted to pressure from third parties, even if they tried to justify that pressure with claims of filial love, or out of that tearful pity which old people, even when they themselves reject it, seem to arouse in the souls of well-brought-up people. I will not go, I'd rather die than go, muttered the potter, aware, however, that these words, precisely because they seem so categorical, so final, might be pretending a conviction which, deep down, he did not feel, might be disguising an inner weakness, like an as yet invisible crack in the thinnest wall of a water jug. That mention of a water jug was clearly the best possible reason for Isaura Estudiosa to return to Cipriano Algor's thoughts, and that was indeed what happened, but the route taken by that thought, or reasoning, assuming any reasoning took place and it was not just an instantaneous flash, drove him to a rather embarrassing conclusion, formulated in a dreamy murmur, That way I wouldn't have to come and live in the Center. The look of annoyance that appeared

on Cipriano Algor's face as soon as he had uttered these words will not allow us to turn our backs on the fact that, despite the evident pleasure he takes in thinking about Isaura Estudiosa, he can nevertheless do nothing to prevent that apparently contradictory shift in mood. There would be little point in wasting time explaining why he likes thinking about her, there are things in life which define themselves, a particular man, a particular woman, a particular word, a particular moment, that is all we would have to say for everyone to understand what we meant, but there are other things, and it might even be the same man and the same woman, the same word and the same moment, which, viewed from a different angle, in a different light, come to signify doubts and perplexities, troubling signs, a strange presentiment, and that is why Cipriano Algor's pleasure in thinking about Isaura Estudiosa suddenly faltered, it was those words that were to blame, That way I wouldn't have to come and live in the Center, which is the same as saying, If I married her, I would have someone to look after me, a further demonstration of something that does not require demonstration, in short, the things a man finds hardest to recognize and confess are his own weaknesses. Especially when those weaknesses appear at the wrong time, like a fruit attached only tenuously to the bough because it was born too late in the season. Cipriano Algor sighed, then looked at his watch. It was time to go and pick up his son-in-law at the door of the security services department.

The dog Found did not like marçal. There were so many things to tell, so much news, so many highs and lows in hopes and spirits, that during the journey from the Center to the pottery, it did not even occur to Cipriano Algor to mention to his son-in-law the dog's mysterious arrival or his equally unusual behavior since. Nevertheless, a love of truth, pricked on by a narrator's natural scrupulousness, will not allow to go unmentioned one brief resurfacing of that remarkable episode in the potter's faulty memory, this, however, did not get any further because marçal, with more than justified resentment, interrupted his father-in-law's story to ask why the devil neither he nor Marta had thought to inform him of what was going on at home, the idea of the dolls, the drawings, their attempts at modeling, It's as if I don't really exist for either of you, he remarked bitterly. Caught out, Cipriano Algor mumbled some excuse citing the intensity and concentration inevitable in all artistic creation, the extreme unfriendliness with which the person who answered the phone responded to calls from the family members of guards living outside the Center, and, finally, a few decorative, halfgarbled words to pad out his speech and bring it to a close. Fortunately, the sight of the burned-out truck helped divert attention from a dispute that could easily have evolved into a family quarrel, which, let it be said, it will not, although marçal Gacho is determined to take up the matter again when he is alone with his wife in their bedroom and behind closed doors. With visible relief, Cipriano Algor left the subject of clay dolls in order to explain the suspicions that the fire had aroused in his mind, a view to which Manual, still angry about the lack of consideration with which he had been treated, responded rather brusquely in the name of deontology, ethical awareness, and the high standard of behavior for which, by definition, the armed forces in general and the administrative and police authorities in particular have always been known. Cipriano Algor shrugged, You're just saying that because you work as a security guard at the Center, if you were a civilian like me, you would see things differently, The fact that I work as a guard at the Center doesn't make me a policeman or a soldier, retorted marçal, No, it doesn't, but you're pretty close, on the border, Oh, I suppose now you're going to tell me that you feel ashamed to have a security guard from the Center sitting here beside you in your van, breathing the same air, The potter did not reply at once, he regretted having given in yet again to the stupid and gratuitous desire to provoke his son-in-law, Why do I do it, he asked himself, as if he didn't already know the answer, this man, this marçal Gacho wanted to take his daughter from him, indeed he already had taken her away, irremediably and irrevocably, by marrying her, Even if, in the end, I get tired of saying no and go with them to live at the Center, he thought. Then, speaking slowly, as if he had to drag each word out one after the other, he said, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you, I didn't mean to be unpleasant, but sometimes I can't help it, it just comes out, and there's no point asking me why, I wouldn't be able to give you an answer or, if I did, I'd just be telling you a pack of lies, because there are reasons, if you look you'll always find them, there's never been any shortage of reasons, even if they're not the right ones, no, it's the changing times, it's the old who age a day for every hour, it's the work which isn't what it used to be, and we, who can only be what we were, suddenly realize that we're not needed in the world, always assuming we ever were, of course, but believing that we were seemed to be enough, seemed sufficient, and that

belief was, in a sense, eternal for as long as we remained alive, which is, after all, what eternity is. marçal said nothing, he merely placed his left hand on his father-in-law's right hand, which was holding the steering wheel. Cipriano Algor swallowed hard, looked at the hand which, gently but firmly, seemed to want to protect his, looked at the oblique, jagged scar that cut across the skin from one side to the other, all that remained of a terrible burn which, by some astonishing stroke of good fortune, had not reached the veins beneath. Inexperienced and inept, marçal had wanted to help in stoking the kiln in order to impress the girl he had been going out with for a matter of only a few weeks, perhaps to impress her father too, to show him that he was a grown man, when, in fact, he was only just out of adolescence and when the one thing in life and in the world about which he felt he knew all there was to know was that he loved the potter's daughter. No one who has at some time in their life known such certainties will have any difficulty whatsoever in imagining the feelings of enthusiasm that filled him as he dragged the logs one by one from the woodshed and then fed them into the kiln, the supreme prize for him at that moment would have been Marta's delight and surprise, her mother's benevolent smile and her father's grave, reluctant look of approval. And suddenly, though no one ever found out why, for such a thing had never happened before in the memory of potters, a flame, slender, swift and sinuous as the tongue of a snake, erupted with a roar from the mouth of the kiln and cruelly bit the hand of the boy, so near, so innocent, so unprepared. That was the origin of the Gacho family's secret antipathy for the Algor family, who had not only acted with unforgivable negligence and irresponsibility, but had also, according to the inflexible Gacho mind, flagrantly abused the feelings of an ingenuous lad by making him work for nothing. It is not only in villages far from civilization that the human cerebral appendage is capable of generating such ideas. Marta frequently dressed marçal's hand, she frequently consoled and cooled it with her breath, and the couple were so steadfast in their desires that, after some years, they were able to get married, though this did nothing to unite the families. At the moment, their love appears to have gone to sleep, but never mind, this seems to be the natural effect of time and life's anxieties, but if ancient knowledge serves for anything, if it can still be of some use to modern ignorance, let us say, softly, so that people don't laugh at us, that while there's life, there's hope. For it is true that however thick and black the clouds over our heads, the sky above the clouds is permanently blue, but then again the rain, hail and lightning always fall downward, and indeed, when faced with such facts, it is hard to know quite what to think. marçal has withdrawn his hand, that's how it is between men, manly displays of affection have to be quick and instantaneous, some people put this down to masculine modesty, and perhaps they're right, but it would have been much more manly, in the full sense of the word, and certainly no less masculine, if Cipriano Algor had stopped the van and embraced his son-in-law right there and then and thanked him for that gesture with the only possible words, Thank you for placing your hand on mine, that is what he should have said, instead of taking advantage of the seriousness of the moment to complain about the ultimatum imposed by the head of the buying department, Can you believe it, he gave me two weeks to take away the whole lot, Two weeks, Yes, two weeks, and with no one to help me either, I'm only sorry I can't lend a

hand, Well, you can't, of course, you haven't got time and it wouldn't do your career much good to be seen working as a porter, and the worst thing is that I have no idea what to do with a load of pots that nobody wants, You might still manage to sell some, We've got more than enough at the pottery, In that case, you really have a problem, We'll see, I might just leave it here by the roadside, The police wouldn't let you, If this old crock wasn't a van but one of those dump trucks, nothing could be easier, I'd just have to push a button and, hey presto, in less than a minute, there it would all be in the gutter, You might get away with it a couple of times, but the traffic police would be bound to catch you at it in the end, Another solution would be to find a cave out in the countryside somewhere, it wouldn't have to be a very big cave, and put everything inside, can you imagine how funny it would be if, in a couple of thousand years, we were to listen in on the debates of archaeologists and anthropologists about the origin of all these earthenware plates, mugs, and dishes, and why there were so many of them and what possible use they could have been in an uninhabited place like that, It may be uninhabited now, but in a couple of thousand years it's quite possible that the city will have spread as far as here, remarked Marçal. He paused, as if the words he had just uttered required him to go back and think about them, and then, in the perplexed tone of one who, without quite understanding how, has reached a logically impeccable conclusion, he added, Or the Center. Now, knowing, as we do, that in the lives of this particular father-in-law and son-in-law the vexed question of the Center has been anything but easy, it seems odd that the security guard Marçal Gacho's unexpected allusion to the Center should have had no further consequences, that the dangerous remark, Or the Center, should not have immediately sparked off another argument that would repeat all the old misunderstandings and the usual litany of recriminations, tacit or explicit. The reason that both remained silent, always assuming that it is possible for us, observing from the outside, to uncover what, in all probability, was not even clear to them, was the fact that those words, spoken by Marçal, especially given the context in which they were pronounced, constituted a genuine novelty. Some will say that this is not the case, that, on the contrary, by admitting the possibility that the Center could, at some point in the future, as part of the process of unstoppable territorial expansion, do away with the fields that the van is now driving past, the security guard Marçal Gacho is himself underlining and secretly applauding the expansionist potential, in both space and time, of the company that pays him his modest salary. That interpretation would be perfectly valid and would settle the matter once and for all if it were not for that almost imperceptible pause, if that moment of apparent suspension of thought did not correspond, if you will permit such an audacious suggestion, with the appearance of someone quite simply capable of thinking differently. Were that the case, it is understandable that Marçal Gacho proved unable to advance along the road that opened up before him, since that road was destined for someone else. As for the potter, he has lived long enough to know that the best way of killing a rose is to force it open when it is still only the promise of a bud. He therefore stored away his son-in-law's words in his memory and pretended not to comprehend their real meaning. They did not speak again until they reached the village. As he usually did when he brought his son-in-law back from

the Center, Cipriano Algor stopped at the door of Manual's disagreeable parents, just time enough for marçal to go in, kiss his mother and his father, if his father was at home, find out how they had been since last he saw them, and leave saying, I'll drop by tomorrow when I've got more time. In general, five minutes was more than enough for this routine of filial sentiment to be accomplished, other news and more substantial conversation would wait until the following day, sometimes over lunch, sometimes not, but almost always without Marta's presence. Today, though, five minutes was not enough, nor ten, and almost twenty minutes had passed before marçal reappeared. He got quickly into the van and slammed the door. His face was very serious, almost somber, with an adult hardness of expression for which his young features were not prepared. You took a long time today, is anyone ill, is there some problem with the family, asked his father-in-law kindly, No, it's nothing, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting so long, You're annoyed about something, Like I said, it's nothing, don't worry. They are almost home, the van turns left in order to begin the climb up to the pottery, and as he changes gear, it occurs to Cipriano Algor that he drove past Isaura Estudiosa's house without giving her a thought, and it is then that a dog comes running down the hill, barking, marçal's second surprise of the day, or the third, if the second was the visit to his parents. Where did that dog come from, he asked, He turned up a few days ago and we let him stay, he's a nice dog, we've called him Found, although, if you think about it, we were the ones who were found, not him. When the van reached the top of the drive and stopped, a few things happened all at once, or at minimal intervals of time, Marta came to the kitchen door, the potter and the security guard got out of the van, Found growled, Marta ran toward marçal, marçal ran toward Marta, the dog gave a deeper growl, husband embraced wife, wife embraced husband, then they kissed, the dog stopped growling and attacked marçal's boot, marçal shook his leg, the dog would not let go, Marta shouted, Found, her father shouted too, the dog released the boot and tried to grab marçal's ankle instead, marçal aimed a fairly gentle kick at him, Marta said, Don't hurt him, marçal protested, He bit me, That's because he doesn't know you, Not even the dogs know me here, these terrible words left marçal's mouth as if he had sobbed them out rather than merely spoken them, each word filled with unbearable pain and sorrow, Marta threw her arms around her husband's neck, Don't ever say that again, and of course he didn't, there are some things that are only ever said once and never again, Marta will hear those words in her head until the last day of her life, and as for Cipriano Algor, if we wanted to know what he was doing at this moment, the easiest response would be, Nothing, were it not for the revealing fact that when he heard what marçal said, he immediately looked away, so he did do something. The dog had backed away toward the kennel, but halfway there, he stopped, turned, and stood there looking. Now and then a growl would emerge from his throat. Marta said, He doesn't know about people embracing, he must have thought you were attacking me, but Cipriano Algor, in order to clear the air, offered a more trivial suggestion, Perhaps he's just got it in for uniforms, it wouldn't be the first time. marçal did not respond, he was caught between two feelings, regret for having spoken words that would stand for all time as a public confession of a deep-seated sorrow kept hidden until then, and an instinctive intuition that the fact of having uttered those words might mean that he was

about to leave one road and follow another, even though it was still far too soon to know where it might lead him. He kissed Marta on the head and said, I'll go and change my clothes. Evening was coming on fast, in less than half an hour it would be dark. Cipriano Algor said to his daughter, I talked to the man in the buying department, Of course, what with all the fuss about the dog, I almost forgot to ask how the interview went, He said that he might be able to give me an answer tomorrow, That's quick, It's hard to believe, isn't it, and even harder to believe that the answer could well be yes, but that's what he seemed to be saying, Let's hope you're right, Alas, the only rose without thorns I know is you, What do you mean, what's all this about roses and thorns, I mean that every good piece of news is generally followed by some bad, And what's today's bad news, I've got two weeks to remove any crockery of ours that they still have in the warehouse, Well, I'll come and help you, No way, if the Center gives us the order, we'll need every spare moment we have to make the final models, create the molds, work on the modeling, do the painting, load and unload the kiln, besides, I'd like to deliver the first part of the order before we remove all our stuff from the warehouse, just in case the man changes his mind, And what are we going to do with those surplus pots, Don't worry, I've sorted that out with Manual, I'll leave them in the countryside somewhere, in a cave, and if anyone wants them they can have them, With so much moving about, most of them will get broken anyway, Probably. The dog came over and touched Marta's hand with its nose, as if asking her to explain the new composition of the family unit, as people used to call it. Marta scolded him, Just you behave yourself from now on, and I'll tell you one thing, if it comes to a choice between my husband and you, I'll always choose my husband. The last bit of shade cast by the mulberry tree was gradually shrinking to nothing as it began to form part of the darker shade of approaching night. Cipriano Algor murmured, We'll have to be careful with marçal, what he said just now came as a real body blow, It was a body blow and it really hurt. The light above the kitchen door came on. marçal appeared in the doorway, he had changed into the ordinary clothes he wore around the house. The dog Found looked at him closely, and, head up, advanced a few steps toward him, then stopped expectantly. marçal went over to him, Are we friends now, he asked. The dog's cold nose lightly brushed the scar on his left hand, We're friends. The potter said, You see, I was right, our dog Found doesn't like uniforms, Everything in life is a uniform, said marçal, the only time our bodies are truly in civilian dress is when we're naked, but there was no bitterness in his voice now.

During supper, they talked a lot about how Marta had come up with the idea of making the dolls, as well as about the doubts, fears, and hopes that had shaken the house and the pottery during the last few days, and then, passing on to more practical matters, they calculated how much time would be needed for each phase of production, as well as the respective safety margins, which differed in both cases from those required by the products they usually made, It all depends on what quantities they order, neither too much nor too little would be best, which is a bit like asking for sun for the threshing and rain for the turnips, as people used to say in the days before plastic greenhouses, said Cipriano Algor. When they had cleared the table, Marta showed her husband the

sketches she had made, the various drafts, the experiments with color, the old encyclopedia from which she had copied the models, at first sight, it looked like a very small amount of work to have provoked such large anxieties, but one must understand that in life's circumnavigations what for some is a gentle breeze, for others is a fatal storm, it all depends on the draft of the ship and on the state of its sails. In their bedroom, with the door shut, marçal decided that there was no point asking Marta to explain why she had not told him about her idea to make the dolls, first, because that particular water had passed under the bridge several hours since, sweeping along with it all the spite and bad temper, second, because he was concerned now about something far more serious than feeling or merely imagining that he had been ignored. Something more serious and no less urgent. When a man returns to home and wife after a separation of ten days, especially a young man like Marçal, or, indeed an old man, assuming that age has not yet killed off his amatory instincts, the natural impulse is to want to give immediate satisfaction to the tremor of the senses, and to leave any talking until afterward. Women tend to think otherwise. If there is no particular pressure of time, if, on the contrary the night is ours, or indeed the afternoon or the morning, the woman would probably prefer the act of love to be preceded by a leisurely, unhurried conversation, if possible about something other than the *idée fixe* that is spinning like a humming top inside the man's head. Like a deep, slowly filling water jug, the woman very gradually draws closer to the man, although it would perhaps be more accurate to say that she draws him closer to her, until the urgency of the one and the longing of the other, declared, concurrent, and unpostponable, make the unanimous water rise singing to the brim. There are exceptions, though, and one such is marçal who, however much he would like simply to drag Marta off to bed, cannot do so until he has emptied out the heavy bag of anxieties he has been carrying, not from the Center, not from the conversation he had with his father-in-law on the way back, but from his parents' house. Nevertheless, the first word will still be spoken by Marta, The dogs may not know you, marçal, but your wife certainly does, I really don't want to talk about that, But we should talk about the things that hurt us, It was stupid of me and unfair, Well, let's leave stupid to one side, because you're certainly not that, let's just stay with unfair, Look, I've already said that I was, But you weren't being unfair either, Don't let's complicate things, Marta, please, what's said is said, The things that seem to be over are always the things that never really are, we're the ones who have been unfair, Who's we, My father and me, especially me, my father has a married daughter and is afraid of losing her, he doesn't need any further justification, And what about you, Well, I have no excuse whatsoever, Why, Because I love you and sometimes, too often, I give the impression that I've forgotten that I do, no, sometimes I do actually forget that the person to whom I owe that love is a real person, complete in himself, not someone who should make do with some rather diffuse emotion which gradually resigns itself to its own fatal vagueness, as if that were a fate against which there were no possible appeal, That's what marriage is like, that's how people live, you just have to look at my parents, There's something else I'm guilty of too, Don't go on, please, Let me finish now, marçal, let me finish, Please, Marta, You don't want me to go on because you know what it is I'm going to say, Please,

When you said that not even the dogs know you, what you were saying to your wife was that not only does she not know you, she hasn't made the slightest effort to get to know you either, well, almost none, That's not true, you do know me, no one knows me better than you, Only enough to understand the meaning of your words, but I'm no more intelligent in that respect than my father, who cottoned on as quickly as I did, Of the two of us, you're the adult, I'm still a child, Maybe you're right, at least you seem to be saying that I'm right, yet this marvelous adult, marçal Gacho's terribly sensible wife, was incapable of seeing, as she should have done, what it means to be a person who has the simplicity and honesty to say of himself that he is a child, Not that I'll always be a child, No, you won't, which is why, while there's still time, I'll have to do everything I can to understand you as you are and doubtless reach the conclusion that, in your case, being a child is actually just a different way of being an adult, If you carry on like this, I won't know who I am, Cipriano Algor will tell you that this is a frequent occurrence in life, You know, I think I'm beginning to get on better with your father, You cannot imagine, or perhaps you can, how happy that makes me. Marta clasped marçal's hands and kissed them, then pressed them to her breast, Sometimes, she said, we need to return to certain ancient gestures of tenderness, How would you know, you weren't alive in the days of bowing and hand-kissing, No, but I've read about it in books, which is the same as having been there, anyway it wasn't bowing and hand-kissing I had in mind, They had different customs, different ways of feeling and communicating quite unlike our own, Strange though the comparison may sound, to me gestures are more than just gestures, they are like drawings made by one body on another body. The invitation could not have been more explicit, but marçal pretended not to have heard, although he knew that the moment had come to draw Marta to him, to stroke her hair, slowly kiss her cheek, her eyelids, gently, as if he felt no desire at all, as if he were merely distracted, it would be a grave mistake to think that what happens on such occasions is that desire takes absolute control of the body in order to make use of it, forgive the materialistic, utilitarian simile, as if we were talking about a tool with multiple applications, as capable of smoothing as of carving, as powerful a transmitter as a receiver, as precise at counting as at measuring, as capable of going up as going down. What's wrong, asked Marta, suddenly uncertain, Nothing important, just a few niggling little problems, At work, No, What then, We have so little time together and yet they still won't leave us alone, We don't live in a bell jar, I dropped in at my parents' house, Did something happen, some complication. marçal shook his head and went on, They started asking lots of questions about whether I had heard anything about when I might be promoted to resident guard, and I said that I hadn't, and that I didn't even have any solid proof that it would happen, You're almost sure that you will be, though, Yes, almost sure, but you know what they say, don't wash your basket out, until the last grape's in, I know, I know, so what else did they say, They kept circling around and around the subject, and I just couldn't make out what it was they were getting at, until finally, they told me their great idea, And what great idea would that be, Only that they're thinking of selling their house and coming to live with us, With us, where, At the Center, Am I understanding you right, your parents want to come and live at the Center with us, Exactly, And what did you say, I started by pointing out that it

was still a bit early to be thinking about that, but they said that selling a house wasn't something that happened overnight, that they weren't going to wait until we had moved in, you and me, and that they would start looking for a buyer, And what did you say, Well, thinking that it would settle the matter, I said that we were intending having your father to live with us when we moved, so that he wouldn't be left alone here, especially now that the pottery is going through a crisis, You told them that, Yes, but they took no notice, they practically started yelling at me and crying, well, my mother did, my father's not really the sloppy type, he just protested and waved his arms around a lot, what kind of a son am I, putting the interests of people who aren't of the same blood over the needs of my own progenitors, they actually used the word progenitors, heaven knows where they found it, that they would never have imagined that one day they would hear me saying that I was rejecting the very people to whom I owe my life, the people who brought me up and educated me, that there's certainly a deal of truth in the old saying that a son is a son until he gets him a wife, but nothing had prepared them for such indifference, anyway I wasn't to worry about them, they hadn't quite been reduced to begging in the streets, but one day I would regret what I'd done, not perhaps while they were alive, but after they were dead, which is always much worse, and they just hoped I didn't have children who would treat me as cruelly as I was treating my own parents, And that was the final word, To be honest, I don't know if it was or not, I've probably forgotten a few others, but they were all out of the same mold, You should have explained that they needn't worry, you know my father doesn't want to live at the Center, Yes, but I didn't want to tell them that, Why not, That would just encourage them to think that they're the only candidates, If they insist, you'll have no option, In that case, I won't accept the promotion, I'll just have to find some convincing excuse to give the Center, Well, I doubt you'll find one. They were sitting on the bed, almost touching, but the moment for caresses had passed, apparently as distant now as the days of hand-kissing and bowing, or even as that other moment when the man's two hands were kissed and then pressed to the woman's breast. marçal said, I know a son shouldn't say things like this, but the fact is that I don't want to live with my parents, Why, We've never really understood each other, I've never understood them and they've never understood me, They're your parents, Yes, they're my parents, and on one particular night, they went to bed, happened to be in the mood, and I was the result, when I was little I remember hearing them say, like someone telling a funny story, that he was drunk at the time, With or without wine, that's the way we're all born, Look, I know it's unreasonable, but I hate the idea that my father was drunk when I was conceived, it's as if I were the son of another man, it's as if the man who really should have been my father couldn't be there, as if his place had been taken by another, the one who said to me today that he hoped my children would be cruel to me, That isn't quite what he said, But it's what he thought. Marta took marçal's left hand, held it between hers, and murmured, All fathers were sons once, many sons become fathers, but some forget what they were and no one can explain to the others what they will become, That's a bit deep, Oh, I don't understand it myself really, it just came to me, pay no attention, Let's go to bed, All right. They got undressed and lay down. The moment for caresses came back into the room and

apologized for having spent so much time outside, I got lost, it said, by way of an excuse, and suddenly, as sometimes happens with moments, it became eternal. A quarter of an hour later, their bodies still entwined, Marta said softly, *marçal*, What is it, he asked sleepily, I'm two days late.

In the safe silence of the bedroom, between sheets rumpled by the recent amorous agitations, the man heard his wife tell him that her period was two days late, and the news seemed to him extraordinary and utterly amazing, a kind of second fiat lux in an age in which Latin has ceased to be used and practiced, a vernacular surgeet ambula which has no idea where it is going and which is frightening for that very reason. Only an hour before, at most, in a moment of touching openness rare in the masculine sex, marçal Gacho had admitted to being a child, when, quite unbeknownst to him, he had been a father in embryo for some weeks, which just goes to show that we should never be too sure about what we think we are because it could easily happen that, at that precise moment, we are, in fact, something completely different. Almost everything that Marta and marçal said to each other that night, before falling asleep out of sheer exhaustion, is described in a thousand and one stories of couples with children, but the concrete analysis of the concrete situation in which this married couple find themselves did not leave un-examined certain questions peculiar to them, for example, Marta's diminished ability to cope with the hard physical work of the pottery, but it failed to resolve, because this was dependent on the expected promotion, whether the baby would be born before or after their move to the Center. On the first point, Marta said she was sure that her mother, the late Justa Isasca, who had worked tirelessly up until the last day of her life, would never have succumbed to the pleasures of complete idleness just because she was pregnant, I myself would be a witness to that if only I could dredge up my memories of the nine months I lived inside her, A child in the womb can't possibly know what's going on outside, replied marçal, yawning, I suppose so, but you must at least admit that a baby would have an intimate knowledge of what's going on inside its mother's womb, it's all just a question of remembering, We don't even remember the trauma of birth, Well, that's probably when we lose the first of all our memories, Now you're just inventing things, give me a kiss. Before this delicate conversation and that kiss, marçal had expressed a vehement wish that the move to the Center should take place before the birth, You'll have the best medical treatment and the best nursing you could possibly imagine, there's nothing like it anywhere, either near or far, as regards both medicine and surgery, How do you know if you've never been to the hospital at the Center, you've probably never even been inside it, No, but I know someone who was admitted as a patient, a superior of mine who was at death's door when he went in and came out a new man, there are people outside who try to use their influence to get admitted as patients, but the rules are very strict, To hear you talk anyone would think that no one at the Center ever dies, Of course they do, but death is less obvious somehow, That's certainly an advantage, You'll see when we go there, See what, that death is less obvious, is that what you mean, No, I wasn't talking about death, Yes, you were, Look, I'm not interested in death, I was talking about you and our child, about the hospital you'll go to, Always assuming your promotion isn't too long in coming, If they don't promote me within nine months, they never will, Give me a kiss, Mr. Security Guard, and let's go to sleep, All right, here's your kiss, but there's still one other thing we need to talk about, What's that, From now on you'll do less work in the pottery and in two or three months' time you'll stop working altogether, Do you expect my father to do

everything, especially if the Center puts in an order for the dolls, Get someone in to help, You know there's no point, no one wants to work in a pottery, In your condition, What about my condition, my mother carried on working when she was pregnant with me, How do you know, Because I can remember. They both laughed, then Marta said, Let's not tell my father about this just yet, he'll be thrilled, but it's best we don't say anything to him, Why, Oh, I don't know, he's got too much on his mind as it is, The pottery, The pottery's just one thing, The Center, The Center's another thing, whether or not we'll get the order, the stock he's got to remove from the warehouse, but there are other things too, a certain water jug with a loose handle, for example, but I'll tell you about that later. Marta was the first to go to sleep. marçal was feeling less shaken by then, he knew more or less which road he would have to take after the birth, and when, nearly half an hour later, sleep touched him with its smoky fingers, he let himself drift unresistingly off, his spirit at peace. His last conscious thought was to ask himself if Marta really had said something about the handle on a water jug, Ridiculous, I must have dreamed it, he thought. He was the one who slept the least, and he was the one to wake up first. The dawn light was sifting in through the gaps in the shutters. You're going to have a child, he said to himself, and he repeated, a child, a child, a child. Then, moved by a curiosity quite without desire, almost innocent, if innocence still exists in that place in the world we call bed, he lifted the covers and looked at Marta's body. She was turned toward him, with her knees slightly bent. The lower half of her nightshirt was caught up around her waist, her white belly was only just visible in the half-darkness and disappeared completely into the dark area of the pubis. marçal lowered the covers and realized that the moment for caresses had not gone away, it had remained in the room all night, and there it was, waiting. Doubtless touched by the draft of cold air caused by the movement of the bedcovers, Marta sighed and changed position. Like a bird gently testing out the site for its first nest, Manual's left hand lightly brushed her belly Marta opened her eyes and smiled, then said jokingly, Good morning, Father-to-be, but her expression changed abruptly, she had just realized that they were not alone in the room. The moment for caresses had slipped in between them, had got in between the sheets, it could not have said precisely what it wanted, but they did exactly as it wished.

Cipriano Algor was already up and about. He had slept badly, worried about whether he would get a reply from the head of the buying department that day and what the reply would be, whether positive or negative, whether reticent or dilatory, but what prevented him from sleeping at all for some hours was an idea that sprang into his head halfway through the night and which, as is so often the case with ideas that assail us at dead of sleepless night, he found extraordinary, magnificent, and even, in the case in question, the masterstroke of a negotiating talent worthy of applause. When he woke up from the barely two hours of restless sleep that his desperate body had managed to filch from its own exhaustion, he realized that the idea was, after all, worthless, that the sensible thing would be not to feed any illusions he might have about the nature and character of the person wielding the big stick, and that any order issued by someone invested with more than the usual degree of authority should be treated as if it were an irrefutable diktat

from destiny. If simplicity really is a virtue, no idea could be more virtuous than this, as you will soon see, Sir, Cipriano Algor would say to the head of the buying department, I've been pondering what you said about having two weeks to remove the stock taking up space in the warehouse, it didn't occur to me at the time, probably because of my excitement when I saw that there was a slight hope that I might be allowed to continue as a supplier to the Center, but then I started thinking about it and thinking about it, and I realized that it's difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill two obligations at once, that is, to remove the crockery and make the dolls, yes, I know you haven't yet put in a firm order for them, but just supposing that you did, it occurred to me, purely as a precaution, to suggest an alternative that would leave me free during the first week to get on with making the dolls, I would then remove half of the crockery in the second week, go back to the dolls during the third week, and remove the remaining crockery during the fourth week, I know, I know, you don't have to tell me, I'm not pretending that there isn't another option which would be to start with the crockery the first week and then alternately, in sequence, dolls, crockery, dolls, but I think, in this particular case, one should take into account the psychological factor, everyone knows how different the state of mind of the creator is from that of the destroyer, of someone who destroys, and if I could start making the dolls, that is start with creation, especially in the excellent frame of mind in which I find myself now, I would face with renewed courage the hard task of having to destroy the fruits of my own labor, because having no one to sell them to or, worse still, not even being able to give them away, is tantamount to destroying them. This speech, which, at three in the morning, appeared to its author to be possessed of an irresistible logic, seemed absurd to him in the early dawn and positively ridiculous in the revealing light of the sun. Oh, well, what will be will be, said the potter to the dog Found, the devil isn't necessarily lurking behind every door. Given the manifest difference in concepts and the different nature of their respective vocabularies, Found could not even begin to understand what his master was trying to tell him, and in a way it was just as well because an indispensable condition for passing on to the next level of understanding would be to ask him who this devil was, a figure, entity, or character who, one supposes, has been absent from the spiritual world of dogs since the beginning of time, and, as you can imagine, if he were to ask a question like that right at the beginning, the discussion would be never-ending. With the arrival of Marta and marçal, both unusually cheerful, as if the night had rewarded them with something more than the usual alleviation of ten days' worth of accumulated desire, Cipriano Algor dismissed the last remnants of his ill humor and immediately, via mental processes, which, for those aware of the premise and the conclusion, would be easy enough to delineate, he found himself thinking about Isaura Estudiosa, about her personally, but also about her name, unable to understand why we still call her Estudiosa, if the name comes from her husband, who is dead, The first chance I get, thought the potter, I must remember to ask her what her own name is, her original family name. Absorbed in the grave decision he had just made, one of the most daring of enterprises in the very private territory of names, indeed it is not the first time that a love story, to take but one example, has begun with that fatally curious question, What's your name, Cipriano Algor did not at first notice that marçal and the dog

were fraternizing and playing like old friends who have not seen each other in ages, It was the uniform, his son-in-law was saying, and Marta was repeating, It was the uniform. The potter looked at them oddly, as if everything in the world had suddenly changed its meaning, perhaps it was because he had been thinking about Isaura more in terms of her name than as the woman she was, it really isn't that common, even when distracted, to get the two things mixed up, maybe there are some things we only begin to understand when we reach that point, Reach what point, Old age. Cipriano Algor walked over to the kiln, muttering, as if it were a senseless litany, Marta, marçal, Isaura, Found, then in a different order, marçal, Isaura, Found, Marta, and yet another, Isaura, Marta, Found, marçal, and another, Found, marçal, Marta, Isaura, finally he added his own name, Cipriano, Cipriano, Cipriano, and he repeated it until he lost count of the number of times he had said it, until a kind of vertigo whirled him outside of himself, until what he was saying became meaningless, then he pronounced the word kiln, the word woodshed, the word mud, the word mulberry, the word floor, the word lantern, the word earth, the word wood, the word door, the word bed, the word cemetery, the word handle, the word jug, the word van, the word water, the word pottery, the word grass, the word house, the word fire, the word dog, the word woman, the word man, the word, the word, and all the things in this world, those with names and those without, the known and the secret, the visible and the invisible, like a flock of birds which, grown weary of flying, descends from the clouds, all gradually took up their places, filling the gaps and reordering the senses. Cipriano Algor sat down on the old stone bench that his grandfather had placed beside the kiln and he rested his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, he wasn't looking at the house or at the pottery, or at the fields that stretched out beyond the road, or at the rooftops of the village to his right, he was looking at the ground scattered with tiny fragments of baked clay, at the whitish, grainy earth beneath them, at a stray ant carrying in its powerful mandibles a strand of wheat beard twice its size, at the shape of a stone from behind which the slender head of a lizard was peeping out, only to disappear at once. He had no thoughts or feelings, he was merely the largest of the bits of clay, a small dry clod that would crumble with the slightest pressure of the fingers, a strand of beard from an ear of wheat that had happened to be carried off by an ant, a stone behind which a living creature would hide from time to time, a beetle or a lizard or an illusion. Found seemed to emerge from the void, he wasn't there and then suddenly he was, he abruptly placed his paws on his master's knees, thus ruining Cipriano Algor's pose as a contemplator of the vanities of this world who is wasting time, or, as he believes, gaining time, asking questions of ants and beetles and lizards. Cipriano Algor stroked the dog's head and asked another question, What do you want, but Found did not answer, he just panted and opened his mouth, as if smiling at the inanity of the question. Just then, he heard marçal's voice calling, Are you coming, Pa, breakfast's ready. It was the first time his son-in-law had done such a thing, something unusual must be happening in the house and in the lives of Marta and marçal, and he could not think what it was, he imagined his daughter saying, You call him, or else, even more extraordinarily, marçal anticipating her, I'll call him, there must be some explanation for all this. He got up from the bench, again stroked the dog's head, then off they went. Cipriano Algor did not notice

that the ant would never again travel the road that would lead it back to the anthill, it still has the strand of wheat beard firmly clenched between its mandibles, but its journey ended there, the fault of that clumsy dog Found, who doesn't look to see where he's putting his feet.

While they were eating, marçal, as if in reply to a question, told them that he had telephoned his parents to say that an urgent job had come up and that he wouldn't be able to have lunch with them, Marta, in turn, expressed the view that they should not start transporting the crockery immediately, That way we can spend the day together, I doubt that one day out of two weeks will make a great deal of difference, Cipriano Algor said that the same thought had occurred to him, mainly because the head of the buying department might phone at any time, And I need to be here to talk to him. Marta and marçal looked at each other doubtfully, and marçal said cautiously, If I was in your place, and knowing as I do how the Center works, I wouldn't get my hopes up, Don't forget that he was the one who said he might give me an answer today, Even so, that might have just been talk, the sort of thing they say without really thinking about it, It's not a matter of getting my hopes up, when the power of decision lies in other people's hands, when we can do nothing to move them one way or the other, the only thing left to do is to wait. They did not have to wait long, the phone rang as Marta was clearing the table. Cipriano Algor rushed forward, grabbed the receiver with trembling hand and said, The Algor Pottery, at the other end, someone, a secretary or a telephonist, asked, Is that Senhor Cipriano Algor, Yes, speaking, One moment, please, I'll just put you through to the head of the buying department, for a long, long minute, the potter had to listen to some violin music which, with maniacal insistence, filled the waiting time, he kept looking at his daughter, but it was as if he could not see her, at his son-in-law, but it was as if he wasn't there, suddenly the music stopped, and he was through, Good morning, Senhor Algor, said the head of the buying department, Good morning, sir, I was just saying to my daughter and to my son-in-law, who's home on leave at the moment, that having promised to phone today, you were bound to do so, We have to make a fuss about the promises that are kept in order to forget about the many that are not, Very true, sir, Now, I've been looking at your proposal and I've considered the various factors, both positive and negative, Forgive me interrupting you, but did you say negative factors, Not negative in the strict sense of the word, but, rather, neutral factors that could produce a negative influence, Sorry, I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you mean, What I am referring to is the fact that your pottery has no known experience of making the products you are proposing, That's true, sir, but both my daughter and myself know how to model clay and I can say without immodesty that we are very good at it too, and the only reason we never went into such work commercially was because, right from the start, we opted for making crockery instead, Yes, I understand, but, given the current climate, it was not easy to defend the proposal, You mean, if you'll allow me the question and the interpretation, that you did defend it, Yes, I did, And the decision, The decision made was to say yes to an initial phase, Oh, thank you, sir, but I must ask you to explain what you mean by an initial phase, It means that we will place an initial, experimental order of two

hundred of each of the figurines and that any future orders will obviously depend on how our customers react to the product, Sir, I don't know how to thank you, As far as the Center is concerned, Senhor Algor, the best thanks we can get are satisfied customers, if they are satisfied, that is, if they buy and keep buying, we will be satisfied too, just look what happened with your crockery, the customers lost interest in it, and since, unlike certain other products, it was deemed not to merit the trouble and expense involved in convincing the customers that they were wrong, we terminated our commercial relationship, very simple, as you see, Yes, sir, very simple, I just hope these dolls don't suffer the same fate, Oh, sooner or later they will, like everything else in life, if something no longer serves a useful purpose it will be thrown out, Including people, Exactly, including people, why, I myself will be thrown out when I'm no longer any use, You're a head of department, Yes, I am, but I'm only that to those below me, there are other judges above me, The Center isn't a court, That's where you're wrong, it is, and I know of no more implacable court, To be honest, sir, I don't know why you waste your precious time talking about these things to an insignificant potter, May I point out that you are repeating words that I myself spoke yesterday, Yes, I am, more or less, The reason is that there are some things that can only be said to those beneath one, And I'm one of those beneath you, Now I wasn't the one who put you there, but, yes, you are, At least I serve some purpose, then, but if your career progresses, as it certainly will, you will have many more people beneath you, Should that happen, Senhor Cipriano, you will become invisible to me, As you said earlier, such is life, Yes, such is life, but meanwhile, I am the person who will sign the order, Sir, I have just one more question to put to you, What's that, It's about the removal of our surplus crockery from the warehouse, That has already been decided, I gave you a deadline of two weeks, It's just that in the meantime I've had an idea, What idea is that, Since it is in our interests, ours and the Center's, to carry out the order as quickly as possible, it would be very helpful if we could alternate, Alternate, Yes, I mean spend one week removing the stock from the warehouse, the next working on the figurines, and so on, But that means you would take a month rather than two weeks to clear my warehouse, Yes, but we would gain time by getting ahead with our work, You said one week crockery and the next figurines, Yes, sir, Let's do it another way, the first week you work on the figurines, the second you remove the crockery, it's basically a question of applied psychology, creating is always so much more stimulating than destroying, You're very kind, sir, I would never have dreamed of asking for so much, Oh, I'm not kind, I'm just practical, said the head of the buying department sharply, Perhaps kindness is a question of practice, muttered Cipriano Algor, Could you say that again, I didn't quite catch it, Oh, it doesn't matter, sir, it wasn't important, But say it again anyway, I said that perhaps kindness is a question of practice, That's the opinion of a potter, Yes, sir, but not all potters would share it, Potters are dying out, Senhor Algor, And so are opinions like mine. The head of the buying department did not respond immediately, he must have been considering whether it was worth amusing himself further with this kind of cat-and-mouse game, but his position on the Center's organization chart reminded him that the whole definition and maintenance of hierarchical configurations is based on their being scrupulously respected and never

contravened or transgressed, and, of course, the inevitable result of being too free and easy with one's inferiors or subalterns is to undermine respect and to encourage license, or, to put it more explicitly and unambiguously, it all ends in insubordination, indiscipline and anarchy. Marta, who for some moments had been vainly trying to attract her father's attention, so absorbed was he in this verbal dispute, had finally scribbled down two questions in large letters on a piece of paper and placed it under his nose, Which ones, How many When he read them, Cipriano Algor raised his unoccupied hand to his head, there was no excuse for his distraction, a lot of talk for talk's sake, a lot of argument and counterargument, and yet he had only found out part of what he really needed to know, and then only because the head of the buying department had told him, that is, that they would be placing an order for two hundred of each of the figurines. The silence did not last as long as it no doubt seems, but it must be remembered that in one moment of silence, even briefer than this one, many things can happen, and when, as in the present case, it is necessary to enumerate them, describe them and explain them in order fully to understand the meaning of all these things both jointly and individually, someone immediately jumps in to say that it's impossible, that you can't fit the whole world in the eye of a needle, when the truth is that the whole universe, even two universes, would fit easily. However, using a circumspect tone, so as not to awaken the sleeping dragon too abruptly, it is now time for Senhor Algor to mutter, Er, sir, time too for the head of the buying department to draw to a close a conversation which tomorrow, for the reasons given above, he may perhaps regret and may even wish had never happened, Right, then, we're agreed, you can start work, the requisition will be sent off today, and, finally, it is time for Cipriano Algor to say that there is still one detail to resolve, And what detail is that, Which ones, sir, Which ones of what, you mentioned one detail, not several, Which of the figurines will you be ordering, that's what I need to know, All of them, replied the head of the buying department, All of them, repeated Cipriano Algor, astonished, but the other man did not hear him, he had hung up. Stunned, the potter looked at his daughter, then at his son-in-law, Well, I never expected that, I heard what I heard and I don't believe it, he said they're placing an order for two hundred of each of the figurines, All six, asked Marta, Well, I think so, that's what he said, all of them. Marta ran to her father and hugged him hard, not saying a word, marçal also went over to his father-in-law, Some days everything seems to go wrong, but then there are other days that bring only good news. Had Cipriano Algor been paying slightly more attention to what was being said, had he not been so distracted by the joyful prospect of guaranteed work, he would certainly have wanted to know what other good news that day had brought. Besides, the pact of silence that the two parents-to-be had agreed to a few hours before was almost broken right there and then, as Marta realized when she found her lips forming the words, Pa, I think I'm pregnant, however, she managed to bite them back. marçal, steadfast in keeping his part of the bargain, did not notice, nor did Cipriano, entirely innocent of suspicion. The truth is that such a revelation would be given only to someone who could not only read lips, a relatively common skill, but could also predict what they were going to say when the mouth was just about to open. This magical gift is as rare as that other gift mentioned elsewhere, that of being able to see into bodies

through the skin that encloses them. However, we will immediately have to abandon the seductive profundity of both subjects, so rich in juicy reflections, to listen to what Marta has just said, Pa, do the sums, six times two hundred is one thousand two hundred, we're going to have to deliver one thousand two hundred figurines, it's a lot of work for two people, especially with so little time in which to do it. The other good news of the day, the likelihood of a child for marçal and Marta, which they felt to be certain, paled into insignificance beside that enormous number, it became a simple everyday possibility, the chance or intentional result of a man and a woman having come together in sexual union, by what we call natural methods and without taking any precautions. The security guard marçal Gacho said, half serious, half joking, I can see that from now on I will vanish from the landscape, I hope, at least, that you don't forget I exist, You've never existed so much as now, said Marta, and Cipriano Algor stopped thinking for a moment about the one thousand two hundred figurines to wonder to himself what she meant.

So the people who live at the Center do die after all, said Cipriano Algor as he went into the house with the dog following behind him, having dropped off his son-in-law at work, I shouldn't think anyone ever doubted it, replied Marta, everyone knows they've got their own cemetery in there, You can't see the cemetery from the road, but you can see the smoke, What smoke, The smoke from the crematorium, There isn't a crematorium in the Center, There wasn't, but there is now, Who told you, marçal did, when we were driving down the avenue, I saw the smoke rising up from the roof, it's something they've been discussing, apparently, and now it's happened, according to marçal they were beginning to run out of space, What I find odd is the smoke, I'd have thought that modern technology would have done away with that, They might be experimenting and burning other things, old things that have gone out of fashion, like our plates, Forget about the plates, we've got lots of work to do, Well, I came home as quickly as I could, I dropped marçal at his work and drove straight back, said Cipriano Algor. He omitted the little detour that had allowed him to go past Isaura Estudiosa's house and did not realize that his words sounded like an excuse, or else he did realize, but was unable to avoid it. It's true that he had lacked the courage to stop the van and go and knock on the door of the widow of Joaquim Estudioso, but that was not the only reason why, to use a somewhat blunt expression, he lost his nerve, what he feared above all was finding himself standing like a fool in front of the woman and having nothing to say, and, in desperation, asking her about the water jug. One important doubt will remain forever unresolved, that is, had Cipriano Algor spoken for, say, two minutes with Isaura Estudiosa, would he have come into the house talking about death, smoke, and crematoria, or, on the contrary, would the pleasures of a doorstep conversation have brought a more pleasing subject to mind, for example, the return of the swallows and the abundance of flowers already blooming in the fields. Marta placed on the kitchen table the six designs from the last preparatory phase, in the order that they had chosen them, the jester, the clown, the nurse, the Eskimo, the mandarin, and the bearded Assyrian, identical to those sent to be judged by the head of the buying department, apart from one or two tiny differences of detail, which were not enough to consider them as different versions of the proposed figurines. Marta drew up a chair for her father, while she remained standing. He was resting his hands on the tabletop, looking at the drawings one by one, then he said, It's a shame we haven't got drawings of them in profile too, Why, To give us a clearer indication of how to make them, My idea, remember, was to make them all naked and then paint the clothes on afterward, But I don't honestly think that's a viable solution, Why not, You're forgetting that there are one thousand two hundred of them, Yes, I know there are one thousand two hundred of them, Well, modeling one thousand two hundred naked figurines and then putting clothes on each of them, one by one, would just be doing the same thing twice, it would double the workload, You're right, of course, it was stupid of me not to have thought of that, Well, if it comes to it, I was as stupid as you were, we thought the Center would choose at most three or four figurines, and it never occurred to either of us that the first order would be so large, So there's only one way of working, said Marta, Exactly, We model the six figurines that we will use for the molds, fire them, make the wooden mold frames, decide if we're going to work using casting slip or press

molding, Well, I don't think we're experienced enough to use casting slip, knowing the theory of it simply isn't enough, we've always done press molding before, said Cipriano Algor, Fine, then that's what we'll continue to do, As for the mold frames, we can get a carpenter to make them, But first I've got to draw the profiles, said Marta, as well as the backs of the figurines, of course, You'll have to make it up, That won't be difficult, just a few simple lines to show the basic shape. They were two peaceful generals studying the operations map, drawing up strategy and tactics, calculating the costs, assessing the sacrifices to be made. The enemies to beat are these six dolls, half-serious, half-grotesque, made out of painted paper, they will have to be forced into surrender using the weapons of clay and water, wood and plaster, paints and fire, not to mention the tireless stroking of hands, for it is not only love that requires both stroking and hands. That was when Cipriano Algor said, There's one thing we must consider, we should have only two mold pieces, any more will just complicate matters further, Two would be enough I reckon, the dolls are very simple, just front and back and there you are, I daren't even think about the difficulties we would have had if we'd tried making the halberdier or the fencer, the navvy or the flautist, or the lancer on horseback, or the musketeer with his plumed hat, said Marta, Or the skeleton with wings and a scythe, or the holy trinity, said Cipriano Algor, Did it have wings, Which do you mean, The skeleton, Yes, it did, although Lord knows why they depict death with wings when death is everywhere, even in the Center, as I saw this morning, Does it date back to your youth that saying about how if you talk about a boat, it's because you want to embark, commented Marta, No, it's not, it's from the days of your great-grandfather, who never even saw the sea, and if his grandson keeps talking about boats, it's in order to remind himself that he doesn't want to set sail quite yet, Truce, Pa, Why, I see no white flag, Here it is, said Marta, giving him a kiss. Cipriano Algor gathered together the drawings, the battle plan had been drawn up, all that was needed now was to blow the bugle and give the order to attack, Forward, prepare for battle, but at the last moment he saw that a nail was missing from the shoe of a horse belonging to the general staff, the fate of the war might well depend on that horse, that horseshoe and that nail, everyone knows that a lame horse can carry no messages, or, if it does, it risks losing them along the way, There's one other thing, the last I hope, said Cipriano Algor, Now what, The molds, We've already discussed the molds, We've only discussed the matrixes, the wooden mold frames, which we'll keep, but what about the actual molds we'll use, we can't make two hundred figurines from just one mold, it wouldn't last very long, we'd start off with a clean-shaven clown and end up with a bearded nurse. Marta had looked away when she heard his first words, she felt the blood rushing to her face and she could do nothing to force it back down into the protective thickness of veins and arteries where shame and embarrassment go disguised as nonchalance and candor, the fault lay with that word, matrix, and the other words that spring from it, mater, maternity, maternal, the fault lay with her silence, Let's not say anything to my father just yet, she had said, and now she could not keep silent, it's true that being two days late, or even three if we count today, is nothing for most women, but she had always been exact, mathematical, very, very regular, a biological pendulum, so to speak, and had there been the slightest doubt in her

mind she would not have immediately told marçal, but what should she do now, her father is waiting for a reply, her father is looking at her, bemused, she hadn't even laughed at his joke about the bearded nurse, she simply hadn't heard it, Why are you blushing, and she cannot possibly tell him that it's not true, that she isn't blushing, in a little while she will be able to say so, because she will suddenly grow pale, there is no defense against this telltale blood and its two opposing ways of pointing the finger, Pa, I think I'm pregnant, she said and lowered her eyes. Cipriano Algor's eyebrows suddenly shot up, the expression on his face changed from puzzlement to surprised perplexity to confusion, then he seemed to be looking for the most appropriate words in the circumstances, but could find only these, Why are you telling me now, why are you telling me like this, obviously she can't say, Oh, I suddenly remembered, there's been quite enough pretense already, It was because you used the word matrix, Did I really use that word, Yes, when you were talking about the molds, You're right, I did. The dialogue was sliding rapidly into absurdity, into comedy, Marta felt a mad desire to laugh, but then suddenly her eyes filled with tears, the color returned to her face, it is not uncommon for such opposing, contrary emotions to manifest themselves in such similar ways, I think I am, Pa, I think I'm pregnant, But you're not certain yet, Yes, I am, Why did you say that you only thought you were pregnant, then, Oh, I don't know, anxiety, nerves, it's the first time it's happened to me, Presumably marçal knows, Yes, I told him when he came home, So that's why you both seemed so different yesterday morning, Don't be silly, that's just your imagination, we were the same as we always are, And I suppose you think your mother and I were the same as we always were when we found out about you, No, of course not, forgive me. The question that Marta could see coming from the very beginning of that conversation finally arrived, So why didn't you tell me before, We've got quite enough to worry about, Pa, Do you see me looking worried now that I know, asked Cipriano Algor, Well, you don't look exactly happy, remarked Marta, trying to change the way the conversation was going, I'm happy inside, very happy, but you surely don't expect me to break into a dance, it's not really my style, Oh, Pa, I'm sorry, I've hurt you, Yes, you have, if I hadn't used that word matrix, how much longer would I have remained in ignorance of the fact that my daughter is pregnant, how much longer would I have looked at you without knowing that, Pa, please, Probably until it began to show, until you started to feel sick, then I would be the one asking are-you-ill-your-stomach's-all-distended, and you would say don't-be-silly-Pa-I'm-pregnant-and-I-forgot-to-tell-you, Pa, please, said Marta, crying now, today shouldn't be a day for tears, You're right, I'm being selfish, It's not that, No, I am being selfish, but I just can't understand why you didn't tell me, you mentioned worries, well, my worries are exactly the same as yours, the pottery, the pots, the dolls, the future, if you share one thing, you share them all. Marta quickly wiped away her tears with her hands, There was a reason, but it was just some childish idea of mine, imagining feelings that probably don't even exist, and if they do exist, I shouldn't be sticking my nose in where it doesn't belong, What are you talking about, what do you mean, asked Cipriano Algor, but his tone of voice had changed, that allusion to vague feelings whose existence seemed doubtful one minute and perfectly believable the next, had troubled him, I'm talking about Isaura Estudiosa, said Marta as if she were

forcing herself to plunge into a bath of cold water, What, exclaimed her father, It's just that if you were interested in her, as it seems to me sometimes you are, I thought that perhaps coming to you and telling you that you're about to have a grandchild, look, I know it's silly, but I couldn't help it, Couldn't help what, Oh, I don't know, it might make you realize, perhaps make you think that, That I'm being imbecilic, ridiculous, Those are your words, not mine, Put another way, there's the old widower out preening himself and making sheep's eyes at the young widow woman, and along comes the old boy's daughter and tells him he's going to be a grandfather, which is tantamount to saying your time is up and all you can look forward to now is taking your little grandchild out for walks and giving thanks to heaven that you've lived so long, Oh, Pa, You will have great difficulty in convincing me that this wasn't precisely the sort of thinking that lay behind your decision to keep silent about something you should have told me about immediately, I'm so sorry, murmured Marta, giving up, and this time there was no holding back her tears. Her father slowly stroked her hair and said, It's all right, time is a master of ceremonies who always ends up putting us in our rightful place, we advance, stop, and retreat according to his orders, our mistake lies in imagining that we can catch him out. Marta took his hand, which he was about to withdraw, and kissed it, pressing it hard against her lips, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, she said again. Cipriano Algor tried to console her, but the words that came out, It's all right, nothing's that important, were probably not the best suited to the purpose. He went out into the yard with a vague sense that he had been unfair to his daughter, but, more than that, he was aware that he had just said about himself what until today he had refused to admit, that his time as a man had reached its end, that during the last few days a woman called Isaura Estudiosa had been merely a fantasy in his head, an illusion gladly accepted, a last invention by the mind for the consolation of his sad flesh, a trick played on him by the fading evening light, an ephemeral breeze that passed and left no trace, a tiny drop of rain that fell and soon evaporated. The dog Found noticed that once again his master was not in the best of moods, even yesterday, when he had gone to see him at the kiln, he had been surprised by the absent look on his face, that of someone who enjoys thinking about things that are hard to understand. He touched his master's hand with his cold, damp nose, someone really should have taught this primitive animal to proffer one of his front paws as all dogs trained in the social graces end up doing perfectly naturally, moreover, there is no other way of preventing the master's beloved hand from abruptly fleeing that contact, proof, if it were needed, that not all has been resolved in the relationship between human persons and canine persons, perhaps because that dampness and coldness awakens old fears in the most ancient part of our brain, the slow, viscous caress of some giant slug, the chill, undulating touch of a serpent, the glacial breath of a cave inhabited by beings from another world. So much so that Cipriano Algor really does withdraw his hand, although the fact that he immediately strokes Found's head, clearly by way of an apology, must be interpreted as a sign that one day he might react differently, always supposing, of course, that their shared life together lasts long enough for what currently manifests itself as instinctive repugnance to become mere habit. The dog Found cannot understand these subtleties, the use he makes of his nose is natural, it comes to him from nature,

and is therefore more healthily authentic than the way humans shake each other's hands, however cordial that may seem to our eyes and touch. What the dog Found wants to know is where his master will go when he finally emerges from the state of distracted immobility in which he sees him now. In order to communicate to him that he is awaiting a decision, he again touches him with his nose, and when Cipriano Algor immediately headed off toward the kiln, Found's animal mind, which, regardless of what others may say, is the most logical of all the minds to be found in the world, led him to conclude that in the lives of humans once is never enough. While Cipriano Algor sat down heavily on the stone bench, the dog devoted himself to sniffing the large pebble from beneath which the lizard had appeared, but his master's evident concerns weighed more in his mind than the seductions of what would doubtless prove to be a futile hunt, and so it was not long before he had lain down in front of him, prepared for an interesting conversation. The first words that the potter said, So that's that, then, a precise, laconic sentence with no ifs, ands, or buts, did not seem to promise any further developments, however, in these cases, the best thing a dog can do is to remain silent until the silence of his master grows weary, dogs know that human nature is, by definition, a talkative one, imprudent, indiscreet, gossipy, incapable of closing its mouth and keeping it closed. Indeed, we can never imagine the abyssal depths of introspection reached by such an animal when it looks at us, we think he is doing simply that, looking, and we do not realize that he only appears to be looking at us, when the truth is that, having seen us, he moves on, leaving us to flounder like idiots on the surface of ourselves, spattering the world with pointless and fallacious explanations. The silence of the dog and the famous silence of the universe to which we made theological reference elsewhere, an apparently impossible comparison given the vast differences in material and objective size, are, in fact, absolutely equal in density and specific weight to two tears, the difference lying only in the pain that made them form, overflow, and fall. So that's that, then, said Cipriano Algor again, and Found did not even blink, knowing perfectly well that what was being referred to was not the supply of plates to the Center, that's ancient history now, no, there's a woman involved in all this, and it can only be that same Isaura Estudiosa whom he had seen from inside the van when his master delivered the water jug, a woman with a pretty face and a pretty figure, although we must point out that this is not an opinion formulated by Found, concepts like ugly and pretty do not exist for him, the canons of beauty are human ideas, Even if you were the ugliest of men, the dog Found would say of his master were he able to speak, your ugliness would have no meaning for me, I would only find you odd if you acquired a different smell or stroked my head in a different way. The trouble with digressions is the ease with which the digressor can become distracted by diversions, making him lose the thread of words and events, as has just happened to Found, who caught only the second half of the following words spoken by Cipriano Algor, which is why, as you will notice, they do not start with a capital letter, that's it, I won't go running after her any more, said the potter, obviously he wasn't referring to the above-mentioned capital letter, since he doesn't use them when he speaks, but to the woman called Isaura Estudiosa, with whom, from then on, he vowed to have no more dealings, I've been behaving like a stupid child, from now on, I won't go running after her any more, that was

the entire sentence, but the dog Found, although not doubting for a moment the little he had heard, could not help noticing that the melancholy look on his master's face openly contradicted the resolution expressed by his words, although we know that Cipriano Algor's decision is final, Cipriano Algor will not go looking for Isaura Estudiosa, Cipriano Algor is grateful to his daughter for having made him see the light of reason, Cipriano Algor is a grown man, grown up but not yet grown old, not one of those silly adolescents who, because they are at the age of unthinking enthusiasms, spend their time chasing fantasies, will-o'-the-wisps, and imaginings, and they don't give up on them until both their head and the feelings they thought they had collide with the wall of impossibilities. Cipriano Algor got up from the stone bench, he seemed to find it hard to lift his own body, which is not surprising, for the weight of what a man feels is not always the same as the weight registered on the scales, sometimes it's more, sometimes it's less. Cipriano Algor is about to go into the house, but contrary to what was said earlier, he will not thank his daughter for having made him see the light of reason, that is too much to ask of a man who has just given up a dream, modest though it was, a mere widow woman, he will say instead that he is going to order the mold frames from the carpenter, not because that is the most urgent task, but in order to gain a bit of time, when it comes to deadlines, carpenters and tailors can never be relied on, at least that is how it was in the old world, although, what with ready-to-wear and do-it-yourself, the world has changed a lot. Are you still angry with me, asked Marta, I wasn't angry, just a bit disappointed, but it's not a subject we want to go on talking about ad infinitum, you and marçal are going to have a child, I'm going to have a grandchild, and it will all be for the best, with everything in its place, it was time to put an end to fantasies, when I come back, we'll sit down and plan our work, we've got to make the most of this coming week, next week I'll be busy transporting the crockery from the warehouse, at least for most of the day, Take the van, said Marta, there's no point wearing yourself out, It's not worth it, the carpenter doesn't live far away. Cipriano Algor called to the dog, Come on, and Found followed him, He might bump into her, he was thinking. Dogs are like that, they sometimes decide to do their owners' thinking for them.

The very genuine motives for complaint that Cipriano Algor has about the Center's pitiless commercial policy, largely presented in this story from the point of view of frank class solidarity without, or so we believe, ever departing from the most rigorous impartiality, cannot disguise the fact, though we run the risk here of stirring up the slumbering bonfire of the historically difficult relationship between capital and work, cannot, as we were saying, disguise the fact that Cipriano Algor bears some of the blame for this himself, the main reason, ingenuous and innocent enough, but also, as so often with the ingenuous and the innocent, the malignant root of all the other reasons, was his assumption that certain tastes and needs common to his founding grandfather's contemporaries vis-à-vis ceramics would remain unchanged per omnia saecula saeculorum or, at least, for the rest of his life, which, when you think about it, comes to the same thing. We have seen the very traditional way in which the clay here is kneaded, we have seen the rustic, almost primitive wheels they use, we have seen that the kiln outside shows traces of an antiquity unforgivable in this modern age, which, for all its scandalous defects and prejudices, has had the goodness to allow a pottery like this to coexist with a Center like that, at least until now. Cipriano Algor complains and complains, but he does not seem to understand that kneaded clay is no longer stored like this, that it will not be long before the basic ceramics industries of today turn into laboratories with employees in white coats taking notes and with immaculate robots doing all the work. This pottery for example, is crying out for hygrometers to measure the atmospheric humidity and the appropriate electronic mechanisms for keeping it constant and correcting it whenever it gets too high or too low, there is no place now for working things out by eye or by touch, by feel or by smell, according to the retrograde technological procedures of Cipriano Algor, who has just said to his daughter as if it were the most natural thing in the world, The clay's fine, just the right degree of wetness and plasticity, nice and easy to work, now, we ask ourselves, how can he be so sure of what he's saying when all he has done is to place his hand on the clay, if all he has done is to pinch the clay between his thumb, forefinger, and middle finger, as if, with eyes closed, depending entirely on the interrogative sense of touch, he were appreciating, not a homogeneous mixture of red clay, kaolin, silica, and water, but the warp and weft of silk. It is likely, as we have recently had occasion to observe and to propose for consideration, that it is not he, but his fingers who know. At any rate, Cipriano Algor's verdict must be in accordance with the physical reality of the clay because Marta, who is much younger and much more modern, much more in tune with the age we live in, and, as we know, no fool when it comes to making pots, passed without comment to another matter, asking her father, Do you think there's enough here to make one thousand two hundred figurines, Yes, I think so, but I'll try to beef it up a bit. They moved into the part of the pottery where they kept the colors and other finishes, recorded what was there and made a note of what was not, We're going to need more colors than this, said Marta, the dolls have to be attractive to the eye, And we'll need plaster for the molds and ceramic soap and oil for the paints, added Cipriano Algor, we'd better get everything we need now, so that we won't have to stop work in order to go and buy things later. Suddenly Marta looked very thoughtful, What's wrong, asked her father, We've got a really serious problem, What's that, We'd decided to

use press molding, Right, But we haven't discussed the making of the figurines themselves, we can't possibly make one thousand two hundred figurines using press molding, the molds wouldn't take it and we wouldn't be able to work quickly enough, it would be like trying to empty the sea with a bucket, You're right, Which means that we're going to have to resort to slip casting, We don't have much experience with that, but we're not too old to learn, That isn't the worst of it, Pa, What is then, Well, I remember reading, I'm sure we've got the book in the house somewhere, that to do slip casting, it's best not to use a clay that contains kaolin, and ours does, at least thirty percent, My brain clearly isn't what it was, why didn't I think of that, It's not your fault, we're not used to working with casting slip, Yes, I know, but you learn that in pottery kindergarten, it's absolutely basic to the craft. They looked at each other in bewilderment, they were not father and daughter, not future grandfather and future mother, they were just two potters confronted by the enormous and risky task of having to extract the kaolin from the worked clay and then making it less heavy by introducing some lighter clay. In fact, such an alchemical operation is simply impossible. What shall we do, asked Marta, let's look at the book, perhaps, No, it's not worth it, you can't remove kaolin from clay or neutralize it, it doesn't even make sense, how could you remove or neutralize kaolin I ask myself, the only solution is to prepare more clay with the right components, There isn't time, Pa, No, you're right, there isn't. They left the pottery, two dejected figures whom Found did not even attempt to approach, and now they were sitting in the kitchen, looking at the drawings that were looking back at them, and they could see no way of getting over this sticking point, they knew from experience that heavy clays tend to shrink too much, to crack and become distorted, they are too plastic, soft, pliable, but they did not know how this would affect the casting slip nor what negative consequences this might have for the finished work. Marta looked for and found the book, there it said that to prepare the slip, it was not enough to dissolve the clay in water, you had to use deflocculants, such as sodium silicate, or soda ash, or potassium silicate, or even caustic soda if it wasn't such dangerous stuff to handle, ceramics is the art in which it is truly impossible to separate chemistry from its physical and dynamic effects, but what the book doesn't say is what will happen to my dolls if I make them with the only clay I've got, and about which there is nothing I can do, the other problem is quantity, if there were only a few of them, we would use press molding, but one thousand two hundred, good grief. If I understand it correctly, said Cipriano Algor, the most important things to bear in mind with casting slip are density and viscosity, Yes, it explains that here, said Marta, Read it, then, The ideal density is one point seven, in other words, one liter of slip should weigh one thousand seven hundred grams, if you don't have a suitable densimeter and you want to know the density of the slip, use a test tube and a pair of scales, minus the weight of the test tube of course, And what about viscosity, To measure viscosity, use a viscosimeter, of which there are various types, each of them giving readings drawn from scales based on different criteria, It's not much help that book, Yes, it is, pay attention, All right, One of the most frequently used is the torsion viscosimeter which gives a reading in degrees Gallenkamp, Who was he, It doesn't say, Read on, According to that scale, the ideal viscosity is between two hundred and sixty and three hundred and

sixty degrees, Can't you find anything in there I can understand, asked Cipriano Algor, Coming up now, said Marta, and she read, In our case we will use a traditional method, which, though empirical and imprecise, can, with practice, give an approximate measurement, Which method is that, Plunge your hand deep into the casting slip, then take it out and let the slip run off your open hand, if it forms a membrane between the fingers like a duck's webbed foot then the viscosity is right, Like a duck's webbed foot, Yes, like a duck's foot. Marta put the book down and said, We're not much farther forward, Yes, we are, now we know that we won't be able to work without deflocculants and that until we have duck's feet we won't have any usable casting slip, Well, I'm glad you're in a good mood, Moods are like the tides, they come in and they go out, mine has just come in, we'll see how long it lasts, It has to last, this house is in your hands, The house is, yes, but not life, Has the tide gone out already, asked Marta, It's hesitant, vacillating, not quite sure whether it's high tide or low tide, Then stay with me, because I'm in a fluctuating mood, as if I wasn't quite sure that I am what I think I am, Sometimes I think we might be better off not knowing who we are, said Cipriano Algor, Like Found, Yes, I imagine that a dog knows less about himself than he does about his master, he can't even recognize himself in a mirror, Perhaps a dog's mirror is his master, perhaps that's the only mirror in which he can recognize himself, suggested Marta, It's a nice idea, You see, even wrong ideas can be nice, If the pottery goes under, we can always breed dogs, There are no dogs at the Center, Poor Center, not even dogs want to live there, It's the Center that doesn't want the dogs, Well, that problem is of interest solely to those who live there, said Cipriano Algor in an angry tone of voice. Marta did not respond, realizing that anything she said might give rise to another argument. As she reordered the somewhat dog-eared drawings yet again, she thought, If marçal comes home tomorrow and says that he's been made a resident guard, that we have to move, then what we're doing now makes no sense, whether Pa comes with us or not, one way or another the pottery will be condemned, even if he insists on staying, he can't work on his own and he knows that. What thoughts Cipriano Algor had meanwhile remain a mystery, and it's hardly worth inventing some which might not coincide with any real and actual thoughts he had, however, always supposing that words were not given to man in order to conceal his thoughts, it would be permissible for us to conclude from what the potter said after a long silence, There's nothing wrong with having illusions, what's wrong is deluding yourself, that he had probably been thinking the same as his daughter and that, logically speaking, they would both have reached the same conclusions. Anyway, said Cipriano Algor, without realizing, or perhaps only realizing at the very moment in which he spoke it, what sibylline subtleties it contained, anyway, a moored boat goes nowhere, whatever happens tomorrow, we've got to work today, there's no way of knowing if the tree you plant will also turn out to be the tree you hang yourself from, In an oil slick like that our boat will never get anywhere, said Marta, but you're quite right, time isn't out there waiting for us, we have to start work, my first task is to draw the side views and back views of the figures and color them in, I should finish them by tonight if no one disturbs me, We're not expecting any visitors, said Cipriano Algor, and I'll make the lunch, It's just a matter of heating it up, so all you have to do is make a salad, said Marta. She

went off to get the drawing paper, watercolors, paint pots, and brushes and an old rag to dry them on, placed everything neatly and methodically on the table, sat down, and picked up the drawing of the bearded Assyrian, I'll start with this one, she said, Simplify as much as possible so that we won't have any problems with bits sticking or catching when the mold is removed, two molds will be enough, a third one would be beyond us, All right, I won't forget. Cipriano Algor remained for a few minutes watching his daughter draw, then he went outside to the pottery. He was going to grapple with the clay, to lift the weights and barbells involved in learning something anew, to rediscover a lost dexterity and to make a few experimental figures that are clearly not jesters or clowns, Eskimos or nurses, nor Assyrians or mandarins, figures that anyone, man or woman, young or old, could look at and say, They look just like me. And perhaps one of those people, woman or man, old or young, out of the pleasure or possible vanity of taking home with them that extraordinarily faithful representation of the image they have of themselves, will come to the pottery and ask Cipriano Algor how much that figurine over there costs, and Cipriano Algor will tell them that it's not for sale, and the person will ask why, and he will reply, Because it's me. It was late afternoon, almost dusk, when Marta came into the pottery and said, I've finished, I've left them to dry on the kitchen table. Then, noticing the work her father had been doing, two unfinished standing figures about two spans high, one male, the other female, both naked, and one of whom has a bit of wire sticking out of one shoulder, she said, Not bad, Pa, not bad, but don't forget that our figurines won't need to be so big, we were thinking of a height of about one span, They should be a bit bigger than that, I think, then they'll stand out more on the shelves in the Center, and we have to take into account shrinkage inside the kiln when they lose the last bit of moisture, besides, I was just experimenting, No, I think they're good, I really do, and they're not like anything else I've ever seen, although the woman does remind me of someone, Make up your mind, said Cipriano Algor, first you say they're nothing like anything you've ever seen and then you say the woman reminds you of someone, It's a kind of dual impression, of strangeness and familiarity, Perhaps I won't have to breed dogs after all, perhaps I can take up sculpture, which is, so I hear, one of the more lucrative arts, An exemplary family of artists, commented Marta with a half-ironic smile, Fortunately, we've got marçal, so all is not lost, replied Cipriano Algor, but he did not smile.

This was the first day of creation. On the second day, the potter went into town to buy plaster for the molds, as well as the soda ash he had decided to use as a deflocculant, colors, a few plastic buckets, new wooden and wire spatulas, paddles and drill bits. The question of colors had been the subject of lively debate during and after supper on that first day, the point of controversy being whether the figurines should be placed in the kiln after being painted or if, on the contrary, they should be painted after firing and then not refired. If they chose one way, the paints had to be of one kind, and if they chose the other way, the paints had to be of another, so the decision had to be made at once, it could not be left until the last minute, when they were sitting poised with brush in hand, It's a question of aesthetics, said Marta, It's a question of time, said

Cipriano Algor, and confidence, Painting them before firing will give them a glossier, higher-quality finish, she insisted, But if we paint them afterward, we avoid any unpleasant surprises, the color we use is the one that will remain, we won't be dependent on the effect on the pigments of firing, because you know how temperamental the kiln can be. Cipriano Algor's view prevailed, the colors to be bought would, therefore, be those known in the specialist market as china paints, quick-drying and easy to apply, with a great variety of colors, and, as for a dilutant, which is essential because the paint itself is normally far too thick, if you don't want to use a synthetic dilutant, ordinary lamp oil will do. Marta opened the art book again, looked for the chapter on cold painting and read, To be applied to pieces that have already been fired, the piece should be sanded down with fine sandpaper so as to eliminate any rough edges or other defects in the finish, rendering the surface more uniform and allowing the paint to adhere more easily in areas where the piece may have been overfired, Sanding down one thousand two hundred figurines is going to take forever, Once this has been done, Marta read on, you must remove any trace of dust produced by sanding, using a compressor, We haven't got a compressor, said Cipriano Algor, Another preferable albeit slower method is to use a stiff brush, The old ways have their advantages, Not always, Marta corrected him, and went on, As happens with nearly all such colors, china paints do not remain homogeneous in the can for very long, which is why it is essential to stir well before applying, That's elementary, everyone knows that, skip to the next bit, The colors can be applied directly to the piece, but they adhere better if you begin by applying an undercoat, usually matte white, We hadn't thought of that, It's difficult to think of things you don't know about, I disagree, I think we think about things precisely because we don't know about them, Leave that enthralling idea for another time and just listen, I am listening, The undercoat can be applied with a brush, but in order to achieve a smooth coat, there is some advantage in using a spray gun, We haven't got one, Or else dipping, That's the classic way of doing it, so let's use dipping, The whole process will be carried out cold, Good, Once painted and dried, the piece should not and cannot be subject to any further firing, That's what I was telling you, it saves time, It gives some other recommendations too, but the most important is that you must let the first color dry completely before applying the next, unless you want to achieve a layered or fused effect, We don't want effects or transparencies, we want speed, this isn't oil painting, Anyway, the mandarin's costume will need more careful treatment, said Marta, remember the design itself calls for great diversity and richness of color, We'll simplify it. Those words closed the debate, but the debate continued in Cipriano Algor's mind as he was making his purchases, for, at the last moment, he bought a spray gun. Given the size of the figurines, there's no point in applying a thick undercoat, he explained to his daughter, I think the gun will work best, just give the figurine a quick spray and there you are, We'll need masks, said Marta, Masks are expensive, we haven't got money to spend on luxuries, It's not a luxury, it's a precaution, we're going to be breathing in a cloud of paint, That's easily solved, How, I'll do the work outside in the open air, the weather looks set fair, Why did you say I'll do it rather than we'll do it, asked Marta, Because you're pregnant and I'm not, as far as I know, Your good humor's returned, Pa, Oh, I do my best, and I realize that there are

some things that are slipping away from me and others that are threatening to do so, I just have to work out which of them it's worth struggling to hold on to and which I should just let slip away painlessly, Or painfully, The worst pain, my dear, isn't the pain you feel at the time, it's the pain you feel later on when there's nothing you can do about it, They say that time heals all wounds, But we never live long enough to test that theory, said Cipriano Algor, and at that precise moment he realized that he was working at the very wheel over which his wife had collapsed when she suffered her fatal heart attack. Then, obliged to do so by his own moral honesty, he asked himself if the pain of which he had spoken also included that death, or if it was true that, in that particular case, time had carried out its work as master healer, or if the pain invoked was not, after all, about death, but about life, about lives, yours, mine, ours, whoever's. Cipriano Algor was working on the figure of the nurse, Marta was busy with the clown, but neither of them felt satisfied with their successive attempts, perhaps because copying is, in the end, more difficult than creating freely, at least that might be the view of Cipriano Algor, who had conceived those two figures, male and female, with such passion and spontaneity, and which are over there, wrapped in damp cloths so that they do not dry out and allow the spirit that keeps them erect, static, and yet alive to crack. Marta and Cipriano Algor have their work cut out for them, part of the clay they are using now comes from other figures they had to discard and knead, so it is with all things in this world, words, for example, which are not things, which merely designate things as best they can, and in doing so shape them, even if employed with exemplary correctness, always assuming that this could happen, words are used millions of times and rejected as many times again, and then we, tails between our legs, like the dog Found when he shrinks with shame, must humbly go in search of them again, like the pounded clay that they are, kneaded and chewed, swallowed down and regurgitated, the eternal return really does exist, but not in that form, in this. The clown Marta has made might be usable, the jester too bears some resemblance to a real jester, but the nurse, who had seemed so simple, so straightforward, so clear-cut, refuses to allow her breasts to emerge from beneath the clay, as if she too were wrapped in a damp cloth and was keeping a tight grip on the corners. Only when the first week of creation was nearly over, when Cipriano Algor was about to move into the first week of destruction, picking up the crockery from the Center warehouse and getting rid of it somewhere like so much useless rubbish, did the fingers of the two potters, simultaneously free and disciplined, finally begin to invent and forge the straight path that will lead them to the right shape, the precise line, the harmonious whole. Moments never arrive either late or early, they merely arrive at the right time for them, not for us, there is no need to feel grateful when what they propose happens to coincide with what we need. On the half day during which her father will be carrying out the absurd task of unloading as useless trash the very objects he had loaded onto the van as being surplus to requirements, Marta will be alone in the pottery with her half dozen figurines almost finished, busy now with sharpening up any blurred angles and in rounding out any curves unwittingly lost in the modeling process, evening out the height, strengthening the bases, working out for each of the statues the optimum seams for the two molds. The mold frames have not yet been delivered by the carpenter, the plaster is

waiting inside great sacks made of thick impermeable paper, but the time to multiply is approaching.

When Cipriano Algor returned home on the first day of the week of destruction, more incensed at the indignity of it all than exhausted by the effort involved, he recounted to his daughter the absurd adventure of a man traipsing around the countryside in search of some deserted place where he could unload the useless crocks he was carrying, as if it were his own excrement, Caught with my trousers down, he was saying, that's what I felt like on the two occasions when people came to ask me what I was doing there, on private property, with a van overflowing with pots and plates, I had to make up some feeble excuse about trying to get to a road farther along and thinking that this was the best route to take, I'm terribly sorry, and by the way, if there's anything in the van you'd like, I'll be happy to give it to you, one of them was very rude and said that, in his house, even the animals wouldn't eat their food off rubbish like that, but the other one took a fancy to a casserole dish and carried it off, So where did you leave the stuff in the end, Near the river, Where, Well, I'd thought a natural cave would be the best bet, but even then there was always the chance that the things would be on full view to anyone passing by and that they would immediately recognize the product and the maker, and we've suffered enough embarrassments and humiliations as it is, I don't feel particularly embarrassed or humiliated, Perhaps you would if you had been in my place from the beginning, Yes, you're probably right, so did you manage to find somewhere, The ideal hollow, Is there such a thing as the ideal hollow, asked Marta, That depends on what you want to put inside it, but imagine in this case a large, more or less circular hollow with trees and bushes growing in it, about nine feet deep and with an easy slope down into it, which, seen from the outside, looks like a green island in the middle of the countryside, in the winter it fills up with water, in fact, there's still some water in the bottom now, It's about a hundred yards from the river edge, said Marta, Oh, so you know it, said her father, Yes, I discovered it when I was ten years old, and it really was the ideal hollow, whenever I went down into it, I felt as if I were going through a door into another world, Yes, I used to go down there too when I was about that age, And my grandfather when he was that age, And my grandfather too, Everything is lost in the end, Pa, for years the hollow was just a hollow, as well as a magic door for a few imaginative children, and now, it'll get filled up with debris and it will be neither one thing nor the other, There aren't that many pots and plates and the brambles will soon grow over them, no one will even notice, So you left it all there, did you, Yes, I did, At least it's near the village, one day, one of the children here, if, that is, they still visit the ideal hollow, will turn up at home with a cracked plate, they'll ask him where he found it and, before you know it, everyone will be rushing over there to take their pick of the very things that, right now, nobody wants, It wouldn't surprise me in the least, that's the way people are. Cipriano Algor finished the cup of coffee that his daughter had placed before him when he got home and asked, Any sign of the carpenter, No, Right, I'd better go over there and chivy him along, Yes, I think you'd better. The potter got up, I'm going to have a wash, he said, then took a few short steps and stopped, What's this, he asked, What, This, he was

pointing at a plate covered with an embroidered napkin, It's a cake, You made a cake, No, I didn't make it, someone brought it over, it's a present, Who from, Guess, I'm not in the mood for guessing games, But this one's really easy. Cipriano Algor shrugged as if to say that he wasn't interested and said again that he was going to have a wash, but he did not move, he did not take the step that would carry him out of the kitchen, a debate was going on inside his head between two potters, one was arguing that it was our duty to behave naturally under all circumstances, that if someone is kind enough to bring us a cake covered with an embroidered napkin, it is only right and proper to ask whom one should thank for this unexpected generosity, and if, in reply, we are told to guess, it would look most suspicious if we pretended not to hear, these little games played in families and in society are not of great importance, no one is going to draw hasty conclusions if we guess correctly, mainly because the number of people who might give us a cake is never going to be that large, indeed often there might be only one, that, at least, is what one of the potters was saying, but the other replied that he was not prepared to play the part of fall guy in some silly circus game of riddles, that it was precisely because he did know the name of the person who had brought the cake that he would not say it, and also because the worst thing about conclusions, at least in some cases, is not that they might occasionally be hasty, but that they are precisely that, conclusions. So, you don't want to guess, then, insisted Marta, smiling, and Cipriano Algor, slightly annoyed with his daughter and very annoyed with himself, but aware that the only way out of the hole he had dug for himself was to admit defeat and turn back, abruptly said a name, though wrapping it up in words, It was the widow, our neighbor, Isaura Estudiosa, as a thank-you for the water jug. Marta shook her head slowly, Her name isn't Isaura Estudiosa, she said, it's Isaura Madruga, Ah, I see, said Cipriano Algor, thinking that now there would be no need to ask Isaura, So what's your maiden name, but then he immediately reminded himself that, while sitting on the stone bench beside the kiln, with the dog Found as witness, he had decided to declare null and void all the words that had been exchanged and all the incidents that had occurred between him and the widow Estudiosa, let us not forget that the words pronounced were So that's that, then, one does not bring an episode in one's sentimental life to such a peremptory close only to unsay what you have said two days later. The immediate effect of these reflections was for Cipriano Algor to adopt such a convincingly nonchalant, superior air that he was able to remove the napkin without a tremor and say, It looks good. It was at that moment that Marta thought fit to add, In a way it's a good-bye present. The hand was slowly lowered, delicately replacing the napkin on top of the cake like a circular crown, Goodbye, Marta heard him ask, Yes, if she doesn't manage to find any work here, Work, You keep repeating what I've just said, Pa, No, I don't, I'm not some kind of echo and I don't keep repeating everything you've said. Marta ignored this answer, We had a cup of coffee, and I wanted to cut a slice of the cake, but she wouldn't let me, she was here for over an hour, we chatted, she told me a bit about her life, the story of her marriage, how they never got a chance to find out whether theirs was a happy marriage or whether the happiness was just beginning to fade, those were her words, not mine, anyway, if she can't find any work, she's going back to where she came from and where

she still has family, There's no work for anyone around here, said Cipriano Algor gloomily, That's what she thinks too, that's why the cake is like the first half of a good-bye, Well, I hope I'm not here when the second half arrives, Why, asked Marta. Cipriano Algor did not answer. He left the kitchen and entered his bedroom, undressed rapidly, glanced at what the wardrobe mirror revealed to him of his body and went into the bathroom. A little salt water mingled with the fresh water falling from the shower.

With remarkable and reassuring unanimity, the dictionaries all define ridiculous as meaning anything deserving of mockery or laughter, anything that merits scorn, seems ludicrous or lends itself to comedy. For dictionaries, the particular circumstance does not appear to exist, although when they have to explain what it is, they describe it simply as a state or quality that accompanies a fact, which, in parenthesis, clearly warns us not to separate the facts from their circumstances and not to judge the former without first considering the latter. Yet could there be anything more profoundly ridiculous than Cipriano Algor wearing himself out trudging down the slope into the hollow, carrying the unwanted crockery in his arms, instead of hurling it willy-nilly down from above, transforming it instantly into mere crocks as he scornfully referred to it when describing to his daughter the various stages of the whole traumatic journey. The ridiculous, however, knows no limits. If one day, as Marta imagined, a boy from the village were to retrieve a cracked plate from the rubble and take it home with him, we can be sure that the unfortunate defect had either occurred in the warehouse itself or been caused, given the inevitable clashing of pots and plates, by the uneven road surface during the trip from the Center to the hollow. We have only to observe the care with which Cipriano Algor goes down the slope, the trouble he takes in placing the various bits of pottery on the ground, in keeping like with like, fitting one inside the other when he can and when it seems advisable, it is enough to see this laughable scene with our own eyes for us to state categorically that not a single plate was broken, that not a single cup lost its handle and not a single teapot was deprived of its spout. The regular lines of piled-up pottery fill one chosen corner of the hollow, they encircle the trunks of the trees, snake about among the low vegetation as if it had been written in some great book that they should remain like that until the end of time and until the unlikely resurrection of their remains. Some will say that Cipriano Algor's behavior is utterly ridiculous, but even here we must not forget the crucial importance of point of view, we are referring this time to marçal Gacho, who, home once more for his day off, and fulfilling what might normally be understood as elementary duties of family solidarity, not only helped his father-in-law to unload the pottery, but also, without any show of puzzlement or bemused perplexity, without asking any questions direct or indirect, without a single ironic or pitying glance, calmly followed his example, even, on his own initiative, steadying some perilously swaying stack, neatening a ragged line, and reducing the height of any piles that have grown excessively tall. It would therefore be only natural, should Marta ever repeat the unfortunate pejorative term which she used in conversation with her father, that her own husband, with the irrefutable authority of one who has seen something with his own eyes, would correct her, It isn't debris. And if she, whom we have come to know as someone who requires clear explanations of all things, were to insist that it was indeed debris, which is the name that has always been used to designate detritus and other useless matter used to fill up holes, apart, of course, from human remains, which are called something else entirely, marçal would doubtless say to her in his grave voice, It isn't debris, I was there. Nor, he would add, should the question arise, is it ridiculous.

Awaiting them when they got home were two novelties, each important in its own

way The carpenter had finally delivered the mold frames, and Marta had read in her book that when filling with casting slip, one could only sensibly expect one mold to yield forty satisfactory copies, That means, said Cipriano Algor, that we will need at least thirty molds, five for every two hundred figurines, which means a lot of work before and a lot of work afterward, and, given our lack of experience, we can't be sure that the molds will work perfectly anyway, When do you reckon you'll have finished removing all the crockery from the Center warehouse, asked Marta, I shouldn't think I'll need the whole of the second week, just two or three days might be enough, This is the second week, said marçal, Yes, the second week of the four weeks, but the first week of ferrying the crockery back and forth, the third week will be the second week of actual production, explained Marta, With all these different weeks, I'm not surprised you and your father are a bit disoriented, We each have our own reasons for being disoriented, I, for example, am pregnant and haven't quite got used to the idea, And your father, He can speak for himself if he wants to, The only disorientation I'm suffering from is having to make one thousand two hundred clay dolls without the faintest idea whether or not I'll be able to do it, said Cipriano Algor. They were standing in the pottery, where, lined up on the work surface, were the six figurines, looking exactly and dramatically what they were, six insignificant objects, some more grotesque than others because of what they represented, but all identical in their poignant futility. Marta had removed the damp cloths wrapped about them so that her husband could see the dolls, but she almost regretted it, for it was as if those obtuse idols had not deserved all the work that had gone into creating them, the repeated making and unmaking, the trying and failing, the experimenting and adjusting, it is not only great works of art that are born out of suffering and doubt, even a simple clay body and a few simple clay limbs sometimes refuse to surrender to the fingers modeling them, to the eyes interrogating them, to the will calling them into being. Any other time and I would have asked for some leave so that I could help you out, said marçal. Although that sentence was apparently complete, it contained problematic implications which did not need to be articulated in order for Cipriano Algor to understand them. What marçal had wanted to say and what, without actually doing so, he had in fact said, was that, since he was awaiting a more or less definite promotion to the rank of resident guard, his superiors would not be very pleased with him if he went off on holiday at that precise moment, as if public notification of his rise on the career ladder were a banal episode of little importance. That was the most obvious and probably the least problematic of whatever other implications there might be. The heart of the matter, which marçal's words unwittingly concealed, was a sense of continuing concern about the future of the pottery, about the work carried out there and the people who did the work and who, for better or worse, had, until then, made a living from it. Those six figurines were like six ironic, insistent question marks, each of them asking Cipriano Algor if he was still confident that he had the necessary strength, and for how long, dear sir, to run the pottery alone when his daughter and son-in-law went to live at the Center, if he was naive enough to think that he could fulfill with satisfactory regularity the ensuing orders, always assuming there were any more orders, and, indeed, if he was foolish enough to imagine that from now on his relationship with the Center and

with the head of the buying department, both commercial and personal, would be one long honeymoon, or, as the Eskimo was asking with discomfiting acuity and bitter skepticism, Do you really think they are always going to want me. It was at this point that Cipriano Algor remembered Isaura Madruga, he thought that she could help him in the work at the pottery, sit beside him in the van on his trips to the Center, he thought of her in diverse and ever more intimate and soothing situations, having lunch at the same table, chatting on the stone bench, giving Found his food, picking the fruit from the mulberry tree, lighting the lamp above the door, drawing back the sheets on the bed, these thoughts were doubtless too many and too adventurous for someone who had not even wanted to try a slice of cake. marçal's words did not, of course, require an answer, they merely verified a fact obvious to all, it was just as if he had said, I would like to help you, but I can't, nevertheless, Cipriano Algor thought he should give expression to some of the thoughts that had filled the silence following Manual's words, not the intimate thoughts, which he keeps locked up in the strongbox of his pathetic old man's pride, but those which, in one way or another, whether they want to admit it or not, are common to those living in the house, and which can be summed up in little more than half a dozen words, I wonder what tomorrow holds for us. He said, It's as if we were walking in the dark, with each step we take, we could as easily go forward as fall flat on our face, we'll soon be worrying about what awaits us once the first order goes on sale, we'll start calculating how long they'll want to keep us on, a long time, a short time, no time at all, it will be like plucking the petals off a daisy to see what answer we get, Not unlike life really, remarked Marta, Yes, except that what would once have been a process of years will now take weeks or days, the future suddenly seems very short, in fact, I think I've said as much before. Cipriano Algor paused, then added with a shrug, Which just proves that it must be true, There are only two ways ahead, said Marta, resolute and impatient, we either continue working as we have up until now, without thinking about anything except how to make a good job of what we're doing, or else we give up, tell the Center that we can't complete the order and wait, Wait for what, asked marçal, For you to be promoted and for us to move to the Center, and for my father to decide once and for all if he wants to stay or to go with us, what we can't do is carry on in this will-we-won't-we situation that has been going on for weeks now, In other words, said Cipriano Algor, if Dad would only die, we could get on with the soup, I'll forgive you for what you've just said, replied Marta, because I know what's going on inside your mind, Don't fall out about it, please, begged marçal, I get quite enough of that from my own family, Calm down, don't worry, said Cipriano Algor, although it might look like it to some people, your wife and I never really fall out, No, although there are times when I feel like hitting you, threatened Marta, smiling, and it will only get worse you know, people have told me that pregnant women often suffer sudden mood changes, they have caprices, fads, tantrums, crying attacks, and violent rages, so prepare yourselves for what is to come, For my part, I'm resigned to it, said Manual, then addressing Cipriano Algor, What about you, Pa, Oh, I've been resigned to it for years, ever since she was born, At last, all power to the woman, tremble, O men, tremble and be afraid, exclaimed Marta. This time the potter did not adopt his daughter's jovial tone of voice, instead he spoke calmly and seriously as

if he were picking up one by one words that had been set down in the place where they had been thought and left to ripen, no, these words had not been thought and left to ripen, they emerged at that moment from his mind like roots suddenly rising to the surface of the soil, Work will proceed normally, he said, I will fulfill our commitments as best I can, without protest or complaint, and when marçal receives his promotion then I will consider the situation, You'll consider the situation, asked Marta, what does that mean, Since it will be impossible to keep the pottery going, I will close it and cease being one of the Center's suppliers, Fine, and what will you live on then, where, how, with whom, insisted Marta, I will go and live with my daughter and my son-in-law at the Center, that is, if they still want me to. This unexpectedly clear statement from Cipriano Algor elicited very different responses from his daughter and from his son-in-law. marçal exclaimed, At last, and he went over and embraced his father-in-law, You've no idea how pleased I am, it's been like a doubt gnawing away at me. Marta looked at her father skeptically at first, like someone who cannot quite believe what they are hearing, but gradually her face lit up with understanding, it was her memory hard at work reminding her of certain popular sayings, certain snippets from the classics, certain old saws, it did not, it is true, recall everything there was to recall, for example, burn your boats, burn your bridges, make a clean break, cut the Gordian knot, cut loose, cut and run, in for a penny, in for a pound, a dying man needs no advice, cut your losses, sour grapes, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, all these and many more, and all meaning more or less the same thing, I don't want what I can't have, and what I can't have I don't want. Marta went over to her father and stroked his face with a long, tender, almost maternal caress, It will be better this way, if that's what you really want, she murmured, and she gave no other sign of contentment than the little conveyed by those few, plain words, but she was sure that her father would understand that this was not out of indifference but out of respect. Cipriano Algor placed his hands on his daughter's shoulders, then drew her to him, kissed her on the forehead and, in a low voice, said the words she wanted to hear or to read in his eyes, Thank you. marçal did not ask Thank you for what, he had long ago learned that the territory in which this father and daughter moved was not just peculiar to that family, it was in some way sacred and inaccessible. It was not jealousy he felt, merely the melancholy of one who knows himself to be definitively excluded not, however, from that territory, which could never be his, but from another in which, if they were ever there or if he could ever be there with them, he would at last find and recognize his own father and his own mother. He realized, without much surprise, that now that his father-in-law had decided to go and live at the Center with them, the idea of his parents selling their house in the village in order to do the same would inevitably be set aside, however hard that might be for them and however much they protested, first, because one of the Center's inflexible rules, determined and imposed by the actual structure of the living quarters, is not to admit large families, and second, because since the two families have never got on well, one can easily imagine the hell their lives would become if they were all crammed together in a small space. Despite certain situations and certain outbursts that might lead one to conclude the opposite, marçal does not deserve to be considered a bad son, it is not his fault alone that his feelings and desires

do not accord with those of his family, and yet, providing still further proof that the human soul is a poisoned well of contradictions, he is glad not to have to live in the same house as those who brought him into being. Now that Marta is pregnant, let us hope that mysterious Fate does not confirm in her and in him those ancient dictums, Like breeds like and Do as you would be done by. It is true, however, that one way or another, by a kind of infallible tropism, filial nature drives children to find substitute parents when, for good motives or bad, for reasons fair or unfair, they cannot, will not or are unable to recognize themselves in their own parents. Indeed, for all its defects, life loves balance, if it was up to life every cloud would have a silver lining, every concavity would have its convexity, there would be no farewell without an arrival, and word, gesture and glance would behave like inseparable triplets who always say the same thing in all circumstances. By routes whose detailed description we do not feel fitted or able to carry out, but of whose existence and intrinsic communicative value we are absolutely convinced, it was precisely the above-mentioned cluster of observations that planted an idea in marçal Gacho's head, an idea that was immediately transmitted to his father-in-law with due filial enthusiasm, We could transport what's left of the crockery in the warehouse in one load, he announced, You don't even know how much is left, there are a good few vanloads yet, objected Cipriano Algor, I'm not talking about vans, I mean that an ordinary truck would be enough to carry all of it in one load, And where are we going to find this precious truck, asked Marta, We'll hire one, That would cost me money I could ill afford, said the potter, but hope made his voice tremble, It would just take one day's work, if we pooled our money, ours and yours, I'm sure we could do it, and besides, with me working as a security guard at the Center, we might get a discount, it's worth a try, With just me doing all the loading and unloading I don't think I could manage, my arms and legs are killing me as it is, You won't be alone, I'll go with you, said marçal, No, they might recognize you and that could look bad, Oh, I don't think there's much danger of that, I've only ever been to the buying department once, and in dark glasses and a beret, I could be anyone, It's a good idea, very good, said Marta, then we could get straight on with the work of making the dolls, That's what I thought, said marçal, Me too, admitted Cipriano Algor. They stood looking at each other, silent and smiling, until the potter asked, When shall we do it, Tomorrow if you like, replied marçal, we can use my free time, we won't get another chance for another ten days and then it will be too late, Tomorrow, repeated Cipriano Algor, that would mean we could set to work properly immediately afterward, Exactly, said marçal, and gain nearly two weeks, You've given me new heart, said the potter, then he asked, How shall we do it, I don't think there are any trucks for hire in the village, We'll hire one in the city, we'll set off first thing tomorrow so that we have time to find someone who'll give us a good price, Look, I know that's the best plan, said Marta, but I really think you should have lunch with your parents, you didn't go last time you were home and they're bound to be put out. marçal bristled, I don't feel like it, and besides, he turned to his father-in-law and asked, What time do you have to be at the warehouse, At four, You see, there isn't time to have lunch with my parents, drive all the way to the city, hire a truck and be at the warehouse to pick up the crockery, Tell them you've got to have lunch really early, There still won't be time, and

anyway I don't want to, I'll go next time I'm home, At least phone your mother, All right, I'll phone her, but don't be surprised if she asks me again when we're moving. Cipriano Algor had left his daughter and son-in-law to discuss the momentous question of the Gacho family lunch and had gone over to where the six dolls stood on the worktable. He very carefully removed the damp cloths and studied the figures closely one by one, they just needed a little retouching on their heads and faces, parts of the body which, on such small figurines, little more than a span high, would inevitably be affected by the pressure of the cloths, Marta will be in charge of restoring them to new, then they will remain uncovered in order to dry off before being placed in the kiln. A shudder of pleasure ran through Cipriano Algor's aching body, he felt as if he were about to begin the most difficult and delicate task of his life as a potter, the potentially hazardous firing of an object of enormous aesthetic value modeled by a great artist who did not mind lowering himself to work in the precarious conditions of this humble place, and who, and we are speaking now of both object and artist, could not possibly accept the ruinous consequences that would result from a variation in heat of just one degree in either direction. What this is really about, without making a great drama out of it, is placing half a dozen insignificant figurines in the kiln and firing them in order to produce two hundred equally insignificant copies from each one, some say that our fate is already planned for us when we are born, but what is clear is that only a few come into this world to make clay adams and eves or to multiply loaves and fishes. Marta and marçal had left the pottery, she in order to make the supper and he to deepen his incipient relationship with the dog Found, who, although reluctant to accept without protest a uniform in the family, does seem prepared to adopt a position of tacit acquiescence as long as the said uniform is replaced, on arrival, by some type of civil garment, whether ancient or modern, new or old, clean or dirty, Found really doesn't mind. Cipriano Algor is now alone in the pottery. He absentmindedly tested the solidity of one of the mold frames, quite unnecessarily moved a bag of plaster and, as if his steps had been guided not by will but by chance, found himself standing before the two figures he had modeled, the man and the woman. In a matter of seconds, the man had been transformed into a shapeless ball of clay. The woman might have survived if the question Marta would be sure to ask him the following morning had not rung in his ears, Why, why the man and not the woman, why only one and not both of them. The woman's clay soon joined that of the man, they are once more one clay.

The first act of the play is over, the scenery has been removed, the actors are resting from their exertions in the final climactic scene. Not a single piece of pottery made by the Algor family remains in the Center's warehouses, apart from a scattering of red dust on the shelves, it is always as well to recall that the cohesive nature of matter is not eternal, if the continual rubbing of time's invisible fingers can so easily destroy marble and granite, what will it not do to mere clay of precarious composition and doubtless the product of somewhat hit-and-miss firing. marçal Gacho went unrecognized in the buying department thanks to the beret and dark glasses he was wearing, not to mention his unshaven face, which he had deliberately left unshaven in order to make his protective disguise still more effective, since among the various distinguishing characteristics of a Center security guard is a perfect, closely shaven chin. The assistant head of department was, however, puzzled by the suddenly improved mode of transport, a logical feeling for a person who had more than once allowed himself an ironic smile at the sight of Cipriano Algor's ancient van, but what was surprising, to say the least, was the barely contained irritation evident in his eyes and in his face when Cipriano Algor informed him that he had come to take away the rest of the crockery, All of it, the man asked, All of it, replied the potter, I've brought a truck and someone to help me. If this demonstrably ill-natured assistant head of department were to have any kind of future in the story we have been following, we would probably eventually get around to asking him to explain what lay behind his feelings on that occasion, that is, to explain the underlying reason for his clearly illogical annoyance, which he either made no attempt to hide or else was simply incapable of doing so. He would doubtless try to fob us off by saying, for example, that he had grown used to Cipriano Algor's daily visits and, although he could not in all honesty say that they were friends, he had grown rather fond of him, especially given the poor man's distinctly inauspicious professional situation. A barefaced lie, of course, since if we go beyond merely uncovering the depths and excavate the even lower depths, we will see that his sense of exasperation betrayed his frustration at losing that most perverse of pleasures, that of gloating over other people's misfortunes even when one stands to gain nothing from them oneself. On the pretext that the work would take too long and that they would get in the way of other suppliers unloading their goods, the ghastly man even tried to stop them loading the truck, but Cipriano Algor, as the eloquent phrase has it, dug his heels in, and asked who then would pay for the hire of the truck if they had to turn back, he demanded to be given the complaints book, and his final, desperate gambit was to say that he would not leave until he had spoken to the head of the buying department. Any book on elementary applied psychology, in the chapter on behavior, will tell you that nasty people are often cowards, and so we should not be too surprised that the assistant head of department's fear of being overruled in public by his hierarchical superior produced an instantaneous change of attitude. He made some rude comment to cover up his feelings of humiliation, then disappeared into the back of the warehouse and remained there until the truck, fully loaded up, had left the basement. Neither Cipriano Algor nor marçal Gacho sang a victory song, either literally or figuratively, they were too tired to waste what was left of their breath on trills and congratulations, the older man merely said, He'll make our lives a misery when we deliver the other merchandise, he'll

examine the dolls with a magnifying glass and reject them by the dozen, and the younger man said that, yes, he might, but it was by no means certain, and, besides, it was the head of the buying department who was in charge, at least we've solved one problem, Pa, and we'll deal with the next one when it arises, that's how life should be, when one person loses heart, the other must have heart and courage enough for both. They had parked the van on a nearby street corner, and it would stay there until they returned from unloading the last bits of crockery in the hollow near the river, then they would return the truck to the garage and, finally, as dusk was falling, they would arrive home, exhausted, more dead than alive, one because he had grown too used to walking the smooth corridors of the Center and had thus lost the healthy habit of physical effort, the other because of the all too familiar disadvantages of age. The dog Found will come down the road to meet them, leaping and barking the way dogs do, and Marta will be waiting at the door. She will ask, So, is it all taken care of then, and they will say, yes, it's all taken care of, and then all three of them are bound to think or feel, always assuming that there is some imbalance or contradiction between feeling and thinking, that the part that has just finished is the same part that is now impatient to begin, that the first, second, and third acts, whether in the theater or in life, are always part of one play. It is true that some of the props have been removed from the stage, but the clay from which the new props will be made is the same as yesterday's clay, and the actors, when they wake tomorrow from their sleep in the wings, will place their right foot in front of the mark made by their left foot, then place the left foot in front of the right, and, do what they will, they will not depart from that path. Despite marçal's exhaustion, he and Marta will repeat, as if it were the first time, the gestures, movements, groans, and sighs of love. And the words too. Cipriano Algor will sleep dreamlessly in his bed. Tomorrow morning, as usual, he will take his son-in-law to work. Perhaps, on the way back, he will have a look at the hollow by the river, for no particular reason, not even out of curiosity, he knows exactly what is there, but despite that, he might nevertheless walk to the edge of the hollow and, if he does, he will look down and wonder if he should cut a few more branches in order to camouflage the pots and plates more effectively, it is as if he did not want anyone to know about them, as if he wanted the pots to stay there, hidden, stored away, until the day when they are needed again, ah, how difficult it is to separate ourselves from what we have made, be it reality or a dream, even if we have actually destroyed it with our own hands.

I'm going to clean out the kiln, said Cipriano Algor when he got home. The dog Found's previous experiences made him think that his master was about to sit down again on the bench of meditations, the poor man's mind must still be clouded with conflicts, his life turned upside down, and it is on just such occasions that dogs are most needed, when they sit before us with the infallible question in their eyes, Do you need help, and although, at first glance, it might seem beyond the ken of an animal like that to offer a remedy for pain, anxiety and other human afflictions, perhaps it is only because we are incapable of perceiving what lies beyond our humanity, as if other afflictions in the world only have a tangible reality if they can be measured by our standards or, put more

simply, as if only what is human existed. Cipriano Algor did not sit down on the stone bench, he walked straight past it, then, having drawn back, one after the other, the three great bronze bolts installed at different heights, at the top, in the middle and at the bottom, he opened the kiln door, which creaked gravely on its hinges. After the first few days of sensorial investigations, which had satisfied his immediate curiosity as a newcomer, the dog Found had shown no further interest in the kiln. It was a brick structure, old and crudely built, with a high, narrow door, it was a building with no known use and where no one lived, with three things on the top like chimneys, but which were obviously not chimneys, since the provoking smell of food had never once issued forth from them. And now the door had unexpectedly opened and his master had gone inside as nonchalantly as if he were entering his house, just like the other house over there. On principle and as a precautionary measure, a dog should always bark at any surprises life throws at him, because he has no way of knowing beforehand if the good surprises could turn bad or the bad cease to be what they were, therefore Found barked and barked, first out of concern when his master appeared to vanish into the shadowy depths of the kiln, then out of joy to see him emerge whole and with a changed look on his face, these are the small miracles of love, for caring about what you do also deserves that name. When Cipriano Algor went back into the kiln, this time wielding a broom, Found was not in the least concerned, for, when you think about it, a master is in some ways like the sun and the moon, we must be patient when he disappears and wait for time to pass, a dog, of course, will be unable to say whether a long time or a short time has passed, for he cannot distinguish between such periods as an hour and a week, between a month and a year, for such an animal there is only absence and presence. During the cleaning of the kiln, Found made no attempt to go in, he moved to one side to avoid the shower of small fragments of fired clay and shards from broken pots expelled by the broom, and lay down, his head between his paws. He seemed absorbed, half-asleep, but even a person inexperienced in canine ways would know, if only from the furtive manner in which the dog occasionally opened and closed his eyes, that the dog Found was simply waiting. Once the task of cleaning was done, Cipriano Algor left the kiln and went over to the pottery. As long as he remained in view, the dog did not move, then he slowly got up, advanced with outstretched neck toward the kiln door and looked in. It was a strange, empty house with a vaulted ceiling, utterly devoid of furniture or decoration and lined with off-white slabs, but what most impressed Found's nose was the extreme dryness of the air inside, as well as the pungency of the one perceptible smell, the final smell of an infinite process of calcination, and do not be surprised by that flagrant and conscious contradiction between final and infinite, for we are dealing here not with human sensations, but with what it was humanly practicable for us to imagine a dog might have felt on entering an empty kiln for the first time. Contrary to what one would naturally expect, Found did not mark the new place with urine. It is true that he began to do as instinct ordered him, it is true that he did threateningly raise one leg, but he controlled himself and stopped at the very last moment, perhaps terrified by the surrounding mineral silence, by the rough construction of the place, by the whitish, phantasmagorical color of walls and floor, perhaps, more simply, it was because he thought his master

might react violently if the kingdom, throne and dossal of the fire, the crucible in which the ordinary clay dreams of being turned into a diamond, were found to be sullied by urine. With the hairs along his back bristling, with his tail between his legs, as if he had been spurned and driven far away, the dog Found left the kiln. He could not see either of his owners, the house and the countryside looked utterly empty, and the mulberry tree, though this was doubtless merely the effect of the sun's angle of incidence, seemed to cast a strange shadow that lay on the ground as if it had been cast by an entirely different tree. Contrary to the general view, dogs, however well cared for and however kindly treated, do not have an easy life, first, because they have not as yet reached a satisfactory understanding of the world into which they were born, and, second, because that difficulty is continually exacerbated by the contradictory and unstable behavior of the human beings with whom they share, if we may put it like that, house, food, and occasionally bed. His master has disappeared, his mistress is nowhere to be seen, so the dog Found vents his melancholy and his full bladder on the stone bench whose only use is as a place of meditation. It was then that Cipriano Algor and Marta emerged from the pottery. Found ran to meet them, it is at moments like this that he has the feeling that he is finally going to understand everything, that feeling did not last, however, it never does, his master bawled at him, Get out of here, his mistress, alarmed, shouted, Down, boy, there really is no fathoming these people, only afterward will the dog Found notice that each of his owners is carrying some clay figures balanced on small planks, three apiece and three on each plank, you can imagine how disastrous it would have been if they hadn't reined in his enthusiasm in time. The funambulists move toward the long drying shelves which, for weeks now, have been empty of plates, mugs, cups, saucers, bowls, jugs, jars, pitchers, pots, and other ornaments for house and garden. These six dolls, which are going to dry in the open air, protected by the shade of the mulberry tree, but touched occasionally by the sun that slips in and out between the leaves, are the advance guard of a new occupation, that of hundreds of identical figures whose serried ranks will fill the long shelves, one thousand two hundred figurines, six times two hundred according to their earlier calculations, but the calculations were wrong, the joy of victory is not always a good counselor, these potters, despite their three generations of experience, seem to have forgotten that, since even scissors can eat the cloth they cut, it is vital to allow some margin for losses, a piece can fall or break, can become distorted, can contract too much or too little, can crack under heat because it was poorly made, can emerge badly fired because of the faulty circulation of hot air, and to all of this, which is directly related to the physical contingencies of a craft that has much to do with alchemy, that, as we know, is not an exact science, to all of this, as we were saying, must be added the rigorous examination to which, as is only to be expected, the Center, not to mention that assistant head of department who seems to have it in for them, will subject each of the dolls. Cipriano Algor only thought of these two threats, one definite and one potential, when he was sweeping out the kiln, that's the good thing about the association of ideas, they draw each other out, one after the other, the skill lies in not losing the thread, in understanding that a shard of pottery on the ground is not only what it is at present, it is also what it was in the past when it was something else, as well as what it

might become in the future.

It is said that a long time ago a god decided to make a man out of the clay from the earth that he had previously created, and then, in order that the man should have breath and life, he blew into his nostrils. The whisper put around by certain stubborn, negative spirits, when they do not dare to say so out loud, is that after this supreme act of creation, the god never again practiced the arts of pottery, a roundabout way of denouncing him for, quite simply, having downed tools. Given its evident importance, this is too serious a matter to be treated in simplistic terms, it requires thought, complete impartiality and a great deal of objectivity. It is a historical fact that from that memorable day onward, the work of modeling clay ceased to be the exclusive attribute of the creator and passed to the incipient skills of his creatures, who, needless to say, are not equipped with sufficient life-giving puff. As a result, fire was given responsibility for all the subsidiary operations that can, through color, sheen or even sound, endow whatever emerges from the kilns with a reasonable semblance of life. However, this would be to judge by appearances. Fire can do a great deal, as no one can deny, but it cannot do everything, it has serious limitations and even some grave defects, for example, a form of insatiable bulimia which causes it to devour and reduce to ashes everything it finds in its path. Returning, however, to the matter in hand, to the pottery and its workings, we all know that if you put wet clay in a kiln it will have exploded in less time than it takes to say so. Fire lays down one irrevocable condition if we want it to do what we expect of it, the clay must be as dry as possible when it is placed in the kiln. And this is where we humbly return to that business about breathing into nostrils, and here we will have to recognize how very unjust and imprudent we were to take up and adopt as our own the heretical idea that the said god coldly turned his back on his own work. Yes, it is true, that no one ever saw him again, but he left us what was perhaps the best part of himself, the breath, the puff of air, the breeze, the soft wind, the zephyr, the very things that are now gently entering the nostrils of the six clay dolls that Cipriano Algor and his daughter have, with great care, just placed on one of the drying shelves. That god, a writer as well as a potter, knew how to write straight on crooked lines, for, not being here himself to do the blowing, he has sent someone to do the job for him, so that the still fragile life of these clay figures will not be extinguished tomorrow in the blind and brutal embrace of the fire. When we say tomorrow, that is, of course, just a manner of speaking, because if it is true that, in the beginning, one puff of air was enough for the clay of the man to gain breath and life, many more will be necessary before the jesters, clowns, bearded Assyrians, mandarins, Eskimos, and nurses, those who are here now and those who will later form serried ranks on these same shelves, gradually lose, by evaporation, the water without which they would never have become what they are, and can thus go safely into the kiln in order to be transformed into what they will be. The dog Found had got up on his hind legs and rested his paws on the edge of the shelf to get a closer view of the six idols lined up in front of him. He sniffed once, twice, and immediately lost interest, but not quickly enough to avoid the sharp, painful slap his master dealt him on the head nor the repetition of the harsh words he had heard before, Get out of here, how could he

explain that he wasn't going to harm any of the figurines, he just wanted to have a closer look and to sniff them, it was unfair of you to hit me for such a minor offense, anyone would think you didn't know that dogs do not have only eyes with which to investigate the outside world, our nose is like an extra eye, it sees what it smells, at least this time, though, she didn't shout, Down, boy, fortunately, there's always someone capable of understanding the motives of others, even those who, dumb by nature or lacking vocabulary, do not know how or do not have words enough to explain themselves, You didn't have to hit him, Pa, he was just curious, said Marta. It is likely that Cipriano Algor himself had not wanted to hurt the dog, he just acted out of instinct, which, contrary to what most people think, we human beings have still not lost and are not about to lose either. It lives side by side with the intelligence, but is infinitely faster, which is why the poor thing is so often made fun of and frequently spurned, that was what happened in this case, the potter reacted out of the fear of seeing something over which he had labored destroyed, exactly as a lioness would react at seeing her cub in danger. Not all creators neglect their creations, be they cubs or clay figurines, not all of them go away and leave in their place an inconstant zephyr that only blows now and then, as if we had no need to grow and go into the kiln to find out who we are. Cipriano Algor called the dog, Come here, Found, come here, there really is no understanding either of these creatures, they lash out and immediately stroke the creature they hit, if you hit them, they immediately kiss the hand that did the hitting, maybe this is just a consequence of the problems we have been encountering since the very beginning of time in our attempts to understand each other, we dogs and we humans. Found has already forgotten the blow he was dealt, but his master has not, his master remembers, he will forget tomorrow or in an hour's time, but for the moment he cannot forget, in these cases memory is like the instantaneous touch of the sun on the retina that burns the surface, a tiny, unimportant thing, but bothersome while it lasts, the best thing would be to call the dog over and say, Found, come here, and Found will go, he always does, and he licks the hand that strokes him because that is the way dogs kiss, soon the burn will vanish, sight will return to normal, and it will be as if nothing had happened.

Cipriano Algor went to check how much wood they had and realized that it wasn't enough. For years he had cherished the idea that the time would come when the old wood-burning kiln would be demolished and in its place would rise a new kiln, a modern, gas-fired one, capable of reaching extremely high temperatures very fast and of producing excellent results. Inside himself, though, he knew that this would never happen, first, because it would require a lot of money, more than he would ever have, but also for other less materialistic reasons, such as knowing beforehand that it would sadden him to destroy what his grandfather had built and what his father had later perfected, if he did, it would be as if he were, quite literally, wiping them from the face of the earth, for the kiln sits precisely on the face of the earth. He had another reason, less easy to own up to, which he could dispatch in three words, I'm too old, but which, objectively, implied the use of pyrometers, pipes, security pilot lights, burners, in short, new techniques and new problems. There was, therefore, no alternative but to continue

fueling the old kiln in the old way, with wood and wood and more wood, perhaps that is the hardest part of working with clay. Just like the stokers on steam trains, who used to spend all their time shoveling coal into the furnace, the potter, at least this one, Cipriano Algor, who cannot afford to pay an assistant, spends hour upon wearisome hour feeding this archaic fuel into the kiln, twigs that the fire enfolds and devours in an instant, branches that the flame gradually nibbles and licks into embers, it is best when fed with pinecones and sawdust, which burn more slowly and produce more heat. Cipriano Algor will get supplies from the surrounding area, order a few cartloads of wood from foresters and farmers, buy a few sacks of sawdust from sawmills and carpenter's workshops in the Industrial Belt, preferably from hardwoods like oak, walnut, and chestnut, and he will do all this alone, it does not even occur to him to ask his daughter to come with him and help him load the sacks onto the van, especially now that she's pregnant, he will take Found with him, just to show that they're friends again, which seems to indicate that the burn in Cipriano Algor's memory has not yet fully healed. The wood in the shed will be more than enough for firing the six figures to be used as molds, but Cipriano Algor hesitates, he finds absurd, crazy, unforgivably wasteful, the huge disproportion between the means to be used and the ends to be achieved, in other words, in order to fire the ridiculously small number of six dolls, he will have to use the kiln as if it were packed to the roof. He said as much to Marta, who agreed and half an hour later came up with a solution, The book explains how to solve the problem, it even gives a helpful drawing. It is quite possible that, when he was starting out as a potter, Marta's great-grandfather, who lived in the olden days, might once have used the process of pit firing, which was antiquated even then, but the installation of the first kiln must have gradually dispensed with that rustic practice and, in a way, consigned it to oblivion, for it was not passed on to Cipriano Algor's father. Fortunately, there are books. We can leave them on a shelf or in a trunk, abandon them to the dust and the moths, dump them in dark cellars, we may not even lay eyes on them or touch them for years and years, but they don't mind, they wait quietly, closed in upon themselves so that none of their contents are lost, for the moment that always arrives, the day when we ask ourselves, I wonder where that book about firing clay has got to, and the book, summoned at last, appears, it's here in Marta's hands while her father, beside the kiln, is digging a small hole about half a meter deep and half a meter wide, that is all the space the dolls need, then he arranges on the bottom a layer of small branches and sets light to them, the flames rise and caress the walls, getting rid of any surface moisture, then the fire will die down and all that will remain are the hot ashes and a few small embers, and it is on these that Marta, having passed the book, open at the relevant page, to her father, very carefully places, one by one, the six test pieces, the mandarin, the Eskimo, the bearded Assyrian, the clown, the jester, and the nurse, inside the pit, the hot air still shimmers, it touches the gray epidermises and the dense interiors of the bodies, from which almost all the water has already evaporated thanks to the effects of the light wind and the breeze, and now, over the mouth of the pit, for lack of a proper grille especially made for the purpose, Cipriano Algor is placing, not too close together, not too far apart, as the book tells him, some narrow iron bars, through which will fall the embers from the fire that the potter had

already begun to kindle. So happy were they to have found that invaluable book, neither father nor daughter had noticed that the near-twilight hour at which they had started work would mean that they would have to keep feeding the fire throughout the night, until the embers had filled the hole completely and the firing was over. Cipriano Algor said to his daughter, You go to bed and I'll stay and watch the fire, and she said, I wouldn't miss this for all the gold in the world. They sat down on the stone bench to watch the flames, from time to time, Cipriano Algor gets up and puts on more wood, smallish branches so that the embers will fall between the bars, when it was time for supper, Marta went into the house to prepare a light meal, which they ate afterward in the light that flickered on the side kiln wall as if the kiln too were burning inside. The dog Found shared what there was to eat, then lay down at Marta's feet, staring into the flames, he had been near other fires in his time, but none like this, well, that is probably not quite what he meant, fires, large and small, are all very similar, burning wood, sparks, charred logs, and ashes, what Found was thinking was that he had never been as he was now, lying at the feet of two people upon whom he had bestowed forever his doggy love, next to a stone bench suited for serious meditations, as he himself, from then on and from direct personal experience, will be able to attest. Filling half a cubic meter with embers takes some time, especially if the wood, as in this case, is not completely dry, and the proof of this is that you can see the last drops of sap sizzling at the ends of the logs that have not yet caught fire. It would be interesting, were it possible, to look inside, to see if the embers have already reached the dolls' waists, but all one can do is to imagine what it must be like inside the pit, vibrant and glowing with the light from the many brief flames that consume the small pieces of incandescent wood as they fall. As the night grew colder, Marta went into the house to fetch a blanket which they, father and daughter, wrapped about their shoulders to keep warm. They did not need anything in front, what was happening now was what used to happen when, in times past, we would go over to the fireside to warm ourselves on winter nights, our backs freezing while our faces, hands and legs were scalding hot. Especially our legs because they were nearest to the fire. Tomorrow the hard work begins, said Cipriano Algor, I'll help, said Marta, Oh, you'll help, all right, you've no alternative, although I don't like it, But I've always helped, Yes, but now you're pregnant, Only a month, if that, it doesn't make any difference yet, I feel absolutely fine, What worries me is that we might not be able to see this through to the end, We'll manage, If only we could find someone to help us, You yourself said that no one wants to work in potteries any more, besides, we'd just waste our time teaching whoever came and for very negligible gains, Right, agreed Cipriano Algor, suddenly distracted. He had just remembered that Isaura Estudiosa, or Isaura Madruga, as she seemed to call herself now, was looking for work, and that if she didn't find anything she would leave the village, but this thought barely troubled him, indeed he did not even want to imagine that Madruga woman working at the pottery, with her hands in the clay, the only talent she had shown for the job so far was the way she had clasped a water jug to her breast, but that's no help when what you've got to do is manufacture figurines, not just clasp them to you. Anyone can do that, he thought, although he wasn't entirely sure that this was true. Marta said, What we could do is get

someone in to take care of the household chores, leaving me free to work in the pottery, We can't afford a maid or a domestic or a char or whatever they're called, said Cipriano Algor sharply, It could be someone who needs something to do and who doesn't mind not earning very much for a while, insisted Marta. Her father impatiently removed the blanket from his shoulders as if he were too hot, If you're thinking what I think you're thinking, we'd better stop this conversation right now, What we don't know is whether it only entered your mind because I thought of it, said Marta, or if you had already thought of it when it entered mine, Please, don't play with words, you're very good at it and I'm not, it's certainly not a talent you inherited from me, There must be some part of us which is all our own work, but anyway, what you call playing with words is just a way of making them more visible, Well, you can cover those particular words up again, because I'm not interested. Marta replaced the blanket, draping it over her father's shoulders again, They're already covered up, she said, and if ever anyone uncovers them again, I can guarantee that it won't be me. Cipriano Algor pushed the blanket off again, I'm not cold, he said, and went to put more wood on the fire. Marta was touched by the meticulous way in which he placed the new logs on the burning embers, careful and precise, like someone who, in order to drive out troubling thoughts, gives all his attention to some unimportant detail. I shouldn't have brought the matter up again, she said to herself, especially not now when he's said that he'll come with us to the Center, besides, if they did get on well enough to want to live together, we would be faced by a difficult, not to say, impossible problem, it's one thing going to the Center with your daughter and son-in-law, it's quite another taking your wife, we wouldn't be one family, we'd be two, I'm sure they wouldn't take us then, Marçal told me that the apartments are tiny, so they would have to stay here and live on, what exactly, two people who hardly know each other, how long would their understanding last, I'm not so much playing with words as playing with the feelings of other people, with the feelings of my own father, what right have I, what right have you, Marta, just put yourself in his place, you can't, of course, well, then, if you can't, just be quiet, they say each person is an island, but it's not true, each person is a silence, yes, that's it, a silence, each of us with our own silence, each of us with the silence that is us. Cipriano Algor came back to the stone bench, and he himself wrapped the blanket around his shoulders even though his clothes were still warm from the fire, Marta snuggled up to him, Pa, she said, Pa, What, Oh, nothing, just ignore me. It was gone one o'clock when the pit began to fill up. We can go in now, said Cipriano Algor, in the morning, when they've cooled off, we can remove the figurines and see how they've turned out. The dog Found accompanied them to the door of the house. Then he went back to the fire and lay down. Beneath the fine layer of ashes, the embers still glowed, giving off a tenuous light. It was only when the embers had burned out completely that Found closed his eyes to go to sleep.

Cipriano Algor dreamed that he was inside his new kiln. He felt happy because he had managed to persuade his daughter and his son-in-law that the sudden increase in activity at the pottery called for radical changes in the way they made the pots and a rapid updating of the means and methods of production, beginning with the urgent replacement of the old kiln, an archaic remnant of a way of life that would not even merit preservation as a ruin in an open-air museum. Let us jettison any feelings of nostalgia which will only hinder and hold us back, Cipriano had said with unusual vehemence, progress moves implacably forward, and we have no option but to keep pace with it, and woe to those who, fearful of future upheavals, are left sitting by the roadside weeping for a past that was no better than the present. These words emerged from his mouth so complete, perfect, and polished that it convinced the two reluctant young people. Besides, it must be said that the technological differences between the new kiln and the old were nothing out of the ordinary, everything that had been in the first kiln in antiquated mode was present, in updated form, in the second kiln, the only really striking differences were the sheer size, with twice the capacity of the old kiln, and, although perhaps less noticeable, the slightly abnormal proportions inside the kiln between height, length, and breadth. Given that all this was happening in a dream, however, the latter point is not so very odd. What is odd, regardless of the liberties and excesses that the logic of dreams may allow the dreamer, is the presence of a stone bench, identical to the bench of meditations, of which Cipriano Algor can see only the back, because, most unusually, the bench is turned to face the rear wall and is positioned barely five spans away from it. The builders probably put it here to sit on during their lunch break, then forgot to take it with them, thought Cipriano Algor, but he knew this couldn't be true, builders, and this is borne out by historical fact, always prefer to have their lunch outside, even when working in the desert, and especially when they're in a pleasant rural setting like this, with the drying shelves set out beneath the mulberry tree and a lovely midday breeze blowing. Well, wherever you came from, you'll have to join the other one outside, said Cipriano Algor, the problem is how to shift you, you're too heavy to carry and if I tried to drag you out, it would ruin the floor, I can't understand why they put you inside the kiln in the first place and in that position too, anyone sitting there would have their nose almost pressed against the wall. To prove to himself that he was right, Cipriano Algor slipped carefully in between one end of the bench and the relevant bit of wall and sat down. He had to admit that his nose did not, in fact, run the slightest risk of being grazed by one of the refractory bricks, and that his knees, even though they were further forward, were also safe from any unpleasant abrasions. However, he could, without the slightest effort, touch the wall with his hand. Just as Cipriano Algor's fingers were about to touch it, a voice from outside said, I wouldn't bother lighting the kiln if I were you, my friend. This unexpected advice came from Marçal, and it was his shadow that was cast briefly on the back wall only to disappear immediately. Cipriano Algor thought it rude and disrespectful of his son-in-law to speak to him like that, He's never usually that familiar with me, he thought. He started to turn around and ask why it wasn't worth lighting the kiln and why he should suddenly start being so familiar with him, but he could not turn his head, this often happens in dreams, we want to run and our legs won't respond, it's

usually the legs, but this time it was his neck that refused to turn. The shadow had gone, so he couldn't ask it any questions, in the vain and irrational hope that a shadow might have a tongue to articulate an answer, but the harmonics of the words Marçal had spoken continued to reverberate between the ceiling and the floor, between one wall and another wall. Before the vibrations had completely died away and before the scattered substance of the broken silence had had time to reconstitute itself, Cipriano Algor wanted to know for what mysterious reason he should not light the kiln, if that really was what his son-in-law's voice had said, for now it seemed to him that he had said something else even more enigmatic, It's not worth sacrificing yourself, Pa, as if Marçal thought that his father-in-law, whom, it would seem, he had not, in fact, treated with disrespectful familiarity, had decided to try out the powers of the fire on his own body before delivering up to them the work made by his hands. He's mad, the potter muttered to himself, my son-in-law would have to be completely crazy to think such a thing, the reason I came into the kiln was because, but the sentence remained incomplete because Cipriano Algor did not know why he was there, which is hardly surprising, if the same thing happens often enough when we're awake, not knowing why we are doing this or that or why we did something else, what can we expect when we are asleep and dreaming. Cipriano Algor thought that the best and easiest solution would be to get up from the stone bench and go outside and ask his son-in-law what the hell he was talking about, but his body felt like a lead weight, or not even that, because no lead weight could possibly be so heavy that it could never be lifted, he was, in fact, tied to the back of the bench, tied without ropes or chains, but tied nevertheless. He again attempted to turn his head, but his neck would not obey him, I'm like a stone statue sitting on a stone bench looking at a stone wall, he thought, although he knew that this was not strictly true, the wall, as his eyes, those of a man who knew about matters mineral, could see, had not been built of stone but of refractory bricks. Just then Marçal's shadow again appeared on the wall, I've brought you the good news we've been expecting for so long, said his voice, I've finally been promoted to resident guard, so there's no point in continuing production, we'll tell the Center we've closed the pottery, they'll understand, it had to happen sooner or later, so you might as well come out of there, the truck's here to take all the furniture away, it was a complete waste of money buying this kiln. Cipriano Algor opened his mouth to reply, but the shadow had already gone, what the potter wanted to say was that the difference between the word of a craftsman and a divine commandment was that the latter had had to be written down, with the disastrous consequences with which we are all familiar, anyway, if he was in such a hurry he could just bugger off, a rather vulgar expression that contradicted the solemn declaration he himself had made not many days since, when he had promised his daughter and his son-in-law that he would go and live with them if Marçal was promoted, since if both of them moved to the Center, he could not possibly continue to work in the pottery. Cipriano Algor was just rebuking himself for having promised to do something that his honor would never allow him to go through with when a new shadow appeared on the wall. In the feeble light that can squeeze in through the door of a kiln this size, it is very easy to confuse two human shadows, but the potter knew at once whose shadow it was, neither the shadow, which was darker, nor the

voice, which was deeper, belonged to his son-in-law, Senhor Cipriano Algor, I have come to tell you that we have just canceled our order for the clay figurines, said the head of the buying department, I don't know and I don't want to know why you're in there, if you fancied yourself as some romantic hero waiting for the wall to reveal the secrets of life to you, that strikes me as plain ridiculous, but if you were intending to go further than that, if your intention was to perform some act of self-immolation, you should know right now that the Center takes no responsibility for your death, that's all we need, getting blamed for the suicides of incompetents who go bust because of their own failure to understand the dictates of the market. Cipriano Algor did not turn his head toward the door, although he was certain that now he would be able to do so, he knew that the dream had ended, that nothing would prevent his getting up from the stone bench whenever he wanted to, only one thing still troubled him, doubtless absurd, doubtless foolish, but understandable if we bear in mind the perplexed state in which he was left by the dream of having to go and live in the very Center that had just spurned his work, and what troubled him, we will get there, don't worry, we haven't forgotten, has to do with the stone bench. Cipriano Algor is asking himself if he has taken a stone bench to bed with him or if he will wake up covered with dew on that other stone bench, the bench of meditations, that is what human dreams are like, sometimes they attach themselves to real things and transform them into visions, at others they make delirium play hide-and-seek with reality, which is why we so often say that we don't know where we are, our dream pulling at us from one side, reality pushing us from the other, the truth is that straight lines exist only in geometry and even then they are only an abstraction. Cipriano Algor opened his eyes. I'm in bed, he thought, relieved, and at that moment he realized that his memory of the dream was about to flee, that he would only manage to hold on to bits of it, and he did not know whether he should rejoice over the little that remained or regret the much that was lost, this is something else that often happens after we have dreamed. It was still dark, but the first changes in the sky presaging the dawn, would soon be revealed. Cipriano Algor did not go back to sleep. He thought a lot of things, he thought that his work had become totally pointless, that his existence had ceased to have any real or even halfway acceptable justification, I'm just an impediment, he muttered, and, at that moment, a fragment of his dream appeared to him with absolute clarity as if it had been cut out and stuck on a wall, it was the head of the buying department saying to him, If your intention is to perform some act of self-immolation, good luck to you, I warn you, though, that it is not one of the Center's eccentricities, if it had any, to send representatives and floral tributes to the funerals of our ex-suppliers. Cipriano Algor had dropped off for a few seconds, and it should be said, before anyone points out to us the apparent contradiction, that dropping off for a few seconds is not the same as falling asleep, the potter merely dreamed briefly about the dream he had had, and, if the words spoken by the head of the buying department did not come out exactly the same as they did the first time, this was for the simple reason that it is not only when we are awake that the words we say depend on the mood of the moment. That unpleasant and quite uncalled-for reference to a possible act of self-immolation did, however, manage to draw Cipriano Algor's thoughts back to the clay figurines left to be fired in the pit, and then, by

paths and alleyways in the brain that it would be impossible for us to reconstruct and describe with sufficient precision, to a sudden recognition of the advantages of the hollow figurine over the solid figurine, both as regards the amount of time spent and the quantity of clay used. The frequent reluctance of obvious truths to reveal themselves without first playing hard to get really ought to be the object of deep analysis by experts, who must be out there somewhere, on the different, but certainly not opposing, natures of the visible and the invisible, in the sense of finding out if, in the innermost part of what is revealed to us, there exists, as there are strong motives to suspect, some chemical or physical quality with a perverse tendency toward negation or extinction, a threatening slide in the direction of zero, an obsessive dream of the void. Be that as it may, Cipriano Algor is pleased with himself. Only a few minutes ago he had considered himself an impediment to his daughter and son-in-law, a hindrance, an obstacle, a complete waste of space, a catchall term to describe something that is no longer useful, and yet he had been capable of producing an idea whose intrinsic goodness is already proven by the fact that others have not only thought of it before, but have frequently put it into action. It is not always possible to have original ideas, it is enough to have ideas that are at least practicable. Cipriano Algor would like to go on luxuriating in the tranquillity of his bed, to take advantage of that delicious morning sleep, which, perhaps because we are vaguely aware of it, is always the most restoring, but the excitement provoked by the idea he has just had, the thought of the figurines under the doubtless still-warm ashes, and, let's be honest, the rather rash statement given earlier that he had not gone back to sleep, all of this made him push back the covers and slip out of bed as lightly and nimbly as he used to in his salad days. He got dressed noiselessly, left the room carrying his boots in his hand and tiptoed into the kitchen. He did not want to wake his daughter, but he did, unless, of course, she was already awake and busily patching together fragments of her own dreams or had ears pricked for the secret work that life, second by second, was carpentering together inside her womb. Her voice rang out light and clear in the silence of the house, Pa, where are you off to so early, I can't sleep, so I'm going to see how the firing went, but you stay where you are, don't get up. Marta said only, All right, knowing him, it was not difficult to imagine that he would want to be alone during the serious business of removing the ashes and the figurines from the pit, just as a child, in the silent depths of night, trembling with fear and excitement, feels his way down the dark corridor to find out what long-imagined toys and presents have been placed in his stocking. Cipriano Algor put on his shoes, opened the kitchen door and went out. The dense foliage of the mulberry tree still had a firm grip on night, it would not let it leave just yet, the first dawn twilight would linger for at least another half an hour. He glanced at the kennel, then looked around him, surprised not to see the dog. He gave a low whistle, but there was still no sign of Found. The potter went from perplexed surprise to outright concern, I can't believe he's just gone, he muttered. He could call out the dog's name, but he did not want to alarm his daughter. He'll be out there somewhere, on the trail of some nocturnal creature, he said to reassure himself, but the truth is that, as he crossed the yard in the direction of the kiln, he was thinking more about Found than about his precious clay figurines. He was only a few steps away from the pit when he saw the dog

appear from beneath the stone bench, You gave me quite a fright, you rascal, why didn't you come when I called you, he scolded him, but Found said nothing, he was busily stretching, getting his muscles back into their appointed places, first stretching his front paws, lowering his head and spine, then carrying out what one can only assume to be, to his way of thinking, a vital exercise of adjustment and rebalancing, lowering and stretching his hindquarters as if he wanted to detach himself from his legs entirely. Everyone tells us that animals stopped talking a long long time ago, however, no one has yet been able to prove that they have not continued to make secret use of thought. In the case of this dog Found, for example, despite the faint light that is only gradually beginning to fall from the skies, you can see from his face what he's thinking, neither more nor less than Ask a silly question and you'll get a silly answer, which means in his language that Cipriano Algor, with his long, albeit not very varied experience of life, should not need to have the duties of a dog explained to him, we all know that human sentinels will only keep watch properly if they are given a definite order to do so, whereas dogs, and this dog in particular, do not wait for someone to tell them, Stay there and watch the fire, we can be sure that, until the coals have burned right down, they will simply remain on watch, eyes open. However, in all fairness to human thought, its famous slowness does not always prevent it from reaching the correct conclusions, as has just happened inside Cipriano Algor's head, a light suddenly came on, allowing him to read and then pronounce out loud the words of recognition that Found so richly deserved, So while I was tucked up asleep in my warm sheets, you were out here on guard, it doesn't matter that your vigilance would not have helped the firing one iota, it's the gesture that counts. When Cipriano Algor had finished praising him, Found ran off to cock his leg and relieve his bladder, then he returned, wagging his tail, and lay down a short distance from the pit, ready to watch the removal of the figurines from the fire. At that moment, the light in the kitchen went on, Marta had gotten up. The potter turned his head, he wasn't clear in his mind whether he wanted to be alone or whether he wanted his daughter to come and keep him company, but he found out a minute later, when he realized that she had decided to allow him to play the principal role to the very last. The frontier of the morning was slowly moving westward, rather like the lip of a luminous vault pushing in front of it the dark cupola of night. A sudden low breeze whipped up, like a dust storm, the ashes on the surface of the pit. Cipriano Algor knelt down, removed the iron bars and, using the same small spade with which he had dug the pit, he began to remove the ashes, along with small bits of as yet un-burned coal. The white, almost weightless particles stuck to his fingers, some, even lighter, were sucked in on his breath or went up his nose and made him snort, the way Found sometimes does. As the spade reached farther into the pit, the ashes became hotter, but not enough to burn him, they were merely warm, like human skin, and just as smooth and soft. Cipriano Algor put the spade down and plunged his two hands into the ashes. He touched the thin and unmistakable roughness of the fired clay. Then, as if he were helping at a birth, he grasped between thumb, forefinger, and middle finger the still buried head of a figurine and pulled it out. It happened to be the nurse. He brushed the ashes from her body and blew on her face, as if he were endowing her with some kind of life, giving to her the

breath of his own lungs, the beating of his own heart. Then, one by one, the remaining figurines, the bearded Assyrian, the mandarin, the jester, the Eskimo, and the clown were taken out of the pit and placed beside the nurse, more or less clean of ashes, but without the extra benefit of that vital breath. No one was there to ask the potter about that difference in treatment, apparently determined by the difference in sex, unless that demiurgic intervention occurred simply because the nurse was the first to emerge from the hole, it was ever thus, since the world began, creators tire of their creation as soon as it ceases to be a novelty. Remembering, however, the difficulties that Cipriano Algor had had to grapple with when shaping the nurse's bust, it would not be too bold to suggest that the real reason for that breath is to be found, in however obscure and imprecise a form, in the immense effort it took to achieve what the very ductility of the clay denied him. Who knows. Cipriano Algor refilled the hole with the earth that rightfully belonged to it, pressed it down well so that not so much as a handful was lost, and with three figurines in each hand, he went back to the house. Curious, his head up, Found bounded along beside him. The shade of the mulberry tree had bidden farewell to the night, the sky was beginning to open up into the first blue of morning, the sun would soon appear above a horizon that could not be seen from there.

How did they turn out, asked Marta when her father came in, All right, I think, but we need to wash off any ash still clinging to them. Marta poured some water into a small earthenware basin, Wash them in here, she said. The first to enter the water and, whether by chance or coincidence, also the first to leave the ashes, this nurse may have her reasons to complain in the future, but she won't be able to complain about any lack of attention. How's this one, asked Marta, unaware of the debate on gender that has been going on, All right, said her father again tersely. It was indeed all right, evenly fired, a lovely red color, with no imperfections, not even the tiniest crack, and the other figurines were all equally perfect, apart from the bearded Assyrian, who had a black stain on his back, the fortunately limited effect of incipient carbonization caused by an unwanted indraft of air. It doesn't matter, it won't affect it, said Marta, and now will you please sit down and rest while I prepare your breakfast, that body of yours has been up since before dawn, Yes, I woke up and couldn't back get to sleep again, The figurines could have waited for daylight, But I couldn't, As the saying goes, a worried man can't sleep, Or else he sleeps, but dreams all night about his problems, Is that why you woke up so early, so as not to dream, asked Marta, Some dreams are best escaped from quickly, Was that what happened last night, Yes, it was, Do you want to talk about it, There's no point, In this house, the problems of one have always been the problems of all, But not dreams, Unless they're dreams about problems, Honestly, there's no arguing with you, In that case, don't waste any more time and tell me, All right, I dreamed that Marçal had been promoted and that the order had been canceled, They're not likely to cancel the order, That's what I think too, but anxieties get tangled up together like cherries, one gets caught on another and, in two shakes, the basket's full, as for Marçal's promotion, we know that could happen any day now, That's true, The dream was a warning to work fast, Dreams don't act as warnings, Unless the person who dreamed them feels that he has

been warned, You've woken up in a very aphoristic mood this morning, dear father, Every age has its defects, and that's the defect that has been afflicting me of late, Oh, I don't mind, I like your aphorisms, I'm learning from them, Even when I'm just playing with words, like now, asked Cipriano Algor, Yes, I think words were born to play with each other, they don't know how to do anything else, and contrary to what people may say, there are no such things as empty words, Now who's being aphoristic, It runs in the family. Marta put the breakfast on the table, coffee, milk, scrambled eggs, toast, butter, and some fruit. She sat down opposite her father to watch him eat. What about you, asked Cipriano Algor, I'm not hungry, she said, That's a bad sign in your state, They say that lack of appetite is quite common in pregnant women, But you need to eat well, logically speaking, you should be eating for two, Or for three, if I'm carrying twins, No, I'm being serious, Don't worry, soon I'll start getting morning sickness and other such delights. There was a silence. The dog curled up under the table, feigning indifference to the smell of food, when what he really feels is resignation, knowing, as he does, that his turn won't come for a few hours yet. Are you going to start work now, asked Marta, As soon as I finish eating, replied Cipriano Algor. Another silence. Pa, said Marta, what if Marçal phoned today to say that he'd been promoted, Have you any reason to think he will, No, it's just a hypothesis, All right, let's imagine that the phone is ringing right now and you get up to answer it, and it's Marçal telling us he's been promoted to resident guard, What would you do then, Pa, I would finish my breakfast, take the figurines over to the pottery, and start making the molds, As if nothing had happened, As if nothing had happened, Do you think that's a sensible decision, don't you think it would be more logical to stop making them and simply turn the page, My dear daughter, folly and illogicality may be a duty to the young, but the old have a perfectly respectable right to them too, Thanks, I'll make a note of the part that concerns me, Even if you and Marçal have to move to the Center first, I'll stay here until I've finished the order, then I'll come and join you as I promised, That's mad, Pa, Mad, foolish, illogical, you don't have a very high opinion of me, It's mad wanting to do this work alone, how do you think I would feel knowing what's going on here, And how do you think I would feel if I abandoned the work halfway through, you don't seem to understand that, at my age, I don't have that many things to hold on to, You've got me, you'll have your grandchild, Sorry, but that's not enough, It will have to be enough when you come and live with us, Yes, I suppose it will, but at least I will have completed my last job, Don't be so melodramatic, Pa, who knows when your last job will be. Cipriano Algor got up from the table. Have you suddenly lost your appetite, asked his daughter, seeing that there was still food left on the plate, I find it hard to swallow, my throat feels tight, It's nerves, Yes, it must be. The dog had got up too, ready to follow his master. Ah, said Cipriano Algor, I forgot to mention that Found spent the night under the stone bench keeping a watch on the fire, So one can learn from dogs too, Yes, what one learns above all is not to discuss what has to be done, simple instinct has its advantages, Are you saying that it's in stinct that is telling you to finish the job, that in human beings, or at least in some, there is a behavioral factor similar to instinct, asked Marta, All I know is that reason would have only one piece of advice for me, What's that, Not to be so stupid, the world won't end if I don't finish the figurines,

Well, yes, what importance can a few clay figurines have to the world, You wouldn't be so offhand about it if instead of figurines we were talking about ninth or fifth symphonies, unfortunately, my dear, your father was not born a musician, If you really thought I was being offhand, I'm sorry, No, of course I didn't, forgive me. Cipriano Algor was about to leave the kitchen, but he paused for a moment at the door, Anyway, reason is capable of coming up with some useful ideas too, when I woke up in the early hours, it occurred to me that it would save a lot of time and material if we made the figurines hollow, they dry and fire much more quickly and we'll save on clay, Well, long live reason, But then again, you see, birds know to make their nests hollow, but they don't go around boasting about it.

From that day on, Cipriano Algor interrupted his work in the pottery only to eat and to sleep. His lack of experience of the necessary techniques meant that he mistook the proportions of plaster and water needed for making the mold piece, made everything worse by getting the wrong quantities of clay, water, and deflocculant to make a balanced mixture for the casting slip, and then poured the resulting mixture in far too quickly, thus creating air bubbles inside the mold. The first three days were spent making and unmaking, despairing over his mistakes, cursing his own clumsiness and trembling with joy whenever some delicate operation turned out well. Marta offered to help, but he asked her, please, to leave him in peace, a turn of phrase that bore very little resemblance to the reality inside the old workshop, what with plasters that hardened too soon and water added too late, what with clay that wasn't dry enough and slips that were too thick to be sieved, it would have been far nearer the truth if he had said, Just leave me in peace to wage my own war. On the morning of the fourth day, as if the mischievous, slippery goblins, which were the various materials he was using, had repented of their cruel treatment of this unexpected beginner in the new art, Cipriano Algor began to find softnesses where before he had found only harshness, docilities that filled him with gratitude and secrets that willingly unveiled themselves to him. Every five minutes, he consulted the manual, all sticky and marked with fingerprints, which he kept open on the worktop, sometimes he misunderstood what he had read, at others, a sudden intuition would illuminate a whole page, it would be no exaggeration to say that Cipriano Algor's mood swung between lacerating misery and utter bliss. He got up at first light, bolted his breakfast and then stayed in the pottery until lunchtime, after lunch, he worked all afternoon and into the evening, with only a brief interval for supper, whose frugality owed nothing to the previous meals. His daughter protested, You'll get ill working so hard and eating so little, I'm fine, he said, I've never felt better in my life. This was both true and untrue. At night, when he finally went to bed, having washed away the smells of his labors and the dirt from his work, his joints creaked and his whole body ached. I can't do as much as I used to, he said to himself, but deep down in his consciousness, a voice which was also his disagreed, You've never been able to do as much, Cipriano, you've never been able to do as much. He slept as one imagines a stone must sleep, without dreaming, without stirring, almost it seemed without breathing, laying on the world the whole weight of his infinite weariness. Sometimes, like an anxious mother, unwittingly anticipating future broken nights, Marta would get up and look in to see how her father was. She went silently into his room, walked slowly to the bed, bent over him slightly to listen, then left with her worries unassuaged. That big man, with his white hair and battered face, her father, was also a son, anyone who refuses to understand this knows little of life, the webs that weave around human relationships in general and family relationships in particular, especially close family relationships, are more complex than they seem at first sight, we talk about parents and children, and think we know perfectly well what we mean, and we do not ask ourselves about the profound reasons for the affection that lies therein or indeed the indifference or the hatred. Marta leaves his room and is thinking, He's sleeping, and those words apparently do no more than express the verifiable truth, and yet those eleven letters, those three syllables were

capable of translating all the love that a human heart can hold at any one moment. It is worth saying, for the enlightenment of the innocent, that in matters of sentiment, the more grandiloquent the feeling the less true.

The fourth day happened to be the day on which he had to go to the Center to fetch Marçal for his day off, which we would call weekly if it were not, as we know, decimal, that is, every ten days. Marta told her father that she would go, so that he wouldn't have to interrupt his work, but Cipriano Algor said no, what an idea, There are fewer robberies on the road, it's true, but there's always a risk, If there's a risk for me, then there's a risk for you too, In the first place, I'm a man, in the second place, I'm not pregnant, Respectable reasons which do you credit, There's a third reason too, the most important, And what's that, I wouldn't be able to do any work until you got back, so it won't make any difference if I go, besides the journey will help to clear my head, which certainly needs an airing, all I can think about are molds, mold pieces, and slips, It would help to clear my head too, so why don't we both go and pick Marçal up, and Found can stay here to guard the castle, If that's what you want, Don't be silly, I was just kidding, you usually go and fetch Marçal and I usually stay at home, so long live usually, No, seriously, we can both go, No, seriously, you go. They both smiled, and the debate on the central question, that is, the objective and subjective reasons we usually do what we do, was postponed. That afternoon, at the appointed hour, and still in his work clothes so as not to waste time, Cipriano Algor set off. As he was leaving the village, he realized that he had not turned his head when he went past the street where Isaura Madruga lives, and when we say turned his head, that could be in either direction, because in recent days, Cipriano Algor had sometimes turned to see if he could spot her, and sometimes turned away so that he would not see her. It occurred to him to wonder what interpretation to put on that troubling indifference, but a stone in the middle of the road distracted him and the moment was gone. The journey to the city passed without incident, he was delayed only once by a police block that was stopping every other car to check the drivers' documents. While he was waiting for them to return his documents, Cipriano Algor had time to notice that the boundary of the shantytown seemed to have shifted closer to the road, Any day now and they'll push it back again, he thought.

Marçal was there waiting for him. Sorry I'm late, said his father-in-law, I didn't leave the house early enough, and then the police wanted to have a nose through my papers, How's Marta, asked Marçal, I didn't manage to phone yesterday, She's fine, I think, but you should ask her yourself really, she's not eating much, no appetite, but she says that's normal in pregnant women, and maybe it is, I don't know much about these things, but if I were you, I wouldn't be too sure, Right, I'll talk to her, don't worry, maybe it's because she's just in the very early stages of pregnancy, We men haven't a clue really, confronted by these things, we're like lost children, you should take her to the doctor. Marçal did not reply. His father-in-law fell silent. They were both probably thinking the same thing, that she would get the best possible treatment at the hospital in the Center, at least that's what people say, although, as the wife of an employee, being resident in the Center isn't

a necessary condition for receiving decent treatment. After a moment, Cipriano Algor said, I can bring Marta in any time you want. They had left the city and so could drive more quickly. Marçal asked, How's the work going, We're still only at the beginning really, we've fired the figurines we made, and now I'm tackling the molds, How's that going, We fool ourselves, we think that clay is just clay, that if you can do one thing with it, you can do anything, and then you realize that it simply isn't true, that we have to relearn everything from scratch. He paused, then added, But I feel happy, it's a bit like trying to be born again, well, not quite, Tomorrow I'll give you a hand, said Marçal, I know next to nothing about making pottery, but I'm sure I can be of some help, You need to spend time with your wife, go for a walk somewhere, No, tomorrow we'll be having lunch with my parents, they still don't know about Marta being pregnant, it'll start to show soon, and you can imagine what they'd say then, And quite right too, I mean, be fair, said Cipriano Algor. Another silence. Nice weather, remarked Marçal, Let's hope it lasts another two or three weeks, said his father-in-law, the dolls need to be as dry as possible before we put them in the kiln. Another silence, longer this time. The police block had been removed, and the road was free. Twice Cipriano Algor was about to speak, the third time he did, Any news about your promotion, he asked, No, not yet, replied Marçal, Do you think they've changed their minds, No, there are various procedures that have to be gone through, the bureaucracy in the Center is as nitpicking as anywhere else, With police patrols checking driving licenses, insurance policies, and health certificates, Yes, that's about the size of it, We don't seem to know how else to do things, Perhaps there isn't another way, Or perhaps it's too late to find another way They did not speak again until they reached the village. Marçal asked his father-in-law to stop at the door to his parents' house, I won't be a minute, I just want to tell them that we'll be coming to lunch tomorrow. It was, indeed, not a long wait, but, again, Marçal seemed unhappy when he got back in the van. What was it this time, asked Cipriano Algor, Oh, I don't know, nothing seems to go right between me and my parents, Don't exaggerate, man, family life was never what you might call a bed of roses, we have good times and bad times, and we're extremely lucky if most of the time it's just so-so, Well, I went in, and my mother was there alone, my father hasn't got back yet, and I said what I had to say and then, to jolly things along a bit, I put on a sort of half-solemn, half-happy face and said that I had a big surprise for them tomorrow, And, guess what my mother's response was, My prophetic gifts don't stretch that far, She asked if the big surprise was them coming to live with me at the Center, And what did you say, I said it wasn't worth saving the secret until tomorrow, I have to tell you, I said, that Marta is pregnant, we're going to have a baby, She was pleased, of course, Oh, yes, she couldn't stop hugging me and kissing me, So what are you complaining about, It's just that with them there's always some dark cloud looming in the sky, at the moment, it's their obsession with wanting to go and live at the Center, You know I don't mind giving up my place to them, No, that's out of the question, and it's not that I'm exchanging my parents for my father-in-law, it's just that they have each other, but you'd be left on your own, Well, I wouldn't be the only person in the world to live on his own, As far as Marta is concerned, I can guarantee that you would, Oh dear, I don't know what to say, Some things are just the way they are and

need no explanation. Faced by such a categorical display of basic wisdom, the potter again found himself lost for words. Another contributory factor to this sudden silence might be that, at that precise moment, they just happened to be passing Isaura Madruga's street, and, unlike on the outward journey, Cipriano Algor's consciousness was unable to remain indifferent. When they reached the pottery, Marçal had the unexpected pleasure of being greeted by Found as if he were wearing not the intimidating uniform of a Center security guard, but the plainest and most pacific of clothes. The young man's sensitive soul, still smarting from the unfortunate conversation with his mother, was so moved by the animal's effusions that he embraced him as if he were the person he loved most in the world. These are exceptional moments, needless to say, the person Marçal loves most in the world is his wife, and she is waiting beside him, smiling sweetly, for her turn to be embraced, but just as there are times when all it takes for us to dissolve into tears is for someone to place a hand on our shoulder, so the disinterested joy of a dog can reconcile us for one brief minute to the pains, sorrows, and disappointments of this world. Given that Found knows little of human emotions, be they positive or negative, but of whose existence there is ample proof, and given that Marçal knows still less about canine emotions, about which there are few certainties and a myriad of doubts, someone will one day have to explain to us the reasons, apparently perfectly comprehensible to both parties involved, why these two should be locked in an embrace when they do not even belong to the same species. Since the making of molds was such a novelty, Cipriano Algor could not really avoid showing his son-in-law what he had been up to for the past few days, but his pride, which had already led him to refuse his daughter's help, trembled at the thought that Marçal might notice some mistake, some botched repair, or any of the other innumerable signs that provided such clear evidence of the mental agonies he had suffered within those four walls. Although Marçal was far too preoccupied with Marta to pay much attention to clay, sodium silicate, plaster of Paris, mold frames, and molds, the potter decided not to work after supper and to spend the evening with them, thus affording him the opportunity to discourse with a degree of theoretical exactitude on a subject whose practical pitfalls and disastrous consequences he knew better than anyone. Marçal warned Marta that they would be having lunch with his parents the next day, but he did not even mention the painful conversation he had had with his mother, which made his father-in-law think that this was a subject that had moved into the private domain, a problem to be analyzed in the privacy of the bedroom, not to be picked over and analyzed in a three-way conversation, unless, of course, with praiseworthy prudence, Marçal merely wanted to avoid falling yet again into a debate on the thorny topic of moving to the Center, we have seen far too often how it begins and have seen far too often where it usually ends.

The following morning, Cipriano Algor was already at work when Marçal came into the pottery, Good morning, he said, your apprentice reporting for duty. Marta came with him, but she did not offer to help with the work, even though she was sure that this time her father would not send her away. The pottery was like a battlefield on which, for four consecutive days, one person had been battling with himself and with everything around

him. I'm afraid it's a bit untidy in here, Cipriano Algor said apologetically, it's not like it used to be when we made pots and plates, we had a system then, an established routine, It's just a matter of time, said Marta, with time, hands and objects become used to each other, and when they do, the objects don't get in the way and neither do the hands, In the evening, I feel so tired that my arms grow heavy just thinking about imposing some order on this chaos, Well, if I wasn't banned from coming in here, I'd be delighted to take on the task, I didn't ban you, protested her father, Not in so many words, no, It's just that I don't want you wearing yourself out, when it's time to do the painting, that will be different, you can work sitting down, you won't have to make much physical effort, Then you'll probably tell me that the smell of the paints could damage the baby, There really is no talking to this woman, Cipriano Algor said to Marçal, in feigned desperation, You've known her longer than I have, so be patient, but, you know, the place certainly could do with a thorough cleaning and a proper tidying, May I have an idea, asked Marta, would you gentlemen allow me to have an idea, You've already had the idea and you'll burst if you don't let it out, muttered her father, What is it, asked Marçal, The clay is resting this morning, so let's get this place shipshape again, and since my beloved father doesn't want me to wear myself out working, I'll just give the orders. Cipriano Algor and Marçal looked at each other to see who would speak first, and since neither one could bring himself to take the lead, they said in unison, All right. Before it was time for Marçal and Marta to go off to lunch, the pottery and everything in it was as clean and tidy as one could expect in a workplace in which mud is the basic ingredient for the product being made. Indeed, whether we mix water and clay, or water and plaster, or water and cement, we can cudgel our brains for as long as we like to come up with a name that is less vulgar, less prosaic, less common, but always, sooner or later, we come back to that word, the word that says all there is to say, mud. Many of the best-known gods chose mud as the material for their creations, but it is hard to know now if that preference represents a point in mud's favor or a point against.

Marta left her father's lunch ready for him, You just have to heat it up, she said as she left with Marçal. The feeble noise of the van's engine faded and then rapidly disappeared altogether, silence filled the house and the pottery, for just over an hour Cipriano Algor will be completely alone. Now fully recovered from the nervous excitement of recent days, he soon became aware that his stomach was showing signs of dissatisfaction. First, he gave up his food, then he went into the kitchen, removed the lid from the pan and sniffed the contents. It smelled good and it was still hot. There was no reason to wait. When he had finished eating and was seated once more in his easy chair, he felt at peace. It is a well-known fact that spiritual contentment is not entirely unrelated to having a well-fed body, however, the reason why Cipriano Algor was, at that moment, feeling at peace, the reason why his whole being was filled by a near ecstasy of joy, had nothing to do with the material fact of having eaten. What also contributed to that happy state of mind were, in order of importance, the undeniable advances he had made in mastering the techniques of molds, the hope that from now on the problems would be largely over or at least prove to be less intractable, the harmonious relationship

between Marta and Marçal, which, as people say, was there for anyone with eyes to see, and finally, though less important, the thorough cleaning and tidying they had given the pottery. Cipriano Algor's eyelids slowly closed, lifted once, then again, this time with more difficulty, and the third time was a feeble attempt lacking all conviction. With soul and stomach in this state of plenitude, Cipriano Algor let himself slip into sleep. Outside, in the shade of the mulberry tree, Found was sleeping too. They could have stayed like that until Marçal and Marta got back, but suddenly the dog barked. The tone was neither threatening nor frightened, it was merely a conventional warning, a who-goes-there performed purely out of duty. Although I know the person who has just arrived, I have to bark because that is what is expected of me. However it was not Found's cheerful barking that woke Cipriano Algor, but a voice, the voice of a woman who was standing outside calling, Marta, and then asking, Marta, are you there. The potter did not rise from the chair, he merely sat up, as if preparing for flight. The dog was no longer barking. The kitchen door stood open, the woman was approaching, getting closer all the time, at any moment she would appear in the room, if this new encounter is not the result of mere chance, a mere coincidence, if it was foreseen and set down in the book of destinies, not even an earthquake will stop it in its tracks. Found came in first, wagging his tail, followed by Isaura Madruga. Oh, she said, surprised. It was not easy for Cipriano Algor to get up, the low chair and the fact that his legs had suddenly turned to water were to blame for the pathetic figure he knew he must be cutting. He said, Good afternoon. She said, Good afternoon, I mean, good morning, I'm not quite sure what time it is. He said, It's gone midday. She said, Oh, I thought it was earlier. He said, Marta isn't here, but do come in. She said, I don't want to bother you, I'll come back some other time, it's nothing urgent. He said, She and Marçal have gone to have lunch with his parents, she won't be long. She said, I just came to tell Marta that I've found a job. He said, Where. She said, Here in the village fortunately. He said, What sort of job is it. She said, In a shop, behind the counter, it could be worse. He said, Do you like that kind of work. She said, Well, we can't always do what we want to do in life, and for me, the main thing was being able to stay here, to this Cipriano Algor did not respond, he said nothing, confused by the questions which, almost without thinking, had issued from his mouth, it's obvious to anyone that if someone asks a question it's because he wants to know the answer, and there must be some reason why he wants to know, now the principal question that Cipriano Algor has to make sense of among his tangled feelings is the reason for those questions which, taken literally, and it's hard to see how else to take them, reveal an interest in the life and future of this woman that goes far beyond what one would normally expect in a good neighbor, an interest, moreover, as we know very well, that stands in complete and irreconcilable contradiction to the decisions and ideas which, throughout these pages, Cipriano Algor himself has made and formulated in relation to Isaura, who was Estudiosa but is now Madruga. The problem is a serious one requiring long, uninterrupted consideration, but the orderly logic and discipline of the story, which can, on occasions, be violated and, when appropriate, should be, will not permit us to leave Isaura Madruga and Cipriano Algor in this distressing situation any longer, standing there facing each other, silent and constrained, with the dog looking at them, unable to

understand what is going on, with the clock on the wall that must be asking itself, as it tick-tocks on, what these two people want with time if they don't make some use of it. Something must be done. Yes, something, but not just anything. We could and should violate the orderly logic and discipline of the story, but we must never ever violate what constitutes the exclusive and essential character of a person, that is, his personality, his way of being, his own, unmistakable nature. A character can be full of contradictions, but never incoherent, and if we insist on this point it is because, contrary to what dictionaries may say, incoherence and contradiction are not synonymous. A person or character contradicts himself within the bounds of his own inner coherence, whereas incoherence, which, far more than contradiction, is a constant behavioral characteristic, resists contradiction, eliminates it, cannot stand to live with it. From this point of view, and at the risk of falling into the paralyzing webs of paradox, we should not exclude the hypothesis that contradiction is, in fact, one of the most coherent contraries of incoherence. Oh dear, these speculations, perhaps not entirely without interest for those who do not content themselves with the apparent and accepted nature of concepts, have diverted us still further from the difficult situation in which we left Cipriano Algor and Isaura Madruga, alone with each other, while Found, realizing that nothing much was going to happen there, had decided to leave and return to the shade of the mulberry tree to continue his interrupted sleep. It is time, therefore, to find a solution to this inadmissible state of affairs, for example, by having Isaura Madruga, who, being a woman, is the more resolute of the two, say a few words just to see what happens, these will do as well as any others, Well, I'll be off then, often that's all that's needed, it's enough just to break the silence, moving the body slightly as if about to leave, and in this case, at least, it proved to be a sovereign remedy, although, unfortunately for the potter Cipriano Algor, the only thing that occurred to him to ask was a question which, later on, will cause him to strike his head with the palm of his hand, we can each judge for ourselves if he was right, So, what news of our water jug, he asked, is it still doing a good job. Cipriano Algor will later strike his head as a punishment for what he considers an unforgivable gaffe, but we hope that later, when his self-punishing fury has passed, he will remember that Isaura Madruga did not unleash an offensive guffaw of mocking laughter, she did not give a sarcastic titter, she did not even smile the slightly ironic smile that the situation seemed to call for, on the contrary, she looked very serious and folded her arms over her chest as if she were still embracing the water jug, which Cipriano Algor, without noticing the slip, had called ours, perhaps later that night, when sleep will not come, this word will question him as to his intentions when he said it, if the water jug was ours simply because one day it had passed from his hand to hers and because he was referring to that moment, or ours because it was ours, plain and simple, just ours, ours as in belonging to us, ours full stop. Cipriano Algor will not reply, he will merely mutter as he has before, How stupid, but he will do so automatically and, indeed, vehemently, though without any real conviction. Only when Isaura Madruga had left with a murmured, See you again, then, only when she had gone out through that door like a subtle shadow, only when Found, having accompanied her to the top of the slope that leads to the road, had come into the kitchen with a patently interrogative look about him,

head cocked, tail wagging, ears up, did Cipriano Algor realize that she had not said a word in response to his question, not a yes or a no, just that gesture of embracing her own body, perhaps in order to find herself inside it, perhaps to defend it or to defend herself from it. Cipriano Algor looked around him perplexed, as if lost, the palms of his hands were sweating, his heart was pounding, with the anxiety of someone who has just escaped a danger the gravity of which he has not yet fully grasped. And that was the first time that he struck his head with the palm of his hand.

When Marta and Marçal returned from lunch, they found him in the pottery, pouring liquid plaster into a mold, Did you manage all right without us, asked Marta, I didn't pine away if that's what you mean, I gave the dog his food, had lunch, had a rest, and here I am again, and how did things go at your parents' house, Oh, the usual, said Marçal, I'd already told them about Marta, so there wasn't any great fuss, just the hugs and kisses you'd expect on these occasions, and we didn't talk about the other matter, Just as well, said Cipriano Algor, continuing to pour the liquid plaster into the mold. His hands were trembling slightly. I'll come and help you, I'll just go and change my clothes, said Marçal. Marta did not leave with her husband. A minute later, Cipriano Algor, without looking at her, asked, Do you want something, No, I don't want anything, I was just watching you work. Another minute passed, and this time it was Marta's turn to ask, Are you feeling all right, Of course I am, You seem odd, different, That's just your eyes, Generally speaking, my eyes and I agree, You're very lucky, then, I never know who I agree with, replied her father brusquely. Marçal would soon be back. Marta asked again, Did anything happen while we were out. Her father put the bucket down on the ground, wiped his hands on a cloth and, looking straight at his daughter, replied, Isaura was here, Isaura Estudiosa or Madruga, or whatever her name is, she wanted to talk to you, You mean Isaura came here, That's what I just said, isn't it, We don't all have your analytical powers, and may one ask what she wanted, To tell you that she'd found a job, Where, Here, Oh, I am glad, very glad, I'll pop around and see her in a while. Cipriano Algor had started work on another mold, Pa, Marta began, but he stopped her, If it's about that same subject, please don't go on, I've given you the message I had to pass on and there's nothing more to be said, Seeds get buried too, but end up springing into life, oh, sorry, is that the same subject. Cipriano Algor did not respond. Between his daughter's departure and his son-in-law's return he again struck his head with his open palm.

We have already mentioned the fact that many anthropogenic myths made use of clay in the creation of man, and anyone moderately interested in the subject can find out more in know-it-all almanacs and know-it-almost-all encyclopedias. Generally speaking, this is not the case with the followers of different religions, since it is through the organs of the church to which they belong that they receive this and other information of equal or similar importance. There is, however, one case, at least one, in which the clay had to be fired in the kiln for the work to be considered finished. And then only after various attempts. This singular creator, whose name we forget, probably did not know about or else did not have sufficient confidence in the thaumaturgic efficacy of blowing air into the nostrils as another creator did before or would do later, indeed, as Cipriano Algor did in our own time, although with the very modest intention of cleaning the ashes from the face of the nurse. To return to the creator who had to fire his man in the kiln, we give below a description of events, and there you will see that the failed attempts referred to above were a result of the said creator's lack of knowledge as regards the correct firing temperatures. He started out by making a human figure out of clay, whether male or female is of no importance, placed it in the kiln and lit the fire. After what seemed to him the right length of time, he took the figure out and, oh dear, his heart sank. The figure had come out pitch black, nothing like his idea of how a man should look. However, perhaps because he was only in the early stages of this venture, he could not face destroying the failed product of his own ineptitude. He gave him life, apparently by flicking him on the head, and sent him away. He made another figure, placed it in the kiln, and this time took great care to keep the fire low. He succeeded in this, but the temperature was too low this time, for the figure turned out whiter than the very whitest of white things. It still wasn't what he wanted. Despite this new failure, though, he did not lose patience, he must have thought kindly, Poor thing, it's not his fault, and so he gave him life too and sent him off. So there was already a black man and a white man in the world, but the left-handed creator had still not achieved the creature he had hoped for. He set to work again, and another human figure took up his place in the kiln, the problem, even without a pyrometer, should be easier to solve now, that is, the secret was to heat the kiln not too much and not too little, neither too hot nor too cold, and by that rule of thumb, things should finally work out. They did not. The new figure was not black, but neither was it white, it was, oh heavens, yellow. Anyone else would perhaps have given up, would have hurriedly despatched a flood to finish off the black man and the white man, and broken the yellow man's neck, indeed, one might even think this the logical conclusion of the thought that went through the creator's mind in the form of a question, If I myself don't know how to make a proper man, how will I ever be able to call him to account for his mistakes. For a few days, our amateur potter could not get up the courage to go back into the pottery, but then, as they say, the creative bug bit him again and, after a few hours, the fourth figure was ready to go into the kiln. Assuming that there was at the time another creator above this creator, it is very likely that the lesser sent up to the greater a prayer, an entreaty, a supplication, or some such thing, Please, don't let me make a mess of it. Finally, with anxious hands, he placed the clay figure in the kiln, then he carefully chose and weighed what seemed to him the correct

amount of firewood, eliminated any that was too green or too dry, removed one piece that was burning badly and clumsily, added another that produced a cheerful flame, calculated approximately the time and intensity of the heat, and, repeating that plea, Please, don't let me make a mess of it, he put a match to the fuel. We modern-day human beings, who have experienced so many moments of anxiety, taking a difficult exam, being stood up by a lover, waiting for a child to come home, not getting a job, can imagine what this creator must have gone through as he waited for the result of his fourth attempt, the sweat which, but for the proximity of the kiln, would doubtless have been ice-cold, the fingernails bitten down to the quick, every minute that passed taking with it ten years of life, for the first time in the history of various creations of the universe, the creator himself felt the torments that await us in eternal life, because it is eternal, not because it is life. But it was worth it. When our creator opened the door of the kiln and saw what was inside, he fell to his knees, amazed. This time the man was not black or white or yellow, he was red, yes, as red as the red of sunrises and sunsets, as red as the molten lava from volcanoes, as red as the fire that had made him red, as red as the blood that was already flowing in his veins, for with this human figure, because he was the one the creator had wanted to create, there was no need to give him a flick on the head, he merely had to say, Come, and the figure stepped out of the kiln of its own accord. Anyone who does not know what happened in later ages will say that, despite all the errors and anxieties or, given the instructive, educational nature of the experiment, precisely because of them, the story had a happy ending. As with all things in this world, and doubtless in all other worlds too, that judgment will depend on the point of view of the observer. Those whom the creator rejected, those whom, albeit with praiseworthy benevolence, he sent away, that is, those with black, white, and yellow skins, grew in number and multiplied, they cover, so to speak, the whole globe, while those with red skins, those who cost the creator so much effort and for whom he suffered such pain and anxiety, they are now the impotent proof of how a triumph can, in time, become the disappointing prelude to a defeat. The fourth and last attempt by the first creator of men to place his creatures in a kiln, the one that apparently brought him a definitive victory, turned out to be a rout. Cipriano Algor, an assiduous reader of know-it-all or know-it-almost-all almanacs and encyclopedias, had read this story when he was a boy and, though he had forgotten many things in his life, for some reason he had not forgotten this. It was a legend that came from the American Indians, the so-called redskins, to be exact, by which the distant creators of the myth must have set out to prove the superiority of their race over all others, including those of whose actual existence they knew nothing at the time. This last point is bound to provoke the objection, the vain and futile argument that, since they had no knowledge of other races, they could not possibly have imagined them white or black or yellow or, even, iridescent. A great mistake. Anyone putting forward such an argument would only be demonstrating their ignorance of the fact that we are dealing here with a people who are potters, as well as hunters, who, in the difficult work of transforming clay into a dish or an idol, would have learned that all kinds of things can happen inside a kiln, the disastrous and the glorious, the perfect and the botched, the sublime and the grotesque. How often,

over and over, generation after generation, they must have removed from the kiln pieces that were distorted, cracked, scorched, unbaked, or half-baked, all of them useless. Indeed, there is not much difference between what happens inside a kiln and what happens inside a bread oven. Bread dough is just a different sort of clay, made from flour, yeast, and water, and just like clay, it can emerge from the oven undercooked or burned. There may not be much difference inside, Cipriano Algor admitted, but once out of the oven, I can tell you that I would give anything to be a baker.

The days and nights passed, as did the afternoons and the mornings. According to books and to life, the labors of men have always taken longer and been more backbreaking than those of the gods, the creator of the redskins is a case in point, for he, after all, made only four human images, and yet that minuscule result, which had little success among its intended public, merited an entry in the history set down in almanacs, while Cipriano Algor, for whom there will be no reward in the form of a printed note on his life and works, will have to wrest from the clay, in this first phase alone, one hundred and fifty times more than that, six hundred figurines with different origins, characteristics, and social backgrounds, three of them, the jester, the clown, and the nurse, are more easily definable by the jobs they do, which is not the case with the mandarin and with the bearded Assyrian, about whom, despite the reasonable amount of information drawn from the encyclopedia, it was not possible to discover exactly what they did in life. As for the Eskimo, one assumes that he will continue to hunt and fish. The truth is that Cipriano Algor does not much care any more. When he starts removing the figurines from the molds, identical in size, the differences in clothing attenuated by their uniform color, he will have to make a real effort not to confuse them and mix them up. He will be so immersed in the work, that he will sometimes forget that the molds have a limited life, that they can only be used about forty times, after which the shapes begin to blur, to lose vigor and clarity, as if the figurine were gradually growing weary of existence, as if it were being drawn back to an original state of nakedness, not just its human nakedness, but to the absolute nakedness of clay before it had begun to be clothed in the first physical expression of an idea. At first, in order not to waste time, he had simply thrown the rejected figurines into a corner, but then, out of a strange and inexplicable feeling of pity and guilt, he had gathered them up, most of them misshapen and confused by the fall and by the shock, and placed them carefully on a shelf in the pottery. He could have reused them in order to give them a second chance of life, he could have pitilessly flattened them as he had those two figures of a man and a woman that he had made at the beginning, the clay is still there, dry, cracked, shapeless, and yet instead he rescued the malformed creatures from the rubbish, protected them, sheltered them, as if he loved his successes less than he did these mistakes that he had not proved skillful enough to avoid. He will not fire these figurines, it would be a waste of firewood, but he will leave them there until the clay cracks and crumbles, until fragments break off and fall away, and, if there is time, until the dust from them is transformed back into resurrected clay. Marta will ask him, What are those rejects doing there, to which he will simply reply, I like them, but he will not, like Marta, call them rejects, for to do so would be to drive

them from the world for which they had been born, to deny them as his own work and thus condemn them to a final, definitive orphanhood. The dozens of finished figurines that are transferred every day to the drying shelves, outside, in the shade of the mulberry tree, are also his work, and very tiring work they are, but these are so many and so difficult to tell apart that the only care and attention they require is to ensure that they do not suffer any last-minute injuries. He and Marta had no option but to tie Found up to stop him jumping onto the shelves, where he would doubtless commit the worst depredations ever seen in pottery's turbulent history, which, as we know, is prodigal in shards and undesirable amalgamations. Remember that when the first six figurines, the others, the prototypes, were placed here to dry, and Found wanted to find out, by direct contact, what they were, Cipriano Algor's instantaneous shout and slap had been enough for Found's hunting instinct, further aroused by the objects' insolent immobility, to withdraw without causing any damage, but it would, of course, be unreasonable to expect such an animal to resist, unmoved, the provoking sight of a horde of clowns and mandarins, of jesters and nurses, of Eskimos and bearded Assyrians, all thinly disguised as redskins. He was deprived of liberty for only an hour. Impressed by the hurt, almost wounded look on Found's face as he submitted to his punishment, Marta suggested to her father that education must have some uses, even when it comes to dogs, It's just a matter of adapting the methods, she declared, And how are you going to do that, The first thing we'll have to do is to untie him, And then, If he tries to get onto the shelves, then we tie him up again, And then, We untie him and tie him up again as many times as it takes for him to learn, It might work, but don't go deluding yourself that he really has learned the lesson, because obviously he won't dare go near the shelves with you there, but, when he's alone, with no one watching him, I fear that none of your educational methods will be enough to discipline the instincts of the jackal grandfather inside Found's head, Surely Found's jackal grandfather wouldn't even give the figurines a sniff, he would just walk straight past and go off in search of something he could actually eat, All right, I just want you to be aware what would happen if the dog did get onto the shelves, imagine the amount of work we'd lose, It might be a lot, it might be a little, we'll see, but if it does happen, I undertake to remake any figurines that get damaged, that's probably the only way I'll be able to convince you to let me help you, Let's not get into that, you just carry on with your pedagogical experiments. Marta left the pottery and, without a word, she removed the lead from the dog's collar. She took a few steps toward the house, then stopped as if she had just thought of something. The dog looked at her and lay down. Marta advanced a few more steps, stopped again, and then went straight into the kitchen, leaving the door open. The dog did not move. Marta closed the door. The dog waited for a moment, then got up and slowly went over to the shelves. Marta did not open the door. The dog looked back at the house, hesitated, looked again, then placed his paws on the shelf where the bearded Assyrians were drying. Marta opened the door and came out. The dog quickly removed his paws and stood there waiting. He had no reason to run away, his conscience told him that he had done nothing wrong. Marta grabbed his collar and, again without saying a word, tethered him with the lead. Then she went back into the kitchen and shut the door. She reckoned that the dog would think

about what had happened, well, think or do whatever he would normally do in such a situation. After two minutes, she released him again, it was best not to give the animal time to forget, the relationship between cause and effect had to be fixed in his memory. This time the dog waited longer before putting his paws on the shelf, but he did so nonetheless, though perhaps with slightly less conviction than before. Shortly afterward he was again tethered. After the fourth time, he began to show signs of understanding what was expected of him, but he kept putting his paws on the shelf, as if to make absolutely certain that this was precisely what he should not do. During all this tying and untying, Marta did not say a word, she went in and out of the kitchen, closed and opened the door, and to every movement by the dog, which was always the same, she responded with her own movement, which was also always the same, in a chain of successive and reciprocal actions that would end only when one of them, by making a different movement, broke the sequence. The eighth time that Marta closed the kitchen door behind her, Found again went over to the shelves, but once there, he did not raise his paws as if he wanted to touch the bearded Assyrians, he stood there looking at the house, waiting, as if he were daring his mistress to be bolder than he was, as if he were asking her, What answer have you got to this brilliant move of mine, which will give me victory and which will defeat you. Pleased with herself, Marta murmured, I've won, I knew I would. She went out to the dog, stroked his head and said gently, Good dog, nice dog, her father had come to the door of the pottery to witness the happy result, Fine, now we just have to find out if it sticks, Bet you anything you like that he never again tries to get up on the shelves, said Marta. Very few human words ever enter a dog's own vocabulary of snarls and barks, and, for that reason alone, because he did not understand them, Found did not protest at his owners' irresponsible display of smug satisfaction, because anyone with any knowledge of these matters and able to make an impartial evaluation of what had happened would say that the winner of this battle was not Marta, the owner, however convinced she might be of that, but the dog, although it must be said that people who judge only by appearances would say exactly the opposite. Let everyone, then, boast about the victory they imagine to be theirs, even the bearded Assyrian and his colleagues, now safe from attack. As for Found, we cannot resign ourselves to leaving him with an unwarranted reputation as a loser. The ultimate proof that victory was his is the fact that, from that day forth, he became the most vigilant of guards ever to watch over clay figurines. You should have heard him barking to alert his owners when an unexpected gust of wind blew over half a dozen nurses.

The first kiln-load contained three hundred figurines, or, rather, three hundred and fifty, allowing for likely breakages. They were all that would fit. This happened to coincide with Marçal's day of rest, and so for Marçal it proved instead to be a day of hard work. Patient and willing, he helped his father-in-law to arrange the dolls on the shelves inside and he took charge of feeding the fire, which is a job only for the robust, as much because of the physical effort of carrying the wood to the furnace and stoking the fire as because of the long hours involved, for an old kiln like this, rudimentary in the light of the latest technology, takes a considerable time to reach the optimum temperature for firing,

and once it does, that temperature has to be kept as stable as possible. Marçal will work into the night, until his father-in-law, once he has completed a task in the pottery that he had insisted on finishing, can take over from him. Marta took her father's supper out to him and then brought Marçal his and, sitting on the bench that had served as the bench of meditations, she ate her supper with him. Neither of them had much appetite, though for different reasons. You're not eating, you must be exhausted, she said, Yes, I am a little, I'm not very fit, so it takes more out of me, he said, It was my idea to make these figurines, Yes, I know, It was my idea, but for the last few days I've been tormented by a kind of remorse, I keep asking myself if it was worth our while to start making them, if it isn't all just pathetically futile, At the moment, the most important thing for your father is the work that he's doing, regardless of whether or not it's of any use, if you took away the work from him, whatever that work was, then in a way you'd be taking away his reason for living, and if you said to him that what he's doing is pointless, even if the evidence was staring him in the face, he probably wouldn't believe you, because he simply couldn't, The Center stopped buying our crockery and he managed to withstand the shock, Only because you immediately came up with the idea of making these dolls, Yes, but I have a feeling that the bad days are just about to begin, even worse than these, My promotion to resident guard, which shouldn't be long in coming now, will be a bad day for your father, He said he'd come and live with us at the Center, He did, but he said it in the same way that we all say that one day we're going to die, there's a part of our mind that refuses to accept what it knows is the fate of all living creatures and pretends that it has nothing to do with it, that's how it is with your father, he says he'll come and live with us, but, deep down, he doesn't really believe it, As if he were waiting for some last-minute diversion that will take him off along another road, He should know by now that as far as the Center's concerned there's only one road, the one that goes from the Center to the Center, I work there and I know what I'm talking about, A lot of people say that life at the Center is one nonstop miracle. Marçal did not reply at once. He gave a piece of meat to the dog, who had been waiting patiently for a few leftovers to come his way, and only then did he reply, Yes, much as, at this hour of the night, that piece of meat I gave to Found must have seemed like a miracle to him. He stroked the animal's back, twice, three times, the first out of simple, normal affection, the other two times with anxious insistence, as if there were some urgent need to comfort him, when he was the one who needed calming down in order to drive away the idea that had just resurfaced from its hiding place in his memory, The Center doesn't allow dogs. It's true, they don't allow dogs in the Center, or cats, only caged birds and aquarium fish, and even those are becoming rare, ever since they invented virtual aquariums, without fish that smell of fish or water that you have to change. Fifty examples of ten different species swim gracefully about inside, and, in order for them not to die, they have to be cared for and fed as if they were living creatures, the water quality has to be checked, and, so that it's not all hard work, not only can one decorate the bottom of the aquarium with various types of rocks and plants, but the happy owner of this marvel will have at his disposal a range of sounds that will allow him, while he watches these gutless, boneless fish, to surround himself with such diverse ambient sounds as a Caribbean beach, a tropical

jungle, or a storm at sea. They don't want dogs at the Center, Marçal thought again, and he noticed that his worry was gradually driving out the other worry, Should I talk to her about this or shouldn't I, he began to think that he should, then he thought it would be better to leave it until later, when he would have to talk about it, when there would be no other option. He decided to say nothing, but, true to the inconstant fluctuations of the will inside the virtual aquarium of the mind, less than a minute later he was saying to Marta, It's just occurred to me that we're not going to be able to take Found with us to the Center, they don't allow dogs, it's going to be a real problem, poor thing, having to abandon him like that, Perhaps there's a solution, said Marta, You've obviously already thought about it, said Marçal, surprised, Yes, I have, a long time ago, So what's your solution, It occurred to me that Isaura wouldn't mind looking after Found, in fact, I think she'd really like that, and besides they already know each other, Isaura, Yes, you remember, Isaura of the water jug, the one who brought us the cake, the one who came here to talk to me the last time we went to have lunch with your parents, Seems like a good idea to me, Yes, I think it would be best for Found, But will your father agree, Half of him will protest and say, certainly not, a single woman isn't good company for a dog, I should imagine he's quite capable of inventing some such theory of disaffinities, and that there must be other people who wouldn't mind taking him in, but we also know that the other half of him will hope against hope that the first half doesn't win, How are the lovebirds, asked Marçal, Poor Isaura, poor Pa, Why do you say poor Isaura, poor Pa, Because it's obvious that she loves him, but she can't get over the barrier he's built around himself, And what about him, Oh, with him it's that old story about the two halves again, one half probably thinks of nothing else, And the other, The other half is sixty-four years old, the other half is afraid, People are so complicated, That's true, but if we were simple we wouldn't be people. Found was no longer there, he had suddenly realized that there was no one to keep the older master company, alone in the pottery and laboring over the second batch of three hundred figurines for the first delivery of six hundred, a dog sees these things and they create an enormous feeling of confusion in him, he sees them but cannot understand them, all that work, all that effort, all that sweat, and I am not referring now to the amount of money that will be earned, it will not be much, it will only be so-so, it certainly won't be a lot, as Marta said a while ago, isn't all of this just pathetically futile. As has been seen before, and has been confirmed now, thanks to the long, deep conversation between Marta and Marçal, the stone bench fully merits the grave and ponderous name we gave to it, that of the bench of meditations, but needs must, and it is time once more to attend to the kiln, to feed more firewood into the mouth of the furnace, carefully though, Marçal, don't forget that tiredness slows down one's defensive reflexes, increases the time they take to respond, we don't want a repeat of what happened on that other ill-fated day, when the snake of howling fire leaped out at you and marked your left hand forever. That is also, more or less, what Marta said, I'm going to wash the dishes and then go to bed, take care, Marçal.

The following morning, very early as usual, Cipriano Algor drove Marçal back to the Center in the van. He had said to Marçal as they left the house, I don't know how to

thank you for all your help, and Marçal had replied, I did my best, I just hope it all continues to go smoothly, Oh, I'm sure that the next lot of figurines will prove less problematic, I've worked out a few shortcuts to simplify the work, that's the great thing about gaining more experience, I reckon the next three hundred figurines could be on the drying shelves in a week, Well, you can certainly count on my help again if they're ready to go into the kiln in ten days' time when I have my next leave, Thanks, do you know something, if it wasn't for this wretched crisis over the pottery, you and I could have made a good team, you could stop being a guard at the Center and devote yourself to the pottery, Possibly, but it's a bit late for that, besides, if we had done that, we would both be without a job, But I've still got a job, Yes, of course you have. Later on, once they were on the road into the city, and after a long silence, Cipriano Algor said, I've had an idea and I'd like to know what you think of it, What is it, Well, I'm thinking of taking those first three hundred figurines to the Center as soon as they've been painted, that way the Center would see that we were serious about the work and they could put them on sale earlier than expected, which would be good for them and even better for us, we wouldn't have to wait so long for the results, and if everything goes as we hope it does, we could take the next stage a bit more easily and not have to do things in quite such a rush, what do you think, Seems like a good idea to me, said Marçal, and it occurred to him that he had said the same thing about Marta's idea of leaving the dog to be looked after by the woman with the water jug, After I drop you off, I'm going to have a word with the head of the buying department, I'm sure he'll agree, said Cipriano Algor, Let's hope so, said Marçal, and again he was aware of repeating words he had used only a short time before, this happens all the time with words, we repeat them constantly, but, quite why we don't know, we seem more aware of it some times than others. When they were entering the city, Marçal asked, Who's going to paint the dolls, Well, Marta insists that she wants to paint them, she says I can't be saying mass and ringing the bell at the same time, she didn't put it quite like that, but that's what she meant, But, Pa, paints contain poisons, Yes, I know, And in Marta's condition it doesn't seem right, I'll do the undercoat and I'll use a spray gun, I know it sprays the paint into the air, but it's much quicker, And then, Then we have to apply the paint with a brush, which is quite safe, You should at least have bought a mask, It was too expensive, muttered Cipriano Algor, as if ashamed of his own words, If we could get enough money together to hire the truck to transport the rest of the pottery from the Center, surely we could afford a mask, We didn't think of that, said Cipriano Algor, then contritely corrected himself, Or, rather, I didn't think of that. They were on the avenue now that led in a straight line to the Center, and although it was still a long way off, they could already make out the words on the giant hoarding, YOU'RE OUR BEST CUSTOMER, BUT, PLEASE, DON'T TELL YOUR NEIGHBOR. Cipriano Algor made no comment, but Marçal echoed his thoughts, They're having fun at our expense. When the van drew up opposite the door of the security department, Marçal said, Drop by here again when you've spoken to the head of the buying department, I'm going to see if I can get hold of a mask, Like I said, I don't really need it for me, and Marta will only be painting with brushes, You know her as well as I do, you'll get distracted for a while in the pottery and, by then, it'll be too late, Look, I don't know how long I'll be at the buying

department, shall I ask for you here, or should I come and find you, No, don't do that, it's not worth it, I'll leave the mask with my colleague at the door, All right, See you in ten days' time, then, Fine, Take care of Marta for me, Pa, Don't worry, I will, you don't love her any more than I do, you know, I don't know if you love her more or less than I do, I just love her differently, Marçal, What, Give me a hug. When Marçal got out of the van, his eyes were wet with tears. This time, Cipriano Algor did not thump his head with the palm of his hand, he just said to himself with a sad half-smile, See what a man's reduced to, asking for a hug like a love-starved child. He started the van, drove around the block, which was bigger now because of the new extension to the Center, Soon no one will even remember what used to be here, he thought. Fifteen minutes later, he was driving down the ramp into the basement, feeling as strange as if he were returning to the place after a long absence, even though he could see no changes that could objectively justify that feeling of strangeness. After telling the guard that he had come to get some information and not in order to unload, he parked the van at the side. There was already a long line of trucks waiting, and some of the trucks were enormous. It would be another two hours before the reception desk for merchandise opened. Cipriano Algor settled back in his seat and tried to sleep. His last glance through the kiln peephole, before driving into town, had shown that the firing process had finished, now they just had to leave the kiln to cool down, unhurriedly, slowly, like someone walking at their own pace. In order to go to sleep, he started counting dolls as if he were counting sheep, he began with the jesters and counted all of them, then he moved on to the clowns and managed to count every one of them too, fifty of those, fifty of these, he wasn't interested in the spares, the ones that were there just in case any of the others were damaged, then he tried to move on to the Eskimos, but for some reason the nurses got in the way, and during the battle he had to wage to drive them off, he fell asleep. It was not the first time that he had completed his morning sleep in the basement of the Center, it was not the first time that he had been wakened by the sound of engines roaring into life, amplified and multiplied by the echo. He got down from his van and went over to the reception desk, explained who he was and that he had come to sort something out, to talk, if possible, to the boss, It's an important matter, he added. The clerk he spoke to looked at him doubtfully, it was perfectly obvious that neither the matter nor the person standing before him could possibly be important, emerging as they had from a wretched little van with the word Pottery on the side, which is why he said that the boss was busy, He's in a meeting, he said, he would be busy all morning, what exactly did he want. The potter explained what he had to explain, and, in order to impress the clerk, he made sure to mention the telephone conversation he had had with the head of the buying department, and, in the end, the other man said, I'll just go and ask the assistant head of department. Cipriano Algor feared that this would be the wretch who had given him such a hard time before, but the assistant head of department who came out to see him was polite and attentive, and he agreed that it was an excellent idea, Yes, a very good idea indeed, it's good for you and even better for us, while you're producing the next batch of three hundred figurines and preparing for the production of the next six hundred, whether you do it in two stages, as now, or in one, we will be able to observe how the buying public responds,

their reactions to the new product, their explicit and implicit responses, it will even give us time to have some questionnaires drawn up to look at two main aspects, first, the situation prior to purchase, that is, customer interest or appetite, whether there is a spontaneous, genuine desire for the product, second, the situation after use, that is the degree of pleasure obtained, the object's perceived usefulness, the sense of pride in ownership, both from the personal point of view and from the group point of view, be it family, professional or whatever, the really important thing for us is to ascertain if the use value, a fluctuating, unstable, highly subjective element, is too far below or too far above the exchange value, And when that happens, what do you do, asked Cipriano Algor simply in order to say something, and the assistant head of department replied in patronizing tones, My dear sir, surely you're not expecting me to reveal to you, here and now, the secret of the bee, But I've always understood that the secret of the bee doesn't actually exist, that it's a mystification, a false mystery, an unfinished fable, a tale that might have been but wasn't, Yes, you're quite right, the secret of the bee doesn't exist, but we know what it is. Cipriano Algor recoiled as if he had been the victim of an unexpected attack. The assistant head of department smiled and insisted politely that it was a good idea, a really excellent idea, that he would await the first delivery and then they would get back in touch. Feeling intimidated and filled with a sense of foreboding, Cipriano Algor got into his van and left the basement. The man's last words kept going around and around in his head, The secret of the bee doesn't exist, but we know what it is, we know what it is, we know what it is. He had seen the mask fall and realized that behind it lay another identical mask, and he knew that the masks beneath would also be identical to those that had fallen, it's true that the secret of the bee does not exist, but they know what it is. He could not speak of his disquiet to Marta and Marçal because they would not understand, and they would not understand because they had not been there with him, on that side of the counter, listening to the assistant head of department explaining the difference between exchange value and use value, perhaps the secret of the bee consists precisely in provoking in the customer sufficient stimuli and desires so that the use value gradually rises in their estimation, a stage followed shortly afterward by a rise in the exchange value, imposed on the buyer by the wily producer who gradually and subtly undermines the buyer's inner defenses, which are the result of his awareness of his own personality, the same defenses that once, if an unsullied once ever really existed, gave him, however precariously, at least some chance of resistance and self-control. Cipriano Algor is entirely to blame for this laborious and confused explanation, because, despite being what he is, a simple potter with no diploma in sociology and no studies in economics, he nevertheless dared, inside his rustic head, to pursue an idea, only to be forced to recognize, due to the lack of a suitable vocabulary and to a grave and evident lack of precision in the terms he had to use, that he was unable to transpose that idea into a sufficiently scientific language that would perhaps allow us, finally, to understand what he had tried to say in his own language. Cipriano Algor will always remember this moment of bafflement with life and his blundering at tempt to understand it, when, having gone one day to the buying department at the Center to ask the simplest of questions, he returned with the most complex and obscure of replies, so dark and

obscure that nothing could be more natural than that he should lose himself in the labyrinth of his own brain. At least he tried. To his credit, Cipriano Algor will always be able to say that he did everything that a potter could do to try to untangle the hidden meaning behind the sibylline words spoken by the smiling assistant head of department, and although it was clear to him that he had failed, at least he had made it absolutely clear to anyone following behind that the particular road he had taken led nowhere. These are matters for people who know, thought Cipriano Algor, unable to silence his inner disquiet. And, or so say we, other people have done far less and made much more fuss about it.

The package Marçal had left with the guard at the door contained two masks, not one. Just in case the air-purifying system in one of them goes wrong, said the note. And again that plea, Please look after Marta for me. It was almost lunchtime. A wasted morning, thought Cipriano Algor, remembering the molds, the clay waiting for him, the cooling kiln, the rows of dolls inside. Then, halfway down the avenue, with his back to the Center where the phrase You're our best customer, but don't tell your neighbor set out with ironic impudence the relational diagram that defined the city's unconscious complicity with the conscious deception that was manipulating and absorbing it, it occurred to Cipriano Algor that not only had the morning been wasted, but the assistant head of department's obscene phrase had done away with what remained of the reality of the world in which he had learned how to live and in which he had grown used to living, from now on everything would be little more than appearance, illusion, absence of meaning, questions with no answers. I might as well just drive the van into a wall, he thought. He wondered why he didn't do so and why he probably never would, then he listed his reasons. Although inappropriate in the context of his analysis, after all, being alive is, at least in principle, the main reason why people kill themselves, the first of Cipriano Algor's strong reasons for not doing so was the fact of being alive, this was immediately followed by his daughter Marta, and close behind, so intimately bound up with her father's life that it was as if he had thought of both simultaneously, came the pottery, the kiln and, of course, his son-in-law Marçal, who is such a good lad and really does love Marta, and Found, although it may strike many people as scandalous to say so, and, objectively speaking, it is inexplicable that even a dog can bind someone to life, and then, and then, then what, Cipriano Algor could find no other reasons, and yet he had a feeling that there was another reason, what could it be, then suddenly, with no warning, memory threw in his face the name and features of his late wife, the name and features of Justa Isasca, because, if Cipriano Algor was looking for reasons not to crash the van into a wall and if he had already found enough of them in number and substance, namely, himself, Marta, the pottery, the kiln, Marçal, the dog Found, and even the mulberry tree, which we forgot to mention earlier, it was absurd that the last of those reasons, that unexpected reason, whose existence he had queasily glimpsed like a shadow or a mirage, should be someone who was no longer of this world, it's true that she isn't just anyone, she is, after all, the woman he married and worked with, the mother of his daughter, but, even so, however much dialectical talent you add to the pot,

it will be hard to sustain that the memory of a dead person can be reason enough for a living person to want to go on living. A lover of proverbs, adages, maxims, and other popular sayings, one of those rare eccentrics who imagines he knows more than he was taught, would say that there's something so fishy going on here, you can even see the fish's tail. With apologies for the inappropriate and disrespectful nature of the comparison, we would say that, in the case in question, the fish's tail is the late Justa Isasca, and that in order to find the rest of the fish, all one has to do is to grab the tail. Cipriano Algor will not do so. However, when he reaches the village, he will leave the van at the cemetery gate, for the first time since that other day, and walk over to his wife's grave. He will spend a few minutes there thinking, perhaps to say thank you, perhaps to ask, Why did you suddenly reappear, perhaps to hear someone else ask him, Why did you suddenly reappear, then he will glance up as if looking for someone. In this heat, at lunchtime, that's highly unlikely.

The first fifty to emerge from the kiln were the Eskimos, which were nearest to hand, right inside the door. This was, in Marta's immediate view, a fortunate coincidence, Just to get used to the technique we couldn't have a better start, they're easy to paint, in fact, only the nurses, who are all dressed in white, will be easier. When the figurines had cooled completely, they took them over to the drying shelves, where Cipriano Algor, armed with a spray gun and protected by the filter of his face mask, methodically covered them with the matte white of the undercoat. He grumbled to himself that it wasn't worth having that thing covering his mouth and nose, I'd just need to make sure I had the wind behind me, and the paint would be carried away from me, it wouldn't even touch me, but then he thought that he was being unfair and ungrateful, especially considering that, with the good weather they've been having, there could be days when there wasn't any breeze at all. When he had finished his part of the work, Cipriano Algor helped his daughter to set out the paints, the jar of oil, the brushes, the colored drawings on which she had based the dolls, he brought her the bench she would be sitting on, but as soon as he saw her make the first brushstroke, he said, This isn't going to work, if you have the figurines in a row like that, you're going to have to keep moving the bench along and it'll be too tiring, and Marçal said, What did Marçal say, asked Marta, That you should be very careful not to wear yourself out, What I find really tiring is having to hear the same advice over and over, It's for your own good, Look, if I put a dozen figurines in front of me, like that, they're all within easy reach and I'll only have to move the bench four times, besides it does me good to move around a bit, and now that I've explained to you how this assembly line in reverse is going to work, I would remind you that there is nothing more off-putting to someone working than the presence of those who are not, which, in this instance, seems to be you, Right, I'll remember to say the same to you when I'm working, You already have, worse than that, you sent me away, All right, I'm going, there's obviously no talking to you today, Just two things before you go, first, if there's anyone you can talk to, it's me, And second, Give me a kiss. Yesterday it was Cipriano Algor who had asked his son-in-law for a hug, now it's Marta asking her father for a kiss, something is happening to this family, any moment now there'll be comets appearing in the sky, aurora borealis, and witches on broomsticks, Found will sit howling all night at the moon, even when there is no moon, and from one moment to the next the mulberry tree will turn barren. Unless, of course, this is just the result of overly impressionable sensibilities, Marta because she is pregnant, Marçal because Marta is pregnant, Cipriano Algor for all the reasons we already know and some that only he knows. Anyway, father kissed daughter, daughter kissed father, and they made a bit of a fuss of Found too when he tried to join in, so he will have no reason for complaint either. And that, as they say, is that. Cipriano Algor went into the pottery to start making the molds for the next three hundred figurines, and Marta, in the shade of the mulberry tree, beneath the conscientious eye of Found, who had resumed his responsibilities as guard, prepared herself to start painting the Eskimos. Alas, she could not, she had forgotten that first she had to sand them down, remove any sharp edges, any irregularities or imperfections in the finish, then clean off the dust, and, since misfortunes never come singly and since one omission usually reminds you of another, she would not be able to

paint them as she had at first thought, moving seamlessly from one color to the next, until the last brush stroke. She remembered the page in the manual where it explicitly stated that only when one color has completely dried should you apply the next, Now I really could do with an assembly line, she said, with the figurines passing before me, once to receive the blue, then the yellow, then the violet, then the black and the red and the green and the white, and, of course, for the final blessing, the one that carries within it all the colors of the rainbow, May God make you good, for I have done what I could, and it won't be so much because of any additional goodness that God, as subject as any ordinary mortal to lapses and oversights, may contribute to crown my efforts, but because of a humble awareness that the reason we didn't do any better was simply because we couldn't. Arguing with what must be has always been a waste of time, as far as what must be is concerned, arguments are more or less random groups of words waiting to be placed in a syntactical order that will give them a sense they themselves are not entirely sure that they have. Marta left Found to keep an eye on the dolls and, declining all further debates with the inevitable, she went into the kitchen to get the only bit of fine sandpaper in the house, This won't last long, she thought, I'll have to buy some more. If she had looked round the door of the pottery, she would have seen that things were not going well in there either. Cipriano Algor had boasted to Marçal that he had invented a few shortcuts to speed up the work, which, from, shall we say, a global perspective, was true, but speed had soon proved itself to be incompatible with perfection, and produced a far larger number of defective dolls than had been the case with the first batch. When Marta went back to her work, the first spoiled figurines had already been placed on the shelf, but Cipriano Algor, having calculated time gained and figurines lost, decided not to give up his fecund, but, on the other hand, neither reprehensible nor ever fully explained shortcuts. And so the days passed. The Eskimos were followed by the clowns, then came the nurses, then the mandarins and the bearded Assyrians, and finally the jesters, who had been placed along the back wall of the kiln. On the second day, Marta had gone down to the village to buy two dozen sheets of sandpaper. This was the shop where Isaura had just started work, as Marta already knew, having visited Isaura after the latter's troubling encounter, emotionally speaking, of course, with Marta's father. These two women do not see each other very often, but there are plenty of reasons for them to become great friends. Discreetly, so that her words did not reach the ears of the owner of the shop, Marta asked Isaura if she was settling into the job, and Isaura said yes, she was, I'll get used to it, she said. She spoke without any show of pleasure, but firmly, as if she wanted to make it clear that pleasure had nothing to do with it, that it had been will, and will alone, that had made her accept the job. Marta remembered the words that Isaura had spoken some time ago, Any job will do, as long as I can go on living here. In the question that Isaura asked next, while she was rolling up the sheets of sandpaper, loosely, as prescribed, Marta heard an echo, distorted but still recognizable, of those words, And how's everyone at home, Oh, tired, working very hard, but pretty well really, Marçal, poor thing, had to stoke the kiln on his day off, his back is probably killing him now. The sheets of sandpaper had been rolled up. While she was taking the money and returning the change, Isaura, without looking up,

asked, And how's your father. Marta could say only that her father was fine, an anxious thought had just flashed through her mind, What will this woman do with her life when we leave. Isaura said good-bye, she had to serve another customer, Give him my regards, she said, and if, at that moment, Marta had asked her, What will you do with your life when we leave, she would perhaps have replied as calmly as she had before, I'll get used to it. Yes, we often hear it said, or we say it ourselves, I'll get used to it, we say or they say, with what seems to be genuine acceptance, because there really isn't any other way, at least none has yet been discovered, of expressing in as dignified a way as possible our sense of resignation, what no one asks is at what cost do we get used to things. Marta left the shop almost in tears. With a kind of desperate remorse, as if she were accusing herself of having deceived Isaura, she was thinking, She has no idea, she doesn't even know that we're about to leave.

Twice they forgot to give the dog his food. Recollecting his days as an indigent, when hope for the morrow was all the food he had after many hours spent with his stomach longing for sustenance, Found did not complain, instead, neglecting his duties as guard dog, he simply lay down beside the kennel, for it is ancient knowledge that a prone body can withstand hunger far longer, waiting patiently until one of his owners struck his or her head and exclaimed, Oh, damn, we've forgotten about the dog. It is hardly surprising, since, during that time, they had almost forgotten about themselves. But it was thanks to that total absorption in their respective tasks and to the hours stolen from their sleep, even though Cipriano Algor kept telling Marta, You must rest, you must rest, it was thanks to that parallel effort that, when the time came for Cipriano Algor to go and pick up his son-in-law from the Center again, the three hundred figurines that had emerged from the kiln were sanded, brushed, painted, and dried, every single one of them, and that the other three hundred, erect and impeccable in their raw clay, with no visible defects, were also, with the help of the heat and the breeze, perfectly dry and ready to be fired. The pottery seemed to be resting after a great labor, the silence had lain down to sleep. In the shade of the mulberry tree, father and daughter looked at the six hundred figurines lined up on the shelves and it seemed to them that they had done an excellent job. Cipriano Algor said, I won't work in the pottery tomorrow, that way Marçal won't have to deal with the kiln all alone, and Marta said, I think we should rest for a few days before we launch into the second batch, and Cipriano Algor said, What about three days, and Marta replied, It's better than nothing, and Cipriano Algor asked, How are you feeling, and Marta said, Tired, but well, and Cipriano Algor said, I feel great, and Marta said, That must be what we call the reward of a job well done. Although it might not seem like it, there was no irony in these words, only a weariness that could be described as infinite if such a description were not a manifestly wild exaggeration. Whatever it was, it was not so much the physical tiredness, but having to stand helplessly by, unable to do anything, watching her father's bitter disappointment and ill-concealed sadness, his ups and downs, his pathetic attempts to appear confident and authoritative, the obsessive, categorical restating of his doubts as if, by doing so, he could remove them from his head. And then there was that woman, Isaura, Isaura Madruga, she of the water jug, to

whom she had replied only, He's fine, to the question Isaura had murmured, eyes lowered, while she was counting out the change, And how's your father when what she should have done was to take her by the arm, march her to the pottery where her father was working and say, Here he is, and then close the door and leave them inside until words came to their rescue, because silences, poor things, are just that, silences, everyone knows how often even apparently eloquent silences have given rise to mistaken interpretations, with serious and sometimes fatal consequences. We're too fearful, too cowardly to risk doing something like that, thought Marta, looking at her father, who seemed to have fallen asleep, we are too caught in the net of so-called proprieties, in the web of what is proper and improper, if anyone found out I had done it, they would immediately come to me and say that throwing a woman at a man like that, because that's the expression they would use, shows a complete lack of respect for another person's identity, that it was an act of irresponsible imprudence, after all, who knows what might happen to them in the future, people's happiness is not something that we can build today with any certainty that it will still be there tomorrow, later on, we might meet one disunited half of the couple we had united and risk hearing them say, It was all your fault. Marta did not want to give in to that commonsense argument, the logical and skeptical result of many hard battles with life, It's ridiculous to throw away the present just because you're afraid there might not be a future, she said to herself, adding, Besides, not everything will necessarily happen tomorrow, some things will happen only the day after tomorrow, What did you say, asked her father abruptly, Nothing, she said, I've just been sitting here quietly so as not to wake you, But I wasn't asleep, Well, I thought you were, You said that there are some things that will happen only the day after tomorrow, How odd, did I really say that, asked Marta, Yes, I wasn't dreaming it, Then I must have dreamed it, I must have fallen asleep and then immediately woken up again, that's what dreams are like, you can make neither head nor tail of them, not because they don't have a head and a tail, but because the head and the tail aren't where you expect them to be, which is why dreams are so hard to interpret. Cipriano Algor got up, It's nearly time to go and pick up Marçal, but I was just thinking that perhaps it would be a good idea to go a bit earlier and drop in at the buying department to tell them that the first three hundred are ready and to agree on a delivery date, That seems like a good idea, said Marta. Cipriano Algor went to change his clothes, put on a clean shirt and some different shoes, and in less than ten minutes he was getting into the van, See you later, he said, See you later, Pa, go carefully, And come back even more carefully of course, Of course, because then there will be two of you, You see what I mean, there's no arguing with you, you have an answer for everything. Found came over to ask his master if this time he could go with him, but Cipriano Algor said no, be patient, cities are not the best places for dogs.

The journey, one of many, would have been of no consequence were it not for the potter's uneasy feeling that something bad was about to happen. He suddenly remembered what he had heard his daughter say, Some things will happen only the day after tomorrow, a few random words, with no apparent rhyme or reason, which she had

been unable or unwilling to explain, I doubt very much she was sleeping, but I can't understand why she should have said she was dreaming, he thought, and then, as a continuance of the remembered phrase, he allowed his mind to follow the same road, and the phrase began to ring in his head like an obsessive litany, Some things will happen only the day after tomorrow, some things will happen only tomorrow, some things will happen today, then he took up the sequence again and reversed it, Some things will happen today, some things will happen only tomorrow, some things will happen only the day after tomorrow, and he repeated and repeated it so many times that the meaning of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow finally lost all sound and sense, and all that remained in his head, like a danger light flashing on and off, Happen today, happen today, today, today, today, Today what, he asked himself abruptly, trying to shake off the absurd feeling of apprehension that made his hands shake as they gripped the steering wheel, I'm driving into town to pick up Marçal, I'm going to the buying department to tell them that the first batch is ready to be delivered, everything I'm doing is perfectly normal and ordinary and logical, I have no reason to be worried, and I'm driving carefully, there's not much traffic, the hijackings have stopped, at least I haven't heard about any, therefore, nothing out of the usual monotonous routine is going to happen to me, the same steps, the same words, the same gestures, the reception desk, the smiling assistant head of department or the rude one, or even the head of the buying department himself if he isn't in a meeting and takes it into his head to see me, then the van door opening, Marçal getting in, Afternoon, Pa, Good afternoon, Marçal, how was work this week, I don't know if you can really call ten days a week, but I don't know what else to call it, Oh, pretty much as usual, he'll say, We've finished the first batch of figurines, and I've arranged a delivery time with the buying department, I'll say, How's Marta, he'll ask, Oh, tired, but otherwise fine, I'll say, words we are constantly using, it wouldn't surprise me in the least if, as we were passing from this world to the next, we didn't dredge up the strength to respond to someone who had the imbecilic idea to ask how we were, Oh, dying, but otherwise fine, is what we would say. In order to shake off the company of the ominous thoughts that persist in bothering him, Cipriano Algor tried to look at the landscape outside, he did so out of sheer desperation because he knew perfectly well that he would find no solace in the depressing sight of plastic greenhouses stretching out on either side, as far as the horizon, which he could see even more clearly from the top of the small hill the van was climbing. And this is what they call the Green Belt, he thought, this desolation, this gloomy encampment, this flock of grubby blocks of ice that melt those who work inside them into pools of sweat, for a lot of people these greenhouses are machines, machines for making vegetables, nothing could be easier, it's like a recipe, mix all the ingredients together, set the thermostat and the hygrometer, press a button, and shortly afterward up pops a lettuce. Cipriano Algor's displeasure does not blind him to the fact that thanks to these greenhouses, he can have vegetables on his plate all year round, what he can't bear is that they should have chosen the name Green Belt for a place where that color is nowhere to be seen, apart from the few weeds that manage to spring up outside the greenhouses. Would you be any happier if the plastic sheeting were green, was the blunt question asked by the thought process that toils

away on the lower landing of the brain, a restless thought process that is never satisfied with what was thought or decided by that on the upper landing, but Cipriano Algor preferred not to respond to that highly pertinent question, he pretended that he hadn't heard, perhaps because of the somewhat impertinent tone that all pertinent questions automatically adopt, simply because they have been asked, and however hard they try to disguise themselves. The Industrial Belt, which more and more resembles a continually expanding tubular construction, a network of pipes designed by an eccentric and built by a maniac, did not improve his mood, but at least his agitated, confused presentiment was now merely muttering quietly to itself. He noticed that the visible boundary of the shantytowns was now much closer to the road, like an army of ants that resumes its march after the rain has stopped, he gave a resigned shrug as he thought that soon the attacks on trucks would be bound to start again, and then, making a heroic effort to drive away the shadow sitting beside him, he joined the city's disorderly traffic. It was early yet to pick up Marçal, he had plenty of time to go to the buying department. He did not ask to speak to the head of the buying department, he knew very well that the matter which brought him there was merely an excuse to remind them of his existence, a visiting card so that they would not forget him or the fact that about thirty kilometers away a kiln was diligently firing clay, a woman was painting, and her father was making molds, and that all had their eyes fixed on the Center, and don't go telling me that kilns don't have eyes, because they do, if they didn't, they wouldn't know what they were doing, so they do have eyes, it's just that they're not like our eyes. He was greeted by the nice, smiling assistant head of department who had dealt with him on the previous occasion, So what brings you here today, he asked, The three hundred figurines are ready, and I just came to find out when you would like me to bring them in, Whenever you want, tomorrow if you like, Ah, I don't know that I can tomorrow, my son-in-law will be home on leave and he'll be helping me put the other three hundred in the kiln, The day after tomorrow, then, as soon as you can, though, because I've had an idea that I want to put into practice right away, To do with my figurines you mean, Exactly, do you remember that I mentioned drawing up a questionnaire, I do, yes, the one comparing the situation before buying and the situation afterward, Congratulations, you've got a good memory, Not bad for a man my age, Well, that idea, which we have used in a number of cases with excellent results, will consist in distributing a certain number of figurines to a fixed number of potential buyers, based on an as yet undefined social and cultural universe, to test their opinion of the product, obviously I'm simplifying matters, the way we ask our questions is, as you can imagine, much more complicated than that, To be honest, I've no experience in the area, sir, I've never asked the questions or been asked, Well, I'm even thinking of using your initial batch of three hundred in the questionnaire, I select fifty customers, provide each of them with a complete set of six figurines, gratis, and in a matter of days I will know their views, Gratis, said Cipriano Algor, does that mean you're not going to pay us, My dear sir, of course we'll pay you, the experiment is made at our expense, we will make sure any costs are covered, we would not want to do anything that might harm you. The relief felt by Cipriano Algor assuaged for a moment the question that had irrupted into his mind, that is, What will happen if the result of the

questionnaire is negative, if the majority of the customers, or all of them, give the same definitive answer to all the questions, No, I'm not interested. He heard himself saying, Thank you, not just out of politeness, but out of fairness too, it isn't every day that someone comes along and soothes us with the benign information that they do not wish to do anything to harm us. Unease had begun gnawing at his stomach again, but now he was the one who would not let the question leave his mouth, he would depart as if he were carrying in his pocket a sealed letter to be opened only once he was on the high seas and in which his fate had been recorded, plotted, written, today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow. The assistant head of department had asked, And what brings you here today, then he had said, Tomorrow if you like, and had concluded, The day after tomorrow then, it's true that this is quite simply the nature of words, they come and go, and go, and come, and come, and go, but why were these waiting for me here, why did they leave the house with me and stay with me during the whole journey, not tomorrow, not the day after tomorrow, but today, right now. Suddenly, Cipriano Algor hated the man standing before him, this nice, genial, almost affectionate assistant head of department, with whom the other day he had been able to discuss practicalities on equal terms, apart, of course, from the obvious distances and differences in age and social class, neither of which, or so it had seemed then, had been an impediment to a relationship founded on mutual respect. If someone sticks a knife in your guts, they should at least have the moral decency to wear a face in keeping with that murderous act, a face that oozes hatred and ferocity, a face that speaks of wild rage or even of inhuman coldness, but please, dear God, don't let them smile while they are tearing out your innards, don't let them despise you that much, don't let them feed you with false hopes, saying, for example, Don't worry, it's nothing, a couple of stitches and you'll be as good as new, or else, I sincerely hope that the results of the questionnaire prove favorable, believe me, few things would give me greater satisfaction. Cipriano Algor made a vague movement with his head, a gesture that could as easily have meant yes as no, which might indeed have meant nothing, then he said, I have to go and pick up my son-in-law.

He left the basement, drove around the Center and parked his car where he could see the entrance to the security department. Marçal took longer than usual to come out and he seemed nervous as he got into the van, Afternoon, Pa, he said, and Cipriano Algor said, Good afternoon, how was work this week, Oh, pretty much as usual, replied Marçal and Cipriano Algor said, We've finished the first batch of figurines, and I've arranged a delivery time with the buying department, How's Marta, Tired, but otherwise fine. They did not speak again until they were out of the city. And it was only as they were passing the shantytown that Marçal said, Pa, I've just been told that I've got my promotion, from today I'm a resident guard. Cipriano Algor turned to his son-in-law and looked at him as if he were seeing him for the first time, today, not the day after tomorrow, not tomorrow, today, his presentiment had been right. Today, what, he asked himself, the threat hidden in the questions on the questionnaire, or this threat now, which has been coming for so long. It has been known, albeit more often in storybooks than in real life, that a sudden surprise can, for a matter of moments, render the surprised person speechless, but a half-

surprise that has remained silent, perhaps pretending, perhaps wanting to be mistaken for a complete surprise, does not, in principle, merit such a reaction. Only in principle, mind you. We have always known that the man driving this van has never doubted for a moment that the dreaded news would arrive one day, but it is understandable that today, caught between two fires, he was suddenly incapable of deciding which one to put out first. Let us reveal, then, right away, even though we risk disrupting the regular order of events, that, over the next few days, Cipriano Algor will not say a word either to his son-in-law or to his daughter about the disquieting conversation he had with the assistant head of the buying department. He will talk about it eventually, but only much later, when everything is lost. Now all he says to his son-in-law is, Congratulations, you must be really pleased, banal, almost neutral words that should not have taken so long to show themselves, and Marçal will not say thank you, just as he will not confirm that he is as pleased as his father-in-law believes him to be, or a little less, or a little more, what he says is as serious as an outstretched hand, It isn't good news for you. Cipriano Algor understood what he meant, glanced at him with a half-smile that seemed to mock his own resigned attitude, and said, Not even the best news is good for everyone, You'll see, everything will work out fine, said Marçal, Don't worry, it was all decided on the day I told you that I would go and live with you at the Center, I gave my word and I won't go back on it, Living at the Center isn't like being sent into exile, Yes, but I have no way of knowing what it will be like and I'll only find out when I get there, you already know it, but I've never heard from your mouth a single explanation, story, or description that has ever really brought home to me the nature of what you so confidently declare not to be a place of exile, You've been to the Center, Not very often and only in passing, as a customer who knew what he wanted, Well, the best way to explain the Center is to think of it as a city within a city, Hm, I don't know if that would be the best explanation, because it still doesn't help me to understand what is inside the Center, There are all the things you would expect to find in any city, shops, people walking around, buying things, talking, eating, having fun, working, You mean just like in the backward little place where we live now, More or less, it's just a question of size, The truth can't be that simple, There must be some simple truths, Possibly, but I don't think they're inside the Center. There was a pause, then Cipriano Algor said, Talking about size, it's odd, you know, but whenever I look at the Center from the outside, I have the feeling that it's bigger than the city itself, I mean, the Center is inside the city, but it's bigger than the city, which means that the part is bigger than the whole, it's probably just because it's taller than the buildings around it, taller than any building in the city, probably because, right from the start, it has been swallowing up streets, squares, whole districts. Marçal did not reply at first, his father-in-law had just given almost visual expression to the vague feeling of disorientation that overwhelmed him whenever he returned to the Center after his days off, especially when he was on night patrol, and all the lights were dimmed and he walked along the deserted galleries, went up and down in the elevators, as if he were keeping watch over nothing in order to ensure that it continued to be nothing. Inside an empty cathedral, if we raise our eyes to the roof, to the highest part of the building, we have the impression that it is higher than the sky is when we stand in a field and look up.

After a silence, Marçal said, I think I know what you mean, and left it at that, he did not want to encourage in his father-in-law's mind a train of thought that might lead him to shut himself up behind a desperate new line of resistance. But Cipriano Algor's preoccupations had gone off in another direction, When are you moving, As soon as possible, I've already seen the apartment they've set aside for me, it's smaller than our house, but that's understandable, however big the Center is, the space they've got isn't infinite, and so it has to be rationed out, Do you think we'll all fit in, asked the potter, hoping that his son-in-law did not notice the tone of melancholy irony that had slipped into his words at the last moment, We'll fit, don't worry, the apartment is plenty big enough for a family like ours, replied Marçal, we won't have to take it in turns to sleep or anything. Cipriano Algor thought, Now I've annoyed him, I shouldn't have asked that question. They did not speak again until they got home. Marta showed no emotion when she heard the news. When you know something is going to happen, in a way it's almost as if it had happened already, expectation does more than simply cancel out surprise, it dulls feelings and trivializes them, everything that one desired or feared has already been experienced while one was desiring it or fearing it. It was during supper that Marçal gave an important bit of news that he had forgotten about, something that irritated Marta intensely, You mean that we can't take any of our own things with us, You can take some things, ornaments, for example, but not furniture or crockery or glasses or cutlery or towels or curtains or bed linen, the apartment has all those things already, So we won't really be moving then, at least not what is usually meant by moving, said Cipriano Algor, The people will be moving, So we'll have to leave this house with everything in it, said Marta, There's no other option. Marta thought for a bit, then had to accept the inevitable, I'll come back now and then to open the windows and air the rooms, a house that stays all shut up is like a plant you forget to water, it dies, dries up, shrivels. When they had finished eating, and before Marta had cleared the table, Cipriano Algor said, I've been thinking. Daughter and son-in-law exchanged glances, as if transmitting words of alarm to each other, You never know what he'll come out with when he's been thinking. My first idea, the potter went on, was that Marçal should help me tomorrow with the kiln, May I remind you that we agreed to take three days off, said Marta, Your time off begins tomorrow, And yours, Mine won't be long in coming, it'll just have to wait a while, So that was your first idea, what about your second and your third, asked Marta, We'll sort out the kiln first thing in the morning, the figurines that are still to be fired I mean, but we won't light the kiln, I'll do that later, then you'll help me load the van with the finished figurines and while I take them to the Center, you two can stay here without a father or a father-in-law sticking his nose in where it isn't wanted, Is that what you agreed with the buying department, to deliver the dolls tomorrow, asked Marçal, that wasn't the impression I got, I thought we'd take them with us later, when all three of us go there, It's better this way, said Cipriano Algor, we gain time, You gain it in one way, but you lose it in another, the other dolls will be delayed, Not by much, I'll light the kiln as soon as I get back from the Center, who knows it might be the last time, What do you mean, we've still got six hundred dolls to make, said Marta, Hm, I'm not so sure, Why, Well, the move to start with, the Center is not the sort of place prepared to wait until the father-in-

law of resident guard Marçal Gacho has completed an order, although it has to be said that, given time, always supposing there is time, I could finish it on my own, and second, Second what, asked Marçal, In life there is always something that comes after what appears first, sometimes we think we know what it is, but we'd prefer to ignore it, at other times we can't even imagine what it might be, but we know it's there, Please, stop talking like an oracle, said Marta, All right, the oracle is silent, let's just stick with what came first, what I was trying to say was that if the move has to be made soon, there won't be time to resolve the problem of the remaining six hundred figurines, It would just be a matter of talking to the Center, said Marta, addressing her husband, three or four more weeks won't make much difference, talk to them, after all, they took long enough to decide on your promotion, so they can help us out now, besides they'd be helping themselves because then they'd get the full order, No, I can't talk to them, there's no point, said Marçal, we have exactly ten days to make the move, not an hour more, that's the regulations, by the time I have my next day off I'll have to have moved into the apartment, You could spend it here instead, said Cipriano Algor, at your house in the country, It would look bad, being promoted to resident guard and then spending my first leave away from the Center, Ten days isn't much time, said Marta, It would be if we had to take the furniture and everything, but the only things we really have to move are ourselves and the clothes that we wear, and they could be in the apartment in less than an hour if necessary, In that case, what shall we do about the rest of the order, asked Marta, The Center knows, the Center will tell us when the time is right, said the potter. Helped by her husband, Marta cleared the table, then went to the door to shake the crumbs off the tablecloth, she stood there for a moment looking out, and when she came back, she said, There's one matter still to be resolved and which cannot be left to the last moment, What's that, asked Marçal, The dog, she said, You mean Found, said Cipriano Algor, and Marta went on, Since we're not the sort to kill him or to abandon him, we'll have to find a home for him, entrust him to someone else to look after, You see they don't allow animals, Marçal explained, looking at his father-in-law, Not even a tortoise, not even a canary, not even a sweet little dove, Cipriano Algor wanted to know, You seem to have suddenly lost interest in the fate of the dog, said Marta, Of Found, Of Found, of the dog, it's the same thing, what matters is that we decide what to do with him, I've got one suggestion, So have I, Cipriano Algor broke in, and immediately got up and went to his room. He reappeared after a few minutes, walked through the kitchen without saying a word and left. He called the dog, Come on, he said, we're going for a walk. He went down the slope with him, turned left at the road, away from the village, and strode out into the countryside. Found did not leave his master's heels, he must have been remembering his unhappy times as a wanderer, when he was driven from farms and even denied the means to slake his thirst. Although he is not a fearful dog, although he is not afraid of the dark, he would much prefer to be lying down in his kennel right now, or, better still, curled up in the kitchen at the feet of one of those three people, he does not say this out of indifference, as if it didn't matter, because he would keep the other two within sight and smell, and because he could change places whenever he wanted without spoiling the harmony and happiness of the moment. It was not a long walk. The stone on

which Cipriano Algor has just sat down will serve as his bench of meditations, that was why he left the house, if he had gone to the real bench, his daughter would have seen him from the kitchen door and it would not have been long before she came out to ask him if he was all right, such acts of consideration are gratefully received, but human nature is so strangely made that even the most sincere and spontaneous gestures of the heart can occasionally prove importunate. It is not worth describing what Cipriano Algor thought about because he had thought about it on other occasions and we have supplied more than enough information on the subject already. The only new thing here is that he allowed a few painful tears to run down his cheeks, tears that had been dammed up for a long, long time, always just about to be shed, but, as it turned out, they were being reserved for this sad hour, for this moonless night, for this solitude that has not yet resigned itself to being solitude. What was truly not a novelty, because it had happened before in the history of fables and in the history of the marvels of the canine race, was that Found went over to Cipriano Algor to lick his tears, a gesture of supreme consolation which, however touching it might seem to us, capable of touching hearts normally not given to displays of emotion, should not make us forget the crude reality that the salty taste of tears is greatly appreciated by most dogs. One thing, however, does not detract from the other, were we to ask Found if it was because of the salt that he licked Cipriano Algor's face, he would probably have replied that we do not deserve the bread that we eat, that we are incapable of seeing beyond the end of our own nose. There they stayed for more than two hours, the dog and his owner, each one immersed in his own thoughts, with no tears now for one to cry and the other to dry, waiting perhaps for the world to turn and to restore everything to its proper place, even those things which, up until now, had not found a place.

The following morning, as agreed, Cipriano Algor took the finished figurines to the Center. The others were already in the kiln, awaiting their turn. Cipriano Algor had gotten up early, while his daughter and son-in-law were still asleep, and when Marçal and Marta finally lurched into wakefulness and appeared at the kitchen door, most of the work had been done. They had breakfast together, making the usual polite noises, would you like more coffee, can you pass me the bread, there's jam if you'd like it, then Marçal went and helped his father-in-law complete the work and began the delicate task of placing the three hundred figurines in the boxes they used to use for transporting the crockery. Marta told her father that she would go with Marçal to his parents' house, they had to tell them about the imminent move, let's see how they react, but, whatever happened, they would not stay there for lunch, We'll probably be here when you get back from the Center, she concluded. Cipriano said that he would take Found with him, and Marta asked if he had been thinking of someone in the city when he said last night that he had a possible solution for the problem of the dog, and he said no, but it was worth thinking about, that way Found would at least be nearby, and they could see him whenever they wanted. Marta remarked that, to her certain knowledge, her father had no close friends in the city, not people trustworthy enough to merit, and she used the word merit deliberately, being given charge of a creature whom they, as a family, considered to be as worthy of respect as a person. Cipriano Algor replied that he did not recall ever having said that he had close friends in the city, and that the reason he was taking the dog with him was to distract himself from unwanted thoughts. Marta said that if he had such thoughts then he should share them with his daughter, who was there with him now, to which Cipriano Algor replied that talking to her about any thoughts he had would be a waste of time, because she was as familiar with them as he was himself, not word for word, of course, as if captured on tape, but she knew the underlying essence, and then she said that, in her humble opinion, the reality was quite different, she knew nothing about the underlying essence of his thoughts and, besides, many of the words he uttered were merely smoke screens, which, in a way, is hardly surprising, since words are often used for precisely that purpose, but it's worse still when the words remain unspoken and become a thick wall of silence, because, when confronted by such a wall, it's very hard to know what to do, Last night I sat up here waiting for you, Marçal went to bed after an hour, but I waited and waited, while you, my dear father, were off heaven knows where walking the dog, We went into the countryside somewhere, Ah, yes, the countryside, there's nothing nicer than going for a walk in the countryside at night, when you can't even see where you're putting your feet, You should have gone to bed, That's what I did in the end, before I turned into a statue, So that's all right then, there's nothing more to be said, No, it's not all right, Why not, Because you robbed me of what I most wanted at that moment, And what was that, To see you come back, that's all, just to see you come back, One day you'll understand, Well, I certainly hope so, but no more words, please, I'm sick of words. Marta's eyes shone with tears, Take no notice, she said, it seems that when we fragile women are pregnant, we don't know how else to behave, we experience everything too intensely. Marçal called from the yard to say that he had finished loading and that his father-in-law could leave whenever he wanted, Cipriano Algor left the house,

got into the van, and called to Found. The dog, who had never even imagined the possibility of such good fortune, leaped up beside his master and sat there, smiling, his mouth open and his tongue lolling, thrilled at the prospect of the journey about to begin, in this, as in so many other things, human beings are very like dogs, they pin all their hopes on what might appear around the corner, and then say, oh, well, we'll see what happens next. When the van disappeared behind the first houses, Marçal asked, Did you have a fight, Oh, it's the usual problem, if we don't talk, we're unhappy, if we do talk, we disagree, We have to be patient, it doesn't take twenty-twenty vision to see that your father feels as if he were living on an island that is getting smaller with each day that passes, one piece gone, then another piece, right now, he's just driven off to take the figurines to the Center, then he'll come back home and light the kiln, but he's doing all these things as if he didn't quite know why any more, as if he wished some insurmountable object would place itself in his path so that he could at last say, that's it, it's over, Yes, I think you're probably right, Well, I don't know if I'm right or not, I'm just trying to put myself in his position, in a week's time everything we can see around us now will lose much of its meaning, the house will still be ours, but we won't live in it, the kiln won't deserve the name of kiln if someone doesn't call it that every day, the mulberry tree will still produce its mulberries, but there will be no one to come and pick them, I wasn't born and brought up under this roof, but even for me it's not going to be easy to leave all this, so for your father, We'll often come back, Yes, to our house in the country, as he ironically referred to it, Is there any other solution, asked Marta, you could stop being a guard and come and work with us in the pottery, making pottery that no one wants or figurines that no one is going to want for very long, The way things are, there's only one solution for me, to be a resident guard at the Center, You've got what you wanted, That was when I thought it was what I wanted, And now, Recently I've learned from your father something I didn't know before, you may not have noticed, but it is my duty to warn you that the man you are married to is much older than he seems, That's not news to me, I've had the privilege of witnessing the aging process, said Marta, smiling. But then her face grew grave, It's true, though, my heart aches at the thought of having to leave all this. They were sitting together under the mulberry tree on one of the drying shelves, opposite them was the house with the pottery beside it, if they turned their heads slightly, they could see the open door of the kiln through the foliage, it's a lovely sunny morning, but cool, perhaps the weather is changing. They felt good, despite their sadness, they felt almost happy, in that melancholy way in which happiness sometimes chooses to manifest itself, but suddenly Marçal got up from the drying shelf and cried, Oh, no, I'd forgotten, my parents, we have to go and talk to my parents, I'll bet you anything you like that they'll start going on and on about how they should be the ones to come with us to the Center and not your father, They probably won't if I'm there, it's a question of politeness, of good taste, Well, I certainly hope so, I certainly hope you're right.

She wasn't. When Cipriano Algor, on his return from taking the figurines to the Center, was driving through the village toward the house, he saw his daughter and son-

in-law walking along ahead of him. Marçal had his arm around her shoulders as if to console her. Cipriano Algor stopped the van, Get in, he said, and he did not send Found to the back seat because he knew that they would want to be together. Marta was trying to brush away her tears, and Marçal was saying, Don't get upset, you know what they're like, if I'd known how they would react, I wouldn't have taken you with me, What happened, asked Cipriano Algor, The same thing as happened the other day, they want to go and live at the Center, they deserve it more than other people, it's time they had a chance to enjoy life, it didn't matter to them that Marta was there, they made the most terrible scene, and I apologize on their behalf. This time Cipriano Algor did not repeat his offer to give up his place, that would be like rubbing salt in the wound, he merely asked, And how did it end, Oh, I told them that the apartment I've been given is basically meant for a couple with one child, and allows for, at most, one other family member to live there, but only if we make the spare room, which was originally intended to provide some storage space, into a bedroom, but that it's much too small for two people, And what did they say, They wanted to know what would happen if we had more children, and I told them the truth, that, in that case, the Center would move us to a bigger apartment, and they asked why they couldn't do that now, bearing in mind that the resident guard's own parents also wanted to live there, And what did you say, I told them that the request hadn't been made early enough, that there are rules and deadlines and regulations to meet, but that perhaps, later on, we might be able to review the situation, You managed to convince them, then, I doubt it, but it cheered them up a bit to think that they might be able to move to the Center one day, Until the next time, Oh, yes, because they wouldn't just let it go at that, they said that it wasn't their fault that the matter hadn't been dealt with earlier, Your parents are no fools, Especially my mother, because she's much keener on the idea than he is, she's always been a pretty tough nut to crack. Marta had stopped crying, And how do you feel, the question came from Cipriano Algor, Humiliated and ashamed, humiliated at having to be present during an argument that was aimed directly at me, but in which I was unable to intervene, and ashamed too, Why, Because whether we like it or not, they have as much right as we do, and we're the ones who are bending the rules so that they can't move to the Center, We're not, I am, broke in Marçal, I'm the one who doesn't want to live with my parents, you and your father have nothing to do with it, But we're accomplices in an injustice, Look, I know that to an outsider my attitude must seem reprehensible, but it was a decision I made freely and consciously in order to avoid an even worse situation, I don't want to live with my parents and I certainly don't want my wife and child to have to put up with them, love unites, but it doesn't unite everyone, and it could be that the reasons why some want union might be the very reasons why others want disunion, And how can you be so sure that our reasons will incline toward union rather than disunion, asked Cipriano Algor, There is only one reason I'm glad not to be your son, said Marçal, Let me guess, It's not that difficult, Because if you were, you wouldn't be married to Marta, Exactly, you guessed. They both laughed. And Marta said, I hope by this stage my child has taken the wise decision to be born a girl, Why, asked Marçal, Because her poor mother won't be strong enough to bear alone and unsupported the terrible smugness of her father and her grandfather. They

laughed again, fortunately, Marçal's parents were not around at the time, they might think that the Algor family was laughing at their expense, hoodwinking their son into laughing at those who gave him life. They had left the last houses in the village behind them now. Found barked out of sheer contentment to see appearing at the top of the hill the roof of the pottery, the mulberry tree, and the upper part of one of the side walls of the kiln. Those who know about such things say that travel is of vital importance in shaping the mind, but one does not need to be an intellectual luminary to know that minds, however well-traveled, need to come back home now and then because only there can they achieve and maintain a reasonably satisfactory sense of themselves. Marta said, Here we are talking about family incompatibilities, about shame, humiliation, vanity, monotony, and mean little ambitions, and we haven't given a thought to this poor animal, who has no idea that in ten days' time he will no longer be with us. I have, said Marçal. Cipriano Algor said nothing. He took his right hand off the steering wheel and, as he would to a child, he ran his hand over the dog's head. When the van stopped by the woodshed, Marta was the first to get out, I'm going to make lunch, she said. Found did not wait for the door on his side to be opened, he slipped between the two front seats, leaped over Marçal's legs and shot off in the direction of the kiln, his startled bladder suddenly demanding urgent satisfaction. Marçal said, Now that we're alone, tell me how the delivery went, As it usually does, I handed in the advice notes, unloaded the boxes, which they then counted, the man who served me examined the figurines one by one, and they were all fine, none of them was broken and there were no scratches on the paint, you did a really excellent job of packing them, And that's all, Why do you ask, Ever since yesterday, I've had the feeling that you were hiding something, But I told you what happened, I didn't hide anything, No, I don't mean about the delivery you've just made, it's a feeling I've had ever since you picked me up at the Center, What do you mean, To be honest, I'm not sure, I was waiting for you to explain, for example, the enigmatic remarks you made over supper last night. Cipriano Algor remained silent, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, as if he were deciding, depending on whether the last drumbeat was even or odd, what answer to give. In the end, he said, Come with me. He got out of the van and, followed by Marçal, walked over to the kiln. He had already placed his hand on one of the door handles, but he stopped for a moment and said, Don't say a word to Marta about what you are about to hear, I promise, Not a single word, Fine, I've said I promise. Cipriano Algor opened the kiln door. The bright light of day abruptly revealed the figurines lined up in groups, blinded first by the darkness and now by the light. Cipriano Algor said, It's possible, indeed very probable, that these three hundred figurines will never leave here, But why, asked Marçal, The buying department decided to draw up a questionnaire to evaluate the level of interest among customers, that's what the figurines I took in today will be used for, A questionnaire about a few clay figurines, said Marçal, That's what one of the assistant heads of department told me, The one who was rude to you, No, another one, who seems terribly nice and friendly, and who always speaks to you as if he had your best interests at heart. Marçal thought for a moment and said, Not that it makes much difference, not that it really matters to us now, because in ten days' time we'll be living in the Center, Do you really think it doesn't make

much difference, that it doesn't matter to us, asked his father-in-law, If the result of the questionnaire is positive, there will still be time to finish the figurines and deliver them, as for the rest of the order, that will automatically be canceled by the irrefutable fact that the pottery will have ceased to operate, And if the result is negative, Well, in a way, that would be better still, because it would save both of you, you and Marta, the labor of firing the figurines and painting them. Cipriano Algor slowly closed the kiln door and said, You're forgetting certain doubtless insignificant aspects, What, You're forgetting the slap in the face of having the fruits of your labor rejected, you're forgetting that if it wasn't for the fact that these tragic events coincided with our move to the Center, we would be in the same situation we found ourselves in when they stopped buying the crockery, only without the absurd hope that a few ridiculous figurines could save our lives, We have to live with what is, not with what could be or might have been, That's a wonderfully accepting philosophy, Well, I'm sorry I can't come up with anything better, No, I can't either, but I was born with a mind that suffers from the incurable disease of worrying precisely about what could be or might have been, And what good has all that worrying done you, asked Marçal, You're quite right, none at all, as you said, we have to live with what is, not with fantasies about what might have been, if only Relieved now of that physiological urgency and having hared about to stretch his legs, Found came over, tail wagging, his usual way of showing contentment and cordiality, but which, in this instance, given the proximity of lunch, signaled another urgent bodily need. Cipriano Algor stroked him, gently twisting his ear, We have to wait until Marta calls us, my lad, it doesn't look good if the dog of the house eats before his owners, we have to respect the hierarchy, he said. Then, to Marçal, as if the idea had just occurred to him at that moment, I'll fire the kiln today, You said you'd only do it tomorrow, when you got back from the Center, Well, I've changed my mind, it will be a way of occupying my time while you two have a rest or, if you'd rather, take the van and go for a drive, once we've moved, you probably won't want to leave the new apartment for a while, especially not to come out here, Whether or not we come out here and when is something we'll have to sort out later, but do you really think I'm the sort of man who could go off for a ride with Marta and leave you here all alone stoking the furnace with wood, Why, I can manage on my own, Of course you can, but if you don't mind, I would like to play an active role in this last lighting of the kiln, if it is the last time, All right, if that's what you want, we'll start after lunch, Fine, But remember, please, not a word about the questionnaire, Don't worry. With the dog at their heels, they walked toward the house and were only a few yards away when Marta appeared at the kitchen door, I was just about to call you, she said, lunch is ready, I'll give the dog his food first, the journey will have given him an appetite, said her father, His food's over there, Marta said. Cipriano Algor picked up the pan and said, Come on, Found, it's just as well you're not a person, if you were, you would have begun to feel suspicious of all the care and attention we've been lavishing on you lately. Found's bowl was, as it always was, beside the kennel and that was where Cipriano Algor headed. He emptied the contents of the pan into the bowl and stood for a moment, watching the dog eat. In the kitchen, Marçal was saying, We're going to light the kiln after lunch, Today, asked Marta, surprised, Your father doesn't want to leave it

until tomorrow, There's no hurry, we were going to have three days off, He doubtless has his reasons, And, as usual, only he knows what those reasons are. Marçal thought it best not to respond, the mouth is an organ that is all the more trustworthy the more silent it is. Shortly afterward, Cipriano Algor came into the kitchen. The food was on the table, Marta was serving it out. In a moment, her father will say, We're lighting the kiln today, and Marta will reply, I know, Marçal told me.

It has already been said, in these or other words, that all the days gone by were once the eves of days to come and all future days will in turn be the eves of other future days. To become an eve, if only for an hour, is the impossible desire of every yesterday that has been and gone and of every today that is happening right now. No day has ever managed to be the eve of another day for as long as it had hoped. Only yesterday, Cipriano Algor and Marçal Gacho were busily stoking the furnace with wood, and anyone walking by, and not knowing the full facts, could easily have thought, judging himself to be right, There they are again, they'll spend their whole life doing that, and now there they are in the van with the word Pottery written on both sides, on their way to the city and the Center, and Marta is with them, sitting beside the driver, who this time is her husband. Cipriano Algor is alone on the back seat, Found is not there, he stayed behind to guard the house. It's morning, but very early, the sun is not yet up, the Green Belt will appear soon, then it will be the Industrial Belt, then the shantytowns, then the no-man's-land, then the buildings being constructed on the periphery, and at last the city, the broad avenue, and finally the Center. Any road you take leads to the Center. None of the passengers in the van will speak during the journey. Although usually so loquacious, it seems now that they have nothing to say to one another. However, it is easy to understand that it might not be worth speaking, wasting time and saliva on articulating speeches, phrases, words, and syllables when what one of them is thinking is already being thought by the others. If Marçal, for example, were to say, Let's go to the Center to see the apartment where we'll be living, Marta will say, How odd, that's exactly what I was thinking, and though Cipriano Algor might demur, Well, I wasn't, I was thinking that I won't come in, that I'll just wait outside for you, even so, however peremptory his words may sound, we shouldn't pay too much attention, Cipriano Algor is sixty-four, he is past the age of childish sulking and has some way to go before he reaches the elderly equivalent. What Cipriano Algor really thinks is that he has no alternative but to go in with his daughter and his son-in-law and to respond as cheerfully as he can to their remarks, to give his opinion when asked, in short, as they used to say in old novels and dramas, to drain the cup of sorrow to the dregs. At that early hour, Marçal found a parking space only a couple of hundred yards from the Center, it will be different when they are actually living there, resident guards have a right to six square meters of space in the parking lot inside. We're here, Marçal said unnecessarily, when he put on the hand brake. The Center was not visible from there, but it appeared before them as soon as they turned the corner of the street where they had left the van. As chance would have it, this was the side, part, face, end, or extremity reserved for residents. It was not a new sight for any of them, but there is a great difference between looking for looking's sake

and looking while someone is saying to us, Two of those windows are ours, Only two, asked Marta, We can't complain, some apartments have only one, said Marçal, not to mention the ones that have only windows with a view of the inside, The inside of what, The inside of the Center, of course, Do you mean there are apartments with windows that overlook the inside of the Center itself, Lots of people actually prefer them, they find the view from there much more pleasant, varied, and interesting, whereas from the other side you have just a view over the same rooftops and the same sky Even so, someone living in one of those apartments would be able to see only the floor of the Center that coincides with the floor they live on, remarked Cipriano Algor, less out of any genuine interest than to show that he hadn't completely withdrawn from the conversation, The height from floor to ceiling on the commercial floors is vast, so it's all very spacious and airy, apparently people never tire of the spectacle, especially older people, But I've never noticed any windows, Marta said abruptly, in order to stall the comment her father was bound to make on what might constitute suitable distractions for the elderly, The décor disguises them. They continued walking along the main façade of the building to the door reserved for security staff, Cipriano Algor remained two reluctant steps behind, as if he were being pulled along by an invisible thread. I feel nervous, said Marta softly so that her father would not hear, You'll see, everything will be easier once we've settled in, it's just a question of getting used to it, said Marçal equally softly A little farther on, in a normal tone of voice, Marta asked, What floor is our apartment on, The thirty-fourth, That's awfully high, There are another fourteen floors above us, A bird in a cage hung outside a window could easily imagine it was free, You can't open the windows, Why not, Because of the air-conditioning, Of course. They had reached the door. Marçal went in, greeted the two guards on duty, said in passing, This is my wife and my father-in-law, and opened the inner door that led into the building. They entered an elevator, We'll have to pick up the key, said Marçal. They got out on the second floor, walked down a long, narrow corridor of gray walls with doors at regular intervals on either side. Marçal opened one door, This is my section, he said. He greeted his colleagues who were on his shift and made the same introductions, This is my wife and my father-in-law, then added, We've come to see the apartment. He went over to a locker bearing his name, opened it, took out a bunch of keys, and said to Marta, Here they are. They entered another elevator. There are two speeds, explained Marçal, we'll go slowly to start with, He pressed the relevant button, then button number twenty, Let's go to the twentieth floor first so that you have time to appreciate the view, he said. The part of the elevator that looked out over the Center was entirely made of glass. It traveled slowly past the different floors, revealing a succession of arcades, shops, fancy staircases, escalators, meeting points, cafés, restaurants, terraces with tables and chairs, cinemas and theaters, discotheques, enormous television screens, endless numbers of ornaments, electronic games, balloons, fountains and other water features, platforms, hanging gardens, posters, pennants, advertising billboards, mannequins, changing rooms, the façade of a church, the entrance to the beach, a bingo hall, a casino, a tennis court, a gymnasium, a roller coaster, a zoo, a racetrack for electric cars, a cyclorama, a cascade, all waiting, all in silence, and more shops and more arcades and more mannequins and more hanging

gardens and things for which people probably didn't even know the names, as if they were ascending into paradise. And is this speed used only so that people can enjoy the view, asked Cipriano Algor, No, at this speed the elevators are used as an extra security aid, said Marçal, Isn't there enough security what with the guards, the detectors, the video cameras, and all the other snooping devices, Cipriano Algor asked. Tens of thousands of people pass through here every day, it's important to maintain security, replied Marçal, his face tense and with a touch of annoyance in his voice, Pa, said Marta, stop tormenting him, please, Don't worry, said Marçal, we understand each other, even when we appear not to. The elevator continued to rise slowly. The floors are still only minimally lit, there are few people around, just the occasional worker who has got up early out of either necessity or habit, it will be at least an hour before the doors are opened to the public. The people who live and work in the Center don't need to rush, those who have to leave the Center don't go through the commercial and leisure areas, they go straight from their apartments down to the underground garages. When the elevator stopped, Marçal pressed the fast button and within a matter of seconds, they were on the thirty-fourth floor. While they were walking along the corridor that led to the residential part, Marçal explained that there were elevators exclusively for the use of residents and that he had used the other one today only because of having to pick up the keys first. From now on, we keep the keys, they're ours, he said. Contrary to what Marta and her father had expected, there was not just one corridor separating the blocks of apartments with a view onto the outside world from those with a view inside. There were, in fact, two corridors and, between them, another block of apartments, but this was twice the width of the others, which, put plainly, means that the inhabited part of the Center is made up of four vertical, parallel sequences of apartments, arranged like cells in a storage battery or honeycombs in a beehive, the interiors joined back to back, the exteriors joined to the central structure by the corridors. Marta said, These people never see the light of day when they're at home, Neither do the people who have apartments with a view onto the inside of the Center, replied Marçal, But as you said, at least they can find some distraction watching the view and the people moving about, while the others are practically enclosed, it can't be easy to live in an apartment with no natural light, breathing canned air all day, Well, you know, there are plenty of people who prefer it like that, they find the apartments more comfortable, better equipped, just to give you a few examples, they all have ultraviolet machines, atmospheric regenerators, and thermostats that can regulate temperature and humidity so accurately that it's possible to keep the humidity and temperature in the apartment constant day and night, all year round, Am I glad we didn't get one of those, I don't think I could stand living there for very long, said Marta, We resident guards have to make do with an ordinary apartment with windows, Well, I would never have imagined that being the father-in-law of a resident guard at the Center would prove to be the best fortune and the greatest privilege that life would offer me, said Cipriano Algor. The apartments were numbered like hotel rooms, the only distinguishing feature being the introduction of a hyphen between the floor number and the number of the door. Marçal put the key in the lock, opened the door and stood aside, After you, he said loudly, pretending an enthusiasm he

did not feel, this is our new home. They were neither happy nor excited by the novelty. Marta stood poised on the threshold, then took a few uncertain steps inside and looked around. Marçal and her father hung back. After a few moments of hesitation, as if she did not quite know what she should do, she headed alone for the nearest door, peered in and went inside. And that was her first encounter with the new apartment, passing swiftly from the bedroom to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the bathroom, from the living room that would also serve as a dining room to the small room intended for her father, There's nowhere for the baby, she thought, and then, While it's young, it can sleep with us, then we'll have to see, they'll probably give us a bigger place. She went back to the hall, where Marçal and Cipriano Algor were waiting for her. Have you been up here before, she asked her husband, Yes, What did you think, Well, as you'll have seen for yourself, the furniture is new, everything's new, as I told you, And what do you think, Pa, I can't give an opinion on something I haven't seen, Well, come in, then, I'll be your guide. She was noticeably tense and nervous, so different from her usual self that she announced each room as if she were singing its praises, This is the master bedroom, this is the kitchen, this is the bathroom, this is the living room that will also serve as our dining room, this is the spacious and comfortable room in which my dear father will sleep and enjoy a well-earned rest, there doesn't seem to be anywhere to put our child when she's older, but I'm sure we'll find a solution. Don't you like the apartment, asked Marçal, It's going to be our new home, so there's no point in discussing whether I like it a lot or a little or not at all, like someone pulling petals off a daisy. Marçal turned to his father-in-law for help, saying nothing, merely fixing him with his gaze, It's not at all bad really, said Cipriano Algor, everything's nice and new, the furniture's made of excellent wood, obviously it isn't going to be like our furniture, but that's how people want things nowadays, in light colors, not like the stuff we've got at home, which looks as if it had been baked in the kiln, as for the rest, we'll get used to it, you always do. Marta was frowning as she listened to her father's little speech, then she made an attempt at a smile and set off around the apartment again, this time opening and closing drawers and cupboards, checking the contents. Marçal shot his father-in-law a look of gratitude, then glanced at his watch and said, It's nearly time for me to start work. Marta said from another room, I won't be long, I'm just coming, that's the advantage of these small apartments, you cautiously let out a deeply felt sigh and immediately someone at the other end of the apartment says accusingly, You sighed, now don't deny it. And some people complain about the guards, the cameras, the detectors, and all those other snooping devices. The visit to the apartment was over, and judging by the difference between how they looked when they had gone in and how they looked now that they were leaving, without, of course, claiming to be able to lay bare the secrets of people's hearts, it appeared to have been worthwhile. They went straight down from the thirty-fourth floor to the ground floor because Marta and her father still did not have the necessary documents to prove that they were residents, and Marçal had to accompany them to the exit. After walking only a few steps as the elevator doors closed behind them, Cipriano Algor said, What an odd sensation, it feels as if the ground was vibrating beneath my feet. He stopped, listened and added, And I think I can hear something that sounds like excavators at work, They

are excavators, said Marçal, quickening his pace, they work nonstop on six-hour shifts, they're quite a few feet beneath the surface, Some sort of construction work, I suppose, said Cipriano Algor, Yes, apparently they're going to install some new cold-storage units, and possibly something else, perhaps more garages, they're always building something here, the Center grows every day without your even noticing it, if not outward, upward, if not upward, downward, In a while, when everything starts up again, you probably won't even notice the noise of the excavators, Marta said, What with the music, the sales announcements over the loudspeakers, the general buzz of conversation, and the escalators going endlessly up and down, you won't even notice they're there. They had reached the door. Marçal said that he would phone later if there was any news, but that, in the meantime, it would make sense to start preparing things for the move, making sure to take only what was absolutely essential, Now that you've seen the amount of space we've got to play with, you can appreciate that there isn't much room to spare. They were outside on the walk, they were about to say good-bye, but Marta said, In a way, it's not like moving at all, our pottery home is still ours, we can hardly bring anything from there, it's more as if we were taking off one set of clothes and putting on another, a sort of masked ball, Yes, said her father, it is a bit like that, but, contrary to what people have generally believed and unthinkingly affirmed, the cowl really does make the monk and clothes do make the man, you might not notice at first, but it's only a matter of time. Good-bye, said Marçal, giving his wife a kiss, you can spend the whole journey home philosophizing, so make the most of it. Marta and her father walked back to where they had parked the van. On the Center façade, above their heads, a gigantic new poster proclaimed, WE WOULD SELL YOU EVERYTHING YOU NEED, BUT WE WOULD PREFER YOU TO NEED WHAT WE HAVE TO SELL.

On the drive back home, or as Marta called it, in order to differentiate it from their new home, their pottery home, father and daughter, despite Marçal's half-mocking, half-affectionate remarks, spoke little, very little, although the simplest examination of the multiple probabilities arising from the situation would suggest that they had much to think about. To leap ahead, by bold suppositions, or by dangerous deductions, or, worse still, by ill-considered guesswork, to what their thoughts were would not, in principle, if we consider how promptly and impudently the heart's secrets are often violated in stories of this kind, would not, as we were saying, be an impossible task, but, since those thoughts will, sooner or later, be expressed in actions, or in words that lead to actions, it seems to us preferable to move on and wait quietly for the actions and words to make those thoughts manifest. We do not have to wait long for the first one. Neither father nor daughter spoke during lunch, which must mean that new thoughts were being added to those of the journey, then suddenly she decided to break the silence, That was an excellent idea of yours to take three days off, and quite apart from being very welcome, it was, at the time, perfectly justifiable, but Marçal's promotion has changed the situation completely, do you realize we have only just over a week to organize the move and to paint the three hundred figurines that are fired and ready in the kiln, we have an obligation to deliver those three hundred at least, Yes, I've been thinking about the figurines too, but have reached exactly the opposite conclusion, What do you mean, The Center already has an advance guard of three hundred figurines, which should be enough for now, clay figurines are not like computer games or magnetic bracelets, people aren't pushing and shoving and screaming I want my Eskimo, I want my bearded Assyrian, I want my nurse, No, I'm sure the Center's customers aren't going to come to blows over the mandarin or the jester or the clown, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't finish the job, Of course not, but it just seems to me that there's no point in rushing, Let me remind you again that we have only a week in which to do everything, I haven't forgotten, So, So, as you yourself said when we left the Center, it's not really as if we were moving at all, our pottery home, as you now call it, will still be here, Look, Pa, I know what a lover of enigmas you are, I'm not a lover of enigmas at all, I always like things to be clear, All right, you don't love enigmas, but you are enigmatic, and I would be very grateful if you could tell me where all this is leading, It's leading to precisely where we are now, where we will be for another week and, I hope, for many weeks afterward, Don't make me lose my patience, please, Same here, look, it's as simple as two plus two makes four, In your head, two plus two always makes five or three or anything but four, You'll be sorry you asked, I doubt it, All right, imagine that we don't paint the figurines, that we move to the Center and leave them in the kiln just as they are now, OK, I've imagined that, Living at the Center, as Marçal explained very clearly, is not like living in exile, people aren't imprisoned there, they're free to leave whenever they want, to spend all day in the city or the countryside and go back at night. Cipriano Algor paused to study his daughter, knowing that soon he would see the dawning of understanding on her face. And so it was. Marta said, smiling, All right, I was wrong, even in your head two plus two can occasionally make four, Didn't I tell you it was easy, We'll come and finish the work when we need to, and that way we won't have to cancel the order for the six hundred figurines

still to come, it's just a matter of agreeing on deadlines with the Center that will suit both sides, Exactly. The daughter applauded her father, her father thanked her for her applause. And you know, said Marta, suddenly filled with enthusiasm by the ocean of positive possibilities that had opened up before her, if the Center really likes the figurines, we could go on making them and we wouldn't have to close the pottery, Exactly, And not just figurines either, we might have another idea they'd like to take up, or we could add other figures to the six we've got already, Precisely. While father and daughter savored these pleasant prospects, which demonstrated yet again that the devil is not always lurking behind every door, let us take advantage of this pause to examine the real value or real meaning of the thoughts of both father and daughter, of those two thoughts which, after that long, long silence, finally found expression. Let us say at once, however, that it will not be possible to reach a conclusion, even a provisional one, as all conclusions are, if we do not start with an initial premise that will doubtless prove shocking to decent, nicely brought up souls, but which is nonetheless true, the premise that, in many cases, the thought actually expressed was, so to speak, dragged into the front line by another thought that preferred not to reveal itself just yet. It is easy enough to see that some of Cipriano Algor's strange behavior is motivated by his own tormenting concerns about the results of the questionnaire, and that his aim in reminding his daughter that, even once they have moved to the Center, they can still come and work in the pottery, was simply to dissuade her from painting the figurines, so that, should a command arrive tomorrow or later on from the smiling assistant head of department or from his immediate superior canceling the order, she would not have to suffer the pain of leaving her work unfinished or, if finished, redundant. Much more surprising is Marta's behavior, that impulsive and in some ways unnaturally joyful reaction to the doubtful possibility of coming back to the pottery and keeping it going, unless, of course, one could establish a link between that behavior and the thought that originated it, a thought that has been tenaciously pursuing her ever since she entered the apartment at the Center and which she swore to herself never to confess to anyone, not even to her father, even though he is there by her side, nor, can you imagine it, to her own husband, even though she loves him very much. What went through Marta's head and put down roots there the moment she crossed the threshold of her new home, in that lofty thirty-fourth floor with its pale furniture and two vertiginous windows that she had not even had the courage to approach, was that she would not be able to stand living there for the rest of her life, with no other identity than that of being the wife of resident guard Marçal Gacho, with no other future than that of the daughter growing inside her. Or the son. She thought about this all the way back to the pottery, she continued to think about it as she was preparing lunch, she was still thinking about it when, not feeling in the least bit hungry, she kept pushing the food on her plate around with her fork, and she was still thinking when she said to her father that, before they moved to the Center, they had a strict obligation to finish the figurines that were still waiting in the kiln. Finishing them meant painting them, and painting was her job, if she could just have three or four days to spend sitting under the mulberry tree with Found lying by her side, his mouth open in a broad grin, his tongue lolling. This was all she asked, like the last desperate wish of a

condemned man, and suddenly, with a few simple words, her father had opened up the door to freedom, she would, after all, be able to leave the Center whenever she wanted, unlock the door to her house with the key to her house, find all the things she had left behind in their accustomed places, go into the pottery to see if the clay was the right consistency, then sit down at the wheel and surrender her hands to the cool clay, only now did she understand that she loved these places the way a tree, if it could, would love the roots that feed it and hold it erect in the air. Cipriano Algor was looking at his daughter, reading her face as if it were the page of an open book, and his heart ached because of the entirely false hopes he would have been nurturing in her if the results of the questionnaire turned out to be so negative that the buying department at the Center decided to abandon the figurines once and for all. Marta had got up from her chair and come over to give him a kiss and a hug, What will she feel in a few days' time, thought Cipriano Algor, reciprocating her affection, but the words he spoke were quite different, they were the usual words, As our grandparents more or less believed, while there's life, we're guaranteed hope. The resigned tone in which he said this would perhaps have given Marta pause for thought had she been less absorbed in her own happy expectations. Let's enjoy our three days off in peace, said Cipriano Algor, we certainly deserve them, and, after all, we're not stealing them from anyone, then we'll start getting ready for the move, You set the example, then, and go and have a nap, said Marta, you spent the whole of yesterday working the kiln and today you had to get up early, now even for a father like mine, stamina has its limits, as for the move, don't worry about that, that's a matter for the mistress of the house. Cipriano Algor went to his bedroom, got undressed with the weary gestures born of a tiredness that was not purely physical and lay down on the bed with a deep sigh. He did not stay there long. He propped himself up on the pillow and looked around him as if this was the first time he had ever come into this room and as if, for some obscure reason, he had to fix it in his memory, as if this was also the last time that he would come here and as if he wanted his memory to serve some purpose other than merely one day recalling for him that stain on the wall, that line of light on the floor, that photograph of a woman on the chest of drawers. Outside, Found barked as if he had heard a stranger coming up the drive, but then he fell silent, he was probably just responding in somewhat desultory fashion to the barking of a distant dog, or else simply wanted to make his presence felt, he must sense that something is going on that he cannot understand. Cipriano Algor closed his eyes in order to summon up sleep, but his eyes preferred not to. There is nothing as sad, nothing as unutterably sad, as an old man crying.

The news arrived the next day. The weather had changed, there was an occasional heavy downpour that flooded the whole yard in minutes and drummed on the mulberry tree's crisp leaves like ten thousand drumsticks. Marta had been making a list of the things they should take with them to the apartment, always keenly aware at every moment of the two contradictory impulses battling inside her, one telling her the most perfect of truths, that is, that a move would not be a move if nothing was moved, the other advising her simply to leave everything as it was, Especially, it said, since you'll

often be back here to work and to breathe the country air. As for Cipriano Algor, with the intention of clearing his head of the web of anxieties that made him keep looking at his watch again and again throughout the day, he had busied himself sweeping out and cleaning the pottery from top to bottom, once more refusing Marta's offer of help, I'd only have to answer to Marçal later on, he said. Found had just been sent back to his kennel after having covered the kitchen floor with the mud clinging to his feet after his first sally forth since the rain had cleared. The rain would never be heavy enough to flood the kennel, but, just in case, his master had placed four bricks underneath it, transforming an ordinary, modern-day canine refuge into a prehistoric stilt house. He was engaged in this when the phone rang. Marta answered and, at first, when she heard the voice say, It's the Center here, she thought it was Marçal, that they were about to put him through to her, but those were not the words that followed, The head of the buying department would like to speak to Senhor Cipriano Algor. Generally speaking, a secretary knows what her boss is going to say when he asks her to get him a particular number, but an actual telephone operator knows nothing at all, which is why she has the neutral, indifferent voice of someone who is no longer of this world, but let us do her the justice of thinking that she might occasionally have shed sorrowful tears if she could have guessed what would happen after uttering the mechanical words, You're through. Marta began by imagining that the head of the buying department was phoning to express his annoyance at the delay in delivering the missing three hundred figurines, or even, who knows, the six hundred that they had not even started yet, and when, having told the telephone operator, Just a moment, please, she ran out to call to her father in the pottery, she did so thinking that she would have a quick critical word with him about his mistaken decision not to get on with the work as soon as the first series of figurines was finished. Any recriminatory words, however, remained stuck fast to her tongue when she saw the agitated look on her father's face as he heard her say, It's the head of the buying department, he wants to talk to you. Cipriano Algor thought it best not to run, it should be enough that he managed to walk with a firm step to the bar where he would be sentenced. He picked up the receiver that his daughter had left on the table. Hello, Cipriano Algor speaking, and the telephone operator said, I'm just connecting you, there was a silence, a slight buzzing, a crackle, and the loud, sonorous voice of the head of the buying department boomed out at the other end, Good afternoon, Senhor Cipriano Algor, Good afternoon, sir, Now I imagine you know why I'm ringing today, You imagine correctly, sir, please go on, I have before me the results and conclusions of the questionnaire on your products which one of my assistants, with my approval, decided to carry out, And what were the results, sir, asked Cipriano Algor, I regret to inform you that they were not as good as we had hoped, If that's the case, then no one can regret it more than I do, Your participation in the life of our Center is, I'm afraid, over, New things begin every day, but sooner or later, they all end, Wouldn't you like me to read out the results, I'm more interested in the conclusions and I know what those are already, the Center won't be buying any more of our figurines. Marta, who had been listening with ever-increasing concern to her father's words, raised her hands to her mouth as if to suppress a cry. Cipriano Algor gestured to her to remain calm, at the same time

responding to a question from the head of the buying department, Yes, I understand your desire to clarify any doubts in my mind, and I agree that presenting conclusions without first explaining the reasons that led to them might be seen as a rather clumsy way of disguising an arbitrary decision, which would never, of course, be the case with the Center, So glad you agree with me, It would be hard not to, sir, Right, then, these are the results, Go on, The statistical population of customers who were to be sent the questionnaire was defined at the start by the exclusion of all those people who by virtue of age, social class, education, and culture, as well as by their known buying habits, were predictably and radically averse to acquiring articles of this type, it is important that you should know that we took that decision, Senhor Algor, in order not to prejudice you from the outset, Thank you very much, sir, Let me give you an example, if we had selected fifty modern young people, fifty ordinary young men and women, you can be sure, Senhor Algor, that none of them would want to take home one of your figurines, or if they did, it would only be in order to use them as target practice, I understand, We chose twenty-five people of each sex, with average jobs and salaries, people from modest family backgrounds, who still had traditional tastes and in whose houses the rustic nature of the product would not look too out of place, And even then, Yes, Senhor Algor, even then the results were bad, Oh, well, Twenty men and ten women said that they did not like clay figurines, four women said that they might buy them if they were bigger, three that they might buy them if they were smaller, of the five remaining men, four said that they were too old to be playing with dolls and the other man was outraged that three of the figurines represented foreigners, exotic ones to boot, and as for the eight remaining women, two said they were allergic to clay, four said that such objects had bad associations for them, and only the last two replied thanking us very much for the opportunity to decorate their house with such lovely statuettes entirely free of charge, it has to be said that both were elderly people living alone. Well, I'd like to have their names and addresses so that I could write and thank them, said Cipriano Algor, Ah, I'm afraid I'm not authorized to reveal any personal data about those questioned, it's a strict condition of any such research to respect the anonymity of respondents, Perhaps you could tell me, though, if those people live in the Center, Who do you mean, all of them, asked the head of the buying department, No, sir, just the two who were kind enough to like our figurines, said Cipriano Algor, Since that hardly constitutes factual information, I don't think I would be betraying the deontology of the questionnaires if I were to tell you that those two women both live outside the Center, in the city, Thank you for that information, sir, Was it any help, Alas, no, sir, Then why did you want to know, Because I might have had the opportunity of meeting them and thanking them personally, but since they live in the city, it would be well nigh impossible, And if they lived here, When, at the beginning of this conversation, you said that my participation in the life of the Center had reached an end, I almost interrupted you, Why, Because, contrary to what you think, despite the fact that you want nothing more to do with the pots, plates, or figurines made by this pottery, my life will continue to be linked to the Center, I don't understand, please be good enough to explain yourself more clearly, In five or six days' time I will be living there, my son-in-law was promoted to the position of resident guard and I'll be going to

live there with my daughter and with him, Well, I'm glad to hear it and please accept my congratulations, you are a lucky man after all, you certainly can't complain, just when you thought you'd lost everything, it turns out you've won, Oh, I'm not complaining, sir, Perhaps we would be justified in proclaiming that the Center writes straight on crooked lines, and what it takes away with one hand, it gives with the other, If I remember rightly, that business about crooked lines and writing straight used to be said about God, remarked Cipriano Algor, Nowadays, it comes to pretty much the same thing, I would not be exaggerating if I were to say that the Center, as the perfect distributor of material and spiritual goods, has, out of sheer necessity, generated from and within itself something that almost partakes of the divine, although I realize that this may offend certain of the more sensitive orthodoxies, Do you distribute spiritual goods as well, sir, Oh, yes, and you cannot imagine the extent to which the Center's detractors, although these are becoming fewer and less combative all the time, are completely blind to the spiritual side of our activities, when the truth is that, thanks to these activities, life has taken on new meaning for millions and millions of people who before were unhappy, frustrated and helpless, and believe me, whether you like it or not, that was not the work of vile matter but of sublime spirit, Yes, I'm sure, Anyway, I just want to say, Senhor Algor, that I have found in you someone to whom, even in difficult situations like the present one, it has always been a pleasure to talk about this and other serious matters, matters in which I take a particular interest because of the transcendent dimension which, in some way, they add to my work, and I hope that, after your imminent move to the Center, we will be able to meet again and continue this exchange of ideas, So do I, sir, Good-bye, Good-bye. Cipriano Algor replaced the receiver on its rest and looked at his daughter. Marta was sitting down with her hands in her lap, as if in response to a sudden need to protect the incipient and still barely perceptible roundness of her belly. Are they not going to buy from us any more, she asked, No, they did a survey of their customers and the results were negative, So they won't be buying the three hundred figurines that are in the kiln, No. Marta got up and went over to the kitchen door, she looked out at the teeming rain and, turning her head slightly, she asked, Haven't you anything to say to me, Yes, said her father, Go on then, I'm all ears. Cipriano Algor joined her at the door and, leaning against the doorjamb, took a deep breath and began, This hasn't come as a surprise, I knew this might happen, one of the assistant heads of department told me that they were going to carry out a survey to find out how their customers felt about the figurines, although the idea almost certainly came from the department head, So I've been deceived these past three days, deceived by you, my own father, dreaming about a pottery in full production, imagining us leaving the Center early in the morning, arriving here and rolling up our sleeves, breathing in the smell of the clay, working beside you, having Marçal with me on his days off, It was just that I didn't want you to suffer, But now I'm suffering twice, your good intentions didn't save me from any suffering at all, Forgive me, And please don't waste your time asking my forgiveness, because you know perfectly well that I'll always forgive you, whatever you do, If the decision had gone the other way, if the Center had decided to buy the figurines, you would never have known anything about the danger we had been in, Now it's no longer a danger, it's a reality,

We've still got the house, we can come here whenever we like, Yes, we have the house, a house with a view of the cemetery, What cemetery, The pottery, the kiln, the drying shelves, the woodshed, what was and is no more, could there be a bigger cemetery than that, asked Marta, on the brink of tears. Her father placed one hand on her shoulder, Don't cry, I realize now that it was a mistake not to have told you what was going on. Marta did not reply, she reminded herself that she had no right to criticize her father, for she too had a secret that she was keeping from her husband and which she would never tell him, How are you going to manage to live in that apartment now, with all hope gone, she was asking herself. Found had left the kennel, plump drops of water fell on him from the mulberry tree, but he did not dare to venture farther. His paws were muddy, his fur dripping, and he was sure that he would not be well received. And yet he it was that they were talking about at the kitchen door. When she saw him appear there and stop to look at them, Marta had asked, What are we going to do with that dog. Calmly, as if discussing a subject they had talked about thousands of times before and which it was hardly worth mentioning again, her father replied, I'll ask Isaura Madruga if she'll have him, Am I hearing right, can you repeat that, please, did you really say that you were going to ask Isaura Madruga if she'll have Found, You heard me perfectly, that was exactly what I said, You mean Isaura Madruga, If you keep this up, I'll say Yes, Isaura Madruga and you'll say You mean Isaura Madruga and we'll spend the rest of the afternoon going back and forth, It's just such a surprise, It can't be that much of a surprise, she's the person you had in mind too, It isn't the person that's the surprise, the surprising thing for me is that you should have had the same idea, There isn't another person in the village, possibly in the whole world, that I would leave Found with, I'd rather kill him first. Expectantly, slowly wagging his tail, the dog was still watching from afar. Cipriano Algor crouched down and called, Found, come here. The dog began to shake himself, spraying water everywhere, as if he could only go to his master once he was decent and presentable, then he made a quick dash and, an instant later, he had his great head pressed against Cipriano Algor's chest, so hard it was as if he were trying to burrow inside. That was when Marta asked her father, Just so that everything is perfect, which doesn't only mean having Found in your arms, tell me if you told Marçal about the survey, Yes, I did, He didn't say anything to me, For the same reason that I didn't tell you. At this point in the dialogue, you might be expecting Marta to respond, Honestly, Pa, fancy telling him and leaving me in the dark, that is how people normally react, no one likes to be left out or to have their right to information and knowledge thwarted, however, every now and then, one still comes across the occasional rare exception in this dull world of repetitions, as the Orphic, Pythagorean, Stoic, and Neoplatonic sages might have called it had they not preferred, with poetic inspiration, to give it the prettier and more sonorous name of the eternal return. Marta did not protest, she did not make a scene, she merely said, I would have been angry with you if you hadn't told Marçal. Detaching himself from the dog and sending him back to his kennel, Cipriano Algor said, At least I manage to get things right sometimes. They stood watching the endless rain, listening to the mulberry tree's monologue, and then Marta asked, What can we do about those figurines in the kiln, and her father replied, Nothing. Terse and to the point, the

word left no room for doubt, Cipriano Algor did not proffer instead one of those vulgar, everyday phrases which, in their attempt to declare themselves to be definitively negative, happily carry within them two negatives, which, according to the expert opinion of grammarians, should turn them into a positive affirmation, as if one such phrase, for example, We can't do nothing, were going to all the trouble of denying itself in order to end up meaning that we can do something.

Marçal phoned after supper, I'm speaking from our new home, he said, I left the security staff dorm today and tonight I'll be sleeping in our own bed, Good, you must be pleased, Yes, and I have some news to give you too, So have we, said Marta, Which shall we begin with, mine or yours, he asked, It would be best to begin with the bad news and leave the good news, if there is any, to last, My news is neither good nor bad, it's just news, Then I'll begin with ours, this afternoon the Center told us that they won't be buying the figurines, they carried out a survey and the result was negative. There was a silence at the other end. Marta waited. Then Marçal said, I knew about the survey, Yes, I know you knew, Pa told me, And I was afraid that would be the result, Your fears were confirmed, Are you annoyed with me for not telling you what was going on, No, I'm not angry with you or with him, that's how things are, we have to do our best to understand and accept it, what I found most difficult was having to give up the hope that, even once we were living in the Center, we would still be able to come and work in the pottery, That wasn't a possibility I had ever considered, It wasn't an idea that I thought up either, it emerged in conversation with Pa, But he couldn't be sure that the figurines would be accepted, Like you, he wanted to save me any pain, and the result of that deceit was that I've been happy as a lark these last few days, which, I suppose, is better than nothing, but there's no point crying over the spilt milk that has been the cause of so many tears in this world, tell me your news, They've given me three days' leave for the move, that's including my normal day off, which this time happens to fall on a Monday, so I'll leave here on Friday afternoon, in a taxi, it's not worth your father's coming to pick me up, we'll get everything ready on Saturday, and on Sunday morning, we'll set sail, Hm, I've already put to one side everything we need to take with us, said Marta rather distractedly. There was another silence. Aren't you happy, asked Marçal, Yes, I am, really I am, replied Marta. Then she said again, I am happy, really I am. Outside, the dog Found barked, some shadow in the dark night must have moved.

The van had been loaded, the windows and doors of the pottery and the house had been closed, all they had to do now, as Marçal had said a few days before, was to set sail. Strained and tense, looking suddenly much older, Cipriano Algor called the dog. Despite the anxious tone that any attentive ear would have picked up, his master's voice raised Round's spirits. He had spent the morning running about, perplexed and uneasy, sniffing the suitcases and packages that were brought out of the house, he had barked loudly in order to attract their attention, and his instincts had not misled him, something singular and out of the ordinary had been happening lately, and now the time had come when luck or fate or chance or the unstable nature of human desires and constraints were about to reach a decision on what was to become of him. He had lain down by the kennel, his head resting on his paws, waiting. When his master said, Found, come here, he thought he was being summoned in order to get into the van as had happened on other occasions, a sign that nothing had really changed in his life, that today would be the same as yesterday, which is the constant dream of all dogs. He thought it odd that they should put the lead on him, which they did not usually do when they went traveling, and this sense of oddness only increased and changed into confusion when his mistress and his younger master stroked his head, at the same time murmuring incomprehensible words among which the sound of his own name kept being repeated in the most disquieting fashion, not that they were saying anything very bad, We'll come and see you soon. A gentle tug on the leash told him that he should follow his master, the situation had suddenly become clear, the van was for his mistress and his other master, he would be going for a walk with the older master. Having to wear a leash still struck him as odd, but it nevertheless seemed a relatively minor detail. Once they reached the countryside, his master would let him off the leash so he could race off after whatever living creature happened to appear, even if it was only a lizard. It's a cool morning, the sky is cloudy, but there's no sign of rain. When they reached the road, instead of turning left toward the open countryside, as he expected, his master turned right, which meant that they would be going into the village. Three times during the walk, Found had to stop suddenly. Cipriano Algor was doing what most of us would do in similar circumstances, when we engage in a futile discussion with our inner selves as to whether we do or do not want what it has become clear that we do in fact want, we begin a sentence and fail to finish it, we stop suddenly, then tear along as if we had to save our own father from the gallows, then we stop again, even the most patient and devoted of dogs will end up wondering if he wouldn't be better off with a more decisive master. He cannot know how firm his master's resolve is. Cipriano Algor has already reached Isaura Madruga's door, he holds out his hand as if to knock on the door, hesitates, and again holds out his hand, at that moment, the door opens as if it had been expecting him, which wasn't, in fact, the case, Isaura Madruga had heard the bell and come to see who it was. Good morning, Senhora Isaura, said the potter, Good morning, Senhor Algor, Forgive me for troubling you at home, but there's something I'd like to discuss with you, I have a great favor to ask of you, Come in, We can talk out here, there's no need for us to come inside, No, please, don't stand on ceremony, come in, Can the dog come too, asked Cipriano Algor, he's got muddy feet, Oh, Found is like one of the family, we're old friends. The door

closed, the darkness in the small sitting room closed around them. Isaura indicated a chair and sat down herself. I have a feeling that you know what I've come about, said the potter, as he made the dog lie down at his feet, That's possible, Perhaps my daughter has already spoken to you, About what, About Found, No, we've never spoken about Found, at least, not in the way you mean, What way, In the sense of having spoken specifically about Found, we've often talked about him, of course, but never had a real chat about him in particular. Cipriano Algor looked down, I've come to ask you if you would look after Found in my absence, Are you going away, asked Isaura, Yes, today, and obviously we can't take the dog with us, the Center doesn't allow pets, I'll look after him, Yes, I know you'll look after him as if he was your own, I'll look after him better than if he was my own, because he's yours. Without thinking, perhaps just to ease his nerves, Cipriano Algor had removed the dog's leash. I think I owe you an apology, he said, Why, Because I haven't always treated you with the politeness you deserve, My memory remembers other things, the afternoon when I met you at the cemetery, the conversation we had about the jug handle that had come off, your coming to my house to bring me a new water jug, Yes, but it was afterward that I behaved badly, rudely, and on more than one occasion too, It doesn't matter, It does, The proof that it doesn't matter is that you're here now, But I'm just about to cease being here, Yes, just about to cease being here. Dark clouds must have covered the sky, the darkness inside the house grew still denser, the natural thing would have been for Isaura to get up now from her chair and turn on the light. She did not do so, though not out of indifference or for some other subterranean reason, but simply because she had not noticed that she could barely see Cipriano Algor's face opposite her, just within reach of her arm if she were to lean slightly forward. The pitcher is still all right then, keeping the water nice and fresh, asked Cipriano Algor, As it did from the start, replied Isaura, and it was at that moment that she realized how dark the room was, I should turn on the light, she said to herself, but she did not get up. No one had ever told her that the fates of many people in the world have been changed radically by that simple gesture of turning a light on or off, whether it be an old-fashioned lantern, or a candle, or an oil lamp, or a modern electric lightbulb, it's true that she thought she should get up, this was what common sense was telling her, but her body would not move, it refused to obey the order from her brain. This was the darkness that Cipriano Algor had needed in order finally to declare himself, I love you, Isaura, and she replied in what seemed wounded tones, And you leave it until the day you're going away to tell me, It would have been pointless telling you before, well, as pointless as it is for me to be telling you now, But you have told me, It was my last chance, take it as a farewell, Why, Because I have nothing else to offer you, I'm a species on the verge of extinction, I have no future, I haven't even got a present, We do have a present, this moment, this room, your daughter and son-in-law waiting to carry you off, this dog lying at your feet, But not this woman, You haven't asked, I don't want to ask, Why not, Like I said, because I have nothing to offer you, If what you told me just now was truly felt and meant, you have love to offer, Love isn't a house, it isn't clothes or food, But food, clothes, and a house are not in themselves love, Please, let's not play with words, a man isn't going to ask a woman to marry him if he has no way of earning a living, Is that how

it is with you, asked Isaura, You know it is, the pottery has closed and I don't know how to do anything else, So you're going to live off your son-in-law, What other option do I have, You could live off what your wife earned, How long would love last in those circumstances, asked Cipriano Algor, But I didn't work when I was married, I lived off my husband's earnings, No one could disapprove of that, that's normal, but put a man in that situation and see what happens, Would love necessarily have to die because of that, asked Isaura, does love die for such trivial reasons, I'm not in a position to answer that, I've no experience. Found got discreetly to his feet, in his opinion, this courtesy visit was going on far too long, he wanted to go back to the kennel, to the mulberry tree, to the bench of meditations. Cipriano Algor said, I have to go, they're waiting for me, So this is good-bye, then, said Isaura, We'll come back now and then, to see how Found is, to see if the house is still standing, it's not good-bye forever. He put the dog on the leash again and placed the leash in Isaura's hands, Here you are, he's only a dog, but. We will never know what ontological ideas Cipriano Algor was about to develop after that conjunction left hanging in the air, because his right hand, the one holding the leash, got lost or else allowed itself to be found in the hands of Isaura Madruga, the woman he had not wanted to include in his present and who, nevertheless, was saying to him now, I love you, Cipriano, you know that. The leash slipped to the floor, and Found, suddenly free again, wandered off to sniff the baseboard, and when, shortly afterward, he turned his head, he realized that the visit had changed direction, there was nothing courteous about that embrace, those kisses, that irregular breathing, nor the words which, for very different reasons, were begun but never completed. Cipriano Algor and Isaura had got to their feet, she was crying with laughter and grief, he was stammering, I'll come back, I'll come back, it really is a shame that the street door is not suddenly flung wide open so that the neighbors can see for themselves and spread the word that the widow Estudioso and the old potter love each other with a true and finally declared love. In a voice that had almost recovered its normal tone, Cipriano Algor said again, I'll come back, I'll come back, there must be some solution for us, The only solution is for you to stay, said Isaura, You know I can't, We'll be here waiting for you, Found and me. The dog could not understand why the woman was holding his leash, since all three of them were moving toward the door, a sure sign that he and his master were finally leaving, he could not understand why the leash had still not been passed back to the hand of the person who had the right to put it on him. Panic began to rise from his guts to his throat, but at the same time, his legs were trembling with excitement at the plan that instinct had just outlined to him, to lunge forward when the door was opened and then triumphantly wait outside for his master to come for him. The door only opened after more embraces and more kisses, more murmured words, however, the woman was still holding him firmly, saying, Stay, stay, as is the way with speech, the same verb that had proved incapable of preventing Cipriano Algor from leaving was the very verb that would not now allow Found to escape. The door closed, separating the dog from his master, but, as is the way with feelings, the pain of abandonment experienced by one could not, at least at that moment, expect to find sympathy or understanding in the tormented happiness of the other. It will not be long before we find out more about Found's life in his new home, whether it was easy or

difficult to adapt to his new mistress, if the kindness and limitless affection she showered on him were enough to make him forget the sadness of being unjustly abandoned. Right now we have to follow Cipriano Algor, just follow him, trot along behind him, accompany his somnambular footsteps. As for imagining how one person can possibly contain such opposing feelings as, in the case we have been looking at, the most profound of joys and the most painful of griefs, and then going on to discover or to create the single word by which the particular feeling born of that conjunction would come to be designated, this is a task that many have undertaken in the past, but all abandoned the attempt knowing that, as is the case with a constantly shifting horizon, they would never even reach the threshold of the door to those ineffabilities longing for expression. Human vocabulary is still not capable, and probably never will be, of knowing, recognizing, and communicating everything that can be humanly experienced and felt. Some say that the main cause of this very serious difficulty lies in the fact that human beings are basically made of clay, which, as the encyclopedias helpfully explain, is a detrital sedimentary rock made up of tiny mineral fragments measuring one two hundred and fiftysixths of a millimeter. Until now, despite long linguistic study, no one has managed to come up with a name for this.

Meanwhile, Cipriano Algor had reached the end of the street, turned off into the road that divided the village in two and, neither walking nor dawdling, neither running nor flying, as if he were dreaming that he was trying to break free from himself, but kept stumbling over his own body, he reached the top of the slope where the van was waiting with his son-in-law and his daughter. Before, the sky had seemed set fair, but now a hesitant, indolent rain had begun to fall, it might not perhaps last very long, but it greatly exacerbated the melancholy of these people who were only the turn of a wheel away from leaving much-loved places, even Marçal felt his stomach tighten uneasily. Cipriano Algor got into the van, sat down next to the driver, in the place that had been left for him, and said, Let's go. He would not say another word until they reached the Center, until they got into the service elevator that carried them and their suitcases and packages up to the thirty-fourth floor, until they opened the door of the apartment, until Marçal exclaimed, Here we are, only then did he open his mouth to utter a few organized sounds, albeit nothing very original, he merely repeated his son-in-law's words, with a small rhetorical addition, Yes, here we are. Marta and Marçal had also said very little during the journey. The only words worthy of recording in this story, and only superficially, purely incidentally, because they have to do with people about whom we have only heard, were those they exchanged when the van was going past the house of Marçal's parents, Did you tell them we were leaving, asked Marta, Yes, the day before yesterday, when I came back from the Center, I just popped in, the taxi was waiting, Don't you want to stop, she asked again, No, I'm tired of arguments, fed up to the back teeth, Even so, Remember the way they behaved when we both went to see them, you surely don't want a repeat performance, said Marçal, It's a shame, though, they are your parents after all, It's a funny expression that, What, After all, That's what people say, Yes, I know, but words which, at first sight, seem to be mere adornment and could, in every sense of the word, easily be discarded, become frightening once you start to think

about them and realize what they imply, After all, Marta had said, which is another disguised way of saying what else can we do, what do you expect, that's the way things are, or, put more bluntly, resign yourself, We have to live with the parents we've got, said Marçal, Not forgetting that someone will have to live with the parents we will become, concluded Marta. It was then that Marçal glanced to his right and said, smiling, Needless to say, this conversation about warring parents and children does not apply to you, but Cipriano Algor did not respond, he merely nodded vaguely. Sitting behind her husband, Marta could just see her father's profile. I wonder what happened with Isaura, she thought, he obviously didn't just go there, leave Found and come back, judging by the delay, they must have said something to each other, what I wouldn't give to know what he's thinking, his face looks quite serene, but at the same time it's the face of someone who isn't quite in control, someone who has escaped a great danger and is surprised to find himself still alive. She would know much more if she could see her father from the front, then she might perhaps say, I recognize those tears that never fall but are absorbed back into the eyes, I recognize that joyful pain, that painful happiness, that being and not being, that having and not having, that wanting and not being able to act. But it was early days yet for Cipriano Algor to answer her. They had left the village, left behind them the three ruined houses, now they were crossing the bridge over the stream with its dark, evil-smelling waters. Over there, in the middle of the countryside, in the clump of trees hidden by brambles, is where the archaeological treasure from Cipriano Algor's pottery is hidden. Anyone would think that ten thousand years had passed since the last remains of an ancient civilization were dumped there.

When, on the morning after his day off, Marçal left the thirty-fourth floor in order to go to work as a fully fledged resident guard, the apartment was clean, tidy, and orderly, with the things brought from the other house in their proper places, and all that was necessary now was for the inhabitants willingly to take up their rightful places among them. It won't be easy, a person is not like a thing that you put down in one place and leave, a person moves, thinks, asks questions, doubts, investigates, probes, and while it is true that, out of the long habit of resignation, he sooner or later ends up looking as if he has submitted to the objects, don't go thinking that this apparent submission is necessarily permanent. The first problem to be resolved by the new inhabitants, with the exception of Marçal Gacho, who will continue with his familiar, routine work of watching over the security of the people and property institutionally or incidentally associated with the Center, the first problem, we were saying, will be to find a satisfactory answer to the question, And now what am I going to do. Marta is in charge of running the household, when her time comes, she will have a child to bring up, and that will be more than enough to keep her occupied for many hours of the day and for some hours of the night. However, because people are, as pointed out above, subject to both action and thought, we should not be surprised if she should ask herself, in the middle of a task that has already taken up an hour and could well take up another two, And now what am I going to do. In any case, it is Cipriano Algor who is confronted by the worst possible situation, that of looking at his hands and knowing that they are useless, of looking at the clock and

knowing that the next hour will be the same as this, of thinking about tomorrow and knowing that it will be as empty as today. Cipriano Algor is no adolescent, he cannot spend the whole day lying on the bed that barely fits into his tiny bedroom, thinking about Isaura Madruga, repeating the words that they said to each other, reliving, if one can give such an ambitious name to the memory's insubstantial operations, their shared kisses and embraces. Some will think that the best medicine for Cipriano Algor's ills would be for him to go down to the garage right now, get into the van and drive off to see Isaura Madruga, who, back in the village, will more than likely be going through the same anxieties of body and soul, and for a man in his position, for whom life holds no more industrial and artistic triumphs of primary or secondary importance, having a woman whom he loves and who has already told him that she reciprocates his love, is the most sublime of blessings and the greatest good fortune. They obviously don't know Cipriano Algor. He has already told us that a man should not ask a woman to marry him if he lacks the means to guarantee his own living, and he would say to us now that he is not someone to take advantage of favorable circumstances and to behave as if he had a right to the resulting satisfactions, however justified by the qualities and virtues that adorn him, by the mere fact of being a man and of having made a particular woman the focus of his male attentions and desires. In other words, put more frankly and directly, what Cipriano Algor is not prepared to do, even though he will pay for it with the bitter pain of solitude, is to see himself playing the part of the fellow who periodically visits his mistress and returns from there with, as his only sentimental souvenirs, an evening or night spent agitating his body and shaking up his senses, then planting an absentminded kiss on a face now bereft of makeup, and in the case in point, patting the head of a canine, See you again soon, Found. Cipriano Algor, therefore, has two ways of escaping the prison which the apartment has, in his eyes, suddenly become, apart from the short-lived and merely palliative act of going over to the window now and then and looking out at the sky through the glass. His first recourse is the city, that is, Cipriano Algor, who has always lived in the insignificant village which we know only slightly and who knows only that part of the city he used to see en route to the Center, will now be able to spend his time strolling, ambling, and airing his feathers, a figurative caricature of an expression that must date from the days in which noblemen and gentlemen of the court wore feathers in their hats and would sally forth to air both hats and feathers. He also has at his disposal the city's public parks and gardens where elderly men tend to gather in the afternoons, men who have the face and typical gestures of the retired and the unemployed, which are two ways of saying the same thing. He could join them and become friends with them, and enthusiastically play cards until dusk, until it is no longer possible for their myopic eyes to tell whether the spots on the cards are red or black. He will demand vengeance if he loses and encourage it in others if he wins, the rules of the park are simple and easy to learn. The second recourse, needless to say, is the Center in which he lives. Naturally, he knows it already from before, but not as well as he knows the city, because, on his few visits to the Center, always with his daughter, just to do a bit of shopping, he could never quite remember how he got where. Now, in a way, the Center is all his, it has been handed to him on a plate of sound and light, he can wander about in it

as much as he likes, enjoy the easy-listening music and the inviting voices. If, when they came to visit the apartment for the first time, they had used the elevator on the other side, they would have been able to see, during the slow ride upward, as well as the new arcades, shops, escalators, meeting points, cafés, and restaurants, many other equally interesting and varied installations, for example, a carousel of horses, a carousel of space rockets, a center for toddlers, a center for the Third Age, a tunnel of love, a suspension bridge, a ghost train, an astrologer's tent, a betting shop, a rifle range, a golf course, a luxury hospital, another slightly less luxurious hospital, a bowling alley, a billiard hall, a battery of table football games, a giant map, a secret door, another door with a notice on it saying experience natural sensations, rain, wind, and snow on demand, a wall of china, a taj mahal, an egyptian pyramid, a temple of karnak, a real aqueduct, a mafra monastery, a clerics' tower, a fjord, a summer sky with fluffy white clouds, a lake, a real palm tree, the skeleton of a tyrannosaurus, another one apparently alive, himalayas complete with everest, an amazon river complete with indians, a stone raft, a corcovado christ, a trojan horse, an electric chair, a firing squad, an angel playing a trumpet, a communications satellite, a comet, a galaxy, a large dwarf, a small giant, a list of prodigies so long that not even eighty years of leisure time would be enough to take them all in, even if you had been born in the Center and had never left it for the outside world.

Cipriano Algor, having excluded, as entirely inadequate, staring out at the city and its rooftops through the apartment windows, having eliminated the parks and gardens because he has not yet reached the state of mind that could be classified as mute despair or utter tedium, and having set aside, for the potent reasons explained above, the tempting but problematic visits to Isaura Madruga for sentimental and physical relief, found that all that was left to him, if he did not want to spend the rest of his life yawning and, figuratively speaking, banging his head against the walls of his inner prison, was to throw himself into the discovery and methodical investigation of the marvelous island on which he had been cast up after the shipwreck. Every morning, therefore, after breakfast, Cipriano Algor tosses his daughter a hurried See you later, and sets off, like someone on his way to work, sometimes going up to the top floor, at others going down to the ground floor, using the elevators, now at maximum speed, now at minimum speed, according to his observational needs, walking down corridors and passageways, crossing large halls, skirting vast, complex conglomerations of shop windows, displays, showrooms, and showcases containing everything that could possibly exist to be eaten and drunk or worn on the body or the feet, to pamper hair and skin, nails and body hair, both above and below, to hang around the neck, to dangle from ears, to slip onto fingers, to jingle on wrists, to do and to undo, to sew and to sow, to draw and to erase, to increase and to diminish, to gain weight with and to lose weight, to stretch and to shrink, to fill up and to empty, and to say all this is to say nothing, since for this, too, it would require more than eighty years of leisure time to read and analyze the fifty-five fifteen-hundred-page volumes that constitute the Center's commercial catalogue. Obviously, Cipriano Algor is not much interested in the goods on display, after all, making purchases is neither his

responsibility nor his concern, that is the business of the wage earner, i.e. his son-in-law, and of the person who then manages, administers and uses the money, i.e., his daughter. He is the one who walks around with his hands in his pockets, stopping here and there, occasionally asking a guard the way, although never Marçal, even if he happens to bump into him, so as not to reveal their family ties, and, above all, making the most of that most precious and enviable of the many advantages of living at the Center, that is, being able to enjoy for free or at much reduced prices the multiple attractions at the disposal of customers. We have already given two sober and condensed accounts of these, the first about what could be seen from the elevator on this side, the second about what could be seen from the elevator on the other side, however, out of a desire for objectivity and informational rigor, we should point out that, in both cases, we never went beyond the thirty-fourth floor. Above this, as you will recall, sits a universe of another fourteen floors. Dealing as we are here with a person of a reasonably inquisitive turn of mind, we hardly need say that Cipriano Algor's first investigative steps led him to the mysterious secret door, which, however, had to remain mysterious because, despite insistent ringing at the doorbell and a few raps on the door, no one emerged from inside to ask him what he wanted. He did, however, have to give a full and prompt explanation to a guard who, attracted by the noise or, more likely, guided by the images on the closed circuit television, came over to ask who he was and what he was doing there. Cipriano Algor explained that he lived on the thirty-fourth floor and that he just happened to be passing and his interest had been aroused by the sign on the door, Simple curiosity, sir, the simple curiosity of someone who has nothing else to do. The guard asked him for his official identity card and the card that proved he was a resident, compared his face with the photos on both, examined the fingerprints on both documents through a magnifying glass, and, finally, took a print of that same finger, which Cipriano Algor, after due instruction, pressed against what was presumably the scanner of a portable computer that the guard removed from a bag he wore slung across his shoulder, at the same time saying, Don't worry, it's just a formality, but take my advice, don't come here again, it could get you into trouble, being curious once is enough, besides, there's nothing secret behind that door, there was once, but not now, In that case, why don't they remove the sign, asked Cipriano Algor, It acts as a lure so that we can find out who are the inquisitive ones living in the Center. The guard waited until Cipriano Algor had moved a few meters off, then followed him until he met a colleague and, in order to avoid being recognized, he passed the duty of surveillance on to him, What did he do, asked Marçal Gacho, pretending unconcern, He was knocking at the secret door, That's hardly a serious offense, it happens several times a day, said Marçal, relieved, Yes, but people have to learn not to be curious, to walk on by, not to stick their nose in where it isn't wanted, it's just a question of time and training, Or force, said Marçal, Apart from certain very extreme cases, force is no longer necessary, I could have taken him in for interrogation, but I just gave him some good advice, used a bit of psychology, Right, I'd better go after him, then, said Marçal, I wouldn't want him to give me the slip, If you notice anything suspicious, tell me so that I can add it to the report and then we can both sign it. The other guard left, and Marçal continued to follow at a distance as his father-in-law

explored two floors above, then he let him go. He wondered what would be the best thing to do, to talk to him and tell him to take care when wandering around the Center, or simply to pretend that he knew nothing about this very minor incident and to pray that nothing more serious happened. He chose the latter option, but when Cipriano Algor laughingly told him about it over supper, he had no alternative but to assume the role of mentor and ask him to behave in a way that would not attract the attention of guards or non-guards, If you're going to live here, that's the only correct way to proceed. Then Cipriano Algor took a piece of paper out of his pocket, I copied down these phrases from some posters, he said, I hope I didn't attract the attention of some spy or observer, So do I, said Marçal grumpily, Is it regarded as suspicious to copy down phrases that are on display for customers to read, asked Cipriano Algor, Reading them is normal, copying them down isn't, and anything that isn't normal is, at the very least, suspected of being abnormal. Marta, who, until then, had taken no part in the conversation, said to her father, Read them out to us. Cipriano Algor smoothed the paper out on the table and began to read, Be bold, dream. He looked at his daughter and at his son-in-law, and since they seemed disinclined to comment, he went on, Experience the thrill of dreaming, that's just a variant on the first one, and here are the others, one, Get operational, two, the south seas within your grasp without even leaving home, three, this isn't your last chance, but it's the best you'll get, four, we think about you all the time, now it's time for you to think about us, five, bring your friends, as long as they buy something, six, with us, you will never want to be anything else, seven, you're our best customer, only don't tell your neighbor, That's the one they had up on the façade outside, said Marçal, Well, now it's inside, the customers must have liked it, replied his father-in-law. What else did you find on this dangerous exploratory expedition of yours, asked Marta, You'll fall asleep if I tell you, All right, then, send me to sleep, The thing I liked best, began Cipriano Algor, were the natural sensations, What's that, Just imagine this, All right, I'll try You go into a reception area, you buy your ticket, I had to pay only ten percent of the normal price because they gave me a discount of forty-five percent for being a resident and the same discount for being over sixty, It looks like you get a pretty good deal if you're over sixty, said Marta, Oh, yes, the older you are, the more you earn, and you die rich, And then what happened, asked Marçal impatiently, Have you never been in there, asked his father-in-law, somewhat surprised, No, I knew it existed, but I've never been inside, never had the time, Well, you've no idea what you've missed, If you don't tell us, I'm off to bed, threatened Marta, All right, after you've paid and they've furnished you with a raincoat, a hat, Wellingtons, and an umbrella, all in bright colors, you can get them in black too, but it costs more, you're ushered into a changing room where a voice from a loudspeaker tells you to put on the boots, the raincoat, and the hat, and then you go into a kind of corridor where they line you up in fours, but with enough space between you so that you can move freely, there were about thirty of us, for some, like me, it was the first time, others, it seemed to me, went there now and then, and at least five of them were old hands, I even heard one of them say This is like a drug, you try it once and you're hooked. And then what happened, asked Marta, Then it began to rain, just a few drops at first, then a bit harder, we all opened our umbrellas, and the voice over the loudspeaker

gave us the order to advance, and it was just indescribable, you would have to have been there, the rain started falling in torrents, then suddenly there's a gale blowing, one gust, then another, umbrellas turn inside out, hats fly off heads, the women are screaming so as not to laugh, the men are laughing so as not to scream, and the wind gets stronger, it's like a typhoon now, the people slither around, fall over, get up, fall over again, the rain has become a deluge, it takes us a good ten minutes to cover, oh, about twenty-five or thirty meters, And then what, asked Marta, yawning, Then we turned around, and immediately snow started falling, just a few scattered flakes at first like threads of cotton, then it got thicker and thicker, it was falling ahead of us like a curtain through which we could barely see our colleagues, some still had their umbrellas up, which only made matters worse, finally we got back to the changing room and there was the most splendid sun shining, A sun in the changing room, said Marçal doubtfully, Well, it wasn't a changing room any more, by then, it was more like a meadow, And these were the natural sensations, asked Marta, Yes, But that's nothing you can't see every day outside, That was precisely what I said when we were giving back the equipment, but I should have kept my mouth shut, Why, One of the old hands looked at me scornfully and said I feel sorry for you, you just don't understand, do you. Helped by her husband, Marta started clearing the table. Tomorrow or the day after, I'm going to the beach, announced Cipriano Algor, Now I have been there once, said Marçal, And what's it like, Very hot and tropical, and the water is warm, And the sand, There is no sand, there's a plastic floor which, from a distance, looks real, And presumably there aren't any waves either, Ah, that's where you're wrong, there's a machine inside that produces a wave motion just like the sea, No, It's true, The things people think up, Yes, I know, said Marçal, it's a bit sad really. Cipriano Algor got to his feet, wandered about, asked to borrow a book from his daughter and then, as he was going into his bedroom, he said, I went downstairs again, the floor doesn't vibrate any more and you can't hear the diggers now, and Marçal replied, They must have finished the work.

Marta had suggested to her husband that they should use his first day off since moving to the Center to go and fetch a few things from their other home that, according to her, they needed, Normally when you move, you take all your possessions with you, but that wasn't the case with us, besides, I'm sure we'll go there on other occasions, and it would be rather nice, we could spend the night in our own bed and come back the following morning, like you used to do. Marçal said that he didn't think it was a good idea to create a situation in which they ended up not knowing where they really lived, Your father seems to want to give us the impression that he's having a wonderful time discovering the secrets of the Center, but I know him, behind that mask, his brain is still working away, He hasn't said a single word to me about what happened at Isaura's house, he's just clammed up, and that's not like him, one way or another, however angrily or reluctantly, he always ends up telling me everything, I think that if we went back to the house now it might help him, he'd obviously want to go and see how Found is, and he'd have another chance to talk to Isaura, All right, if that's what you want, we'll go, but remember what I said, we either live here or we live at the pottery, trying to live in two places as if they were one will be like living nowhere at all, Perhaps that's how it will be for us, What do you mean, Like living nowhere, Everyone needs a home, and we're no exception, The home we had was taken from us, It's still ours, But not like it was, This is our home now. Marta looked around her and said, I don't think it will ever really be our home. Marçal shrugged, these Algors were difficult people to understand, but, then again, he wouldn't change them for the world. Shall we tell your father, he said, Only at the last moment, so that he doesn't have too long to brood over it and end up poisoning his blood.

Cipriano Algor never knew that his daughter and his son-in-law had plans for him. Marçal Gacho's day off was canceled, and the same happened with his colleagues on the same shift. In absolute confidence, the resident guards, because they were considered the most trustworthy, were told that the work on building the new cold-storage units on floor zero five had uncovered something that would require long and careful examination, For the moment, access is limited, said the captain of the security guards, in a few days' time, a team will be working down there made up of various specialists, geologists, archaeologists, sociologists, anthropologists, forensic experts, and PR people, someone told me there would even be a couple of philosophers too, though don't ask me why. He paused, scanned the faces of the twenty men lined up before him and went on, You are forbidden to speak to anyone at all about what I have just told you or about anything you might find out in the future, and when I say anyone at all, I mean anyone, wife, children, parents, I require absolute secrecy from you, do you understand, Yes, sir, chorused the men, Good, the entrance to the cave, I forgot to mention that it's a cave, will be under constant guard day and night, in four-hour shifts, this chart shows you who's on duty when, it's five o'clock now, and we start at six. One of the men raised his hand, he wanted to know, if at all possible, when the cave had been found and who had been guarding it since, We will only have responsibility for security from six o'clock onward, he said, so presumably we can't be held responsible for any slipups that happened before

that, The entrance to the cave was discovered this morning when the earth was being shifted manually, work was stopped immediately and the administration informed, since then, three engineers from the construction department have been there all the time, Is there something inside the cave, another guard asked, Yes, said the captain, you will have a chance to see what it is with your own eyes, Is it dangerous, should we be armed, asked the same guard, As far as we know, there is no danger, however, as a precaution, you should not touch anything or go too close, we don't know what the consequences of any contact might be, For us or for whatever is in there, asked Marçal, For you and for them, So there is more than one of them in the cave, then, Yes, said the captain, and the expression on his face changed. Then, as if making an effort to pull himself together, he went on, Now if there are no further questions, these are your instructions, first, as for whether you should go armed or not, I think it will be enough if you carry your truncheons with you, not because I think you'll need them, but just so that you feel more confident, the truncheon is like a vital piece of clothing, a uniformed guard feels naked without it, second, anyone not on guard duty should dress in plainclothes and patrol the various floors listening for any conversations that have or seem to have some bearing on the cave, and should that happen, although this is highly unlikely, the central service should be informed immediately and we will take the necessary steps. The captain paused again and concluded, That's all you need to know, just remember your orders, absolute secrecy, it's your career that's on the line here. The guards went over to look at the duty roster, Marçal saw that he would be on the ninth shift, so he would be on duty between two and six o'clock on the morning of the day after next. Down below, thirty or forty meters underground, you would not notice the difference between night and day, there would be nothing but darkness pierced by the crude beams from floodlights and arc lights. As the elevator was carrying him up to the thirty-fourth floor, he was thinking about what he could tell Marta without compromising himself too much, the prohibition seemed to him absurd, a person has not so much a right but an obligation to confide in his family, but this was purely theoretical, for whichever way he looked at it, he would have no option but to do as he was told, orders are orders. His father-in-law was not at home, he was doubtless off on one of his inquisitive-child jaunts, in search of the meanings of things and quite astute enough to find them out however hidden they were. He told Marta that his duties had changed temporarily, he was to wear plainclothes, although it wouldn't be permanent, just for a few days. Marta asked why and he said that he wasn't authorized to say, that it was confidential, I gave my word of honor, he said by way of justification, and that wasn't exactly true, the captain had not asked them to do so, such formulas belong to other times and to other mores, but sometimes we find ourselves saying them without thinking, the same thing happens with our memory, which always has more to offer us than the little we ask of it. Marta did not reply, she opened the wardrobe and removed one of Marçal's two suits from its hanger, Will this do, she said, That will be fine, said Marçal, glad that they were in agreement on this important point. He thought it best to warn her about what else was involved, to sort the matter out once and for all, if he were in his colleague's shoes, he would be going on duty very shortly and he would have to tell Marta right there and then, I'm on duty from six until ten, don't ask me any questions, it's

a secret, that's all he has to say, he just has to change the hours and the day, I'm on duty the day after tomorrow, from two until six in the morning, don't ask me any questions, it's a secret. Marta looked at him, intrigued, But the Center's closed then, Well, I won't be in the Center exactly, You'll be outside, then, No, inside, but not in the Center, I don't understand, Look, I'd prefer it if you didn't ask me any questions, All I'm saying is that I can't understand how something can happen inside and outside at the same time, It's in the excavations they're doing for the new cold-storage units, but I won't say any more, Have they struck oil or found a diamond mine or the stone that marks the belly button of the world, asked Marta, I don't know what they've found, And when will you know, When I go on guard duty, Or when you ask your colleagues who have been on duty before you, We were forbidden to talk to each other about it, said Marçal, looking away because these words could not strictly be described as true, they were, rather, a partial version of the captain's orders and recommendations, freely adapted to suit his current rhetorical difficulties, It's obviously a great mystery, said Marta, Yes, so it seems, agreed Marçal, taking exaggerated care over getting just the right amount of shirt cuff to appear beneath the sleeves of his jacket. In plainclothes he looked older than he really was. Will you be here for supper, asked Marta, I haven't been told otherwise, but, if I can't make it, I'll phone. He left before his wife could come up with any more questions, relieved to have escaped her insistent curiosity, but sad too because the conversation, on his part, had not been exactly a model of honesty, No, I was just being loyal, he protested to himself, I told her right away that it was a secret. Despite the vehemence and good sense of this protest, Marçal remained unconvinced. When, more than an hour later, Cipriano Algor returned home, barely recovered from the terrors of the ghost train, Marta asked him, Did you see Marçal, No, I didn't, Well, even if you had, you probably wouldn't have recognized him, Why, He came home to change his clothes, now he's a plainclothes security guard, That's new, Those were his orders, Being a plain-clothes guard isn't guarding, it's spying, declared her father. Marta told him what she knew, which was almost nothing, but it was enough to quell Cipriano Algor's interest in the amazon river complete with indians where he had been intending to go the next day, That's odd, but you know, right from the start, I've had the feeling that something was going to happen here, What do you mean, right from the start, asked Marta, The floor trembling and vibrating, the noise of excavators, do you remember, when we first came to see the apartment, We would be in a real state if we had presentiments every time we heard an excavator at work, like the sewing machine noise we used to think we could hear in the kitchen wall and which Mama used to say was a sign that some poor seamstress had been condemned for the sin of having worked on a Sunday, But this time I've been proved right, Yes, so it seems, said Marta, repeating her husband's words, We'll see what he has to say when he comes back, said Cipriano Algor. They learned nothing more. Marçal clung to the answers he had given before, repeating them over and over, and he finally resolved to put an end to the matter, If you were to press me, I would be the first to find the order ridiculous, but that was the order I was given, so there's nothing more to be said about it, At least tell us why you suddenly had to start patrolling in plainclothes, asked his father-in-law, We don't patrol, we just keep an eye on security in the Center, All right, whatever, Look, I've

nothing more to add, so please don't ask, said Marçal angrily. He glanced at his wife as if wanting to know why she said nothing, why she didn't defend him, and she said, Marçal is right, Pa, don't go on at him, and addressing Marçal and at the same time planting a kiss on his head, Forgive us, we Algors can be terrible bullies. After supper, they watched a television program broadcast on the Center's own channel, exclusively for residents, then they went to their rooms. With the lights out, Marta apologized again, Marçal gave her a kiss and the only reason he did not continue with a second and a third kiss was that he realized just in time that, if he carried on like that, he would end up telling her everything. Cipriano Algor, meanwhile, was sitting on his bed, with the light on, he had thought and thought again, only to conclude that he had to find out what was going on in the depths of the Center, and that, if there was another secret door down there, they would at least not be able to tell him that there was nothing on the other side. There was no point in cross-questioning Marçal again, besides, it was unfair to the poor boy, if he had orders not to say anything and he was carrying them out, he should be congratulated, not submitted to the various shameless forms of emotional blackmail at which families excel, I'm your father-in-law, you're my son-in-law, tell me everything, Marta was right, he thought, we Algors are bullies. Tomorrow he would leave the river amazon complete with indians to its own devices and devote himself to walking through the whole Center, from end to end, listening to people's conversations. In essence, a secret is rather like the combination to a safe, although we don't know what it is, we know that it is made up of six digits, that one or more of them might even be repeated, and that however numerous the possible sequences, they are not infinite. As with all things in life, it is just a question of time and patience, a word here, another word there, an insinuating remark, an exchange of glances, a sudden silence, small disparate cracks that start opening up in the wall, the art of sleuthing lies in knowing how to bring them all together, how to eliminate the rough edges separating them, there will always come a moment when we must ask ourselves if the dream, the ambition, the secret hope of all secrets is, in fact, the possibility, however vague, however remote, of ceasing to be a secret. Cipriano Algor got undressed, turned out the light, thought that he was in for a sleepless night, but after only five minutes, was sleeping such a dense, opaque sleep that not even Isaura Madruga could have managed to peer around the last door as it closed upon him.

When Cipriano Algor left his room, later than usual, his son-in-law had already gone off to work. Still half-asleep, he said good morning to his daughter, sat down to eat his breakfast, and at that moment, the phone rang. Marta went to answer it and came right back, It's for you. Cipriano Algor's heart skipped a beat, For me, who would want to speak to me, he asked, already convinced that his daughter would reply, It's Isaura, but instead what she said was, It's the buying department, one of the assistant heads of department. Caught between disappointment that the call was not from the person he would have liked it to be from and relief at not having to explain to his daughter this sudden intimacy with Isaura, although it might easily have been something to do with Found, that he was pining for example, Cipriano Algor went to the phone, gave his name and, shortly

afterward, the nice assistant head of department was saying at the other end of the line, I was most surprised to learn that you had come to live at the Center, as you see, the devil isn't necessarily lurking behind every door, it's an old saying, but much truer than you might think, Quite right, said Cipriano Algor, The reason I'm calling is to ask if you could drop by this afternoon so that we can pay you for the figurines, What figurines, The three hundred that you gave us for the survey, But none of them were sold, so there's nothing to pay, My dear sir, said the assistant head of department in an unexpectedly severe tone, please allow us to be the judges of that, but anyway, you should know that even when payment represents a loss of more than one hundred percent, as in this case, the Center always pays its debts, it's a matter of ethics, now that you're living among us you will doubtless come to understand this better, Fine, but what I can't understand is how you can possibly make a loss of more than one hundred percent, It's precisely because people fail to take such things into consideration that whole families fall into ruin, If only I had known that earlier, Now listen, first, we're going to pay the exact value of the figurines that you invoiced us for, not a penny less, Right, I'm with you so far, Second, we will obviously also have to pay for the survey, that is, the materials used, the people who analyzed the data, and the time it took, now, when you think that those materials, those people, and that time could have been employed on more profitable tasks, you don't have to be gifted with great intelligence to reach the conclusion that we did in fact suffer a loss of over one hundred percent, when you take into account what we did not sell and what we spent on concluding that we should not sell, Well, I'm sorry the Center lost money because of me, It's an occupational hazard, sometimes you lose, sometimes you win, but it wasn't a matter of any great consequence, it was a very minor deal, Of course, I too, said Cipriano Algor, could invoke my own ethical scruples and refuse to be paid for work that people declined to buy, but the fact is that I could do with the money, That's a very good reason, the best possible reason, All right, I'll drop by this afternoon, then, You don't need to ask for me, just go straight to the till, since this is the last commercial transaction we will have with your now extinct company, we want you to have the best possible memories of us, Thank you, Enjoy the rest of your life, you're certainly in the right place to do so, Exactly what I've been thinking myself, sir, Take advantage of the tide of fate, That's precisely what I'm doing. Cipriano Algor put down the phone, They're going to pay us for the figurines, he said, so we won't have lost out entirely. Marta gave a nod which could have meant anything, resignation, disagreement, indifference, and went back into the kitchen. Aren't you feeling well, asked her father, standing at the door, Oh, I'm just a bit tired, it must be the pregnancy, You seem a bit down, distracted, you should get out more, go for a walk, What, like you, you mean, Yes, like me, Are you really interested in all that stuff out there, asked Marta, now think twice before you answer, Once is quite enough, no, it doesn't interest me in the least, I'm just pretending, To yourself, of course, You're old enough to know that there is no other way of pretending, although it might not seem like it, we are only ever pretending to ourselves, never to other people, Well, I'm pleased to hear you say that, Why, Because it confirms what I've been thinking about you with regard to Isaura Madruga, The situation has changed, Even better, If the occasion arises, I'll tell you, but, for the moment, I'm like

Marçal, a closed mouth.

Cipriano Algor's auricular expedition achieved nothing, afterward, over lunch, by some kind of tacit accord, none of the three dared touch on the awkward subject of the excavations and what might have been uncovered. Father-in-law and son-in-law left at the same time, Marçal to resume his work of listening and spying, which would no doubt prove as fruitless as it had that morning for both of them, and Cipriano Algor to find out, for the first time, how to get from inside the Center to the buying department. He realized that his resident's badge, complete with photo and fingerprint, would allow him a certain ease of movement when the guard responded to his request for directions as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Keep straight on down this corridor and, when you reach the end, you just have to follow the signs, you can't miss it, he said. He was on the ground floor, at some point in the journey he would have to go down to the basement where, in happier times, although this is probably not a view shared by the nice assistant head of department, he used to go to unload his plates and his mugs. An arrow and an escalator told him where to go. I'm going down, he thought. I'm going down, I'm going down, he repeated, and then, How stupid, of course I'm going down, that's what stairs are for except when they're for going up, with stairs, those that don't go down, go up, and those that don't go up, go down. He seemed to have reached an unanswerable conclusion, of the sort for which there is no possible logical rebuttal, but suddenly, with the brilliance and instantaneity of a lightning flash, another thought crossed his mind, Go down, yes, down there. Yes, go down there. Cipriano Algor has just decided to try to join Marçal tonight when he is on guard duty, between two and six in the morning, if you remember. Good sense and prudence, which always have something to say in such situations, had already asked him how, without knowing the way, he thought he would reach such a recondite place, and he replied that while the combinations and compositions of chance are indeed many, they are not infinite, and that it is always better to take a risk and climb the fig tree in order to pick the fig than to lie down in the shade of the tree and wait for the fig to fall into your mouth. The Cipriano Algor who presented himself at the till of the buying department, having first gotten lost twice, despite the help of all those arrows and signs, was not the man we thought we knew. His hands were trembling badly, not because of the petty thrill of receiving for his work money he had not been expecting, but because the orders and directions sent by his brain, occupied now with matters of more transcendent importance, were arriving at their respective terminals in incoherent, confused, and contradictory form. When he returned to the commercial part of the Center, he seemed slightly calmer, all his agitation had disappeared inside him. Freed now from having to worry about hands, the brain was busily planning ruses, tricks, ploys, stratagems, dodges, and subterfuges, it even went so far as to consider the possibility of resorting to telekinesis to whisk the impatient body it was having such difficulty controlling from the thirty-fourth floor down to the mysterious excavations.

Although he still had long hours of waiting ahead of him, Cipriano Algor decided to go back to the apartment. He tried to give his daughter the money he had received, but she

said, No, you keep it, I don't need it, and then she said, Would you like a cup of coffee, Yes, that's a good idea. The coffee was made, poured into a cup and drunk, everything indicates that, for now, there will be no further words between them, it seems, as Cipriano Algor has sometimes thought, although we failed to record these thoughts at the time, that the apartment in which they are now living has the malign gift of silencing its inhabitants. Meanwhile, Cipriano Algor's brain, now that it has had to abandon the idea of telekinesis, lacking as it does the necessary training, has a burning need for a particular bit of information without which his plan for a nighttime raid will, to put it bluntly, go down the tubes. That is why he throws out the question, while apparently distractedly stirring the little coffee that remains in the bottom of his cup, Do you happen to know how far down the excavation is, Why do you want to know, Just curious, that's all, Marçal never said. Cipriano Algor concealed his frustration as best he could and said he was going to have a nap. He spent all afternoon in his room and only came out when his daughter called him for supper, Marçal was already sitting at the table. As had happened at lunch, no one mentioned the excavation until after supper, and it was only when Marta said to her husband, You should try to rest until it's time for you to go down there, otherwise you won't get any sleep at all, and he said, It's too early, I'm not sleepy, that Cipriano Algor, grabbing this unexpected opportunity, repeated his question, How far down is the excavation, Why do you want to know, Just to get an idea, out of curiosity really. Marçal hesitated before replying, but it seemed to him that the information did not fall into the strictly confidential category, Access is from floor zero five, he said at last, Oh, I thought the diggers had been working deeper down than that, It's still fifteen or twenty meters below ground, said Marçal, Yes, you're right, that is pretty deep. They did not mention the subject again. Marçal did not appear annoyed by the brief conversation, on the contrary, one might almost say that he was somewhat relieved to have been able to speak a little about the matter that was clearly preoccupying him, but without touching on any dangerous or secret matters. Marçal is no more fearful than the average person, but he is not at all looking forward to the prospect of spending four hours down in a hole, in utter silence, knowing what lies behind him. We weren't trained for these situations, one of his colleagues had said to him, let's hope those specialists the captain talked about arrive soon, so that we don't have to do this any more, Were you afraid, asked Marçal, Well, no, I don't know that I was afraid, but I warn you now that you're going to feel all the time as if someone behind you was about to put their hand on your shoulder, Worse things could happen, That depends on the hand, to be honest, I spent the whole four hours fighting off a desperate urge to run away, to escape, to get out of there, Forewarned is forearmed, at least I know what to expect, No, you don't, you just think you do, and you're wrong, his colleague said. Now it is half past one in the morning, Marçal is saying good-bye to Marta with a kiss, she says, Don't hang around when you come off duty, No, I'll come straight back and I promise that tomorrow I'll tell you everything. Marta went with him to the door, they kissed again, then she came back in, tidied up a few things and returned to bed. She wasn't sleepy. She told herself that there was nothing to worry about, that other guards had already been on duty down there and survived, how often the most trifling of incidents have formed the bases for terrible

mysteries, as if they were some hydra-headed monster, and yet, when looked at closely, they were just smoke, air, illusion, the desire to believe in the unbelievable. The minutes passed and sleep was still a long way off, Marta had just said to herself that she might as well turn on the light and read a book when she thought she heard her father's bedroom door opening. Since he was not in the habit of getting up during the night, she listened carefully, he probably needed to go to the bathroom, but the footsteps she heard shortly afterward, cautious but audible, were in the small entrance hall. Perhaps he's going to the kitchen to get a drink of water, she thought. At the unmistakable sound of the door latch, however, she sprang to her feet. She pulled on her dressing gown and left her room. Her father had his hand on the door handle. Where are you off to at this hour, Marta asked, Oh, just out, said Cipriano Algor, You can go where you like, I mean, you're old enough to do as you please, but you can't just go off without a word, as if there was no one else living here, Look, I can't hang around here wasting time, Why, are you afraid you might get there after six, asked Marta, If you already know where I'm going then you don't need any explanations, You should at least consider the problems you might be creating for your son-in-law, As you yourself said, I'm old enough to do as I please, and Marçal can't be held responsible for my actions, His bosses may think otherwise, No one will see me, and if someone does order me away, I'll just tell them that I walk in my sleep, This is no time for jokes, All right, I'll be serious, And I should think so, Something is going on down there that I need to know about, Whatever it is can't stay a secret forever, and Marçal said that he'd tell us all about it when he finishes his shift, That's fine, but a description isn't enough for me, I want to see it with my own eyes, In that case, just go then and don't torture me any more, said Marta, crying. Her father went over to her, put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a hug, Please, don't cry, he said, do you know what the worst thing is, the fact that we haven't been the same since we moved here. He gave her a kiss, then left, slowly closing the door behind him. Marta went to get a blanket and a book, sat down on one of the small sofas in the living room and covered her knees. She did not know how long she would have to wait.

Cipriano Algor's plan could not have been simpler. He would go down in a service elevator as far as floor zero five and then abandon himself to fate and to chance. Battles have been won with fewer weapons, he thought. Then, in order to be totally impartial, he added, and many more have been lost. He had noticed that the service elevators, probably because they were intended exclusively for transporting materials, were not fitted with closed-circuit cameras, at least none that he could see, and if there were any of those tiny camouflaged ones, the guards on duty would probably be concentrating their attention on the outer doors and on the floors containing the shops and the attractions. If he was wrong, he would soon find out. In the first place, assuming that the residential floors above ground level formed a block with the ten underground floors, it would be best if he used the service elevator that was nearest the inner façade in order not to waste time looking for a way through the thousands of containers that he imagined would be kept belowground, especially on zero five, the particular floor that interested him. Nevertheless, he was not that surprised when he found a large open space, clear of all

merchandise, which was obviously intended to facilitate access to the excavation. One section of a supporting wall, between two pillars, had been demolished, and it was through there that one entered. Cipriano Algor looked at his watch, it was two forty-five. Despite the dim lighting on that floor, there was no way of telling if there was any light inside the excavation itself to alleviate the blackness of the great maw about to swallow him. I should have brought a flashlight, he thought. Then he remembered having read once that the best thing to do when entering a dark place, if you wanted to be able to make out what was inside as soon as you got in there, was to close your eyes before going in and open them afterward. Yes, he thought, that's what I should do, close my eyes and plummet down into the center of the earth. He did not plummet anywhere. To his left, almost at floor level, was a tenuous glow which, once he had advanced a few more steps, gradually revealed itself as a line of lights. They illuminated a dirt ramp that led down to a landing from which another downward ramp emerged. The silence was so thick, so dense that Cipriano Algor could hear his own heart beating. Here we go, he thought, poor Marçal is going to get the fright of his life. He began walking down the ramp, he reached the first landing, went down the next ramp to another landing and stopped. In front of him two spotlights, one on either side, so that the light would not fall directly into the interior, revealed the oblong shape of the cave entrance. On some cleared ground to the right stood two small diggers. Marçal was sitting on a low bench, beside him was a table on which stood a flashlight. He had not yet seen his father-in-law. Cipriano Algor emerged from the half-darkness of the final landing and said out loud, Don't be frightened, it's me. Marçal leaped to his feet, what else would he do, he that would have replied nonchalantly, Hi, fancy seeing you here, let him cast the first stone. It was only when his father-in-law was standing right in front of him that Marçal, still with some difficulty, managed to say, What are you doing here, what kind of stupid idea was it coming down here, and yet, contrary to the demands of logic, there was no anger in his voice, what there was, apart from the natural relief of someone who has just realized that he is not being threatened by some malign spirit, was a kind of shamefaced satisfaction, something like an intense feeling of gratitude to which he might even admit one day. What are you doing here, he said again, I just came to have a look, said Cipriano Algor, And I suppose it didn't occur to you to think of the trouble I might get into if anyone found out, it didn't occur to you that it might cost me my job, Just tell them that your father-in-law is a complete idiot, an irresponsible fool who should be locked up in a lunatic asylum in a straitjacket, Oh, yes, that would really help. Cipriano Algor looked over at the cave and said, Have you seen what's inside, Yes, said Marçal, What is it, Go and see for yourself, here's the flashlight if you need it, Come with me, No, I went alone too, Is there some path marked out, a passageway, No, you just have to keep left all the way and never lose contact with the wall, you'll find what you're looking for at the end. Cipriano Algor switched on the flashlight and set off. I forgot to close my eyes, he thought. The indirect light from the spotlights allowed him to see only about three or four meters in front of him, beyond that it was as black as the inside of someone's body. There was a fairly gentle, albeit uneven slope. Very cautiously, touching the wall with his left hand, Cipriano Algor began to descend. At one point, he thought he could see

something to his right that appeared to be a platform and a wall. He said to himself that on his way back, he would find out what it was, It's probably some structure to shore up the earth, and then he continued on down. He had the impression that he had already come some distance, perhaps thirty or forty meters. He looked back at the mouth of the cave. Lit only by the spotlights, it looked a long way off, I haven't really come very far, he thought, I'm just getting disoriented. He noticed that panic had started to grate insidiously on his nerves, and he had thought he was so brave, so much better than Marçal, and now he was almost ready to turn tail and stumble his way back up to the top. He leaned against the wall and took a deep breath, I'd rather die first, he said, and started walking again. Suddenly, the wall appeared in front of him, as if it had turned back on itself to form a right angle. He had reached the end of the cave. He shone the beam downward to see if he was on firm ground, took two steps and was just taking a third when his right knee struck something hard, and he cried out. The shock made the flashlight flicker, and, for a moment, there appeared before his eyes what seemed to be a stone bench, and, the following moment, a row of vague shapes appeared and disappeared. A violent tremor ran through Cipriano Algor's limbs, his courage faltered like a piece of fraying rope, but inside him he heard a voice calling him to order, Remember, you'd rather die first. The tremulous light from the torch swept slowly over the white stone, caught some bits of dark cloth, then moved upward to reveal a human body sitting there. Beside it, covered in the same dark fabric, were five other bodies, all sitting as erect as if a metal spike had been put through their skulls to keep them fixed to the stone. The smooth rear wall of the cave was about ten spans away from their hollow eye sockets, in which the eyeballs had been reduced to mere grains of dust. What is this, murmured Cipriano Algor, what nightmare is this, who were these people. He went closer, shone the flashlight beam on the dark, parched heads, this is a man, this is a woman, another man, another woman and another man and another woman, three men and three women, he saw the remnants of the ropes that had been used to keep their necks from moving, then he shone the light lower down, identical ropes were around their legs. Then slowly, very slowly, like a light in no hurry to show itself, but which had come in order to reveal the truth of things, even those hidden in the darkest and most hidden crannies, Cipriano Algor saw himself going into the kiln again, he saw the stone bench that the builders had left there and he sat down on it, he heard Marçal's voice, although the words were different now, they call and call again, anxiously, from afar, Pa, can you hear me, say something. The voice echoes around the inside of the cave, the echoes bounce off the walls, they multiply, if Marçal doesn't keep quiet for a moment, we won't be able to hear Cipriano Algor's voice, sounding as distant as if it too were an echo, I'm fine, don't worry, I won't be long. His fear had vanished. The flashlight once more caressed the wretched faces, the skin-and-bone hands folded on the knees, and, more than that, it guided Cipriano Algor's own hand when it touched, with a respect that would have been religious had it not been merely human, the dry forehead of the first woman. There was nothing more to do there, Cipriano Algor had understood. Like the circular route of a calvary, which will always find a calvary ahead, the climb back up was slow and painful. Marçal had come down to meet him, he held out his hand to help him, and when

they emerged from the darkness into the light, they had their arms around each other, though they could not have said for how long they had been like that. Drained of all his strength, Cipriano Algor flopped down on the bench, rested his head on the table and, noiselessly, his shoulders almost imperceptibly shaking, he began to cry. It's all right, Pa, I cried too, said Marçal. A little while later, more or less recovered, Cipriano Algor looked at his son-in-law in silence, as if at that moment he had no better way of telling him how fond he was of him, then he asked, Do you know what that is, Yes, I remember reading something about it once, replied Marçal, And do you know that, since that's what it is, what we saw there has no reality, cannot be real, Yes, I do, And yet I touched the forehead of one of those women with my own hand, it wasn't an illusion, it wasn't a dream, if I went back there now, I would find the same three men and the same three women, the same cords binding them, the same stone bench, the same wall in front of them, If they can't be those other people, since they never existed, who are they, asked Marçal, I don't know, but after seeing them, I started thinking that perhaps what really doesn't exist is what we call nonexistence. Cipriano Algor got slowly to his feet, his legs were still shaking, but, on the whole, his physical strength had returned. He said, When I was going down there, I thought at one point that I passed something like a wall and a platform, if you could just change the direction of one of those spotlights, he did not need to complete the sentence, Marçal started turning a wheel, working a lever, and the light spread across the ground until it came to the base of a wall that crossed the cave from side to side, though without touching the cave walls. There was no platform, just a passageway alongside the wall. There's only one thing missing, muttered Cipriano Algor. He walked forward a few steps and suddenly stopped, Here it is, he said. There was a large black stain on the ground, the ground was scorched, as if a fire had burned there for a long time. There's no point now asking if they existed or not, said Cipriano Algor, the proof is here, each person must draw his own conclusions, I've drawn mine already. The spotlight returned to its place, as did the darkness, then Cipriano Algor asked, Do you want me to stay and keep you company, Thanks, but no, said Marçal, you'd better get back home, Marta must be worried sick, doubtless fearing the worst, See you in a while, then, See you, Pa, there was a pause, and then, with a half-embarrassed smile, like that of an adolescent who draws back at the same moment as he gives himself, Thanks for coming.

Cipriano Algor looked at his watch when he reached floor zero five again. It was half past four. The service elevator carried him up to the thirty-fourth floor. No one had seen him. Marta silently opened the door to him, and closed it equally carefully, How's Marçal, she asked, Don't worry, he's all right, believe me, you've got a fine husband there, So what have they found, Let me sit down first, I feel as if I'd taken a real beating, I'm too old for this kind of thing, So what have they found, Marta asked again when they had both sat down, There are six dead people there, three men and three women, That doesn't surprise me, that was exactly what I thought, that it must be human remains, it often happens during excavations, what I don't understand is why all this mystery, all this secrecy, all this security, the bones won't run away, and I shouldn't think stealing them

would be worth the effort, If you had gone with me, you would understand, in fact you've still got time, What nonsense, You wouldn't think it was nonsense if you had seen what I saw, What did you see, who are those people, Those people are us, said Cipriano Algor, What do you mean, That they are us, me, you, Marçal, the whole Center, probably the world, Explain yourself, please, Pay attention and listen. The story took half an hour to be told. Marta listened without interrupting him once. At the end, all she said was, Yes, I think you're right, they are us. They did not speak again until Marçal arrived. When he came in, Marta hugged him hard, What are we going to do, she asked, but Marçal did not have time to respond. In a firm voice, Cipriano Algor was saying, You must decide what to do with your own lives, but I'm leaving.

Your things are here, said Marta, there wasn't very much, it all fitted easily into the smallest suitcase, anyone would think you knew you were going to be here for only three weeks, There comes a time in life when it should be enough simply to be able to carry one's own body on one's back, said Cipriano Algor, Fine words, but what I want to know is what you're going to live on, Consider the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they spin, More fine words, but that's why they never got to be anything else but lilies, You're a rabid skeptic, a disgusting cynic, Pa, please, I'm serious, Sorry, Look, I know it's been a shock for you, as it was for me, and I wasn't even there, I understand that those men and those women are far more than just dead people, Don't go on, it's precisely because they are far more than just dead people that I don't want to continue living here, And what about us, what about me, asked Marta, You must decide for yourselves what to do with your lives, as for me, I've already made my decision, and I'm not going to spend the rest of my days tied to a stone bench, staring at a wall, But how will you live, Well, I've got the money they paid for the figurines, that will last me a month or two, then I'll see, Yes, but I wasn't talking about money, one way or another you'll have enough to feed and clothe yourself, what I mean is that you'll have to live on your own, I've got Found, and you'll come and visit me now and then, Pa, What, What about Isaura, What's Isaura got to do with this, You told me that the situation between you had changed, you didn't say how or why, but that's what you said, And it's true, So, So what, Well, you could live together. Cipriano Algor did not reply. He picked up his suitcase, I'll be off then, he said. His daughter embraced him, We'll come and see you on Marçal's next day off, but stay in touch, phone me when you get there to tell me how the house is, and Found, don't forget about Found. With one foot out of the door, Cipriano Algor said, Give Marçal a hug from me, You already gave him a hug, you've already said your good-byes, Yes, but give him another hug. When he reached the end of the corridor, he turned. His daughter was standing there at the door, she waved with one hand, at the same time covering her mouth with the other to keep herself from crying. See you soon, he said, but she didn't hear him. The service elevator took him down to the garage, now he just had to find where the van was parked and see if it would start after three weeks without moving, sometimes the batteries die. That's all I need, he thought anxiously. But his fears did not materialize, the van fulfilled its obligations. True, it did not start the first or the second time, but the third time it roared into action with a noise worthy of another engine entirely. Minutes later, Cipriano Algor was driving down the avenue, he didn't exactly have the open road before him, but things could have been worse, despite its slowness, it was the traffic itself that was actually carrying him along. He wasn't surprised that the traffic was so heavy, cars love Sundays and for the owner of a car it is almost impossible to resist the so-called psychological pressure, the car just has to be there, it doesn't need to speak. At last, he left the city behind him, along with the suburbs, soon the shantytowns will appear, will they have reached the road in those three weeks, no, they still have another thirty or so meters to go, and then there's the Industrial Belt, almost at a standstill, apart from a few factories that seem to have made a religion out of continuous production, and now the grim Green Belt, the dismal, grubby, gray hothouses, that's why the strawberries are losing their color, it won't be long before they are as

white outside as they are beginning to be inside, which is why they taste like something that tastes of nothing. On our left, in the distance, where you can see those trees, that's right, the ones clumped together like a bouquet, there is an important archaeological site yet to explore, I have it from a reliable source, it's not every day that you're lucky enough to get such information straight from the maker's mouth. Cipriano Algor wondered how he could possibly have let himself be shut up inside for three weeks without being able to see the sun or the stars, except by dint of craning his neck at the sealed window of a thirty-fourth-floor flat, when he had this river, smelly and shrunken it's true, this bridge, old and dilapidated it's true, and these ruins that were once people's houses, and the village where he had been born, grown up and worked, with its street down the middle and the square off to one side, those people there, that man and that woman, are Marçal's parents, this is the first time we have seen them in this whole long story, looking at them now no one would ever think that they were as black as they've been painted, even though they have given more than enough proof that they are, this is the dangerous thing about appearances, when they deceive us, it's always for the worse. Cipriano Algor stuck his arm out of the window and waved to them as if they were his best friends, it would have been better if he hadn't really, now they will probably think he was making fun of them, and he wasn't, that wasn't his intention at all, it's just that Cipriano Algor is happy, in three minutes' time, he will see Isaura and have Found in his arms, or, rather, have Isaura in his arms and Found leaping up at them, waiting for them both to give him some attention. He passed the square, and suddenly, without warning, Cipriano Algor's heart contracted, he knows from experience, they both do, that no amount of sweetness today can diminish the bitterness of tomorrow, that the water of this fountain will never be able to slake your thirst in that desert, I don't have a job, I don't have a job, he murmured, and that was the answer he should have given, with no frills and no subterfuges, when Marta asked him what he was going to live on, I don't have a job. On this same road, at this same place, as he had on the day when he came back from the Center with the news that they would not be buying any more crockery from him, Cipriano Algor slowed the van. He wanted both not to arrive and to have arrived already, and between one thing and another there he was at the corner of the street where Isaura Madruga lives, it's that house over there, suddenly the van was in a terrible hurry, suddenly it stopped, suddenly Cipriano Algor burst out of it, suddenly he went up the steps, suddenly he rang the bell. He rang once, twice, three times. No one came to open the door, no one called out from inside, Isaura did not appear, Found did not bark, the desert that had been due tomorrow had arrived early. They should both be here, it's Sunday, there's no work, he thought. Disconcerted, he went back to the van and sat with his arms folded on the wheel, the normal thing would be to go and ask the neighbors, but he had never liked other people knowing about his life, indeed, when we ask about someone else, we are saying much more about ourselves than we might imagine, luckily for us, most people when questioned don't have their ears trained to pick up what lies hidden behind such innocent words as these, Have you by any chance seen Isaura Madruga. Two minutes later, after further consideration, he recognized that sitting parked and waiting outside the house must have looked just as suspicious as if he had gone

nonchalantly over to ask the first neighbor if she had happened to notice Isaura going out. I'll go for a drive around, he thought, I might come across them. The drive around the village proved fruitless, Isaura and Found appeared to have vanished from the face of the earth. Cipriano Algor decided to go home, he would try again later that afternoon, They must have gone somewhere, he thought. The van's engine sang the homecoming song, the driver could already see the highest branches of the mulberry tree, and suddenly, like a black flash, Found appeared at the top and came running and barking down the hill like a mad thing, Cipriano Algor's heart was a beat away from stopping, not because of the dog, however much he loves the creature, he wouldn't go that far, but because he realized that Found would not be alone, and that, if he wasn't alone, only one person in the world could possibly be with him. He opened the van door, the dog leaped up at him, into his arms, so he was, after all, the first to be embraced, licking his face and blocking his view of the path, at the top of which appears an astonished Isaura Madruga, stop everything now, please, don't anyone speak, don't anyone move, don't anyone interfere, this is the really moving bit, the van driving up the hill, the woman who took two steps and then could go no farther, see how she has her hands pressed to her breast, see Cipriano Algor who climbed out of the van as if stepping into a dream, see Found, who follows behind, getting caught up in his master's legs, although nothing bad will happen, that's all we need, having one of the principal characters stumble inaesthetically at the culminating moment, this embrace and this kiss, these kisses and these embraces, how often must we remind you that this same devouring love is begging to be devoured, it was always thus, always, we just notice it more at some times than at others. In an interval between two kisses, Cipriano Algor asked, What are you doing here, but Isaura did not answer at once, there were other kisses to give and to receive, as urgent as the very first kiss, then she found enough breath to say, Found ran away on the day you left, he dug a hole under the garden hedge and came here, and I couldn't get him to leave, he was determined to wait for you until who knows when, so I thought it best to leave him here and to bring him food and water and keep him company sometimes, not that I think he needed it. Cipriano Algor felt in his pockets for the key to the house, while he was still thinking and imagining, Let's both go in, let's go in together, and he actually had the key in his hand when he saw that the door was open, which is how doors should be when someone arrives back after a long journey, he didn't need to ask why, Isaura explained calmly, Marta left me a key so that I could come and air the house occasionally, get rid of the dust, and so, what with Found being here, I started coming every day, in the morning, before going to the shop, and in the afternoon, when I finished work. She seemed to have something else to add, but her lips closed firmly as if to bolt the door on those words, You will not come out, they ordered, the words, however, regrouped, joined forces, and all that modesty could do was to make Isaura bow her head and lower her voice to a murmur, One night, I slept in your bed, she said. Now let us make something quite clear, this man is a potter and therefore a manual laborer, with no elevated intellectual and artistic training apart from that required to carry out his profession, a man of more than mature years, brought up in an age when it was normal for people to repress their individual feelings and, indeed, other people's feelings too, to damp down

any expressions of emotion or any bodily desires, and although it is true that not many in his social and cultural milieu could best him when it came to sensitivity and intelligence, however energetically he might be striding toward the house where this equivocal act took place, hearing suddenly like that, from the mouth of a woman with whom he had never lain in intimacy, that she had slept in his bed, would be sure to stop him in his tracks, to make him stare in amazement at this bold creature, men, let us confess at once, will never understand women, fortunately, though without quite knowing how, this man managed to discover in the midst of his confusion the exact words that the occasion called for, And you will never sleep in any other. This phrase was just as it should be, the whole effect would have been lost had he said, for example, like someone putting their signature to a mutually advantageous agreement, Right, then, since you've slept in my bed, I'll go and sleep in yours. Isaura had embraced Cipriano Algor again after what he had said, and it is not hard to imagine the enthusiasm with which she did so, but he had a sudden thought in which his feelings of passion apparently had no part, I forgot to take my suitcase out of the van, was what he said. Not foreseeing the consequences of this prosaic act, with Found bounding at his heels, he opened the van door and took out the suitcase. He had the first inkling of what was going to happen when he went into the kitchen, the second when he went into his bedroom, but he was only absolutely certain when Isaura, in a voice that struggled to remain steady, asked him, Have you come back for good. The suitcase was on the floor, waiting for someone to open it, but that operation, though necessary, can be left until later. Cipriano Algor closed the door. There are such moments in life, when, in order for heaven to open, it is necessary for a door to close. Half an hour later, at peace now, like a beach from which the tide is retreating, Cipriano Algor told her what had happened at the Center, the discovery of the cave, the imposition of secrecy, the increased security, his visit to the excavation site, the blackness inside, the fear, the dead people tied to the stone bench, the ashes of the bonfire. At first, when she had seen him coming up the hill in the van, Isaura had thought that Cipriano was coming home because he had been unable to stand the separation and absence any longer, and that idea, as you can imagine, warmed her yearning lover's heart, but now, with her head resting in the hollow of his arm, feeling his hand on her waist, the two reasons seem to her equally right, and besides, if we take the trouble to observe that in at least one respect, that of unbearability, both reasons touch and become one, there is clearly no evidence that the two reasons are in fact mutually contradictory. Isaura Madruga is not particularly well-versed in ancient stories and mythological inventions, but it took only three simple words for her to grasp the essence. Although we already know what those words are, we lose nothing by writing them down again, They were us.

That afternoon, as agreed, Cipriano Algor phoned Marta to tell her that he had arrived safely, that the house looked as if they had left it only yesterday, that Found was almost mad with joy, and that Isaura sent her love. Where are you speaking from, asked Marta, From home, of course, And Isaura, She's here beside me, do you want to talk to her, Yes, but first tell me what's going on, What do you mean, I mean the fact that Isaura

is there, Don't you like the idea, Don't be silly and stop beating about the bush, answer my question, All right, Isaura is staying with me, And who are you staying with, We're staying with each other, if that's what you want to hear. There was a silence at the other end. Then Marta said, I'm really pleased, Well, I'd never know it from your voice, My tone of voice has nothing to do with those particular words, but with others, What words are those, Tomorrow, the future, We'll have time to think about the future, Don't pretend, don't close your eyes to reality, you know perfectly well that the present is over for us, You're both all right, and we'll sort ourselves out here, No, I'm not all right and neither is Marçal, Why, If there's no future there, there's certainly none here, Can you explain yourself more clearly, please, Look, I have a child growing inside me, if, when he's old enough to make his own decisions, he should choose to live in a place like this, he will be doing what he wants, but I won't give birth to him here, You should have thought of that before, It's never too late to correct a mistake, even when you can do nothing about the consequences, although we might still be able to do something about those too, How, First, Marçal and I need to have a long talk, then we'll see, Think carefully and don't rush into anything, A mistake can just as easily be the consequence of careful thought, Pa, besides, as far as I know, nowhere is it written that rushing into things necessarily has bad results, Well, I hope you're never disappointed, Oh, I'm not that ambitious, I just don't want to be disappointed this time, and now, if you don't mind, that's the end of the father-daughter dialogue, call Isaura for me, I've got lots of things to say to her. Cipriano Algor passed the telephone over and went outside. There stands the pottery in which a solitary lump of clay lies drying, there is the kiln in which the three hundred figurines are asking each other why the devil they were ever made, there is the firewood that will wait in vain to be carried to the furnace. And Marta saying, If there's no future here, there's none there either. Cipriano Algor knew happiness today, the open sky of a love which, once declared, was consummated, and now yet again the storm clouds are gathering, the malign shadows of doubt and fear, it's obvious that, even if they pull in their belts to the very last notch, what the Center paid him for the figurines will last for two months at most, and that the difference between what the shop assistant Isaura Madruga earns and zero must be very nearly another zero. And what then, he asked, looking at the mulberry tree, who replied, Then, my old friend, the future, as always.

Four days later, Marta phoned again, We'll be there tomorrow evening. Cipriano Algor made a few rapid calculations, But it can't be Marçal's day off yet, No, it isn't, So, Keep your questions for when we arrive, Do you want me to come and pick you up, No, don't bother, we'll take a taxi. Cipriano Algor told Isaura that he found the visit odd, Unless, he added, the roster for rest days has been upset by some bureaucratic confusion caused by the discovery of the cave, but in that case she would have said so and not told me to keep my questions for when they arrive, A day passes quickly enough, said Isaura, we'll find out tomorrow. However, the day did not pass as quickly as Isaura thought. Twenty-four hours spent thinking are a lot of hours, twenty-four hours we say because sleep is not everything, at night, there are probably other thoughts in our head that draw a curtain and continue thinking unbeknownst to anyone. Cipriano Algor had not forgotten

Marta's categorical words about her unborn child, I won't give birth to him here, an absolutely explicit statement, unequivocal, not one of those conglomerations of more or less organized vocal noises that seem to be doubting themselves even as they affirm. Logically speaking, there could be only one possible conclusion to draw, Marta and Marçal were going to leave the Center. If they do, they'll be making a great mistake, said Cipriano Algor, what are they going to live on afterward, You could ask the same of us, said Isaura, but do I look worried, You believe in a divine providence that watches over the helpless, No, I don't, I just happen to think that there are times in our lives when we have to let ourselves be carried along by the current of events, as if we didn't have the strength to resist, but then there comes a point when we suddenly realize that the river is flowing in our favor, no one else has noticed, but we have, anyone watching will think we're about to go under, and yet our navigational skills have never been better, Let's just hope that this is one such occasion. He would soon find out. Marta and Marçal got out of the taxi, took some packages out of the trunk, fewer than they had taken with them to the Center, Found gave vent to his excitement by running wildly twice around the mulberry tree, and when the taxi drove down the hill to go back to the city, Marçal said, I am no longer an employee of the Center, I've resigned from my job as security guard. Cipriano Algor and Isaura did not feel they needed to look surprised, which would, anyway, have rung entirely false, but they felt obliged to ask at least one question, one of those useless questions we seem unable to live without, Are you sure you've acted for the best, and Marçal replied, I don't know if it was for the best or for the worst, I just did what I had to do, and I wasn't the only one, two of my colleagues resigned as well, one external guard and one resident, And how did the Center react, If you don't adapt you're no use to them, and I had stopped adapting, the last two phrases were spoken after supper, And when did you feel that you had stopped adapting, asked Cipriano Algor, The cave was the last straw for me, as it was for you, And for those two colleagues of yours, Yes, for them too. Isaura had got up and started clearing the table, but Marta said, Leave it for now, we'll do it together later on, we need to decide what we're going to do, Well, Isaura, said Cipriano Algor, is of the opinion that we should let ourselves be carried along on the current of events, that there always comes a time when we realize that the river is flowing in our favor, I didn't say always, said Isaura, I said sometimes, but take no notice of me, it's just an idea I had, It's good enough for me, said Marta, besides it fits in very well with what's actually been happening to us, What shall we do, then, asked her father, Marçal and I are going to start a new life a long way from here, that much we've decided, the Center is finished, the pottery was already finished, from one hour to the next we've become like strangers in this world, And what about us, asked Cipriano Algor, You can't expect me to advise you on what you should do, Do I understand you to be saying that we should go our separate ways, No, not at all, I'm just saying that our reasons may not necessarily be your reasons, May I say something, suggest something, asked Isaura, I don't honestly know if I have the right, I've only been a member of this family for about six days and I feel as if I was still on probation, as if I had slipped in through the back door, You've been here for months already, ever since the famous water-jug incident, said Marta, as for the rest of what you said I think it's up to my father to respond, All I

heard was that she had something to say, a suggestion, so any comments I might make at the moment would be completely out of place, said Cipriano Algor, What's this idea of yours, then, asked Marta, It has to do with that fantasy of mine about the current sweeping us along, said Isaura, Go on, It's the simplest thing in the world, Ah, I know what it is, said Cipriano Algor, What is it then, asked Isaura, That we go with them, Exactly. Marta took a deep breath, You can always rely on a woman to come up with a good idea, We shouldn't rush things, though, said Cipriano Algor, What do you mean, asked Isaura, You've got your house, your job, So, Well, just leaving like that, turning your back on everything, But I'd already left everything anyway, I'd already turned my back on everything when I clasped that water jug to my chest, you'd have to be a man to fail to realize that it was you I was clasping to me, these last words were almost lost in a sudden irruption of sobs and tears. Cipriano Algor shyly reached out and touched her arm, and she could not help but cry all the more, or perhaps she needed that to happen, sometimes the tears we have cried before are not enough, we have to say to them, please, go on.

The preparations took up the whole of the following day. First from one house, then from the other, Marta and Isaura selected what they thought was necessary for a journey that had no known destination and which no one knew how or where it would end. The two men loaded the van, helped by encouraging barks from Found, not in the slightest bit worried today about what was, quite clearly, another move, because the idea never even entered his doggy head that they might be about to abandon him again. The morning of their departure dawned beneath a graying sky, it had rained in the night, here and there in the yard there were small puddles of water, and the mulberry tree, forever bound to the earth, was still dripping. Shall we go, asked Marçal, Yes, let's go, said Marta. They climbed into the van, the two men in front and the two women behind, with Found in the middle, and just as Marçal was about to start the engine, Cipriano Algor said abruptly, Wait. He got out of the van and went over to the kiln, Where's he going, asked Marta, What's he going to do, murmured Isaura. The kiln door was open, Cipriano Algor went in. When he emerged shortly afterward, he was in his shirtsleeves and was using his jacket to carry something heavy, a few figurines, it couldn't be anything else, He probably wants to take some with him as a souvenir, said Marçal, but he was wrong, Cipriano Algor went over to the door of the house and started arranging the figurines on the ground, placing them firmly in the damp earth, and when he had put them all in their positions, he went back to the kiln, by then, the other travelers had got out of the van too, no one asked any questions, one by one they went into the kiln as well and brought out the figurines, Isaura ran to the van to fetch a basket, a sack, anything, and the area in front of the house gradually filled up with figurines, then Cipriano Algor went into the pottery and very carefully removed from the shelves the defective figurines gathered there and reunited them with their sound and perfect siblings, the rain would eventually turn them into mud, and then into dust when the sun dried the mud, but that is a fate we all will meet, now the figurines are not just guarding the front of the house, they are defending the entrance to the pottery too, in the end, there will be more than three hundred

figurines, eyes front, clowns, jesters, Eskimos, mandarins, nurses, bearded Assyrians, Found has not yet knocked over a single one, Found is a very conscientious, sensitive dog, almost human, he does not need anyone to explain to him what is going on. Cipriano Algor went and shut the kiln door, then he said, Right, now we can go. The engine started and the van went down the hill. When they got to the road, it turned left. Marta, though dry-eyed, was sobbing, Isaura had her arms about her, while Found lay curled up in one corner of the seat, not knowing who to comfort first. After a few kilometers, Marçal said, I'll write to my parents when we stop for lunch. And then, addressing Isaura and his father-in-law, There was a poster, one of those really big ones outside the Center, can you guess what it said, he asked. We've no idea, they replied, and, as if he were reciting something, Marçal said COMING SOON, PUBLIC OPENING OF PLATO'S CAVE, AN EXCLUSIVE ATTRACTION, UNIQUE IN THE WORLD, BUY YOUR TICKET NOW.

Reading Group Guide

1. In addition to The Center's cave, excavated at the end of the novel, caves are also used by Cipriano to house his rejected pottery; he even jokes that archaeologists might misinterpret these items centuries from now. What relics—frightening or treasured—would best represent your impressions of the twenty-first century so far?
2. The Cave addresses themes of city and countryside, nature and artificiality, most notably in the descriptions of The Center as compared to those of Cipriano's house. Does your community more closely resemble The Center or the rural area around it? Has mass marketing affected the way you live?
3. Life at The Center is driven by customer surveys, hierarchies, and rigorously enforced regulations. Advertising slogans replace wise proverbs, and curiosity is discouraged. What is the true source of The Center's malevolence? Who is responsible for its creation and expansion?
4. Marta's imminent child and Cipriano's wistful comments regarding the pottery becoming a family business indicate the multigenerational thread of The Cave. What is the significance of this thread? What does the pottery represent to Cipriano in terms of posterity? What do you predict your aspirations will be when you reach Cipriano's stage of life? Do finances enhance or interfere with the use of your innate talents?
5. Marçal undergoes perhaps the most extensive transformation of all in The Cave. In what way do his contentious parents and his early bouts of competitiveness with Cipriano shape the storytelling? How does Marta cope with her conflicting loyalties?
6. How are creativity and profit reconciled in contemporary economics? Do you believe that today's artisans fare better or worse than their predecessors a generation ago?
7. Discuss Cipriano's choice of characters for the figurines: a nurse, an Alaskan, a bearded Assyrian, a mandarin, and a clown, and a jester. How do they complement each other? What does this assortment indicate about its creator?
8. The Center takes on a God-like role in the lives of its inhabitants and vendors. How does its power compare to that exercised by Cipriano when he must determine which figurines are defective and which ones are acceptable?
9. What is Found's role in the novel? How does his canine perception of the world measure up to reality? What does his new family find in him?
10. What do the novel's primary characters hope for? What keeps Isaura and Cipriano apart? What finally unites them?

11. The Cave bears several hallmarks of Saramago's literary form: lines of dialogue are not differentiated with quotation marks, paragraphs might unfold over several pages, and innocuous details take center stage in the midst of suspense. In what way do these elements enhance the believability of Saramago's fiction?
12. Envisioning Saramago's novels as one continuum, in what way does The Cave respond to his previous characters and scenarios?
13. Did your attitude toward Cipriano shift throughout the novel? What did you make of him at first?
14. The novel ends with the family's reunion and liberating departure. Where do you imagine they are going? What would their version of idyllic living be like?

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THE DOUBLE

Translated from the Portuguese by
Margaret Jull Costa

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A C E G I K J H F D B

For Pilar, until the last moment
For Ray-Güde Mertin
For Pepa Sánchez-Manjavacas

Chaos is merely order waiting to be deciphered.
—The Book of Contraries

I believe in my conscience I intercept many a thought
which heaven intended for another man.

—LAURENCE STERNE,
The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy

THE MAN WHO HAS JUST COME INTO THE SHOP TO RENT A video bears on his identity card a most unusual name, a name with a classical flavor that time has staled, neither more nor less than Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. The Máximo and the Afonso, which are in more common usage, he can just about tolerate, depending, of course, on the mood he's in, but the Tertuliano weighs on him like a gravestone and has done ever since he first realized that the wretched name lent itself to being spoken in an ironic, potentially offensive tone. He is a history teacher at a secondary school, and a colleague had suggested the video to him with the warning, It's not exactly a masterpiece of cinema, but it might keep you amused for an hour and a half. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is greatly in need of stimuli to distract him, he lives alone and gets bored, or, to speak with the clinical exactitude that the present day requires, he has succumbed to the temporary weakness of spirit ordinarily known as depression. To get a clear idea of his situation, suffice it to say that he was married but can no longer remember what led him into matrimony, that he is divorced and cannot now bring himself to ponder the reasons for the separation. On the other hand, while the ill-fated union produced no children who are now demanding to be handed, gratis, the world on a silver platter, he has, for some time, viewed sweet History, the serious, educational subject which he had felt called upon to teach and which could have been a soothing refuge for him, as a chore without meaning and a beginning without an end. For those of a nostalgic temperament, who tend to be fragile and somewhat inflexible, living alone is the harshest of punishments, but, it must be said, such a situation, however painful, only rarely develops into a cataclysmic drama of the kind to make the skin prick and the hair stand on end. What one mostly sees, indeed it hardly comes as a surprise anymore, are people patiently submitting to solitude's meticulous scrutiny, recent public examples, though not particularly well known and two of whom even met with a happy ending, being the portrait painter whom we only ever knew by his first initial, the GP who returned from exile to die in the arms of the beloved fatherland, the proofreader who drove out a truth in order to plant a lie in its place, the lowly clerk in the Central Registry Office who made off with certain death certificates, all of these, either by chance or coincidence, were members of the male sex, but none of them had the misfortune to be called Tertuliano, and this was doubtless an inestimable advantage to them in their relations with other people. The shop assistant, who had already taken down from the shelf the video requested, entered in the log book the title of the film and the day's date, then indicated to the customer the place where he should sign. Written after a moment's hesitation, the signature revealed only the last two names, Máximo Afonso, without the Tertuliano, but like someone determined to clarify in advance something that might become a cause of controversy, the customer murmured as he signed his name, It's quicker like that. This precautionary explanation proved of little use, for the assistant, as he transferred the information from the customer's ID onto an index card, pronounced the unfortunate, antiquated name out loud, in a tone that even an innocent child would have recognized as deliberate. No one, we believe, however free of obstacles his or her life may have been, would dare to claim that they had never suffered some similar humiliation. Although, sooner or later, we will all, inevitably, be confronted by one of those hearty types to whom human frailty, especially in its most

refined and delicate forms, is the cause of mocking laughter, the truth is that the inarticulate sounds which, quite against our wishes, occasionally emerge from our own mouth, are merely the irrepressible moans from some ancient pain or sorrow, like a scar suddenly making its forgotten presence felt again. As he puts the video away in his battered, teacher's briefcase, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, with admirable brio, struggles not to reveal the displeasure provoked by the shop assistant's gratuitous sneer, but he cannot help thinking, all the while scolding himself for the vile injustice of the thought, that the fault lay with his colleague and with the mania certain people have for handing out unasked-for advice. Such is our need to shower blame on some distant entity when it is we who lack the courage to face up to what is there before us. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso does not know, cannot imagine or even guess that the assistant already regrets his gross impertinence, indeed, another ear, more finely tuned than his and capable of dissecting the subtle vocal gradations in the assistant's At your service, sir, offered in response to the brusque Good afternoon thrown back at him, would have told him that a great desire for peace had installed itself behind the counter. After all, it is a benevolent commercial principle, laid down in antiquity and tried and tested over the centuries, that the customer is always right, even in the unlikely, but quite possible, eventuality that the customer's name should be Tertuliano.

Sitting now on the bus that will drop him near the building where he has lived for the last six or so years, that is, ever since his divorce, Máximo Afonso, and we use the shortened version of his name here, having been, in our view, authorized to do so by its sole lord and master, but mainly because the word Tertuliano, having appeared so recently, only six lines previously, could do a grave disservice to the fluency of the narrative, anyway, as we were saying, Máximo Afonso found himself wondering, suddenly intrigued, suddenly perplexed, what strange motives, what particular reasons had led his colleague from the Mathematics Department, we forgot to mention that his colleague teaches mathematics, to urge him so insistently to see the film he has just rented, when, up until then, the so-called seventh art had never been a topic of conversation between them. One could understand such a recommendation had it been an indisputably fine film, in which case the pleasure, satisfaction, and enthusiasm of discovering a work of high aesthetic quality might have obliged his colleague, over lunch in the canteen or during a break between classes, to tug anxiously at his sleeve and say, I don't believe we've ever talked about cinema before, but I have to tell you, my friend, that you absolutely must see The Race Is to the Swift, which is the title of the video Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has in his briefcase, something we also neglected to mention. Then the history teacher would ask, Where's it being shown, to which the mathematics teacher would respond, explaining, Oh, it's not being shown anywhere at the moment, it was on four or five years ago, I can't understand how I missed it when it first came out, and then, without a pause, concerned as to the possible futility of the advice he was so fervently offering, But maybe you've already seen it, No, I haven't, I hardly ever go to the cinema, I just make do with what they show on TV, and I don't see very much of that, Well, you should make a point of seeing it then, you'll find it in any video store, you can always rent

if you don't want to buy it. That is how the dialogue might have gone if the film had been worthy of praise, but things happened rather more prosaically, I don't want to stick my nose in where it isn't wanted, the mathematics teacher had said as he peeled an orange, but for a while now you've struck me as being rather down, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso agreed, You're right, I have been feeling a bit low, Health problems, No, I'm not ill as far as I know, it's just that everything tires me and bores me, the wretched routine, the repetitiveness, the sense of marking time, Go out and have some fun, man, a bit of fun is always the best remedy, If you'll forgive me saying so, having fun is a remedy only for those who don't need one, A good answer, no doubt about it, but meanwhile, you've got to do something to shake off this feeling of apathy, Depression, Depression, apathy, it doesn't really matter, what we call the factors is arbitrary, But the intensity isn't, What do you do when you're not at school, Oh, I read, listen to music, occasionally visit a museum, And what about the cinema, No, I don't go to the cinema much, I make do with what they show on TV, You could buy a few videos, start a collection, a video library if you like, You're right, I could, except that I haven't even got enough space for my books, Well, rent some videos then, that's the best solution, Well, I do own a few videos, science documentaries, nature programs, archaeology, anthropology, the arts in general, and I'm interested in astronomy too, that sort of thing, That's all very well, but you need to distract yourself with stories that don't take up too much space in your head, I mean, given, for example, that you're interested in astronomy, you might well enjoy science fiction, adventures in outer space, star wars, special effects, As I see it, those so-called special effects are the real enemy of the imagination, that mysterious, enigmatic skill it took us human beings so much hard work to invent, Now you're exaggerating, No, I'm not, the people who are exaggerating are the ones who want me to believe that in less than a second, with a click of the fingers, a spaceship can travel a hundred thousand million kilometers, You have to agree, though, that to create the effects you so despise also takes imagination, Yes, but it's their imagination, not mine, You can always use theirs as a jumping-off point, Oh, I see, two hundred thousand million kilometers instead of one hundred thousand million, Don't forget that what we call reality today was mere imagination yesterday, just look at Jules Verne, Yes, but the reality is that a trip to Mars, for example, and Mars, in astronomical terms, is just around the corner, would take at least nine months, then you'd have to hang around there for another six months until the planet was in the right position to make the return journey, before traveling for another nine months back to Earth, that's two whole years of utter tedium, a film about a trip to Mars that respected the facts would be the dullerest thing ever seen, Yes, I can see why you're bored, Why, Because you're not content with anything, I'd be content with very little if I had it, You must have something to hang on to, your career, your work, it doesn't seem to me that you have much reason for complaint, But it's my career and my work that are hanging on to me, not the other way around, Well, that's a malaise, always assuming it is a malaise, that I suffer from too, I mean, I myself would much rather be known as a mathematical genius than as the long-suffering, mediocre secondary school teacher I have no option but to continue to be, Maybe it's just that I don't really like myself, Now if you came to me with an equation containing two unknown factors, I could

give you the benefit of my professional advice, but when it comes to an incompatibility of that sort, all my knowledge would only complicate things still further, that's why I suggested you pass the time watching a few films, as if you were taking a couple of tranquilizers, rather than devoting yourself to mathematics, which would really do your head in, Any suggestions, About what, About what would be an interesting, worthwhile film, There's no shortage of those, just go into a shop, have a look around, and choose one, Yes, but you could at least make a suggestion. The mathematics teacher thought and thought, then said, The Race Is to the Swift, What's that, A film, that's what you asked me for, It sounds more like a proverb, Well, it is a proverb, The whole thing or just the title, Wait and see, What sort is it, What, the proverb, No, the film, A comedy, You're sure it's not one of those old-fashioned, crime-of-passion melodramas, or one of those modern ones, all gunshots and explosions, It's a light, very amusing comedy, All right, I'll make a note of it, what did you say it was called, The Race Is to the Swift, Right, I've got it, It's not exactly a masterpiece of cinema, but it might keep you amused for an hour and a half.

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is at home, he has a hesitant look on his face, not that this means very much, it isn't the first time it's happened, as he watches his will swing between spending time preparing something to eat, which generally means nothing more strenuous than opening a can and heating up the contents, or, alternatively, going out to eat in a nearby restaurant where he is known for his lack of interest in the menu, not because he is a proud, dissatisfied customer, he is merely indifferent, inattentive, reluctant to take the trouble to choose a dish from among those set out in the brief and all-too-familiar list. He is confirmed in his belief that it would be easier to eat in by the fact that he has homework to mark, his students' latest efforts, which he must read carefully and correct whenever they offend too extravagantly against the truths they have been taught or are overly free in their interpretations. The History that it is Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's mission to teach is like a bonsai tree the roots of which have to be trimmed now and then to stop it growing, a childish miniature of the gigantic tree of places and time and of all that happens there, we look, we notice the disparity in size and go no further, ignoring other equally obvious differences, the fact, for example, that no bird, no winged creature, not even the tiny hummingbird, could make its nest in the branches of a bonsai, and that if a lizard could find shelter in the tiny shadow the bonsai casts, always supposing its leaves were sufficiently luxuriant, there is every likelihood that the tip of the creature's tail would continue to protrude. The History that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso teaches, as he himself recognizes and will happily admit if asked, has a vast number of tails protruding, some still twitching, others nothing but wrinkled skin with a little row of loose vertebrae inside. Remembering the conversation with his colleague, he thought, Mathematics comes from another cerebral planet, in mathematics, those lizard tails would be mere abstractions. He took the homework out of his briefcase and placed it on the desk, he also took out the video of The Race Is to the Swift, these were the two tasks to which he could devote the evening, marking homework or watching a film, although he suspected that there wouldn't be time for both, especially since he

neither liked nor was in the habit of working late into the night. Marking his students' homework was hardly a matter of life and death, and watching the film even less so. It would be best to settle down with the book he was reading, he thought. After a visit to the bathroom, he went into the bedroom to change his clothes, he donned different shoes and trousers, pulled a sweater on over his shirt, but left his tie, because he didn't like to leave his throat exposed, then went into the kitchen. He took three different cans out of the cupboard and, not knowing how else to choose, decided to leave the matter to chance, and resorted to a nonsensical, almost forgotten rhyme from childhood, which, in those days, had usually got him the result he least wanted, and it went like this, Eenie, meenie, minie, mo, catch a tiger by his toe, if he hollers let him go, eenie, meenie, minie, mo. The winner was a meat stew, which wasn't what he most fancied, but he felt it best not to go against fate. He ate in the kitchen, washing the food down with a glass of red wine, and when he finished, he repeated the rhyme, almost without thinking, with three crumbs of bread, the one on the left was the book, the one in the middle was the homework, the one on the right was the film. The Race Is to the Swift won, obviously what will be will be, don't quibble with fate over pears, it will eat all the ripe ones and give you the green ones. That's what people usually say, and because it is what people usually say, we accept it without further discussion when our duty as free people is to argue energetically with a despotic fate that has determined, with who knows what malicious intentions, that the green pear should be the film and not the homework or the book. As a teacher, and a teacher of history, this Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, for one has only to consider the scene we have just witnessed in the kitchen, entrusting his immediate future and possibly what will follow to three crumbs of bread and some senseless childhood drivel, this teacher, we were saying, is setting a bad example for the adolescents whom fate, whether the same or an entirely different one, has placed in his hands. Unfortunately, we do not have room in this story to anticipate the doubtless pernicious effects of the influence of such a teacher on the young souls of his pupils, so we will leave them here, hoping only that one day they may encounter on life's road a contrary influence that will free them, possibly in extremis, from the irrationalist perdition that currently hangs over them like a threat.

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso carefully washed up the supper dishes, for leaving everything clean and in its place after eating has always constituted for him an inviolable duty, which just goes to show, returning one last time to the young souls mentioned above, to whom such behavior might, indeed in all probability would, seem laughable and such a duty a mere dead letter, that it is still possible to learn something even from someone with so little to recommend him on all subjects, matters, and topics relating to free will. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso took this and other excellent lessons from the sensible customs of the family in which he was brought up, especially from his mother, who we are glad to say is alive and well, and whom he is sure to visit one of these days in the small provincial town where the future teacher first opened his eyes to the world, the cradle of the Máximos on his mother's side and the Afonsos on his father's side, and where he was the first Tertuliano to be born, almost forty years ago. He can only visit his

father in the cemetery, that's what this bitch-of-a-life is like, it always runs out on us. The vulgar expression came into his mind unbidden, because, as he was leaving the kitchen, he happened to think about his father and to miss him, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has never been one for using coarse language, so much so that on the rare occasions when he does, he himself is surprised by an awkwardness, by a lack of conviction in his phonatory organs, his vocal cords, palate, tongue, teeth, and lips, as if they were, against their will, articulating a word from a language hitherto unknown to them. In the small room that serves as both study and living room is a two-seater sofa and a coffee table, a rather welcoming armchair, with the television directly in front of it, at the vanishing point, and, placed at an angle to catch the light from the window, the desk where the history homework and the video are waiting to find out who will win. Two of the walls are lined with books, most of them dog-eared from use and wizened with age. On the floor, a carpet bearing a geometric design in subdued or possibly faded colors helps to create the no more than averagely cozy atmosphere, quite without affectation and making no pretense at appearing to be more than what it is, the home of a secondary school teacher who doesn't earn very much, a fact that may be capricious pig-headedness on the part of the teaching profession or the result of a historical penalty as yet still unpaid. The middle bread crumb, that is, the book that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has been reading, a weighty tome on ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, lies where it was left the previous night, on the coffee table, waiting, like the other two bread crumbs, waiting, as all things always are, it's something they can't avoid, it is their ruling destiny, part, it seems, of their invincible nature as things. Given what we have so far seen of the character of Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, who, in the short time we have known him, has already shown signs of being something of a daydreamer, even somewhat noncommittal, it would come as no surprise now if he were to indulge in a display of certain conscious acts of self-deceit, leafing with feigned enthusiasm through his students' homework, opening the book at the page where he stopped reading, coolly studying both sides of the videocassette box, as if he had not yet decided what he wanted to do. But appearances, while not always as deceptive as people say, not infrequently belie themselves, revealing new modes of being that open the door to the possibility of real changes in a pattern of behavior, which, generally speaking, had been assumed to be defined already. This laborious explanation could have been avoided if, instead, we had got right to the point and said that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso headed straight for the desk, picked up the video, read the information on the front and back of the box, studied, on the former, the smiling, amiable faces of the actors, noted that only one of the names was known to him, the main one, that of a pretty, young actress, a sure sign that the film, when it came to drawing up contracts, had not been taken very seriously by the producers, and then, with the bold action of a will that seemed never to have wavered for a moment, slotted the cassette into the VCR, sat down in the armchair, pressed the play button on the remote control, and settled back to enjoy the evening as best he could, although, given the unpromising material, any real enjoyment seemed unlikely. And so it proved. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso laughed twice and smiled three or four times, for the comedy was not just light, to use the mathematics teacher's conciliatory expression, it was, above all, absurd,

ridiculous, a cinematic monster in which logic and common sense had been left protesting on the other side of the door, having been refused entry into the place where the madness was being perpetrated. The title, *The Race Is to the Swift*, was deployed merely as a very obvious metaphor, like one of those really easy riddles, what's white and is laid by hens, though there was no mention of races, runners, or speed, it was just a story of rampant personal ambition, which the pretty, young actress embodied as well as she had been trained to do, the plot being full of misunderstandings, hoaxes, mixups, and confusions, in the midst of which, alas, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's depression found not the least relief. When the film ended, Tertuliano was more irritated with himself than with his colleague. The latter had the excuse of being well intentioned, but he himself was far too old to go chasing after sky rockets, and, as always happens with the ingenuous, what pained him most was his own ingenuousness. Out loud he said, I'll return this crap tomorrow, there was no surprise this time, he felt he had earned the right to vent his feelings using crude language, and one must bear in mind, too, that this was only the second vulgarity to escape him in recent weeks, what's more he had only thought the first one, and mere thoughts don't count. He glanced at his watch and saw that it wasn't yet eleven o'clock. It's early, he murmured, and by this he meant, as became apparent immediately, that he still had time to punish himself for his frivolity in having exchanged obligation for devotion, the authentic for the false, the enduring for the transient. He sat down at his desk, carefully drew the history homework toward him, as if seeking its forgiveness for his neglect, and worked into the night, like the scrupulous teacher he had always prided himself on being, full of pedagogical love for his pupils, but rigorous with dates and implacable when it came to epithets. It was late by the time he reached the end of the task he had set himself, but, still repentant for his lapse, still contrite for his sin, and like someone who has decided to swap one painful hairshirt for another no less punitive one, he took to bed with him the book on ancient Mesopotamian civilizations and began the chapter about the Amorites and, in particular, about their King Hammurabi and his code of law. After only four pages he fell peacefully asleep, a sign that he had been forgiven.

He awoke an hour later. He had not been dreaming, no horrible nightmare had disordered his brain, he had not been flailing around, trying to defend himself against a gelatinous monster that was stuck to his face, he merely opened his eyes and thought, There's someone in the apartment. Slowly, unhurriedly, he sat up in bed and listened. His bedroom has no windows, even during the day any outside noises are inaudible, and at this time of night, What time is it, the silence is usually complete. And it was complete. Whoever the intruder was, he was staying put. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso reached out to the bedside table and turned on the light. The clock said a quarter past four. Like most ordinary people, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is a mixture of courage and cowardice, he isn't one of those invincible cinema heroes, but neither is he a wimp, the kind who pees his pants when, at midnight, he hears the door of the castle dungeon creak open. True, he felt all the hairs on his body prickle, but that even happens to wolves when faced by danger, and no one in their right mind would describe wolves as pathetic cowards.

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is about to prove that he certainly isn't either. He slid quietly out of bed, picked up a shoe for lack of any sturdier weapon, and, very cautiously, peered out into the corridor. He looked right and left. The sense of another presence that had woken him up grew slightly stronger. Turning on lights as he went, aware of his heart pounding in his chest like a galloping horse, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went first into the bathroom and then into the kitchen. No one. And oddly enough, the presence seemed less intense there. He went back into the corridor and, as he approached the living room, he felt the invisible presence growing denser with each step, as if the atmosphere had been set vibrating by reverberations from some hidden incandescence, as if Tertuliano, in his nervousness, were walking over radioactive ground carrying in his hand a Geiger counter that, instead of sending out warning signals, was pumping out ectoplasm. There was no one in the room. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso looked around him, there they were, solid and impassive, the two tall, crowded bookshelves, the framed engravings on the walls, to which no reference has been made until now, but which are nonetheless there, and there, and there, and there, the desk with the typewriter on it, the chair, the coffee table in the middle with a small sculpture placed in its exact geometric center, and the two-seater sofa and the television set. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso muttered fearfully to himself, So that's what it was, and then, just as he uttered that last word, the presence, like a soap bubble bursting, silently disappeared. Yes, that's what it was, the television set, the VCR, the comedy called The Race Is to the Swift, an image from inside that had now returned to its place after going to rouse Tertuliano Máximo Afonso from his bed. He couldn't imagine what it could be, but he was sure he would recognize it as soon as it appeared. He went into the bedroom, put a dressing gown on over his pajamas, so as not to catch cold, and came back. He sat down in the armchair, pressed the play button on the remote control, and leaning forward, all eyes, his elbows on his knees, no laughter or smiles this time, he replayed the story of that pretty, young woman who wanted to be a success in life. After twenty minutes, he saw her go into a hotel and walk over to the reception desk, he heard her say her name, My name's Inés de Castro, he had noticed this interesting historical coincidence earlier, then he heard her go on, I have a room reserved, the clerk looked straight at her, at the camera, not at her, or, rather, at her standing where the camera stood, but this time, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso barely understood what the clerk said, the thumb of the hand holding the remote control immediately pressed the pause button, but the image had gone, obviously they weren't going to waste film on an actor who was little more than an extra, who only appeared twenty minutes into the plot, the tape rewound, past the receptionist's face, the pretty, young woman went into the hotel again, said again that her name was Inés de Castro and that she had reserved a room, and now, there it was, the frozen image of the clerk at the reception desk looking straight at the person looking at him. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso got up from the chair, knelt down in front of the television, his face as close to the screen as he could get it and still be able to see, It's me, he said, and once more he felt the hairs on his body stand on end, what he was seeing wasn't true, it couldn't be, any sensible person who happened to be there would say reassuringly, Come off it, Tertuliano, I mean, he's got a mustache, and you're clean shaven. Sensible people are

like that, they tend to simplify everything, and then, but always too late, we witness their astonishment at the great diversity of life, they remember that mustaches and beards don't have minds of their own, they grow and prosper only when allowed to do so, or, occasionally, out of sheer indolence on the part of the wearer, but, from one moment to the next, because the fashion changes or because their hirsute monotony becomes an irritating sight in the mirror, they can also vanish without trace. Since, of course, anything can happen in the world of actors and the dramatic arts, there was also a strong probability that the clerk's fine, well-groomed mustache was, quite simply, false. It has been known. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso himself could have come up with these considerations, which, precisely because they were so obvious, would be bound to occur to anyone, had he not been so intent on finding other scenes involving this same extra or, to be more accurate, this supporting actor with a small speaking part. The man with the mustache appeared another five times in the film and on each occasion had very little to do, although in the last scene he was given a couple of supposedly saucy remarks to exchange with the mighty Inés de Castro and then, as she walked off, swaying her hips, he had to gaze after her with a grotesque leer on his face, which the director must have thought the audience would find irresistibly funny. Needless to say, if Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had failed to find this funny the first time, he found it still less so the second. He had gone back to the first image, the one in which the clerk at the reception desk, in close-up, is looking directly at Inés de Castro, and he was minutely analyzing the image, line by line, feature by feature, Apart from a few slight differences, he thought, especially the mustache, the different hairstyle, the thinner face, he's just like me. He felt calmer now, the resemblance was, to say the least, astonishing, but that was all it was, and there's no shortage of resemblances in the world, twins for example, the really amazing thing would be that out of the six thousand million people on the planet there weren't two people exactly alike. Obviously, they couldn't be exactly alike, the same in every detail, he said, as if he were talking to his almost—alter ego staring out at him from inside the television set. Seated once more in the armchair, thus occupying the position of the actress playing the part of Inés de Castro, he too pretended to be a customer at the hotel, My name's Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, he announced, then with a smile, What's yours, it was the rational thing to ask, if two identical people meet, it's only natural that they should want to know everything about each other, and the name is always the first thing we ask, because we imagine that this is the door through which one enters. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso fast-forwarded the tape to the end, there was the list of the supporting cast, he wondered if the roles they played would be mentioned too, but the names, and there were a lot of them, were simply listed alphabetically. He absentmindedly picked up the box, glanced again at what was on it, the smiling faces of the leading actors, a brief plot summary, and underneath, in small print, among the technical details, the date of the film. It's five years old, he muttered, and remembered that his colleague, the mathematics teacher, had told him this as well. Five years, he said again, and suddenly, the world gave another almighty shudder, it was not the effect of another impalpable, mysterious presence such as the one that had woken him, but of something concrete, not just concrete, but something that could be documented. With

trembling hands, he opened and closed drawers, pulled out envelopes full of negatives and photographs, scattered them over his desk, and, at last, found what he was looking for, a photo of himself, five years ago. He had a mustache, a different hairstyle, and his face was thinner.

NOT EVEN TERTULIANO MÁXIMO AFONSO HIMSELF COULD have said whether sleep once more opened her merciful arms to him after what, to him, had been the terrifying revelation of the existence, possibly in that same city, of a man who, to judge by his face and by his general appearance, was his very image. After a careful comparison of the photograph from five years ago with the close-up of the clerk in the film, and after finding no difference, however tiny, between the two, not even the smallest line present in one and absent in the other, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso fell onto the sofa, not into the armchair, which was not large enough to contain the physical and moral collapse of his body, and there, head in hands, nerves exhausted, stomach churning, he struggled to put his thoughts in order, untangling them from the chaos of emotions that had accumulated since the moment when memory, watching without his knowledge from behind the closed curtain of his eyelids, had woken him with a start from his initial and only sleep. What troubles me most, he finally managed to think, isn't so much the fact that the guy resembles me, is a copy, you might say, a duplicate of me, that's not so very unusual, there are twins, for example, there are look-alikes, species do repeat themselves, the human being repeats itself, head, trunk, arms, legs, and it could happen, although I can't be sure, it's just a hypothesis, that some unforeseen change in a particular genetic group could result in the creation of a being similar to one generated by another entirely unrelated genetic group, that doesn't trouble me as much as knowing that five years ago I was the same as he was then, I mean, both of us even had mustaches, and more than that, the possibility, or, rather, the probability that five years on, that is, now, right now, at this precise hour in the morning, that sameness continues, as if a change in me would occasion the same change in him, or worse still, that one of us changes not because the other one changes, but because any change is simultaneous, that's enough to send you stark staring mad, yes, all right, I mustn't make this into a tragedy, we know that everything that can happen will happen, but, first, there was the chance event that made us the same, then there was the chance event of my seeing a film I'd never even heard of, I could have lived out the rest of my life never imagining that a phenomenon like this would choose to manifest itself in an ordinary teacher of history, a man who only a few hours earlier was correcting his students' mistakes and who now doesn't know what to do with the mistake into which he himself, from one moment to the next, has seen himself transformed. Am I really a mistake, he wondered, and supposing I am, what significance, what consequences does it have for a human being to know that he's a mistake. A shiver of fear ran down his spine and he thought that some things were better left just as they are, to be what they are, because otherwise there is the danger that other people will notice and, even worse, that we too will begin to see through their eyes the hidden blunder that corrupted us at birth and which waits, impatiently chewing its nails, for the day when it can show itself and say, Here I am. The excessive weight of such deep thought, centered as it was on the possibility of the existence of absolute doubles, albeit intuited in brief flashes rather than put into words, made his head slowly droop and, eventually, sleep, a sleep that, in its own way, would continue the mental labors carried out up until then by wakefulness, overwhelmed his weary body and helped it make itself comfortable on the sofa cushions. Not that it was a rest that merited and justified that

sweet name, for after a few moments, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso suddenly opened his eyes, like a talking doll whose mechanism has gone wrong, and repeated, in different words this time, the question he had just asked, What does it mean, being a mistake. He shrugged, as if the question had abruptly ceased to interest him. Whether this indifference was the understandable effect of extreme tiredness or, on the contrary, the beneficent consequence of that brief sleep, it is, nonetheless, both disconcerting and unacceptable because, as we well know, and he better than anyone, the problem was not resolved, it's still there untouched, waiting inside the VCR, having put into words that no one heard but which were there beneath the surface of the scripted dialogue, One of us is a mistake, that was what the clerk at the reception desk actually said to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso when, addressing the actress playing Inés de Castro, he informed her that the room reserved for her was number twelve-eighteen. How many unknown factors are there in this equation, the history teacher asked the mathematics teacher as he was once more crossing the threshold of sleep. His numerate colleague did not answer his question, he merely looked at him pityingly and said, We'll talk about it later, rest now, try to get some sleep, you need it. Sleep was indeed what Tertuliano Máximo Afonso most wanted at that moment, but the attempt failed. Soon afterward, he was awake again, full of the brilliant idea that had suddenly occurred to him, which was to ask his colleague in mathematics to tell him why he had suggested watching The Race Is to the Swift, when it was a film of little merit, weighed down by five years of what had doubtless been a troubled existence, which in the case of any run-of-the-mill, low-budget movie is a surefire reason for being retired early on the grounds of disability or for meeting an inglorious end briefly postponed by the curiosity of a handful of eccentric viewers who, having heard talk of cult movies, erroneously thought that this was one. In this tangled equation, the first unknown factor he would have to resolve was whether his colleague had noticed the resemblance when he first saw the film and, if so, why he had not warned him when he suggested renting the video, even by jokily threatening him with, Prepare yourself, you're in for a shock. Although he does not really believe in Fate, distinguished from any lesser destiny by that respectful initial capital letter, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso cannot shake off the idea that so many chance events and coincidences coming all together could very well correspond to a plan, as yet unrevealed, but whose development and denouement are doubtless already to be found on the tablets on which that same Destiny, always assuming it does exist and does govern our lives, set down, at the very beginning of time, the date on which the first hair would fall from our head and the last smile die on our lips. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has ceased lying on the sofa like an empty, crumpled suit, he has just stood up as steadily as he can manage after a night that, for violent emotions, has had no equal in his entire life, and, feeling that his head was not quite in its right place, he went over to the window to look out at the sky. The night was still clinging to the city's rooftops, the streetlamps were still lit, but the first, subtle wash of early-morning light was beginning to lend a certain transparency to the upper atmosphere. This was how he knew that the world would not end today, for it would be an unforgivable waste to make the sun rise in vain, merely to have the very entity that first gave life to everything witness the beginning of the void, and so, although

the link between one thing and the other was not at all clear and certainly far from obvious, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's common sense finally turned up to give the advice that had been noticeable by its absence ever since the clerk at the reception desk first appeared on the television screen, and this advice was as follows, If you feel you must ask your colleague for an explanation, then do so at once, that would be infinitely better than walking around with all kinds of questions and queries stuck in your throat, but I would recommend that you don't open your mouth too much, that you watch what you say, you're holding a very hot potato, so put it down before you get burned, take the video back to the shop today, that way you can draw a line under the whole business and put an end to the mystery before it begins to bring out things you would rather not know or see or do, besides, if there is another person who is a copy of you, or of whom you are the copy, as apparently there is, you're under no obligation to go looking for him, he exists and you knew nothing about him, you exist and he knows nothing about you, you've never seen each other, you've never passed in the street, the best thing you can do is, But what if one day I do meet him, what if I do pass him in the street, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso broke in, You just look the other way, as if to say, I haven't seen you and I don't know you, And what if he speaks to me, If he has even a grain of good sense, he'll do exactly the same, You can't expect everyone to be sensible, That's why the world's in the state it is, You didn't answer my question, Which one, What do I do if he speaks to me, You say, well, what an extraordinary, fantastic, strange coincidence, whatever seems appropriate, but emphasizing that it is just a coincidence, then you walk away, Just like that, Just like that, That would be rude, ill-mannered, Sometimes that's all you can do if you want to avoid the worst, if you don't, you know what will happen, one word will lead to another, after that first meeting there'll be a second and a third, and in no time at all, you'll be telling your life story to a complete stranger, and you've been around long enough to have learned that you can't be too careful with strangers when it comes to personal matters, and frankly, I can't imagine anything more personal, or more intimate, than the mess you seem about to step into, It's hard to think of someone identical to me as a stranger, Just let him continue to be what he has been up until now, someone you don't know, Yes, but he'll never be a stranger, We're all strangers, even us, Who do you mean, You and me, your common sense and you, we hardly ever meet to talk, only very occasionally, and, to be perfectly honest, it's hardly ever been worthwhile, That's my fault I suppose, No, it's my fault too, we are obliged by our nature and our condition to follow parallel roads, but the distance that separates or divides us is so great that mostly we don't hear each other, Yes, but I can hear you now, It was an emergency and emergencies bring people together, What will be, will be, Oh, I know that philosophy, it's what people call predestination, fatalism, fate, but what it really means is that, as usual, you'll do whatever you choose to do, It means that I'll do what I have to do, neither more nor less, For some people what they did is the same as what they thought they would have to do, Contrary to what you, common sense, may think, the things of the will are never simple, indecision, uncertainty, irresolution are simple, Who would have thought it, Don't be so surprised, there are always new things to learn, Well, my mission is at an end, you're obviously going to do exactly what you like, Precisely, Good-bye, then, see

you next time, take care, See you at the next emergency, If I manage to get there in time. The streetlamps had been switched off, the traffic was growing thicker by the minute, the blue was gaining color in the sky. We all know that each day that dawns is the first for some and will be the last for others, and that for most people it will be just another day. For the history teacher Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, this day in which we find ourselves, in which we continue to exist, since there is no reason to believe it will be our last, will not be just another day. One might say that it appeared in the world with the possibility of being another first day, another beginning, and indicating, therefore, another destiny. Everything depends on what steps Tertuliano Máximo Afonso takes today. However, the procession, as people used to say in times gone by, is just about to leave the church. Let's follow it.

What a face, murmured Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, when he looked at himself in the mirror, and he was quite right. He had slept for only an hour, having spent the rest of the night struggling with the shock and horror described above, possibly in excessive detail, an excess entirely forgivable perhaps, given that never before in the history of humanity, the same history that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso tries so hard to teach his students, have two identical people existed in the same place and at the same time. There have been instances in far-distant times of a perfect physical resemblance between two people, sometimes men, sometimes women, but they were always separated by tens and hundreds and thousands of years and by tens and hundreds and thousands of kilometers. The most remarkable case we know was that of a particular town, long since disappeared, in which in the same street and in the same house, but not in the same family, and separated by an interval of two hundred and fifty years, two identical women were born. This marvelous event was not recorded in any chronicle, nor was it preserved in the oral tradition, which is perfectly understandable, really, given that when the first was born, no one knew there would be a second, and when the second came into the world, all memory had been lost of the first. Naturally. Notwithstanding the complete absence of any documentary proof or of eyewitness accounts, we are able to confirm, and even swear on our word of honor if necessary, that everything we have described or will describe or might describe as having happened in that now disappeared town did actually happen. The fact that history does not record a fact doesn't mean the fact did not exist. When he had reached the end of his morning shaving ritual, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso dispassionately examined the face before him and thought that, all in all, he looked better. Indeed, any impartial observer, whether male or female, would not shrink from describing his features, taken as a whole, as harmonious, and would definitely not neglect to give due importance to certain slight asymmetries and certain subtle volumetric variations that, if we may put it like this, constituted the salt that enlivened what would otherwise be an entirely savorless delicacy, so often the curse of faces endowed with an overly regular physiognomy. Not that we're saying Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is the perfect figure of a man, he would never be so immodest and we would never be so subjective, but, with just a pinch of talent he could doubtless have had a successful career as a leading man in the theater. And, of course, if he could act in a

theater, he could act in movies too. An unavoidable parenthesis. There are moments in a narrative, and this, as you will see, has been one of them, when any parallel manifestation of ideas and feelings on the part of the narrator with respect to what the characters themselves might be feeling or thinking at that point should be expressly forbidden by the laws of good writing. The violation, either out of imprudence or a lack of respect, of such restrictive clauses, which, if they existed, would probably be of a nonobligatory nature, can mean that a character, instead of following, as is his inalienable right, an autonomous line of thought and feeling in keeping with the status conferred upon him, finds himself assailed quite arbitrarily by thoughts or feelings that, given their provenance, cannot be entirely alien to him, but which can, nonetheless, prove, at the very least, inopportune and, in some cases, disastrous. This was precisely what happened to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. He was looking at himself in the mirror the way someone looks at himself simply in order to gauge the damage done by a bad night's sleep, he was thinking about this and nothing else, when, suddenly, the narrator's unfortunate thoughts about his physical features and the problematic possibility that, should he reveal the necessary talent, they might, at some future date, be placed at the service of the dramatic or cinematic arts, unleashed in him a reaction that it would be no exaggeration to describe as one of horror. If the man who played the part of the clerk at the reception desk were here, he thought melodramatically, if he were standing here in front of this mirror, the face he would see would be this face. We cannot blame Tertuliano Máximo Afonso for forgetting that the other man was wearing a mustache in the film, he did forget, it's true, but perhaps only because he was absolutely certain that the other man wouldn't have a mustache now, which is why he has no need to resort to that mysterious source of knowledge, the presentiment, because he finds the best of all reasons in his own clean-shaven, utterly hairless face. Any feeling person will happily agree that the word horror, apparently ill suited to the domestic world of a person living alone, would describe with some accuracy what went through the mind of the man who has just come running back from his desk where he went to fetch a black felt-tipped pen and who now, standing once more before the mirror, traces on his own image, just above his own upper lip, a mustache identical to that worn by the clerk at the reception desk, the fine, pencil mustache of a leading man. At that moment, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso became the actor about whose name and life we know nothing, the teacher of history in a secondary school is no longer here, this apartment is not his, the face in the mirror has another owner. Had the situation lasted a minute longer, or not even that, anything could have happened in this bathroom, a nervous breakdown, a sudden fit of madness, a destructive rage. Fortunately, despite certain behavior which may have led one to believe the contrary, and which has doubtless not made its last appearance, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is made of sterner stuff, and having, for a few moments, lost control of the situation, he has now regained it. However great an effort it may take, we know that all it requires to escape from a nightmare is to open our eyes, but the cure in this case was to close the eyes, not his own, but those reflected in the mirror. As effectively as any wall, a squirt of shaving foam separated these Siamese twins who have not yet met, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's right hand, splayed over the mirror, undid the faces of both

men, so much so that neither would now be able to find or recognize himself in the surface smeared with white foam and with gradually thinning trickles of black. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso could no longer see the face in the mirror, now he was alone in the apartment. He got into the shower, and although he has always, since birth, been deeply skeptical about the Spartan virtues of cold water, his father used to say that there is no better way to prime the body or sharpen the brain, and so it occurred to him this morning that a good blast of cold water, without the addition of any decadent but delicious warmer water, might prove beneficial to his feeble head and might rouse once and for all the part inside him that is trying, all the time, surreptitiously, to slide into sleep. Washed and dried, hair combed without the aid of the mirror, he went into his bedroom, made the bed, got dressed, and then went straight to the kitchen to prepare a breakfast composed, as usual, of orange juice, toast, coffee, and yogurt, for teachers need to be well fed before they set off to school to face that most difficult of tasks, planting trees or even bushes of wisdom in ground that, in most cases, tends to be barren rather than fertile. It is still very early, his class will not start until eleven o'clock, but, in the circumstances, it is understandable that he would rather not be at home today. He returned to the bathroom to clean his teeth, and, while he was doing so, it occurred to him that today was the day his upstairs neighbor usually came to clean the apartment, she was an elderly woman, a widow with no children, who, as soon as she realized that her new neighbor also lived alone, had appeared at his door six years ago to offer her services as a cleaner. No, it's not her day today, he will leave the mirror as it is, the foam is already starting to dry, it comes off with the slightest touch of the fingers, but, for the moment, it's still sticking to the surface and he can see no one peeping out from underneath. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is ready to leave, he has already decided that he will go in the car in order to reflect calmly on the recent troubling events, without having to put up with the push and shove of public transport, which, for obvious economic reasons, it has been his habit to use. He put the homework books into his briefcase, paused for a few seconds to look at the empty video box, it would be a good time to follow the advice given by his common sense and take the video out of the VCR, put it back in its box, and go straight to the shop, Here you are, he would say to the assistant, I thought it would be interesting, but it wasn't, it was a waste of time, Do you want another one, the assistant would ask, struggling to recall the name of this customer who had only been in the day before, we've got a very wide selection, good films of every kind, old and new, ah, yes, Tertuliano, the last three words would only be thought, of course, and the accompanying ironic smile only imagined. Too late, the history teacher Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is already on his way down the stairs, this is not the first battle that common sense will have to resign itself to losing.

He drove slowly through the city, like someone who has decided to make the most of being out and about early, and while he did so, despite the help of a few red and amber lights slow to change, he vainly racked his brains to find some way out of a situation that, as would be clear to any reasonably informed person, was entirely in his hands. He knew where the difficulty lay and admitted it to himself out loud as he reached the street

where the school stands, If only I could put all this nonsense behind me, forget about this insane business, just dismiss the whole absurd situation, here he paused to consider that the first part of this sentence would have been quite sufficient on its own, and then concluded, But I can't, which shows all too clearly how obsessed this disoriented man has become. As mentioned before, the history class doesn't start until eleven, which is two hours away. Sooner or later, his colleague the mathematics teacher will appear in the staff room where Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, who is waiting for him, is pretending, with apparent naturalness, to check through the homework in his briefcase. An attentive observer would not perhaps take long to notice this pretense, but for that he would have to be aware that no run-of-the-mill teacher would start reading for a second time what he had corrected a first time, not so much because there was a chance he would find new mistakes and therefore have to make new emendations, but as a matter of prestige, authority, and experience, or merely because what has been corrected stays corrected, and it is neither necessary nor possible to go back. That was all Tertuliano Máximo Afonso needed, to be correcting his own mistakes, always assuming that on one of the sheets of paper, which he is now reading without seeing, he had corrected what was right and put a lie in the place of an unexpected truth. As can never be stated too often, the best inventions are made by those who did not know what they were doing. At this point, the mathematics teacher entered the room. He saw his colleague the history teacher and went straight over to him. Good morning, he said, Good morning, Sorry, he said, I'm interrupting you, No, no, not at all, I was just having another quick glance through these, but I've corrected most of them already, How are they, Who, Your students, Oh, the usual, so-so, not too bad, Exactly like us when we were their age, said the mathematics teacher, smiling. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was waiting for his colleague to ask him if he had, in the end, got around to renting the video, if he had seen it and liked it, but the mathematics teacher seemed to have forgotten entirely, his mind far from their interesting conversation of the previous day. He went and poured himself a coffee, came back, sat down, and calmly spread the newspaper out on the table, ready to learn about the general state of the world and the country. Having perused the headlines on the front page and wrinkled his nose at each of them, he said, Sometimes I wonder if the disastrous state the planet's in isn't all our own fault, Ours, whose, mine, yours, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, pretending to be interested but hoping that this conversation, even though it was starting off with a subject so very far from his own concerns, would, eventually, lead them to the nub of the matter, Imagine a basket of oranges, said his colleague, imagine that one of them, at the bottom, starts to rot, and then imagine how each orange, one after the other, starts to rot too, who would then be able to say where the rot began, The oranges you're referring to, are they countries or people, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, Within a country, they're the people, within the world, they're countries, and since there are no countries without people, it's obvious that the rot begins with the people, And why should it be us, you, me, who are the guilty parties, It must have been someone, Ah, but you're not taking society into account, Society, my dear friend, like humanity, is an abstraction, Like mathematics, Far more than mathematics, mathematics, in comparison, is as real as the wood this table's made of, What about

social studies then, So-called social studies are often not studies about people at all, Let's just hope no sociologists are listening, they would condemn you to a civic death, at the very least, Contenting yourself with the music of the orchestra you play in and with the part you play in it is a common mistake, especially among nonmusicians, Some people are more responsible than others, you and I, for example, are relatively innocent, of the worst evils that is, Ah, the usual argument of the easy conscience, Just because it comes from an easy conscience doesn't mean it isn't true, The best way to achieve a universal exoneration is to conclude that since everyone is to blame, no one is guilty, Perhaps there's nothing we can do about it, perhaps they're just the world's problems, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, as if bringing the conversation to a close, but the mathematics teacher retorted, The only problems the world has are problems caused by people, and with that he stuck his nose in his paper. The minutes passed, it was nearly time for the history class, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso could see no way of bringing up the subject that interested him. He could, of course, simply ask his colleague directly, put the question to him point-blank, By the way, except that he hadn't been coming that way at all, but these language fillers exist precisely for such situations, an urgent need to change the subject without appearing to insist, a kind of socially acceptable pretend-that-I-just-remembered-something, By the way, he would say, did you notice that the clerk in the film, the one at the reception desk, is the spitting image of me, but this would be tantamount to showing your strongest card in a game, making a third person party to a secret that wasn't even known as yet to two parties, with all the subsequent, future awkwardness of avoiding inquisitive questions, for example, So, have you met your double yet. Just then the mathematics teacher glanced up from the newspaper, So, he said, did you rent that video, Yes, I did, replied Tertuliano Máximo Afonso excitedly, almost happy, And what did you think of it, Quite amusing really, It helped with your depression, your apathy, I mean, Apathy or depression, it makes no odds, the name isn't the problem, It helped you though, Possibly, it made me laugh a couple of times. The mathematics teacher got up, he too had students waiting for him, what better opportunity for Tertuliano Máximo Afonso to say, By the way, when was the last time you saw The Race Is to the Swift, not that it really matters, of course, I was just curious, The last time was the first and the first time the last, When did you see it though, About a month ago, a friend lent it to me, Oh, I thought it was yours, part of your collection, No, if it had been, I would have lent it to you, not made you go spending good money on renting it. They were in the corridor now, on their way to the classrooms, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso felt easy and relaxed in his mind, as if his depression had suddenly evaporated, disappeared into infinite space, perhaps never to return. At the next corner, they would part and go their separate ways, and it was only when they had reached the corner and had both said, See you later, then, that the mathematics teacher, when he was about four paces away, turned and said, By the way, did you notice that one of the bit-part actors in the film looked incredibly like you, all you need is a mustache, and you'd be as alike as two peas in a pod. Like a devastating bolt of lightning, his depression fell from on high and reduced Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's buoyant mood to ashes. Despite this, he put on a brave face and managed to reply in a voice that seemed to break with

every syllable, Yes, I did, it's an amazing coincidence, absolutely extraordinary, then added with a colorless smile, The only difference is that I haven't got a mustache and he's not a history teacher, otherwise we're identical. His colleague looked at him oddly, as if he had just met him again after a long absence, Now that I think of it, you had a mustache a few years ago too, he said, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, throwing caution to the wind, just like the lost man who will listen to no advice, replied, Perhaps, at the time, he was the teacher. The mathematics teacher came over to him, placed a paternal hand on his shoulder, You really are seriously depressed, I mean, something like that, a silly, unimportant coincidence, shouldn't upset you in this way, It didn't upset me, I just didn't sleep very much, I had a bad night, You probably had a bad night because you were upset. The mathematics teacher felt Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's shoulder tense beneath his hand, as if his whole body, from head to toe, had suddenly grown hard, and the shock was so great, the impression so strong, that it forced him to withdraw his hand. He did so as slowly as he could, trying not to show that he knew he had been rejected, but the unusual hardness in Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's eyes left no room for doubt, the pacific, docile, submissive history teacher whom he usually treated with friendly but superior benevolence is a different person right now. Perplexed, as if he had been set down in front of a game whose rules he did not know, he said, Right, I'll see you later, then, I won't be having lunch at school today. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's only reply was to bow his head and go off to his class.

CONTRARY TO THE ERRONEOUS STATEMENT MADE A FEW lines back, which, however, we neglected to correct at the time, since this story is at least one step above a mere school exercise, the man had not changed, he was the same man. The sudden shift in mood observed in Tertuliano Máximo Afonso and which had so shaken the mathematics teacher was nothing but a simple somatic manifestation of a psychopathological state known as the wrath of the meek. Making a brief diversion from the central theme, we might be able to explain ourselves better if we were to refer to the old classification system, albeit somewhat discredited by modern advances in science, that divided the human temperament into four main types, namely, the melancholic, produced by black bile, the phlegmatic, produced, obviously, by phlegm, the sanguine, related no less obviously to the blood, and finally, the choleric, which was the consequence of white bile. As you can see, in this quaternary and primarily symmetrical division of the humors, there was no place for the community of the meek. Nevertheless, History, which is not always wrong, assures us that they already existed in those far-off times, indeed existed in great numbers, just as the Now, a chapter of History always waiting to be written, tells us that they still exist, that they exist in even greater numbers. The explanation of this anomaly, which, if we accept it, would serve as a way of understanding the dark shadows of Antiquity as well as the festive illuminations of the Now, may be found in the fact that when the clinical picture described above was defined and established, another humor had been forgotten. We are referring to the tear. It is surprising, not to say philosophically scandalous, that something so visible, so commonplace and abundant as tears have always been should have gone unnoticed by the venerable sages of Antiquity and received so little consideration from the no less wise, although far less venerable, sages of the Now. You will ask what this long digression has to do with the wrath of the meek, especially bearing in mind that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, who gave such flagrant expression to it, has not yet been observed to cry. The statement we have just made regarding the absence of the tear from the humoral theory of medicine does not mean that the meek, who are naturally more sensitive and therefore more prone to that liquid manifestation of the emotions, spend all day, handkerchief in hand, blowing their nose or dabbing constantly at tear-reddened eyes. It does mean that, inside, a person, be they male or female, could well be tearing themselves to pieces as a result of loneliness, neglect, shyness, what the dictionaries define as an affective state triggered by social situations and which has volitive, postural, and neurovegetative effects, and yet, sometimes, all it takes is a simple word, a mere nothing, a well-intentioned but overprotective gesture, like the gesture made, quite unwittingly, by the mathematics teacher, for the pacific, docile, submissive person suddenly to vanish and be replaced, to the dismay and incomprehension of those who thought they knew all there was to know about the human soul, by the blind, devastating wrath of the meek. It doesn't usually last very long, but while it does, it inspires real fear. That is why the fervent bedtime prayer of many people is not the ubiquitous Lord's Prayer or the perennial Ave Maria, but Deliver us, O Lord, from evil and, in particular, from the wrath of the meek. The prayer seems to have worked well for Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's students, assuming they have habitual recourse to it, which, bearing in mind their extreme youth, is highly unlikely. Their time

will come. It is true that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso entered the room frowning, which caused one student who thought himself more perspicacious than the others to whisper to the colleague beside him, He looks really pissed off, but this wasn't true, what could be seen on the teacher's face were merely the final effects of the storm, the last, scattered gusts of wind, a delayed flurry of rain, with the less flexible trees struggling to raise their heads. The proof of this was that, having called the register in a firm, serene voice, he said, I had intended saving the revision of our last written exercise for next week, but I had yesterday evening free and decided to get ahead of myself. He opened his briefcase, took out the papers, which he placed on the table, saying, I've corrected them all and given marks based on the number of errors made, but I'm not going to do as I usually do, simply hand the work back to you, instead, we're going to spend this class analyzing the mistakes, that is, I want each of you to explain the reasons for your mistakes, and the reasons you give me might even lead me to change your mark. There was a pause, and he added, For the better. The students' laughter blew the last clouds away.

After lunch, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, along with most of his colleagues, took part in a meeting called by the headmaster to analyze the ministry's latest proposals for modernizing teaching practices, one of the many thousands of such proposals that make the lives of unfortunate teachers an arduous journey to Mars through an endless rain of threatening asteroids, some of which, all too often, hit their target. When it was his turn to speak, in a tone of voice that the other teachers found oddly indolent and monotonous, he merely repeated an idea that had long ceased to be a novelty and which always provoked a few benevolent smiles around the table as well as the ill-disguised annoyance of the headmaster, In my view, he said, the only important choice to make, the only serious decision to be taken as regards the teaching of history, is whether we should teach it from back to front or, as I believe, from front to back, everything else, while by no means insignificant, depends on that choice, and everyone knows this to be true, however much they may continue to pretend it is not. The effect of this speech was, as always, to elicit a resigned sigh from the headmaster and an exchange of glances and murmurs from the rest of the staff. The mathematics teacher smiled too, but his smile was one of friendly complicity, as if he were saying, You're quite right, none of this deserves to be taken seriously. The slight nod that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso sent back to him across the table meant that he was grateful for the message, but there was something else accompanying the gesture, something that, for lack of a better term, we will call a subgesture, telling him that the episode in the corridor had not yet been entirely forgotten. In other words, while the main gesture appeared to be openly conciliatory, saying, What's done is done, the subgesture hung back, adding, Yes, but not altogether. Meanwhile, it was the next teacher's turn to speak, and while he, unlike Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, discourses eloquently, pertinently, and proficiently, we will take the opportunity to discuss briefly, all too briefly given the complexity of the subject, the question of subgestures, which is, as far as we know, being raised here for the first time. People say, for example, that Tom, Dick, or Harry, in a particular situation, made this, that, or the other gesture, that's what we say, quite simply, as if the this, that, or

the other, a gesture expressing doubt, solidarity, or warning, were all of a piece, doubt always prudent, support always unconditional, warning always disinterested, when the whole truth, if we're really interested, if we're not to content ourselves with only the banner headlines of communication, demands that we pay attention to the multiple scintillations of the subgestures that follow behind a gesture like the cosmic dust in the tail of a comet, because, to use a comparison that can be grasped by all ages and intelligences, these subgestures are like the small print in a contract, difficult to decipher, but nonetheless there. Putting aside the modesty that convention and good taste demand, we would not be the least bit surprised if, in the very near future, the study, identification, and classification of subgestures did not become, individually and as a whole, one of the most fertile branches of the science of semiotics in general. Stranger things have happened. The teacher who was speaking has just finished, the headmaster is about to move on to the next person, when Tertuliano Máximo Afonso shoots his right arm up in the air to indicate that he wishes to speak. The headmaster asked if he wished to comment on the points of view just expressed, adding that, if he did, according to the current rules of the meeting, as he doubtless knew, he must wait until everyone had had their say, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso replied that, no, it wasn't a comment, nor was it to do with his colleague's very pertinent remarks, and that, yes, he knew and had always respected the rules, both those in current use and those fallen into disuse, all he wanted was to ask permission to be excused from the meeting because he had urgent matters to deal with outside of school. This time there was no subgesture, but there was a subtone, a harmonic, shall we say, which reinforced the incipient theory set out above as to the importance we should give to the many variations in communication, both gestural and oral, not just the second variation or the third, but also the fourth and the fifth. In the present case, for example, everyone at the meeting noticed that the subtone emitted by the headmaster expressed a feeling of deep relief underlying his actual words, Yes, of course, feel free. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso said good-bye with a generous wave of the hand, a gesture for the meeting as a whole, a sub-gesture for the headmaster, and left. His car was parked near the school, he was soon inside it, looking steadily at the road ahead, in the direction that would, for the moment, be the only appropriate destination given the events that had taken place since the previous afternoon, the shop where he had rented the video *The Race Is to the Swift*. He had sketched out a plan in the canteen, where he had lunched alone, had polished it under the protective shield of his colleagues' soporific speeches, and was now face-to-face with the assistant at the video shop, the one who had found this customer's name, Tertuliano, so very amusing and who, after the commercial transaction that will soon take place, will have more than enough reason to reflect upon the coincidence between the strangeness of the name and the extremely peculiar behavior of the person bearing that name. At first, there was no indication that this would happen, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso entered the shop like anyone else, he said good afternoon like anyone else, and, like anyone else, he started slowly perusing the shelves, stopping here and there, putting his head on one side to read the spines of the boxes containing the cassettes, until, finally, he went over to the counter and said, I'd like to buy the video I rented yesterday, I don't know if you remember, Yes, I remember

perfectly, it was The Race Is to the Swift, Exactly, well, I'd like to buy it, With pleasure, but, if you don't mind my saying, and I only say this in your own interest, it would be best if you returned the video you rented and bought a new one, because, with use, you see, there's always some deterioration in both image and sound, minimal, it's true, but it does become more obvious over time, No, it's not worth it, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, the one I rented is fine for my purposes. The assistant heard with some perplexity the intriguing words for my purposes, it isn't a phrase generally considered necessary to apply to a video, you want a video to watch, that was what it was born for, the reason it was made, and that's all there is to it. The customer's eccentricities would not end there. In the hope of encouraging future transactions, the assistant had decided to treat Tertuliano Máximo Afonso with the most lavish display of appreciation and commercial consideration since the days of the Phoenicians, I'll deduct the rental price, he said, and as he was performing this subtraction, he heard the customer ask, Have you, by any chance, got any films by the same production company, Do you mean by the same director, asked the assistant cautiously, No, no, I mean the same production company, it's the production company I'm interested in, not the director, Forgive me, but in all my years in the business, no customer has ever asked me that, they ask for films by title, often by the name of a particular actor, and only very rarely does any one ask me about a director, but production companies, never, Let's just say I belong to a very select group of customers, So it would seem, Senhor Máximo Afonso, muttered the assistant, after a rapid glance at the customer's card. He felt stunned, confused, but pleased too by the sudden, happy inspiration that had prompted him to address the client by his surnames, which, since these could also be used as given names, might, from then on, manage to drive into the shadows of his memory the authentic name, the real name that had once, alas, made him feel like laughing. He had forgotten that he had neglected to reply to the customer as to whether he had in his shop other films by the same production company, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had to repeat the question, adding an explanation that he hoped would correct the reputation for eccentricity he had clearly acquired in that establishment, The reason I'm interested in seeing other films by the same production company is that I'm currently working on a fairly advanced draft of a study of the tendencies, inclinations, intentions, and messages, explicit, implicit, and subliminal, in short, the ideological signals disseminated among its consumers, step by step, yard by yard, frame by frame, by a particular film-production company, always discounting, of course, the actual degree of awareness with which the company does so. As Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had developed his discourse, the assistant had opened his eyes wider and wider in pure astonishment and pure amazement, utterly won over by a customer who not only knew what he wanted but could give credible reasons for wanting it, something very rare indeed in commerce and, more particularly, in video-rental shops. It must be said, however, that the pure astonishment and pure amazement evident on the assistant's rapt face was tainted by the unpleasant stain of base commercial interest, the simultaneous thought that, since the production company in question was one of the most active and one of the oldest in the business, this customer, whom I must remember always to address as Senhor Máximo Afonso, will end up by depositing a fair bit of money

in the cash register when he finishes that work, study, essay, or whatever it is. Of course, one had to bear in mind that not all the films were available on video, but, even so, it was a promising deal, worth pursuing, Might I suggest, said the assistant, recovered now from his initial surprise, that we ask the production company for a list of all their films, Yes, possibly, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, but that isn't the most urgent thing at the moment, besides, I probably won't need to see every film they've produced, so we'll begin with what you have here, and then, depending on the results and conclusions reached, I'll decide what to do next. The assistant's hopes suddenly shriveled, the balloon was still on the ground and it already seemed to be losing gas. This, though, is precisely the kind of problem that besets small businesses, but just because the donkey kicked doesn't mean he'll break his leg, and if you haven't managed to get rich in twenty-four months, perhaps you'll make it if you work for twenty-four years. With his moral armor more or less restored thanks to the curative properties of these little nuggets of patience and resignation, the assistant announced as he came out from behind the counter and walked toward the shelves, Well, I'll just go and see what we've got, to which Tertuliano Máximo Afonso replied, If you do have any, then five or six will be enough to start with, just so that I can get down to work tonight, Six videos is equivalent to about nine hours' worth of viewing, the assistant remarked, it will be a long evening. This time Tertuliano Máximo Afonso did not reply, he was looking at a poster advertising what must have been a very recent film by the same production company, called The Goddess of the Stage. The names of the principal actors were written in different-sized fonts and were arranged on the poster in accordance with the greater or lesser importance of their place in the national cinematic firmament. The name of the actor who played the role of the hotel receptionist in The Race Is to the Swift would clearly not be there. The assistant returned from his explorations, bringing a pile of six videos, which he placed on the counter, We've got more, but you did say you only wanted five or six, That's fine, I'll come by tomorrow or the day after to pick up any others you find, Should I order those we don't already have, asked the assistant, in an attempt to rekindle dying hopes, Let's start with what we have here and then see. There was no point insisting, the customer really did know what he wanted. In his head, the assistant multiplied by six the individual prices of the videos, he belonged to the old school, to the age before pocket calculators, when these did not even exist in people's dreams, and said a number. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso corrected him, That's the sale price of the videos not the rental price, Oh, since you bought the other one, I assumed you'd want to buy these too, said the assistant by way of explanation, Yes, I might buy some or even all of them eventually, but first I have to see them, to view them, I think that's the right word, to find out if they have what I'm looking for. Overwhelmed by the customer's irrefutable logic, the assistant made a rapid recalculation and slipped the videos into a plastic bag. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso paid, said good afternoon, see you tomorrow, and left. Whoever named you Tertuliano knew what he was doing, muttered the frustrated vendor.

Given that preference is likely to be given to a device blessed with the seal of academic approval, the easiest thing for the relater or narrator, having reached this point,

would be to say that nothing happened during the history teacher's homeward journey across the city. Like a time machine, especially when professional scruples will not permit the invention of a public fracas or a traffic accident just to fill in any gaps in the plot, those words, *Nothing Happened*, are used when there is an urgent need to move on to the next incident or when, for example, one does not know quite what to do with the character's own thoughts, especially if these bear no relation to the existential milieu in which the character is supposed to live and work. The teacher and fledgling lover of videos, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, is in precisely this situation as he is driving his car. He was in fact thinking, a lot and very intensely, but his thoughts bore so little relevance to the last twenty-four hours he had just lived through that if we were to take them into account and include them in this novel, the story we had decided to tell would inevitably have to be replaced by another. True, it might be worthwhile, or rather, since we know everything about Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's thoughts, we know that it would be worthwhile, but this would mean declaring all our hard work, these forty or so dense, difficult pages, null and void, and going back to the beginning, to the ironic, insolent first page, throwing away all that honest toil to take a chance on an adventure, not just new and different, but also highly dangerous, for, of this we are sure, that is precisely where Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's thoughts would lead us. Let us remain therefore with this bird in the hand, rather than suffer the disappointment of seeing two fly away. Besides, we haven't got time for anything else. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has just parked his car and is walking the short distance to his apartment, in one hand he has his teacher's briefcase, in the other the plastic bag, what will he be thinking about now apart from calculating how many videos he will manage to view, to use the more formal term, before going to bed, that's what comes of taking an interest in bit-part players, if he were a star, he'd be there in the very first scenes. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has already opened the front door, gone in, and closed the door behind him, he puts the briefcase down on the desk and, beside it, the bag containing the videos. The air is free of any presences, or perhaps they are simply not apparent, as if what came into the apartment last night had meanwhile become an inseparable part of it. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went to his room to change his clothes, opened the fridge in the kitchen to see if there was anything in it he fancied eating, closed it again, and went back into the living room with a can of beer and a glass. He took the videos out of the bag and arranged them in order of date of production, from the oldest, *The Accursed Code*, made two years before *The Race Is to the Swift*, which he has already seen, to the most recent, *The Goddess of the Stage*, from last year. The other four, in the same order, are *Passenger without a Ticket*, *Death Strikes at Dawn*, *The Alarm Rang Twice*, and *Phone Me Another Day*. An involuntary reflex movement, doubtless provoked by the last of these titles, made him turn and look at his own phone. The light on the machine was blinking, informing him that there were messages for him. He hesitated for a few seconds but ended up pressing the button to hear them. The first was a female voice that did not announce its identity, knowing presumably that it would be instantly recognized, it said only, *It's me*, then went on, *I don't know what's wrong, but you haven't phoned me for a week now, if you want to end the relationship, then it would be better to tell me so to my face, surely this silence isn't*

to do with the fact that we quarreled the other day, well, only you know that, anyway, just to say that I still care about you, lots of love, bye. The second message was the same voice, Please phone me. There was a third message, but this was from the mathematics teacher, Listen, my friend, I got the impression that I did something today to annoy you, but, to be perfectly honest, I can't imagine what it was I did or said, I think we should talk and clear up any possible misunderstanding between us, if I owe you an apology, then please take this call as at least the beginning of one, all the best, and I'm sure I don't need to tell you that you have a friend in me. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso frowned, he vaguely remembered that something irritating or unpleasant had happened at school involving the mathematics teacher, but he couldn't remember what it was. He rewound the tape and listened again to the first two messages, this time with a half smile and a look on his face that is usually described as dreamy. He got up to remove the tape of The Race Is to the Swift from the VCR and to replace it with The Accursed Code, but at the last moment, his finger already on the play button, he realized that, if he went on, he would be committing a grave infraction, omitting one of the sequential points in the plan of action he had drawn up, that is, copying down from the end of The Race Is to the Swift the names of the lowest-ranking bit-part actors, the ones who, even though they occupy time and space in the story, even though they say a few words and serve as satellites, tiny ones, of course, at the service of the interconnections and crossed orbits of the stars, do not even have the right to one of those temporary names, as necessary in life as in fiction, although we should not perhaps say so. He could, of course, do it afterward, at another time, but order, as people also say of the dog, is man's best friend, although, like the dog, it does occasionally bite. Everything in its place and a place for everything has always been the golden rule in prosperous families, just as, time and again, do what you have to do in good order has been shown to be the most solid insurance policy against the phantoms of chaos. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso quickly wound on the now familiar tape of The Race Is to the Swift, paused it at the relevant place, copied onto a sheet of paper the names of the men, only the men, because this time, most unusually, the object of the search is not a woman. We assume this provides an adequate explanation of the plan Tertuliano Máximo Afonso drew up during his long deliberations, that is, to try and identify the hotel receptionist, the one who was the spitting image of himself in the days when he had a mustache, and who doubtless continues to be so today without the mustache, and, who knows, tomorrow too, when the receding hairline of one begins to move in the direction of the baldness of the other. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's plan was, like Columbus's discovery of the Indies, obvious once one had thought of it, to note down all the names of the supporting actors, both in the films in which the receptionist appeared and those in which he did not. For example, if his human copy does not appear in the film, The Accursed Code, that he has just slotted in the VCR, he can strike from the first list all those actors who also appeared in The Race Is to the Swift. As we know, a Neanderthal's brain would be no use at all in a situation like this, but for a history teacher accustomed to grappling with people from the most various places and times, why, only yesterday he was reading a chapter on the Amorites in that erudite tome about ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, this poor man's version of a treasure hunt is pure child's play

and probably did not merit, on our part, such a detailed and comprehensive explanation. In the end, contrary to all our expectations, the hotel receptionist did appear in *The Accursed Code*, this time in the guise of a bank clerk being threatened by a gunman and, doubtless to appear more convincing in the dissatisfied eyes of the director, exaggerating his fearful tremblings as he was forced to transfer the contents of the safe into a bag that the attacker hurled across the counter at him, at the same time snarling out of the corner of his mouth, a gesture so characteristic of the gangster genre, Either fill this up or I'll fill you full of lead. He had a certain taste for alliteration, this bandit. The bank clerk reappeared on two other occasions, the first time to answer police questions, the second when the bank manager decided to take him off counter duty because, traumatized by the incident, he had started to view all customers as potential thieves. Needless to say, the bank clerk sported the same fine, lustrous mustache as the hotel receptionist. This time, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso did not feel cold rivulets of sweat running down his back, this time his hands did not shake, he paused the image for a few seconds, studied it with cold curiosity, then moved on. Since this was a film in which the identical man, the look-alike, the unattached Siamese twin, the prisoner of Zenda, or some other thing still awaiting classification, had taken part, the method to be followed in the search for his real identity would clearly have to be different, marking any names that had appeared on the first list and were repeated on the second. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso marked two, only two, with a cross. It was still some time until supper, his appetite showed no signs of impatience, he could therefore see the film that was next in chronological order, *Passenger without a Ticket* was the title, but it might just as well have been called *A Complete Waste of Time*, for the man in the iron mask had not been hired to appear in it. *A Complete Waste of Time*, we say, but not so complete, because thanks to the film a few more names could be crossed out on the first list and the second, By a process of elimination I'll get there in the end, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso said out loud, as if he had suddenly felt a need for company. The telephone rang. The least probable of all the possibilities was that it was his colleague the mathematics teacher, the most possible of all the probabilities that it was the same woman who had phoned twice before. It could also be his mother calling from far away, inquiring after the health of her beloved son. After a few rings, the telephone fell silent, a sign that the recording mechanism was about to start, from then on the recorded words will have to wait for the time when someone wants to listen to them, the mother asking, How have you been, my dear, the friend insisting, I don't think I said or did anything wrong, the lover despairing, I don't deserve to be treated like this by you. Whatever is now inside the machine, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso does not feel like listening to it. To distract himself, rather than because his stomach was demanding food, he went into the kitchen to make himself a sandwich and open another can of beer. He sat down on a stool, munched without pleasure on this frugal meal while his thoughts, set free, abandoned themselves to daydreaming. Realizing that conscious vigilance had faded away into a kind of swoon, common sense, which, after its first energetic intervention, had simply wandered off somewhere, insinuated itself in between two inconclusive fragments of that vague meditation and asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso if he was happy with the situation he had created.

Brought abruptly back to the bitter taste of a beer that had soon lost its coldness and to the soft, clammy consistency of a piece of low-quality ham squeezed between two slices of phony bread, the history teacher replied that happiness had nothing to do with what was going on here, and, as for the situation, he would just like to say that he had not created it. I agree you didn't create it, replied common sense, but most situations in which we find ourselves would never have got where they are if we hadn't helped them along, and you're not going to deny that you helped this one along, It was just curiosity, that's all, We've already discussed this, Have you got anything against curiosity, All I'm saying is that life hasn't yet taught you to understand that our finest gift, and by ours I mean common sense's, has always been curiosity, In my view, common sense and curiosity are incompatible, How wrong you are, sighed common sense, Prove it to me then, Who do you think invented the wheel, Nobody knows, Oh yes we do, the wheel was invented by common sense, only an enormous amount of common sense would have been capable of inventing it, And what about the atomic bomb, did common sense invent that too, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso in the triumphant tone of one who has just caught his opponent off guard, Oh, no, the atomic bomb was obviously invented by a sense, but there was nothing common about it, Forgive me saying so, but common sense is naturally conservative, I would go further and say reactionary, Ah, those accusing letters, sooner or later everyone writes them and everyone receives them, If all those people were sufficiently of one mind to write them, even those who had no alternative but to receive them, apart, that is, from writing them themselves, then it must be true, You know perfectly well that being of one mind doesn't always mean being in the right, what tends to happen is that people gather together under an opinion as if it were an umbrella. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso opened his mouth to speak, if the expression "opened his mouth" is allowable in a description of an entirely silent dialogue, taking place entirely in the mind as this one was, but common sense was no longer there, it had noiselessly withdrawn, not defeated exactly, but annoyed with itself for having allowed the conversation to be diverted from the matter that had provoked its reappearance. Always assuming, of course, that it hadn't been entirely common sense's fault that this had happened. Indeed, common sense has often been mistaken about consequences, badly so when it invented the wheel, disastrously so when it invented the atomic bomb. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso looked at his watch, calculated how long it would take to watch another film, for he was starting to feel the effects of that sleepless night, his eyelids, with the help of the beer he had drunk, were heavy as lead, and this was probably what lay behind the abstracted state into which he had fallen earlier. If I go to bed now, he said, I'll probably just wake up again in two or three hours' time, and then I'll feel even worse. He decided to see a bit of Death Strikes at Dawn, the guy might not even be in it, which would simplify everything, he could fast-forward to the end, make a note of the names, and then go to bed. He was quite wrong. There he was, playing the part of a hospital auxiliary, without a mustache this time. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's hair stood on end again, this time only on his arms, the sweat left his back alone, and a normal sweat, not a cold one, contented itself with slightly dampening his forehead. He watched the whole film, put a cross next to another name that had appeared on other

lists, and went to bed. He even read a couple of pages from the chapter on the Amorites before turning out the light. His last conscious thought was about his colleague the mathematics teacher. He really didn't know how to explain his sudden coldness toward him in the corridor at school. Was it because he put his hand on my shoulder, he asked, and immediately replied, I'll look like a complete fool if I tell him that and he turns his back on me, which is what I would do in his place. He used the final second before sleep to murmur, perhaps addressing himself, perhaps his colleague, There are some things you just can't explain in words.

WELL, THAT'S NOT QUITE TRUE. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN there were so few words that we did not even have enough to express something as simple as, This is my mouth, or, That is your mouth, still less ask, Why are our mouths touching. It doesn't occur to people nowadays what a lot of work was involved in creating those words, it was necessary, in the first place, to realize that there was a need for them, which may, who knows, have been the most difficult thing of all, then to reach a consensus on the significance of their immediate effects, and finally, a task that will never fully be completed, to imagine the consequences that might ensue, in the medium and long term, from these effects and from these words. Compared with this, and contrary to common sense's peremptory statement of last night, the invention of the wheel was no more than a lucky chance, as would be the discovery of the universal law of gravity, all because an apple happened to fall on Newton's head. The wheel was invented and stayed invented forever and ever, whereas words, those and all the others, came into the world with a vague, diffuse destiny, as highly provisional phonetic and morphological clusters, however much, thanks perhaps to the inherited glow of their glorious creation, they may insist on passing themselves off, not so much in their own right, but on behalf of the thing they variably mean and represent, as immortal, undying, or eternal, depending on the taste of the person doing the classifying. This congenital tendency, which they proved unable to resist, became, over time, a grave and possibly insoluble problem of communication, either in the collective or in the personal sense, getting their apples and their onions mixed up, their legacies with their legalese, the words usurping the place of the thing that, before, for better or worse, they had done their best to express, and out of which came, in the end, don't let the mask fool you, the thunderous clatter of empty cans, the carnivalesque cortege of canisters with labels on the outside but nothing inside, or merely, fading fast, the evocative smell of the food for mind and body that they once contained and conserved. This rambling reflection on the origins and destinies of words has led us so far from our real subject that we have no option but to start again at the beginning. Contrary to appearances, it was not mere chance that made us write the phrase, This is my mouth or the phrase, That is your mouth, still less, Why are our mouths touching. Had Tertuliano Máximo Afonso spent some of his time years ago, always assuming he had done so at the right moment, pondering the consequences and effects, short-term and long-term, of similar phrases and others that tend and incline to the same end, it is highly probable that he would not now be looking at the phone, scratching his head, a perplexed look on his face, wondering what the devil he will say to the woman who twice, possibly three times, left her voice and her lamentations on his answering machine. The smug half smile and dreamy expression we noticed last night when he listened to the messages were, after all, just a reprehensible sign of pride, and pride, especially among the male half of the world, is like one of those supposed friends who, at the first hint of trouble in our life, make themselves scarce or look the other way, whistling loudly. Maria da Paz, for that is the sweet, promising name of the woman who phoned, will soon be leaving for work, and if Tertuliano Máximo Afonso does not speak to her right now, the poor woman will have to spend another day worrying, which, whatever may have been her errors or her sins, if, indeed, she has committed any, really would be

most unfair. Or undeserved, which was the term she preferred to use. It must be said, however, in respect and obedience to the rigor of the facts, that the difficulty Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is wrestling with at the moment has nothing to do with estimable questions of morality or scruples about justice or injustice, but the knowledge that if he doesn't phone her, she will phone him, and that the new call will bring down on him more recriminations, possibly tearful, possibly not. The wine has been poured and, in its time, savored, now he has to drink the bitter dregs in the bottom of the glass. As we will have ample opportunity to discover in the future, and in situations that will teach him some hard lessons, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is not what one would call a bad person, we could even find him honorably included in a list of good people, if the list was drawn up according to some fairly undemanding criteria, but apart from being, as we have seen, extremely sensitive, which is a clear indication of a lack of self-confidence, his main weakness lies in his emotions, which have never been strong or enduring. His divorce, for example, was not one of those classic melodramas, all jealousies and betrayals, desertions and violence, it was merely the climax of a long process of continuous decay that had afflicted his own loving feelings and which he, whether out of distraction or indifference, would merely have sat back and watched to see what arid deserts would result, but which the woman to whom he was married, more honest and decent than him, finally found unbearable and unacceptable. I married you because I loved you, she said one famous day, but the only reason I would continue in this marriage now would be out of cowardice, And you're no coward, he said. No, she said, I'm not. The likelihood of this, in many ways, attractive person playing a part in the story we are telling is, alas, minimal, not to say nonexistent, it would depend on an action, gesture, or word from this her ex-husband, a word, gesture, or action that would doubtless be determined by some need or interest of his but about which, at this stage, we have no way of knowing. That is why we do not feel it necessary to give her a name. As for Maria da Paz, whether or not she continues to be a presence in these pages, for how long and to what end, is up to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, he knows what he will say to her if and when he finally decides to pick up the phone and dial a number he knows by heart. He doesn't know by heart the mathematics teacher's number, which is why he is looking it up in his address book, it would seem, after all, that he is not going to phone Maria da Paz, he thought it more important, more urgent, to clear up an insignificant misunderstanding than to soothe a suffering female soul or deliver the coup de grâce. When Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's ex-wife said she was not a coward, she was at pains not to offend him with the assertion or even suggestion that he was, but in this case, as so often in life, a word to the wise is enough, and returning to the present emotional scene, the long-suffering, patient Maria da Paz is not even being granted half a word, although she has already grasped almost everything there is to understand, namely, that her boyfriend, lover, sexual partner, or whatever people call these things nowadays, is preparing to say good-bye. It was the mathematics teacher's wife who answered the phone and asked, Who is it, in a voice that barely disguised the irritation caused by a phone call at that hour in the morning, she didn't communicate this with half words but with a shrill, vibrant subtone, we are clearly in the presence here of a subject crying out for the attention of scholars

from various disciplines, in particular that of sound theory, with appropriate help from those who have known most about the subject for centuries now, we are referring, of course, to people in the music world, to composers, in the first place, but also to the interpreters, to musicians, who are the ones who have to know how to make the sounds. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso began by apologizing, then gave his name and asked if he could speak to, Just a minute, I'll call him, the woman cut in, and shortly afterward there was his colleague saying, Good morning, and him responding, Good morning, he apologized again, said that he had only just heard his friend's message, I could have waited to talk to you at school but felt I should clear the air as quickly as possible so as not to leave room for any further misunderstandings, these things can so easily get out of hand, As far as I'm concerned, there is no misunderstanding, said the mathematics teacher, my conscience is as clear as a baby's, Yes, I know, I know, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, it's all my fault, the fault of this apathy, this depression that puts my nerves on edge, I get oversensitive, mistrustful, I imagine things, What things, asked his colleague, Oh, I don't know, just things, for example, that I'm not being treated with the consideration I think I deserve, sometimes I even have the feeling I don't really know what I am, that is, I know who I am, but not what I am, does that make sense, More or less, but it still doesn't explain the reason for your, what should I call it, reaction, yes, your reaction, To be perfectly honest, I don't understand it either, it was just a fleeting impression, as if you had treated me, how can I put it, in a paternalistic way, And when did I treat you in this paternalistic way, to use your terms, When we were standing in the corridor, about to go off to our respective classes, you placed your hand on my shoulder, it was obviously a friendly gesture, but I just took it the wrong way, it was as if you had hit me, Yes, I remember now, How could you not remember, if I'd had an electricity generator in my stomach you would have been struck down there and then, You mean your rejection of my gesture was that strong, Rejection may not be the right word, the snail doesn't reject the finger that touches it, it simply withdraws, That's the snail's way of rejecting it, Yes, But you haven't got much of the snail about you, Sometimes I think we're very similar, Who, you and me, No, me and the snail, Look, just shake off that depression and it will put a whole new complexion on things, That's odd, What is, That you should use those words, What words, About putting a whole new complexion on things, The meaning's fairly obvious, isn't it, Oh, yes, I understood what you meant, but what you've just said chimes in exactly with certain recent anxieties of mine, If I'm to continue following you, you're going to have to be more explicit, It's too soon for that now, but perhaps one day, Good, I'll look forward to it. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso thought, You can look forward to it all you like, and then, Coming back to what really matters, my friend, I just wanted to ask you to forgive me, You're forgiven, man, you're forgiven, although it's really not that important, you'd just created inside your head what people usually call a tempest in a teacup, fortunately, these shipwrecks nearly always happen within sight of the beach and no one drowns, Thanks for taking it all so well, That's all right, I'm glad to, If my common sense weren't so distracted with fantasies and phantoms and unwanted advice, I would have seen at once that the way I responded to your generous impulse wasn't just over the top, it was positively mad, Don't be deceived,

common sense is much too common to really be sense, it's just a chapter from a statistics book, the one everyone always trots out, How interesting, I'd never thought of old, much-applauded common sense as being like a chapter from a statistics book, but when I think about it, that's exactly what it is, exactly, It could equally well be a chapter from a history book, in fact, now that we're on the subject, there's a book that should have been written, but which doesn't, as far as I know, exist, What book's that, A history of common sense, You're amazing, don't tell me you always produce ideas of this caliber first thing in the morning, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso somewhat archly, If I get the right kind of stimulus, yes, but only after breakfast, replied the mathematics teacher, laughing, Well, I'll have to start phoning you every morning, then, Careful, remember what happened with the goose that laid the golden eggs, See you later, Yes, see you later, and I promise I won't go all paternalistic on you again, Even though you are almost old enough to be my father, All the more reason. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso replaced the receiver, he felt pleased, relieved, besides, the conversation had been both interesting and intelligent, it's not every day that someone turns up and tells us that common sense is nothing but a chapter from a statistics book and that what every library in the world lacks is a history of common sense from the time Adam and Eve were driven out of Paradise. A glance at the clock told him that Maria da Paz would have already left for her job at the bank and that the matter could be more or less sorted out, however temporarily, with a nice message left on her answering machine, Then I'll see. Out of prudence, just in case fate was conspiring against him, he decided to wait half an hour. Maria da Paz lives with her mother and they always leave the house together in the morning, one to go to work, the other to go to Mass and do the day's shopping. Maria da Paz's mother has been a great churchgoer ever since she was widowed. Deprived of the majesty of matrimony, in whose shadow, which she had always seen as a refuge, she had been shriveling up for years and years, she had gone in search of another gentleman to serve, a gentleman for life and for death too, a gentleman, moreover, whose one inestimable advantage was that he would never leave her a widow again. Once the half hour of waiting was over, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was still unclear about the terms in which he should respond to the message, he had begun by thinking that a simple reply would be best, affectionate and natural, but, as we all know, the subtle shades of meaning between affectionate and cool and between natural and artificial are little less than infinite, normally, we come out with the right tone of voice for each circumstance spontaneously, but when there's an element of mistrust, as there is in this case, everything that strikes one at first as perfectly adequate and fitting will, the next moment, seem either abrupt or excessive. The eloquent silence, long favored by a particularly lazy kind of literature, does not exist, eloquent silences are just words that have got stuck in the throat, choked words that have been unable to escape the embrace of the glottis. After much racking of his brain, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso decided that, to be absolutely safe, the most prudent course of action would be to write the message down and then read it over the phone. This is what he came up with after several torn-up sheets of paper, Hi, Maria da Paz, I got your messages, and I'd just like to say that I think we should act with great caution and only make decisions that are right for both of us, bearing in mind that the only thing that lasts a

whole lifetime is life itself, everything else is inevitably precarious, unstable, transient, time has taught me that one great truth, but I do know that we're friends and that we'll go on being friends, what we need is to have a good, long conversation and sort things out between us, I'll be in touch again soon. He hesitated for a second, what he was about to say was not on the piece of paper, then he ended the call with, Lots of love. When he had put the phone down, he reread what he had written and noticed the importunate presence of a few subtle shades of meaning to which he had not paid sufficient attention, some were less subtle than others, for example, that awful old chestnut, we're friends now and we'll always be friends, that's the worst thing anyone can say if they're trying to end a romantic relationship, it's as if we had closed the door only to find that we were still stuck fast in it, and then, quite apart from that pathetic Lots of love he had added at the end, there was the crass error of saying that they needed to have a long conversation, he should know by now, from personal experience and from the continual lessons learned from *A History of Private Lives through the Ages*, that long conversations, in situations such as this, are terribly dangerous, how often has someone begun such a conversation feeling positively murderous toward the other person only to end up in their arms. What else could I do, he groaned, I obviously couldn't tell her that everything between us would continue as before, eternal love and all that, but neither could I, over the phone and when she's not there to pick it up, deliver the final blow, just like that, sorry, sweetheart, it's all over, that would be utter cowardice and I very much hope I never sink quite that low. With this conciliatory thought, along the lines of you win some, you lose some, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso decided to rest on his laurels, knowing, however, poor man, that the most difficult part was yet to come. At least I did my best, he concluded.

Up until now we have not needed to know on which day of the week these intriguing events are taking place, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's next actions, if they are to be understood, demand the information that today is a Friday, from which one will easily draw the conclusion that yesterday was Thursday and the day before that was Wednesday. Many readers will judge the complementary information we have given them about yesterday and the day before yesterday to be unnecessary, obvious, useless, absurd, even downright stupid, but, in anticipation of such a remark, we would counter by saying that any criticism along these lines reveals only bad faith and ignorance, given that, as is widely known, there are languages in the world that call Wednesday, for example, *mercredi*, *miércoles*, *mercoledì*, or *quarta-feira*, that call Thursday *jeudi*, *jueves*, *giovedì*, or *quinta-feira*, and as for Friday, if we had not taken the overt precaution of protecting its name, there would even be people out there who would start calling it *Freitag*. It may yet happen, all in good time, its moment will come. Having clarified this point, having agreed that today is Friday, having mentioned that the history teacher will have classes today only in the afternoon, and having noted that tomorrow, Saturday, *samedi*, *sábado*, *sabato*, there will be no classes, that we are therefore on the eve of the weekend, but, above all, because one should never put off till tomorrow what one can do today, it is clear that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is quite right to go to the video-rental

shop this morning so that he can rent the remaining films that interest him. He will return Passenger without a Ticket to its source, as being of no use in his researches, and will purchase copies of Death Strikes at Dawn and The Accursed Code. He still has three videos left from yesterday, which represent at least four and a half hours' viewing, and, along with whatever else he brings back from the shop, it promises to be an unforgettable weekend, a cinematic blowout if ever there was one, a real button-buster as country people used to say. He got dressed, ate breakfast, put the videos back in their respective boxes, locked them in one of the desk drawers, and left, first going upstairs to tell his neighbor that she could come down anytime to clean and tidy his apartment, Pop down whenever you like, I won't be back until later this afternoon, and then, far less agitated than he was the previous day but still afflicted by the nervousness of someone on his way to a meeting with a person who, although this is not the first of such meetings, will, for that very reason, brook no mistakes, he got into the car and set off for the video-rental shop. The moment has come to inform those readers who, given the, so far, rather scant urban descriptions, have created in their mind the idea that this is all taking place in a medium-sized city, one, that is, of fewer than a million inhabitants, but the moment has come, as we were saying, to inform them that, on the contrary, this teacher, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, is one of the just over five million human beings who, with major differences in standards of living and other differences that defy all comparison, inhabit the vast metropolis that extends over what were, long ago, hills, valleys, and plains, and which is now a continuous labyrinthine duplication both horizontally and vertically, initially made more complicated by components we will term diagonals, but which, meanwhile, with the passing of time, have brought some measure of equilibrium to the chaotic urban mesh, for they established frontier lines that, paradoxically, instead of driving things apart, brought them closer together. The survival instinct, for that is what one is dealing with in big cities, applies both to the animal and to the inanimal, an admittedly abstruse term that does not appear in any dictionary and that we have had to invent so that, aptly and appositely, we can render transparent, at a glance, whether via the ordinary sense of the first word, animal, or via the unusual spelling of the second, inanimal, the differences and similarities between things and non-things, between the inanimate and the animate. From now on, whenever we use the word "inanimal," we will do so with the intention of being as clear and precise as when, in the other kingdom, where the novelty of being and all its designations has entirely worn off, we used to refer to both man and dog as animals. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, despite being a teacher of history, has never understood that everything that is animal is destined to become inanimal and that, however great the names and deeds inscribed by human beings on History's pages, it is from the inanimal that we come and toward the inanimal that we are going. Meanwhile, though, between the lashes, as the above-mentioned country people used to say, meaning that in the briefest of brief intervals between one lash and the next the back had time to rest, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is driving to the video-rental shop, one of the many intermediate destinations that await him in life. The assistant who had attended him on his two previous visits was busy with another customer. He gave a nod of recognition, however, and showed his teeth in a

smile, which, though lacking any apparent special meaning, might have concealed some murky intention. A female assistant who stepped forward to ask the newly arrived customer what he wanted was stopped in her tracks by a few curt but imperious words, I'll deal with this, and she had to withdraw with a small, faint smile, which was at once understanding and apologetic. Being new to the profession and to that establishment, and therefore inexperienced in the sophisticated art of selling, she was not yet authorized to deal with first-class customers. Let us not forget that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, who is, as we know, a respected teacher of history and a renowned scholar of serious audiovisual matters, is also a large-scale renter of videos, as was shown yesterday and as will be shown again today. Having dealt with his other customer, the assistant, bright-eyed and zealous, came over to him, Good morning, sir, lovely to see you again, he said. While not wishing to cast doubt on the sincerity or cordiality of this greeting, it is, nevertheless, impossible to allow to pass without comment the evident and apparently unbridgeable contradiction between it and the final words muttered yesterday by this same assistant when this same customer left the shop, Whoever named you Tertuliano knew what he was doing. The explanation, let us hasten to add, lies in the pile of videos on the counter, about thirty at least. Expert in the aforesaid art of selling, the assistant, having given vehement but sotto voce expression to his feelings, decided that it would be a mistake to let himself be blinded by disappointment and that, although he had been unable to make the big sale he had initially hoped for, there was still the possibility that this Tertuliano fellow could be encouraged to rent all the videos available from the same production company, thus, and not without some basis, preserving the hope of being able to sell him a large number of the videos he had rented. Business life is full of trapdoors and pitfalls, a real lucky dip, although not always so lucky, you have to play your cards close to your chest, you have to be sly and calculating but without the client noticing your subtle maneuverings, you have to wear away at any preconceived ideas he may have brought with him to protect himself, to lay siege to any show of resistance, and to probe his innermost desires, in short, the new assistant will have to eat a lot of bread and a lot of salt if she is ever to reach such heights. What the assistant does not know is that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has gone there with the precise aim of stocking up with videos for the weekend, determined now to get through as many as he can lay his hands on, rather than, as he did yesterday, content himself with a mere half dozen. In this way, vice once more paid homage to virtue, in this way vice raised virtue up, rather than trampling it underfoot as it had hoped. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso put Passenger without a Ticket on the counter and said, I'm not interested in this one, And what about the others you rented, have you decided what to do with them, asked the assistant, Yes, I'll keep Death Strikes at Dawn and The Accursed Code, but the other three I haven't yet seen, Now correct me if I'm wrong, but those three are The Goddess of the Stage, The Alarm Rang Twice, and Phone Me Another Day, recited the assistant, after consulting the relevant index card, Exactly, So that means you're renting Passenger and buying Death and the Code, Exactly, Right, so what can we do for you today, here we have, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso did not give him time to finish his sentence, Those videos over there were, I assume, set aside for me, Exactly, echoed the assistant, caught, in his mind,

between contentment at having won without a struggle and disappointment at not having had to struggle in order to win, How many are there, Thirty-six, How many hours is that, If we continue to calculate on the basis of an average hour and a half per film, let me see now, said the assistant, reaching for his calculator, Don't worry, I can tell you the answer, it's fifty-four, How did you manage to do that so quickly, asked the assistant, ever since these machines became available, and even though I haven't lost the ability to do sums in my head, I always use them for more complicated calculations, It's really easy, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, thirty-six half hours equals eighteen, so if you add the thirty-six whole hours we already had to the eighteen from the half hours, you get fifty-four, Are you a mathematics teacher, No, history, not mathematics, in fact, I've never been much good at figures, Well, you'd never know it, knowledge really is a wonderful thing, It depends what you know, It depends too, I think, who knows it, If you were capable of reaching that conclusion on your own, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, then you don't need calculators at all. The assistant was not sure he had entirely grasped the meaning of the customer's words, but they struck him as pleasant, friendly, even flattering, and as soon as he got home, assuming he hadn't forgotten them en route, he would repeat them to his wife. He decided to do the multiplication with pencil and paper, so many videos at so much, because he had resolved that, at least in front of this customer, he would never again use a calculator. It came to quite a tidy sum, not as much as it would have if, instead of renting, he had been buying, but this selfish thought went as quickly as it came, the peace had definitely been signed. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso paid, then asked, Would you very much mind making up two packages of eighteen cassettes each while I go and fetch my car, it's parked too far away for me to be able to carry them all there. A quarter of an hour later, it was the assistant himself who came and put the packages in the trunk, closed the car door after Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had got in, said good-bye with a smile and a wave that were the very embodiment of fond affection, and who murmured as he returned to the counter, People may say that it's first impressions that count, but here's a person whom I didn't take to at all to start with, and yet. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's thoughts were following a very different route, Two days equals forty-eight hours, mathematically, of course, that's not enough time for me to watch all the films even if I don't sleep for those two days, but if I start tonight, with the whole of Saturday and Sunday ahead of me, and make it a serious rule not to watch a film all the way through if the fellow hasn't appeared by the halfway point, I'm sure I'll have finished the task by Monday. The plan of action was complete in its objective and perfect in its form, there was no need for addenda, appendices, or footnotes, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso insisted, If he doesn't appear by the halfway point, he won't appear afterward. Yes, afterward. That is the word that has been hanging around ever since the actor who played the part of the hotel receptionist appeared for the first time in that interesting and amusing film *The Race Is to the Swift*. And afterward, asked the history teacher, like a child who does not know that there is no point asking about something that has not yet happened, what will I do afterward, what will I do after finding out that this man has appeared in fifteen or twenty films, that, so far as I have been able to ascertain, as well as playing a hotel receptionist, he has also been a bank clerk and a medical auxiliary,

what will I do then. He had the answer on the tip of his tongue, but he only gave that answer a minute later, Find him and meet him.

BY CHANCE OR FOR SOME OTHER UNKNOWN REASON, SOMEONE must have gone to tell the headmaster that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was in the staff room, apparently filling in time until lunch, since all he had done since going in there had been to read the newspapers. He wasn't marking homework, he wasn't putting the final touches to a lesson plan, he wasn't making notes, he was just reading the newspapers. He had begun by taking from his briefcase the receipt for the rental of the thirty-six videos, which he unfolded and placed on the table, then he looked for the entertainment page in the first newspaper, the cinema section. He would do the same with another two newspapers. Although, as we know, his addiction to the seventh art is very recent and his ignorance about anything to do with the image industry unchanged, he knew, assumed, imagined, or guessed that any new releases would not be launched immediately onto the video market. In order to reach this conclusion he did not need to be endowed with a prodigious deductive intelligence or with some extraordinary access to a knowledge beyond reason, it was a simple and obvious matter of applying very ordinary common sense and looking under the section devoted to videos to buy and rent. He looked for cinemas that showed older films, and, one by one, ballpoint in hand, he compared the titles of the films shown there with those on the receipt, marking the titles on the latter with a small cross whenever they coincided. If anyone were to ask Tertuliano Máximo Afonso why he was doing this, if he intended going to those cinemas to see films he already had on video, he would probably look at us surprised, astonished, perhaps offended that we judged him capable of such an absurd act, not that he would give us an acceptable explanation either, apart from the one that erects walls to keep out other people's curiosity and which in two words says, Just because. Meanwhile, we, who have been privy to the history teacher's intimate thoughts and have insinuated ourselves into his secrets, can tell you that the sole point of this absurd undertaking is to keep his attention fixed on the one objective that has obsessed him for the last three days, or to prevent his attention from becoming distracted, for example, by reading the news in the newspapers, as the other teachers present in the room probably imagine he is doing now. Life, however, is made in such a way that even doors we considered firmly locked and bolted against the world find themselves at the mercy of the modest, solicitous errand boy who has just come into the room to announce to the history teacher that the headmaster would very much like to see him in his office. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso got to his feet, folded up the newspapers, put the receipt back in his briefcase, and went out into the corridor where some of the classrooms were. The headmaster's office was on the floor above, and the stairs that led up to it had, in the roof, a skylight so opaque inside and so grimy outside that, winter and summer, it allowed in only a miserly amount of natural light. He went down another passageway and stopped at the second door. The green light was lit, and so he rapped on the door and opened it when he heard a voice inside say, Come in, then he said his good mornings, shook the headmaster's hand, and, at a sign from him, sat down. Whenever he went into this room, he had the feeling that he had seen this same office somewhere else, it was like one of those dreams we know we have dreamed but which we cannot manage to recall when we wake up. The floor was carpeted, there were thick curtains at the window, the desk was large and old-

fashioned, the black leather armchair modern. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso knew this furniture, these curtains, this carpet, or thought he did, one possibility is that he had one day read in a novel or a story the brief description of another office belonging to another headmaster of another school, in which case, if this could be proved with book in hand, he would be forced to replace, with a banal occurrence that could happen to anyone endowed with a reasonable memory, something that he had always thought, up until now, was an intersection between his routine life and the majestic circular flow of the eternal return. Fantasies. Absorbed in these visions, the history teacher had not heard the headmaster's first words, but we, who will always be around lest anything be missed, can safely say that he did not miss much, merely the reciprocation of his good morning, the question, How have you been, the preamble I asked you to come and see me, but from then on, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was there in body and in spirit, with the light of his eyes and understanding awake. I asked you to come and see me, said the headmaster again because he noticed what appeared to be an air of distraction on the other man's face, to talk to you about what you said at yesterday's meeting about the teaching of history, What did I say at yesterday's meeting, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, Don't you remember, Well, I have a vague idea, but my head's not very clear, I didn't sleep much last night, Are you ill, No, not ill, just slightly anxious, that's all, That's bad enough, Really, sir, it's of no importance, there's no need to worry, What you said, word for word, I've got it written down on this piece of paper, was that the only serious decision to be taken as regards the teaching of history is whether we should teach it from back to front or from front to back, It's not the first time I've said that, Precisely, you've said it so often that your colleagues no longer take it seriously, they start to smile as soon as you say the first words, My colleagues are lucky, they're easily amused, and you, And I what, Do you take me seriously, I wonder, or do you too smile as soon as I say the first words, or perhaps the second, You know me well enough to realize that I'm not easily amused, still less in a situation like that, as for taking you seriously, there's no question, you're one of our best teachers, the students admire and respect you, which, these days, is nothing short of miraculous, So why did you ask to see me, Just to ask you not to repeat, That business about the only serious decision to be taken, Yes, In that case, I won't open my mouth in meetings anymore, if someone thinks they have something important to say and the others don't want to hear it, then it's best to keep quiet, Personally, I've always found your idea very interesting, Thank you, sir, but don't tell me that, tell my colleagues, tell the ministry, besides, it's not even my idea, I didn't invent it, people far more competent than me have proposed and defended it, Without noticeable success, That's understandable, sir, talking about the past is the easiest thing there is, it's all written down, it's just a question of repeating, of parroting, of checking in books what students write in their essays or say in the oral exams, whereas talking about a present that is exploding in our face at every minute, talking about it every day of the year and at the same time navigating the river of History back to the source, or thereabouts, always struggling to get a better understanding of the chain of events that has brought us where we are now, that's quite another story, it's a lot of work, requires great perseverance in its application, you have to keep the rope pulled tight all the time, What you've just said

is admirable, indeed, I think even the minister would be persuaded by your eloquence, Hm, I doubt it, sir, ministers are put there in order to persuade us, Look, I withdraw what I said before, from now on, I'll support you all the way, Thank you, but it's best not to foster illusions, the system has to render accounts to the person in charge and that's a kind of arithmetic they don't like at all, We'll insist, Someone once said that all the great truths are basically trivial and so we have to find new ways, preferably paradoxical ways, of expressing them, in order to keep them from falling into oblivion, Who said that, A German, a man called Schlegel, but others probably said it before him, It makes you think, though, Yes, but what I like most about it is the fascinating assertion that the great truths are just so much trivia, the rest, the supposed need for a new, paradoxical way of expressing them and thus prolonging their existence and giving them substance doesn't really concern me, after all, I'm just a history teacher in a secondary school, We should talk more, my friend, There isn't time to do everything, sir, besides, there are my other colleagues who doubtless have more important things to tell you, for example, how to find easy amusement in difficult words, and the students, we mustn't forget the students, poor things, who, if they didn't have someone to talk to, might one day end up with nothing to say, imagine what school life would be like with everyone talking to each other, we'd never get anything done, and work calls. The headmaster looked at his watch and said, So does lunch, let's go and eat. He got up, walked around his desk, and, in a spontaneous expression of real regard, placed his hand on the shoulder of the history teacher, who had also stood up. There was, inevitably, something paternalistic about this gesture, but coming as it did from the headmaster, this was only natural, only right even, human relations being what we know them to be. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's hypersensitive electricity generator did not react to this touch, a sign that there had been no troublesome hyperbole in the headmaster's show of appreciation, or, who knows, perhaps it was just that this morning's illuminating conversation with the mathematics teacher had simply unplugged the generator. One can never repeat too often that other trivial truth, that small causes can produce great results. When the headmaster went back to his desk to fetch his glasses, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso looked around the room, saw the curtains, the black leather armchair, the carpet, and again thought, I've been here before. Then, perhaps because someone had suggested that he might merely have read somewhere a description of an office similar to this, he added another thought, Reading is probably another way of being in a place. The headmaster's glasses were now safely in his top jacket pocket and he was saying, smiling, Off we go then, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso will be unable to explain now or ever why the air seems to have thickened, as if impregnated with an invisible presence, as intense and powerful as the one that roused him brusquely from his bed after watching that first video. He thought, If I had been here before I became a schoolteacher, what I'm feeling now could be nothing more than a memory of myself reactivated by my current nervous state. The remainder of that thought, if there was a remainder, was never developed, the headmaster was taking his arm and saying something about great lies, wondering if they were also trivial, and if paradoxes could stop them from falling into oblivion too. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso just managed to pick up the thread at the very last moment, Great truths, great lies, I

suppose in time everything becomes trivial, the usual dishes with the same old sauce, he replied, Now I hope that isn't a criticism of our kitchens, joked the headmaster, Certainly not, I'm a regular customer, responded Tertuliano Máximo Afonso in the same vein. They went downstairs to the canteen and, on the way, were joined by the mathematics teacher and a teacher of English, which meant that the headmaster's table was full for that lunchtime. So, said the mathematics teacher in a low voice, while the headmaster and the English teacher went on ahead of them, how are you feeling, Good, very good actually, Did you have a little chat, Yes, he called me to his office to ask me not to bring up that business of teaching topsy-turvy history again, Topsy-turvy, It's just a figure of speech, And what did you say, Oh, I explained my point of view for the hundredth time and I think I finally managed to persuade him that my crazy idea was not quite as dotty as he had always thought, A victory, Which won't get us anywhere, True enough, though, of course, one can never be quite sure where exactly victories get us anyway, sighed the mathematics teacher, Whereas everyone knows where defeats get us, especially the people who poured everything they were and everything they had into the battle, but no one pays any attention to that particular lesson from history, Anyone would think you were fed up with your job, Perhaps I am, it's just that we seem to be putting the same old sauce on the usual dishes, nothing changes, Are you thinking of leaving teaching, I don't know exactly, or even vaguely, what I think or want, but I imagine it would be a good idea, To abandon teaching, To abandon anything. They went into the canteen, sat down at a table for four, and the headmaster, as he unfurled his napkin, said to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, I'd like you to tell our colleagues here what you told me just now, About what, About your very original concept for the teaching of history. The English teacher began to smile, but the look that the history teacher gave her, deadpan, absent, and, at the same time, cold, froze the smile just beginning to appear on her lips. Always assuming concept is the right word, sir, it's not in the least original, that particular laurel wreath was not meant for my head, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso after a pause, Ah, yes, but the speech that convinced me was yours, retorted the headmaster. In an instant, the history teacher's gaze left the canteen, went down the corridor, up to the next floor, through the locked door of the headmaster's office, saw what it was expecting to see, then returned by the same route, and became present again, but this time, there was in his gaze a look of troubled perplexity, a tremor of disquiet that bordered on fear. It was him, it was him, it was him, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso repeated over and over to himself, while, with his eyes fixed on his colleague the mathematics teacher, he restated, using more or less the same words, the various stages of his metaphorical navigation up the river of Time. He didn't say the river of History now, he felt that river of Time would have more impact. The English teacher was looking at him, grave faced. She is about sixty years old, a mother and a grandmother, and contrary to first impressions, she is not one of those people who go through life dispensing mocking smiles right, left, and center. What happened was only what has happened to so many of us, we go astray not because we intended to but because we saw in that going astray a connecting link, a comfortable complicity, a knowing wink from someone who thought they understood what was going on, purely on the say-so of others. When Tertuliano Máximo Afonso ended his brief

speech, he saw that he had convinced someone else. The English teacher murmured shyly, You could do the same thing with languages, I mean, teach them in the same way, and navigate back up to the source of the river, perhaps that way we might get a clearer understanding of what it means to speak, There's no shortage of specialists on that subject, commented the headmaster, But I'm not one of them, I'm expected to teach English in a complete void, as if nothing had existed before. The mathematics teacher said, smiling, I don't think these methods would work with arithmetic, the number ten is stubbornly invariable, it didn't even have to be a nine first nor is it consumed with ambition to be an eleven. The food had been brought to the table and the conversation turned to other things. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was no longer so sure that the person responsible for the invisible plasma dissolving in the atmosphere of the headmaster's office was the bank clerk. Or the hotel receptionist. Especially not with that ridiculous little mustache, he thought, and then, smiling sadly to himself, I must be losing my mind. In the class he gave after lunch, he spent the whole lesson, completely inappropriately and apropos of nothing, since the subject was not part of the syllabus, discoursing on the Amorites, on Hammurabi's code of law, the Babylonian legal system, the god Marduk, the Accadian language, with the result that he changed the view of the student who, the day before, had whispered to his neighbor that the teacher looked really pissed off. The much more radical diagnosis now was that he either had a screw loose or else a screw with a badly worn thread. Fortunately, the next class, for younger students, went smoothly enough. A single passing reference to historical films was greeted with passionate interest by the class, but that was as far as the divertimento went, there was no mention of Cleopatra or Spartacus, nor of the Hunchback of Notre Dame, nor even of the everreliable Emperor Napoléon Bonaparte. A fairly forgettable day, thought Tertuliano Máximo Afonso when he got into his car to go home. He was being unjust to the day and to himself, after all, he had won over the headmaster and the English teacher to his reforming ideas, there would be one less person smiling at the next staff meeting, and, anyway, he has nothing to fear from the former, who, as we found out a few hours ago, is not easily amused.

The house was clean and tidy, the bed as neat as a marriage bed, the kitchen bright as a new pin, the bathroom exuding detergent odors, a sort of lemon smell, which one had only to breathe in for one's body to be purified and one's soul to be exalted. On the days when the upstairs neighbor comes to bring order to this single man's apartment, the occupier eats supper out, he feels it would show a lack of respect to soil plates, light matches, peel potatoes, open cans, and then put a frying pan on the stove, that would be unthinkable, the oil would spurt everywhere. The restaurant is close by, last time he was there he ate meat, this evening he will eat fish, it's good to make changes, if we're not careful, life can quickly become predictable, monotonous, a drag. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has always been a very careful man. The thirty-six videos he brought from the shop are piled up on the small coffee table in the living room, the three remaining from the previous visit, and which have not yet been seen, are in a drawer in the desk, the magnitude of the task ahead is quite simply overwhelming, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso

would not wish it on his worst enemy, not that he knows who that might be, perhaps because he is still young, perhaps because he has always been so careful with life. To pass the time until supper, he started putting the videos in order according to the dates when the original film was issued, and since they would not fit on the table or on the desk, he decided to line them up on the floor, at the bottom of one of the bookshelves, the oldest, on the left, is called A Man Like Any Other, the most recent, on the right, The Goddess of the Stage. If Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had been consistent with the ideas he has been defending about the teaching of history to the point of applying them, insofar as this was possible, to his everyday activities, he would watch this row of videos from front to back, that is, he would begin with The Goddess of the Stage and end with A Man Like Any Other. We all know, however, that the enormous weight of tradition, habit, and custom that occupies the greater part of our brain bears down pitilessly on the more brilliant and innovative ideas of which the remaining part is capable, and although it is true that, in some cases, this weight can balance the excesses and extravagances of the imagination that would lead us God knows where were they given free rein, it is equally true that it often has a way of subtly submitting what we believed to be our free will to unconscious tropisms, like a plant that does not know why it will always have to lean toward the side from which the light comes. The history teacher will therefore faithfully follow the teaching program placed in his hands and will therefore watch the videos from back to front, from the oldest to the most recent, from the days of effects that we did not need to call natural to these days of effects we call special and which, because we don't know how they are created, fabricated, or produced, should really be given a much more neutral name. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has returned from supper, he did not, after all, have fish, the dish on offer was monkfish, and he does not like monkfish, that benthonic marine creature that lives on the sandy or muddy sea bottom, from inshore areas to depths greater than a thousand meters, that can measure up to two meters in length and weigh more than forty kilos, with a vast, flat head equipped with very strong teeth, which, in short, is a most disagreeable animal to look at and one that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's palate, nose, and stomach have never been able to tolerate. He is gleaning all this information now from an encyclopedia, finally prompted by curiosity to find out something about this creature that he has detested since the first day he saw it. This curiosity dates from times past, from years back, but today, inexplicably, he is giving it due satisfaction. Inexplicably, we said, and yet we should know that this is not so, we should know that there is no logical, objective explanation for the fact that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has spent years and years knowing nothing about the monkfish apart from its appearance and the taste and consistency of the pieces put on his plate, and then suddenly, at a certain moment on a certain day, as if he had nothing more urgent to do, he opens the encyclopedia and finds out more. We have an odd relationship with words. We learn a few when we are small, throughout our lives we collect others through education, conversation, our contact with books, and yet, in comparison, there are only a tiny number about whose meaning, sense, and denotation we would have absolutely no doubts if, one day, we were to ask ourselves seriously what they meant. Thus we affirm and deny, thus we convince and are convinced, thus we argue, deduce, and conclude,

wandering fearlessly over the surface of concepts about which we have only the vaguest of ideas, and, despite the false air of confidence that we generally affect as we feel our way along the road in the verbal darkness, we manage, more or less, to understand each other and even, sometimes, to find each other. If we had time and if impatient curiosity were to prick us, we would always end up finding out exactly what a monkfish was. The next time the waiter at the restaurant suggests this inelegant member of the Lophiidae family, the history teacher will know what to say, What, that hideous benthonic creature that lives in the sand or on the muddy sea bottom, and will add firmly, Certainly not. Responsibility for this tedious piscine and linguistic digression lies entirely with Tertuliano Máximo Afonso for having taken such a long time to put A Man Like Any Other in the VCR, as if he were hesitating at the foot of a mountain, pondering the effort required to reach the summit. Like nature, they say, a narrative abhors a vacuum, which is why, since Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has, in this interval, done nothing worth telling, we had no option but to improvise some padding to more or less fill up the time required by the situation. Now that he has decided to take the video out of its box and put it in the VCR, we can relax.

After an hour, the actor still had not appeared, and it seemed likely that he was not in the film. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso fast-forwarded the tape to the end, carefully read the credits, and removed from his list of participants any names that were repeated. If we had asked him to explain in his own words what he had just watched, he would probably have shot us the angry glance one reserves for the impertinent and replied with another question, Do I look like someone who would be interested in such vulgarities. We would have to agree with him here, because the films he has so far seen clearly belong to the so-called B-movie category, films made quickly for quick consumption and which aspire only to help pass the time without troubling the spirit, as the mathematics teacher had so neatly put it, albeit in other words. Another video has been put in the VCR, this one is called A Merry Life, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's twin will appear in the role of doorman at a cabaret or nightclub, it will be impossible to gauge with any clarity which of the two definitions best suits this place of worldly delights that is the scene of jollities shamelessly copied from various versions of The Merry Widow. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso thought at first that it wasn't worth watching the whole film, he already knew what he needed to know, that is, whether his other self appeared in the story, but the plot was so gratuitously convoluted that he let himself be carried along until the end, surprised to notice stirrings inside him of compassion for the poor devil who, apart from opening and closing the doors of cars, did nothing but raise and lower his peaked cap to greet the elegant clientele as they came and went, with a grave though not always subtle blend of respect and complicity. At least I'm a teacher of history, he murmured. A statement like that, made with the overt intention of pointing up and emphasizing his superiority, not only professionally, but also morally and socially, compared with the insignificance of the character's role, was crying out for a response that would restore courtesy to its proper place, and this was supplied by his common sense with an unusual touch of irony, Beware of pride, Tertuliano, think of what you've missed by not being an actor, they could have

made your character a headmaster, a teacher of mathematics, but since you obviously couldn't be an English teacher of the female sex, you'll just have to be a plain old male teacher. Pleased with the warning note it had sounded, common sense, deciding to strike while the iron was hot, again brought the hammer down hard, Obviously, you'd have to have some slight talent for acting, but apart from that, my friend, as sure as my name is Common Sense, they would be bound to make you change your name, no self-respecting actor would dare to appear in public with that ridiculous Tertuliano, you'd have no option but to adopt an attractive pseudonym, although, on second thoughts, that might not be necessary, Máximo Afonso wouldn't be bad, think about it. A Merry Life returned to its box, the next film appeared with an intriguing title, very promising in the circumstances, Tell Me Who You Are it was called, but it contributed nothing to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's knowledge of himself and nothing to the research he is embroiled in. To amuse himself, he fast-forwarded it to the end, added a few crosses to his list, and, with a glance at the clock, decided to go to bed. His eyes were red, his temples throbbed, and he could feel a weight on his forehead. I'm not going to kill myself over this, he thought, the world won't end if I don't manage to watch all the videos this weekend, and if it did end, this wouldn't be the only mystery left unresolved. He was in bed, waiting for sleep to answer the call of the tablet he had taken, when something that might have been common sense again, but which did not announce itself as such, said that, quite frankly, in his opinion, the easiest route would be to telephone or to go in person to the production company and ask straight out for the name of the actor in this, this, and this film who played the parts of receptionist, bank clerk, medical auxiliary, and nightclub doorman, they must be used to it, they might find it odd that such a question should be about an insignificant, bit-part actor, little more than an extra, but at least it would make a change from having to talk about stars and superstars all the time. Vaguely, as the first tangled mesh of sleep was wrapping around him, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso replied that it was a stupid idea, far too simple, too humdrum, I didn't study history just to come up with ideas like that, he added. These last words had nothing to do with anything, they were just another display of pride, but we must forgive him, it's the sleeping tablet talking, not the person who took it. From Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, on the very threshold of sleep, came the final remark, as strangely lucid as the flame of a candle about to burn out, I want to find him without anyone knowing and without him suspecting. These were definitive words that brooked no argument. Sleep closed the door. And Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is now slumbering.

BY ELEVEN O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING, TERTULIANO MÁXIMO Afonso had already watched three films, although none of them from beginning to end. He had risen very early, breakfasted on a couple of biscuits and a warmed-up cup of coffee, and, without wasting time on shaving, and omitting all but the most necessary ablutions, still in his pajamas and dressing gown, like someone who is expecting no visitors, he launched into the day's task. The first two films passed in vain, but the third, entitled *The Parallel of Terror*, brought to the scene of the crime a jolly, gum-chewing police photographer who kept saying, in Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's voice, that in life and death it's all a question of angle. At the end, the list was again brought up-to-date, a name struck through, new crosses added. There were five actors marked five times, as many as the number of films in which the history teacher's double had appeared, and their names, in impartial alphabetical order, were Pedro Félix, Adriano Maia, Carlos Martinho, Daniel Santa-Clara, and Luís Augusto Ventura. Up until then, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had been lost on the great sea of the more than five million inhabitants of the city, but from now on, he will only have to deal with fewer than half a dozen, possibly even fewer than that if one or more of those names is struck off for not answering the roll call, Quite an achievement, he muttered, but it immediately leaped to his notice that this new labor of Hercules had not, after all, been so very arduous, given that at least two million, five hundred thousand people belonged to the female sex and were, therefore, excluded from the field of his research. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's oversight should not surprise us, since, in calculations involving such large numbers, as in the present case, the tendency not to take women into account is irresistible. Despite this blow to his statistics, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went into the kitchen to celebrate the promising results with another cup of coffee. The doorbell rang just as he was taking his second sip, the cup remained suspended in midair, halfway on its journey to the tabletop, Who can that be, he asked, at the same time putting the cup lightly down. It could be his helpful upstairs neighbor, wanting to know if he had found everything to his liking, it could be one of those young people selling encyclopedias that explain the habits of the monkfish, it could be his colleague the mathematics teacher, no, it wouldn't be him, they had never visited each other's homes, Who can it be, he said again. He quickly finished his coffee and went to see. Crossing the room, he cast a worried glance at the video boxes scattered about, at the impassive line of videos on the floor at the foot of the bookshelf, waiting their turns, his upstairs neighbor, always assuming it was her, wouldn't be at all pleased to see the deplorable mess he had made of the place she had taken such pains to tidy up yesterday. It doesn't matter, she doesn't have to come in, he thought, and opened the door. It wasn't his upstairs neighbor standing there before him, it wasn't a young saleswoman bearing encyclopedias and telling him that, at last, he had within his grasp the enormous privilege of knowing everything there was to know about the habits of the monkfish, it was a woman who has not yet appeared in person but whose name we already know, Maria da Paz, bank employee. Oh, it's you, exclaimed Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, and then, trying to hide his perturbation, his confusion, Hello, this is a surprise. He should have asked her in, Come in, come in, I was just having a cup of coffee, or, How nice of you to drop by, just make yourself comfortable while I shave and have a shower, but it

was only with an effort that he stood to one side and let her pass, ah, if only he could say to her, Just wait right here while I hide some videos I don't want you to see, ah, if only he could say, Sorry, but you've come at a bad time, I can't really talk to you right now, come back tomorrow, ah, if only he could say something, but it's too late now, he should have thought of this before, it's all his fault, the prudent man should always be on his guard, alert, he should foresee all eventualities, he should, above all, never forget that the best way to proceed is always the simplest, for example, not ingenuously to open the door just because the bell rings, haste always brings complications in its wake, no doubt about it. Maria da Paz entered the apartment with the ease of someone who knows every corner, and asked, How have you been, and then, I got your message and I agree, we need to talk, I hope I haven't come at a bad moment, No, of course not, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, you must forgive me for receiving you like this, hair uncombed, face unshaven, and looking as if I'd just got out of bed, When I've seen you like this on other occasions, you've never felt the need to apologize, Today is different, In what way, You know what I mean, I've never opened the door to you dressed like this, in pajamas and a dressing gown, It has a certain novelty, and there's not much of that between you and me anymore. She was only three steps from the living room, her astonishment would soon become apparent, What the hell's all this, what are you doing with all these videos, but Maria da Paz pauses to ask, Aren't you going to kiss me, Of course, was Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's unfortunate and embarrassed response, as he made to kiss her on the cheek. This masculine modesty, if that's what it was, proved vain, Maria da Paz's mouth had come to meet his and was now sucking, pressing, devouring it, while her body glued itself to his from head to toe, as if there were no clothes separating them. Maria da Paz was the first to draw back and murmur, panting, a sentence she never managed to finish, Even if I regret what I've just done, even if I'm ashamed of having done it, Don't be silly, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, improvising furiously to gain time, what nonsense, regret, shame, why on earth should anyone regret and feel ashamed of expressing their feelings, You know perfectly well what I mean, so don't pretend you don't, You came in, we kissed, what could be more normal, more natural, We didn't kiss, I kissed you, Yes, but I kissed you back, Only because you had no option, You're exaggerating as usual, dramatizing, You're right, I do exaggerate and I do dramatize, I exaggerated in coming to your apartment, I dramatized by embracing a man who no longer loves me, I should leave this very instant, regretful and ashamed, despite all those charitable phrases about how it really doesn't matter. The possibility that she might leave, although obviously a remote one, sent a ray of hopeful light into the tortuous crannies of Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's mind, but the words that emerged from his mouth, some might say escaped against his will, expressed a very different sentiment, Honestly, I don't know where you've got this peculiar idea that I don't care about you, You expressed yourself pretty clearly on the subject the last time we met, But I never said I didn't care about you, I never said that, In matters of the heart, about which you know so little, even the most obtuse of intelligences can understand what wasn't said. To imagine that those words of Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's, currently under analysis, escaped against his will would be to forget that the skein of the human spirit has many and various ends, and that the function of

some of its threads, while seeming to lead the interlocutor to a knowledge of what lies inside, is to give false directions, to suggest detours that will end up in culs-de-sac, to distract from the fundamental subject, or, as in the case that concerns us now, to lessen, in anticipation, the shock of what is to come. In affirming that he had never said he didn't care about Maria da Paz, thus letting it be understood that he really did care about her, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's intention was, if you'll forgive the banality of the images, to wrap her in cotton wool, to surround her with muffling pillows, to bind her to him with loving feelings when it was no longer possible to detain her further outside the living-room door. Which is what is happening now. Maria da Paz has just taken the necessary three steps, she goes in, she doesn't want to think about the sweet nightingale song that lightly brushed her ears, but she can think of nothing else, she would even be prepared to recognize, contritely, that her ironic allusion to obtuse intelligences had been not merely impertinent but unjust too, and with a smile on her lips she turns to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, ready to fall into his arms and determined to forget all about grievances and complaints. Chance, however, chose, although it would be more exact to say that it was inevitable, since alluring concepts like fate, fortune, and destiny really have no place in this narrative, that the arc described by Maria da Paz's eyes would pass, first, the television set, turned on, then the videos that had not yet resumed their appointed positions, and, finally, the row of videos itself, an unheard-of, inexplicable presence to anyone, like her, who had an intimate knowledge of this place and of the occupier's tastes and habits. What's all this, what are all these videos doing here, she asked, It's material for some work I'm engaged in at the moment, replied Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, looking away, Unless I'm very much mistaken, your work, for as long as I've known you, has involved teaching history, said Maria da Paz, and this thing, she was studying the video with curious eyes, called The Parallel of Terror, doesn't look to me as if it has very much to do with your speciality, There's no law that says I can only study history for the rest of my life, No, of course not, but it's only natural that I should find it odd to see you surrounded by videos, as if you had suddenly developed a passion for the cinema, when, before, you weren't really interested at all, As I said, I'm engaged in a piece of work, a sociological study, if you like, Look, I may be an ordinary clerk, a bank employee, but even my rather dim intelligence can sense you're not telling the truth, Not telling the truth, exclaimed Tertuliano Máximo Afonso indignantly, not telling the truth, that really is the limit, There's no point getting angry, I'm just saying how it seems to me, Now I know I'm not perfect, but dishonesty is not one of my faults, you should know me better than that, Forgive me, That's all right, you're forgiven, we won't mention the matter again. That is what he said, but he would in fact have preferred to continue talking about it, if only to avoid talking about the other subject he was much more afraid to broach. Maria da Paz sat down in the armchair in front of the television set and said, I came to talk to you, I'm not interested in your videos. The nightingale's song had got lost in the stratospheric regions of the ceiling, it was already, as they used to say in days gone by, but a sweet memory, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, who cut a deplorable figure in his dressing gown and slippers, his face unshaven, all of which put him in a position of clear inferiority, was aware that an acerbic conversation, even though the angry words he

might use would suit what we know to be his final aim, that is, to end his relationship with Maria da Paz, would be difficult to conduct and doubtless even harder to bring to a close. So he sat down on the sofa, covered his legs with his dressing gown, and began in a conciliatory tone of voice, My idea, What are you talking about, broke in Maria da Paz, us or your videos, We'll talk about us afterward, for the moment I just want to explain to you the kind of work I'm involved in, If you must, replied Maria da Paz, reining in her impatience. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso prolonged the ensuing silence for as long as possible, he racked his brain for the words he had used to put the assistant in the video shop off the track, and he experienced a strange and contradictory feeling. Although he knows he is going to lie, he thinks, nevertheless, that this lie will be a kind of warped version of the truth, that is, although the explanation may be completely false, the mere fact of repeating it will, in a way, make it plausible, and all the more plausible if Tertuliano Máximo Afonso does not stop at this first attempt. At last, feeling himself master of his material, he began, My interest in looking at a number of films by this production company, chosen at random, for, as you will see, they are all made by the same company, was born out of an idea I had some time ago, that of making a study of the tendencies, inclinations, intentions, and messages, explicit, implicit, and subliminal, in short, the ideological signals disseminated among its consumers, image by image, by a particular film company, And how did it come about this sudden interest, or as you call it, this idea, what has it got to do with your work as a history teacher, asked Maria da Paz, completely unaware that she had just handed to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso on a plate the very answer which, in his hour of dialectical need, he might not have been capable of finding for himself, It's very simple, he replied with a look of relief on his face that could easily have been mistaken for the virtuous satisfaction experienced by any good teacher taking delight in the act of transmitting his knowledge to the class, It's very simple, he said again, just as the history that we write, study, or teach penetrates every line, every word, and even every date, what I termed ideological signals, inherent not just in the interpretation of facts, but also in the language we use to express those facts, not forgetting the various types and degrees of intentionality in our use of that language, so it is that the cinema, a storytelling mode that, given its particular efficacy, acts upon the actual contents of history, at once contaminating and falsifying them, so it is, I repeat, that the cinema, with far greater speed and no less intentionality, participates in the general propagation of a whole network of those ideological signals, usually in a way that promotes its own interests. He paused and, with the indulgent half smile of someone apologizing for the aridity of an explanation that failed to take into consideration his audience's inadequate ability to understand, added, I hope to clarify my ideas when I write them down. Despite her more than justified reservations, Maria da Paz couldn't help looking at him with a certain admiration, after all, he is a skilled history teacher, a trained professional of proven competence, one presumes he knows what he's talking about even when he ventures into matters outside his speciality, while she is a mere middle-ranking bank employee, without the necessary preparation to take full cognizance of any ideological signals unless they first explained who they were and what they wanted. However, throughout Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's speech, she had noticed a kind of

embarrassed catch in his voice, a disharmony that occasionally distorted his delivery, like the characteristic vibrato produced by a cracked water jar when struck with the knuckles, quick, someone, go to Maria da Paz's aid and tell her that it is with precisely this sound that our words leave our mouth when the truth we appear to be saying is the lie we are concealing. Apparently, yes, apparently someone did warn her or else intimidated as much with the usual hints and suggestions, what other explanation can there be for the fact that the admiring light in her eyes was suddenly extinguished and replaced by a wounded expression, an air of compassionate pity, whether for herself or for the man sitting opposite we do not know. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso realized that his discourse had been not only offensive but useless too, that there are many ways of showing one's disrespect for other people's intelligence and sensitivity and that this had been one of the grosser examples. Maria da Paz did not come to see him in order to be given explanations about procedures that are neither here nor there, or anywhere else for that matter, she came to find out how much she would have to pay to have restored to her, if such a thing were still possible, the small happiness she had believed to be hers during the last six months. It is also true that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is not going to say, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, You won't believe this, but I've discovered a man who is my exact double and who appears as an actor in some of these films, there was no way he would say that to her, if, indeed, such words could legitimately follow the words that immediately preceded them, for this could be interpreted by Maria da Paz as yet another diversionary tactic, when all she had come to find out was how much she would have to pay to have restored to her the small happiness she had believed to be hers during the last six months, and please forgive the repetition, which we make in the name of the right we all have to say over and over where the pain is. There was an awkward silence. Maria da Paz should really speak now and say defiantly, Right, if you've finished your stupid spiel about nonexistent ideological signals, let's talk about us, but dread has formed a lump in her throat, the fear that the simplest word could shatter the glass of her fragile hope, which is why she says nothing, which is why she waits for Tertuliano Máximo Afonso to begin, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is sitting, eyes downcast, apparently absorbed in contemplation of his slippers and the pale fringe of skin that appears where his pajama bottoms end, the truth, however, is very different, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso does not dare to look up in case his eyes drift over to the papers on the desk, the list of films and actors' names, with its little crosses, deletions, and question marks, all so far removed from his unfortunate discourse on ideological signals, which seems to him now the work of another person. Contrary to popular belief, the helpful words that open the way to great, dramatic dialogues are, in general, modest, ordinary, banal, no one would think that Would you like a cup of coffee could serve as an introduction to a bitter debate about feelings that have died or to the sweetness of a reconciliation that neither person knows how to bring about. Maria da Paz should have responded with due coolness, I didn't come here to drink coffee, but, looking inside herself, she saw that this wasn't true, she saw that she really had come there to drink coffee, that her own happiness, imagine, depended on that coffee. In a voice that was intended to reveal only weary resignation but which shook with nerves, she said, Yes, I would, and added, I'll make it. She got up

from her chair, and it wasn't that she stopped as she walked past Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, how can we explain what happened, we pile up words, words, and more words, the very words we talked about elsewhere, a personal pronoun, an adverb, a verb, an adjective, and, however we try, however hard we struggle, we always find ourselves outside the feelings we so ingenuously hoped to describe, as if a feeling were like a landscape with mountains in the distance and trees in the foreground, but the truth is that Maria da Paz's spirit subtly froze the rectilinear movement of her body, hoping, who knows what, perhaps that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso would stand up and embrace her, or softly take the hand hanging loose by her side, which is indeed what happened, first his hand taking hold of hers, then the embrace that did not dare to go beyond a discreet proximity, she did not offer him her lips and he did not seek them, there are times when it is a thousand times better to do less than to do more, to hand the matter over to sensibility, which will know better than rational intelligence how best to proceed toward the full perfection of the following moments, if, that is, they were born to reach such heights. They slowly separated, she smiled a little, he smiled a little, but we know that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has another idea in his head, which is to remove from Maria da Paz's eyes, as quickly as possible, the telltale papers, which is why we need not be surprised by the way he almost propels her toward the kitchen, Go on, then, you make the coffee while I try to bring some order to this chaos, and then the unexpected happened, for, as if giving no particular importance to the words emerging from her mouth or as if she did not entirely understand them, she murmured, Chaos is merely order waiting to be deciphered, What, what did you say, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, who had already removed the list of names, Chaos is merely order waiting to be deciphered, Where did you read that, or did you hear someone say it, No, it just occurred to me now, I don't think I read it anywhere and I certainly never heard anyone say it, But how could you just come out with something like that, Is there something special about it, There certainly is, Oh, I don't know, perhaps it's because my work at the bank is all to do with numbers, and numbers, when they're all mixed together, muddled up, can seem like chaotic elements to people who don't know them, and yet there exists in them a latent order, in fact I don't think numbers have any sense at all outside some sort of order you impose on them, the problem lies in finding that order, There aren't any numbers here, But there is a chaos, you yourself said so, A few videos out of place, that's all, And the images inside them, attached to each other so as to tell a story, i.e., an order, as well as the successive chaoses they would form if we jumbled them up before putting them together to make different stories, and the successive orders that would come out of that, always leaving behind an ordered chaos, always advancing into a chaos waiting to be put into an order, Ideological signals, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, not entirely sure that the reference was pertinent, Yes, ideological signals if you want, It sounds to me like you don't believe me, It doesn't matter whether I believe you or not, you presumably know what you're after, What I find hard to understand is how you stumbled upon that discovery, the idea of order being contained within a chaos and which can be deciphered from within, Do you mean to say that in all these months, ever since our relationship first began, you have never considered me intelligent enough to have

ideas, Oh, come on, that's got nothing to do with it, you're a very intelligent person, but, Oh, I know, but not as intelligent as you, and, needless to say, I haven't got the necessary training, I am, after all, just a poor little bank employee, There's no need to be ironic, I've never once thought you were less intelligent than me, I just meant that your idea is really original, And you didn't expect such originality from me, No, in a way, I didn't, You're the historian, but I would say that it was only after our ancestors had had the ideas that made them intelligent that they actually began to be intelligent enough to have ideas, Now you've gone all paradoxical on me, I can't keep up with all these surprises, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, Well, before you turn into a pillar of salt, I'll go and make the coffee, said Maria da Paz with a smile, and as she headed off down the corridor that led to the kitchen, she said, Tidy up that chaos, Máximo, tidy up that chaos. The list of names was swiftly locked away in a drawer, the loose videos were returned to their respective boxes, and The Parallel of Terror, which was still in the video player, followed the same route, it hadn't been so easy to impose order on chaos since the world began. Experience has taught us, however, that there are always a few ends left untied, always some milk spilled along the way, always a line that comes out of alignment, which, when applied to the situation under scrutiny, means that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is aware that his war is lost even before it's begun. The way things stand now, thanks to the sovereign stupidity of his speech on ideological signals, and after her masterstroke, that comment about the existence of order in chaos, of a decipherable order, it is impossible to tell the woman who is now in the kitchen making coffee, Our relationship has come to an end, we can still be friends if you like, but that's all, or else, I hate to have to tell you this, but I've been weighing up my feelings for you and I just don't feel that first flush of enthusiasm anymore, or even, It's been very nice, my dear, but it's over, from now on, you go your way and I'll go mine. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso goes over the conversation, trying to find out where his tactic failed, always assuming he had a tactic and wasn't just led by Maria da Paz's changes of mood, as if they were sudden minor fires he had to put out as they arose, unaware that flames were meanwhile licking around his feet. She always was more confident than me, he thought, and at that moment he saw the reasons for his defeat quite differently, who was this grotesque figure, disheveled and unshaven, in down-at-the-heels slippers, the stripes on his pajama bottoms like faded fringes peeping out from beneath his dressing gown, which has been tied clumsily so that one edge is higher than the other, there are some decisions in life that must be taken only when dressed to the nines, with one's tie knotted and one's shoes polished, so that one can exclaim in noble, wounded tones, If my presence bothers you, madam, say not another word, then sweep out of the door, without looking back, looking back brings with it terrible risks, a person can be turned into a pillar of salt at the mercy of the first shower of rain. But Tertuliano Máximo Afonso now has another problem to solve, one that requires great tact, great diplomacy, a talent for maneuvering which has so far eluded him, especially since, as we have seen, the initiative always lay in Maria da Paz's hands, even right at the start, when she arrived and threw herself into her lover's arms like a woman about to drown. This was precisely what Tertuliano Máximo Afonso thought, caught between admiration, annoyance, and a kind of dangerous

tenderness, She looked as if she were about to drown, but she actually had her feet firmly on the ground. Returning to the problem, what Tertuliano Máximo Afonso cannot allow is for Maria da Paz to be left alone in the living room. What if she appears with the coffee, and, by the way, why is she taking so long, coffee takes only a few minutes to make, gone are the days when you had to strain it, what if, after drinking their coffee in sweet harmony, she says to him, either with or without ulterior motives, You go and get dressed while I have a look at one of these videos of yours, to see if I can spot any of your famous ideological signals, what if cruel fate were to make Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's double appear in the role of nightclub doorman or bank clerk, imagine Maria da Paz's scream, Máximo, Máximo, come here, quick, come and see this actor playing a medical auxiliary and who looks just like you, really, you can call him anything you like, good Samaritan, divine Providence, brother of charity, but he's certainly no ideological signal. None of this, however, will happen, Maria da Paz will bring in the coffee, you can hear her coming down the corridor now, the tray with two cups and a sugar bowl on it, a few biscuits to placate the stomach, and everything will pass off as Tertuliano Máximo Afonso would never have dared to dream, they drank their coffee in silence, but it was a companionable silence, not hostile, the perfect domestic bliss that, as far as Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was concerned, turned into utter heaven when he heard her say, While you're getting dressed, I'll sort out the chaos in the kitchen, then I'll leave you in peace to get on with your work, Oh, don't let's talk any more about that, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso in order to remove this importunate stone from the middle of the road, but aware that he had just put another stone there in its place, more difficult to remove, as he will soon find out. In any case, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso did not want to leave anything to chance, he shaved in a trice, washed in a twinkling, got dressed in a flash, did all this, in short, so rapidly that when he went into the kitchen, he was still in plenty of time to dry the dishes. The most touchingly familiar of all scenes then took place in this apartment, the man drying the plates and the woman putting them away, it could have been the other way around, but destiny or fate, call it what you will, decided that it should be thus so that what had to happen happened as Maria da Paz was reaching up to place a serving dish on a shelf, thus, either wittingly or unwittingly, offering up her slender waist to the hands of a man incapable of resisting the temptation. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso put down the tea towel, and while the cup, slipping from his grasp, shattered on the floor, he embraced Maria da Paz, clasped her furiously to him, and the most objective and impartial of spectators would readily have admitted that his so-called first flush of enthusiasm could never have been greater than this. The question, the painful and eternal question, is how long will this last, will this really mean a rekindling of an affection that will have occasionally been confused with love, with passion even, or do we merely find ourselves once more before the familiar phenomenon of the candle that, as it goes out, burns with a higher and unbearably brighter flame, unbearable only because it is the last, not because it is rejected by our eyes, which would happily remain absorbed in looking. It is said and has been said before that between the lashes the back takes its pleasure, but it is not the back, in fact, that is taking its pleasure, indeed we would go so far as to say, if we can allow ourselves to be so crude, that it is, rather, the lash that is

taking its pleasure, however, the truth is, although this is not the moment for high-flown lyricism, that the joy, pleasure, and delight of these two people stretched out on the bed, one on top of the other, arms and legs literally entwined, should prompt us respectfully to doff our hat and hope that it will be always thus for them, or for each of them, whoever their future partners might be, if, that is, the candle that is burning now does not last beyond this brief, final spasm, the very spasm that, even as it melts us, also hardens and drives us apart. Bodies, thoughts. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is thinking about life's contradictions, about the fact that in order to win a battle it might sometimes be necessary to lose it, the present situation is a case in point, to win would have been to guide the conversation in the direction of the desired total and definitive split, and that battle, at least for the time being, had to be given up as lost, but to win would also be to distract Maria da Paz's attention from the videos and the imaginary study on ideological signals, and that battle has, for the moment, been won. According to popular wisdom, you can't have everything, and there's a good deal of truth in that, the balance of human lives is constantly swinging back and forth between what is gained and what is lost, the problem lies in the equally human impossibility of coming to an agreement on the relative merits of what should be lost and what should be gained, which is why the world is in the state it's in. Maria da Paz is also thinking, but, being a woman, and therefore closer to things fundamental and essential, she is remembering her anxiety of mind when she entered the apartment, her certainty that she would leave here vanquished and humiliated, and yet, after all, the one thing that she had never for a moment imagined would happen has happened, going to bed with the man she loves, which just goes to show how much this woman still has to learn if she does not know that it is in bed that so many dramatic arguments between couples end up and are resolved, not because having sex is a panacea for all physical and moral ills, although there are plenty of people who think it is, but because, when bodies are exhausted, minds take the opportunity to raise a timid finger and ask permission to enter, ask if their reasons can be heard now and if they, the bodies, are prepared to listen. That is when the man says to the woman, or the woman to the man, We must be mad, what fools we've been, and one of them, out of compassion, does not respond as in fairness they could, Well, you might have been, but I've been here all the time. Impossible though it may seem, it is this silence full of unspoken words that saves what had been judged to be lost, like a raft that looms out of the fog looking for its sailors, with its oars and its compass, with its candle and its cache of bread. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso said, We could have lunch together, if you're free that is, Of course I am, I always have been, No, what I meant was that there's your mother to be considered, Oh, I told her I fancied going for a walk alone and that I might not be home for lunch, An excuse to come here, Not exactly, it was only after I'd left the house that I decided to come and speak to you, And now we've spoken, Meaning, asked Maria da Paz, that everything between us will continue as before, Of course. One might have expected a little more eloquence from Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, but he will always be able to say, I didn't have time, she flung her arms around my neck and kissed me and I did the same, and, God help us, there we were once more entwined, And did God help, asked the unknown voice that we haven't heard for a while now, Well, I don't know if it

was God exactly, but it was certainly good, Sowhat next, We're going to have lunch, And you're not going to talk about it, About what, About you and her, We've talked, No, you haven't, Yes, we have, So the clouds have all blown away, They have, Does that mean you're no longer considering ending the relationship, then, That's another matter, let's leave for tomorrow what belongs to the morrow, A good philosophy, The best, As long as you know what does belong to the morrow, We can't know that until we get there, You've got an answer for everything, You would too if you had had to lie as much as I have in the last few days, So, you're going out to lunch, Yes, we are, Well, bon appétit, and what will you do afterward, Afterward, I'll take her home and come back here, To watch the videos, Yes, to watch the videos, Well, have a good time, said the unknown voice. Maria da Paz had already got up, one can hear the sound of the water in the shower, they always used to take a shower together after making love, but this time she didn't think of it and he didn't remember, or they both remembered but preferred to say nothing, there are times when it is best to be content with what one has, so as not to lose everything.

It was past five o'clock in the afternoon when Tertuliano Máximo Afonso got home. All that time wasted, he thought, as he opened the drawer where he had put the list and while he hesitated between Arm-in-arm with Fate and Angels Dance Too. He will never put either in the VCR, which is why he will never know that his double, the actor who looks just like him, as Maria da Paz might have said, plays a croupier in the first film and a dance teacher in the second. He suddenly rebelled against the self-imposed obligation to keep to the chronological order in which the films had been produced, from oldest all the way up to the most recent, he thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to vary things a bit, to break with routine, I'm going to watch The Goddess of the Stage, he said. Within ten minutes his double appeared, playing the part of a theater impresario. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso felt a jolt in the pit of his stomach, a lot of things must have changed in this actor's life for him to be playing a character who was gaining in importance all the time, after years of playing, fleetingly, a hotel receptionist, a bank clerk, a medical auxiliary, a nightclub doorman, and a police photographer. After half an hour, he couldn't stand it anymore, so he fast-forwarded the tape to the end, but, contrary to expectation, he failed to find in the credits any of the names on his list. He rewound back to the beginning, to the opening credits, which, out of force of habit, he had ignored, and there it was. The actor playing the part of the theater impresario in the film The Goddess of the Stage is called Daniel Santa-Clara.

DISCOVERIES MADE OVER THE WEEKEND ARE NO LESS VALID or valuable than those that first find being or expression on other, so-called working days. In both cases, the person who has made the discovery will inform his assistants, if they happen to be working overtime, or his family, if they happen to be near, and, if there's no champagne on hand, they will toast the success with the bottle of sparkling wine that has been waiting in the fridge for just such an occasion, congratulations will be given and received, details for the patent noted down, and life, imperturbable, will move on, having shown yet again that inspiration, talent, or chance are not particular about either time or place when it comes to revealing themselves. There can have been few cases when the discoverer, because he lived alone or had no assistants, did not have at least one person with whom he could share the joy of having bestowed on the world the light of a new piece of knowledge. More extraordinary and rarer still, not to say unique, is the situation in which Tertuliano Máximo Afonso finds himself at this precise moment, for not only has he no one to whom he can communicate his discovery of the name of the actor who is the very image of himself, he must also take great care to keep this discovery secret. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine Tertuliano Máximo Afonso rushing off to phone his mother, or Maria da Paz, or his colleague the mathematics teacher, and saying, the words tumbling over themselves in his excitement, I've found him, I've found him, the guy's name is Daniel Santa-Clara. If there is one secret in life he wants to keep under wraps so that no one even suspects its existence, it is this. For fear of the consequences, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is obliged, possibly forever, to maintain absolute silence on the results of his investigations, both the results of this first phase, which ended today, and of any further investigations he may carry out in the future. He is also condemned, at least until Monday, to total inactivity. He knows the man is called Daniel Santa-Clara, but knowing this is about as useful as being able to say that a particular star is called Aldebaran, but knowing nothing else about it. The production company will be closed today and tomorrow, so there is no point in trying to phone them, at best a security guard would answer and he would only say, Phone back on Monday, no one's here today, Oh, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso would declare in an attempt to drag the conversation out, I thought there were no Sundays or holidays for a production company, that they filmed every day the Good Lord sent, especially in spring and summer, so as not to waste all those daylight hours, That's not my business, it's not my responsibility, I'm just a security guard, A well-informed security guard should know everything, They don't pay me to know everything, That's a shame, Anything else, the man would ask impatiently, Can you at least tell me who I should contact there to find out about actors, Look, I don't know, I don't know anything, I've already told you I'm just a security guard, phone back on Monday, the man will say again in exasperation, if he doesn't unleash a few choice words that the caller's impertinence more than justifies. Sitting in the armchair, in front of the television, surrounded by videos, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso comes to the conclusion, There's nothing I can do about it, I'm just going to have to wait until Monday to phone the production company. He said this and immediately felt his stomach contract as if with sudden fear. It was very quick, but the subsequent tremor lasted a few seconds longer, like the troubling vibration of a double-bass string. In order not to think about what had

seemed to him some kind of threat, he asked himself what he could do with the rest of the weekend, what remains of today and all of tomorrow, how to occupy all those empty hours, one possibility would be to watch the remaining films, but that wouldn't provide him with any further information, he would merely see his face in other roles, perhaps as a dance teacher, perhaps as a fireman, perhaps as a croupier, a pickpocket, an architect, a primary school teacher, an actor looking for work, his face, his body, his words, his gestures, repeated ad nauseam. He could phone Maria da Paz, ask her to come and see him, tomorrow if not today, but that would mean tying his own hands, no self-respecting man asks for help from a woman, even if the woman doesn't know he's asking for help, to just send her away again afterward. It was at this point that a thought which had occasionally raised its head behind other more fortunate thoughts, without Tertuliano Máximo Afonso paying it the slightest attention, suddenly managed to push its way to the front, If you went and looked in the phone directory, it said, you could find out where he lives, you wouldn't have to bother the production company then, you could even, always assuming you felt up to it, go and see the street where he lives, and the house, although obviously you'd have to take the elementary precaution of disguising yourself, don't ask me as what, that's your problem. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's stomach gave another lurch, this man refuses to understand that emotions are wise things, they worry about us, tomorrow they'll say, We warned you, but by then, in all probability, it will be too late. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has the phone directory in his hands, which tremble as they search for the letter S, they leaf backward and forward, here it is. There are three Santa-Claras, but none of them is a Daniel.

It wasn't such a big disappointment. Such an arduous search couldn't just end like that, it would be too ridiculously easy. It's true that telephone directories have always been one of the prime investigatory tools of any private detective or local policeman endowed with a little basic intelligence, a kind of paper microscope capable of bringing the suspect bacterium to the investigator's visual curve of perception, but it is also true that this method of identification has had its difficulties and failures, all those people with the same name, heartless answering machines, wary silences, that frequent, discouraging reply, Sorry, that person doesn't live here anymore. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's first and, logically speaking, correct thought was that Daniel Santa-Clara had not wanted his name to appear in the directory. Some influential people, with a high social profile, adopt this procedure, it's called defending their sacred right to privacy, businessmen and financiers do it, for example, as do corrupt politicians of the first order, the stars, planets, comets, and meteorites of the cinema, brooding writers of genius, soccer wizards, Formula One racing drivers, models from the worlds of high and medium fashion, and from low fashion too, and, for rather more understandable reasons, criminals with various crime specialities have also preferred the reserve, discretion, and modesty of an anonymity that, up to a point, protects them from unhealthy curiosity. In these cases, even if their exploits make them famous, we can be sure that we will never find their names in the phone book. Now, since Daniel Santa-Clara, at least from what we know of him so far, is not a criminal, and since he is not, and of this we have not the slightest doubt, a film

star, despite belonging to the same profession, the reason for his absence from the small group of people bearing the surname Santa-Clara is bound to cause real perplexity, from which only profound thought will free us. This was precisely what Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was engaged in while we, with reprehensible frivolity, have been discussing the sociological type of those people who, deep down, would like to be included in a private, confidential, secret telephone directory, a kind of Almanach de Gotha that would record the new forms of ennoblement that exist in modern societies. The conclusion reached by Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, even though it belongs to the category of the blindingly obvious, is no less deserving of applause, for it demonstrates that the mental confusion which has tormented the history teacher's past few days has not proved an impediment to free and impartial thought. It is true that Daniel Santa-Clara's name does not appear in the telephone directory, but this doesn't mean that there isn't some, shall we say, family connection between one of the three people who do appear and Santa-Clara the film actor. Equally admissible is the probability that they all belong to the same family or even, if we are going down that road, that Daniel Santa-Clara does, in fact, live in one of those houses and that the telephone he uses is still, for example, registered in the name of his late grandfather. If, as children used to be told, in order to illustrate the relationship between small causes and great effects, for want of a shoe the horse was lost, for want of a horse the battle was lost, the trajectory followed by the deductions and inductions that brought Tertuliano Máximo Afonso to the conclusion set out above seems to us no less dubious and problematic than that edifying episode from the history of wars whose first agent and ultimate culprit must have been, when all's said and done and with no room for objections, the professional incompetence of the vanquished army's farrier. What will Tertuliano Máximo Afonso do next, that is the burning question. Perhaps he will be satisfied with having whittled away at the problem with a view to a subsequent study of the necessary conditions for drawing up an oblique approach strategy, of the prudent kind that proceeds by small advances and constant vigilance. To look at him, sitting in the chair where there began what is now, by any measure, a new phase of his life, back bent, elbows resting on his knees, and head in his hands, you would not imagine the hard work going on inside that brain, weighing up alternatives, pondering options, considering other variants, anticipating moves, like a chess master. Half an hour has gone by, and he hasn't moved. And another half an hour will have to pass before we suddenly see him get up and go over to the desk with the telephone directory open at the page containing the enigma. He has clearly taken a bold decision, let us admire the courage of this man who has finally put prudence behind him and decided to attack head on. He dialed the number of the first Santa-Clara and waited. No one picked up the phone and no answering machine came on. He dialed the second number and a woman's voice said, Hello, Good afternoon, madam, I'm sorry to bother you, but I'd like to speak to Senhor Daniel Santa-Clara, I understand he lives at this address, No, you're wrong, he doesn't live here and never has, But the surname, The surname is just a coincidence, like many others, Oh, I thought you might perhaps be related and be able to help me find him, Look, I don't even know you, Forgive me, I should have told you my name, No, don't, I don't want to know, It would seem I was badly informed, It would indeed, Many thanks for your time, That's

all right, Good-bye, then, sorry to have troubled you, Goodbye. It would have been natural, after this inexplicably tense exchange of words, for Tertuliano Máximo Afonso to pause in order to regain his composure and his normal pulse rate, but this was not the case. There are times in our lives when we think that we might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, and when all we want is to find out as quickly as possible the true dimensions of the disaster, and then, if possible, never to think about the matter again. Therefore, the third number was dialed without hesitation, a man's voice asked abruptly, Who is it. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso felt as if he had been caught out and so mumbled some name or other, What do you want, the voice asked in the same harsh tone, although curiously there was no hostility in it, some people are like that, their voice comes out in a way that makes it sound as if they were angry with everyone, and, in the end, you discover that they have a heart of gold. On this occasion, given the brevity of the conversation, we will never find out if the heart of this person really is made of that most noble of metals. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso expressed a desire to speak to Senhor Daniel Santa-Clara, and the man with the angry voice replied that no one of that name lived there, and the conversation seemed unlikely to progress any further, there was no point in revisiting the curious coincidence of surnames or the chance possibility of a family relationship that might lead the questioner to his destination, in such cases the questions and answers are always the same, Is so-and-so there, No, so-and-so doesn't live here, but this time something new happened, the man with the dissonant vocal cords mentioned that more or less a week before someone else had phoned with exactly the same question, It wasn't you, was it, no, the voice is different, I have a very good ear for voices, No, it wasn't me, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, feeling troubled, and was this person a man or a woman, A man, of course. Yes, of course, a man, stupid fool, it stands out a mile that however many differences there may exist between the voices of two men, there are far more between a female voice and a male voice, Although, the man added, now that I think about it, there was a moment when I thought he was trying to disguise his voice. Having duly thanked the man for all his help, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso replaced the receiver and sat looking at the three names in the directory. If the man who phoned had been asking for Daniel Santa-Clara, simple logic dictated that, as he himself had just done, he too must have phoned all three numbers. Obviously Tertuliano Máximo Afonso could not know if anyone would have answered at the first number, and everything indicated that the ill-disposed woman with whom he had spoken, and who really was rude despite her neutral tone of voice, had either forgotten or deemed it unnecessary to mention the fact, or, and this was a far likelier reason, she had not taken the previous call. Perhaps because I live alone, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso said to himself, I tend to assume that other people do as well. The deep disquiet caused by the news that an unknown man was also looking for Daniel Santa-Clara left him with a troubling sense of bewilderment as if he had been handed a quadratic equation to solve when he had already forgotten how to do simple ones. It was probably a creditor, he thought, yes, that's probably who it was, a creditor, artists and literary people tend to lead fairly disorganized lives, he probably owes money in one of those places where people gamble and now they want it back. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had read some time

ago that gambling debts are the most sacred of all debts, some people even call them debts of honor, and although he did not quite see why these debts should be any more honorable than others, he had accepted both code and prescription as something that had nothing to do with him, Ah, well, it's up to them, he had thought. Now, however, he would have preferred those debts to be less sacred, to be ordinary ones, of the kind that are forgiven and forgotten, as was not only prayed for but promised too in the old Lord's Prayer. To calm his mind, he went into the kitchen to make some coffee, and, while he drank it, he took stock of the situation, I've still got to make that call, now, two things could happen when I do, they will either tell me that they know neither the name nor the person, and that will be that, or they'll say, yes, he lives here, and then I'll hang up, at the moment, all I need to know is where he lives.

With his spirit fortified by the impeccable logic he had just produced and by his no less impeccable conclusion, he went back into the living room. The phone directory lay open on the desk, the three Santa-Claras had not moved. He dialed the first number and waited. He waited and continued to wait long after he was sure no one would answer. It's Saturday today, he thought, they're probably out. He hung up, he had done everything he could, no one could accuse him of irresolution or timidity. He looked at his watch, it was about time to go out to supper, but the gloomy memory of the tablecloths, white as shrouds, the miserable little vases of plastic flowers on the tables, and, above all, the permanent threat of monkfish, made him change his mind. In a city of five million inhabitants, there is, naturally, a proportionate number of restaurants, a few thousand at least, and even excluding, at the one extreme, the luxurious, and at the other, the frankly repellent, he would still be left with a large range to choose from, for example, the charming place where he had had lunch with Maria da Paz today, and which they had simply happened upon, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso disliked the idea of dining there alone when, at lunchtime, he had been in company. He therefore decided not to go out, he would, as the time-honored expression has it, just have a bite to eat at home and go to bed early. He wouldn't even need to draw back the sheets, the bed was exactly as they had left it, the sheets rumpled, the pillows unplumped, the smell of cold love. He thought that he really should phone Maria da Paz and say something nice, send her a smile that she would doubtless feel at the other end of the line, it's true that their relationship is bound to come to an end one of these days, but there are tacit obligations that cannot and should not be ignored, it would show gross insensitivity, not to mention an unforgivable moral coarseness, to behave as if, that morning, in that apartment, they had not enjoyed some of the pleasurable, beneficial, agreeable activities that, sleeping aside, tend to take place in bed. Being a man should never be an impediment to behaving like a gentleman. And we have no doubt that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso would have acted like one if, however odd this may at first seem, the thought of Maria da Paz had not returned him to his obsessive preoccupation of the last few days, that is, how to find Daniel Santa-Clara. His zero success in his attempts at phoning had left him no alternative but to write a letter to the production company, since it would be out of the question to go there himself, in the flesh, running the risk that the person of whom he

was asking the information might say to him, How are you, Senhor Santa-Clara. Resorting to a disguise, the classic false beard, mustache, and wig, apart from being totally ridiculous, would be utterly stupid too, it would make him feel like a bad actor in an eighteenth-century melodrama, like an aristocratic father or the rake who turns up in the fourth act, and since he had always feared that life might choose him to be the victim of one of the frequent and tasteless practical jokes on which it preens itself, he was convinced that the mustache and beard would fall off just as he was inquiring about Daniel Santa-Clara and that the person he asked would burst out laughing and summon his or her colleagues to join in the fun, Oh, very good, very good, come over here everyone, it's Senhor Santa-Clara inquiring about himself. A letter was, therefore, the only way, and probably the safest, of achieving his conspiratorial ends, with the one condition, sine qua non, that he did not sign his own name or mention his address. As we can testify, he had lately been pondering this tangle of tactics, although in such a diffuse and confused manner that such mental labors should not properly be called thought, it was more like a drift or a meander of vacillating fragments of ideas that had only now managed to come together and organize themselves in a sufficiently focused way, which is also why we have only now recorded them here. The decision that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has just taken is one of truly startling simplicity, of brilliant, transparent clarity. Common sense does not share this view and has just bustled in through the door asking indignantly, How could such an idea even enter your head, It's the only one and it's the best one too, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso coldly, It might well be the only one and it might well be the best, but if you'd care to know my opinion, I think it would be shameful of you to write that letter in Maria da Paz's name and giving her address, Why shameful, Well, if you need it explained, more fool you, She won't mind, How do you know if you haven't even talked to her about it, I have my reasons, We know about your reasons, my friend, they're known as the presumptuousness of the male, the vanity of the seducer, and the arrogance of the conqueror, Well, I am male, that's my sex, but I've never seen the seducer you describe reflected in the mirror, and as for me being a conqueror of women, please, if my life is a book, then that's one chapter that's missing, Really, Believe me, I'm never the conqueror, always the conquered, And how are you going to explain your reasons for writing a letter asking for information about an actor, But I won't tell her I'm interested in finding out about an actor, What will you say, then, That the letter is to do with the work I mentioned to her, What work, Oh, don't make me go through it all again, All right, but you obviously think that all you have to do is snap your fingers and Maria da Paz will come running to satisfy your every whim, All I'm doing is asking her a favor, The current state of your relationship means that you've lost any right to ask her favors, It might prove awkward signing my own name, Why, You never know what consequences it might have in the future, So why not use a false name, The name would be false, but the address would be real, Frankly, I still think you should forget all about this business of doubles, twins, and duplicates, Maybe I should, but I can't, it's something that's stronger than me now, My feeling is that you've set in motion a great crushing machine that is slowly advancing toward you, warned common sense, but since his companion did not reply, he withdrew, shaking his head, saddened by the outcome of the

conversation. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso dialed Maria da Paz's number, her mother would probably answer, and their brief dialogue would be another small comedy of pretenses, grotesque and with just a touch of the pathetic, May I speak to Maria da Paz, he would ask, Who's calling, A friend, What's your name, Just tell her it's a friend, she'll know who it is, My daughter does have other gentleman friends, you know, Not that many, Many or few, the ones she has have names, All right, tell her it's Máximo. During the six months that he has been seeing Maria da Paz, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has not often had to phone her at home and still less often has her mother answered first, but the tone of words and voice has always been, on her part, one of suspicion, and, on his part, one of ill-disguised impatience, she perhaps because she doesn't know as much about the affair as she would like, he doubtless annoyed that she should know so much. The previous dialogues had not differed very much from the example given above, which is merely a rather pricklier version of how it might have been but, in the end, was not, since Maria da Paz was the one to answer the phone, however, all of these dialogues, this one and the others, would, without exception, have been found in the index of any Manual of Human Relations under Mutual Incomprehension. I was beginning to think you weren't going to phone me, said Maria da Paz, As you see, you were wrong, here I am, Your silence would have meant that today didn't mean the same thing to you as it did to me, Whatever it meant, it was the same for us both, But perhaps not in the same way or for the same reasons, We don't have the instruments to measure such differences, if there were any, You still care about me, Yes, I still care about you, You don't sound very enthusiastic, all you did was repeat what I said, Tell me why those words shouldn't serve me as well as they served you, Because in being repeated they lose some of the conviction they would have carried if they had been spoken first, Of course, a round of applause for the ingenuity and subtlety of the analyst, You'd know that too if you read more fiction, How am I supposed to read fiction, novels, and stories, or whatever, if I don't even have time for history, which is my job, right now I'm struggling through a major work on Mesopotamian civilizations, Yes, I noticed it on the bedside table, You see, But I'm still not convinced you're that pressed for time, If you knew what my life was like, you wouldn't say that, But I would know what your life was like if you'd let me, We're not talking about that, we're talking about my professional life, Well, I'd say that your professional life was far more likely to be suffering because of that famous study you're immersed in, with all those films to watch, than because of any novel you might be reading in your spare time. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had realized that the direction the conversation had taken was not to his advantage, that he was moving further and further away from his main objective, which was to mention, as naturally as possible, the matter of the letter, and now, for the second time that day, as if it were some automatic game of actions and reactions, Maria da Paz herself had just given him the opportunity, almost in the palm of her hand. He would still have to be cautious, though, and not let her think that his phone call was motivated entirely by self-interest, that he hadn't in fact called in order to talk about feelings, or even the good time they had had in bed, given that his tongue refused to pronounce the word love. I am interested in the subject, he said in a conciliatory manner, but rather less than you think, No one would have thought as much

seeing you as I did, hair all over the place, in your dressing gown and slippers, still unshaven, with videos all over the place, you certainly didn't look like the sensible, levelheaded man I thought I knew, That's perfectly understandable, I was relaxing alone at home, but now that you mention it, I did have an idea that could facilitate and speed up the work, Well, I hope you're not going to make me watch your films, surely I didn't do anything to deserve such a punishment, Don't worry, my cruel instincts don't go that far, my idea was simply to write to the production company asking them for various specific facts related, in particular, to their distribution network, the location of cinemas and the number of viewers per film, it could be very useful to me I think, and would help me draw a few conclusions, Hm, I don't really see what that has got to do with the ideological signals you were looking for, It may not have as much to do with them as I imagine, but I'd still like to try, Fine, then, it's up to you, Yes, but there's one small problem, What's that, Well, I don't want to be the one to write the letter, Why don't you go and see them personally, then, some things are best done face to face, and they would probably be flattered, a history teacher taking an interest in the films they produce, That's precisely what I don't want, mixing up my scientific and professional qualifications with a study that's outside my speciality, Why, Well, I'm not sure I can explain really, but perhaps it's a matter of scruples, Then I don't really know how you're going to resolve a difficulty that you yourself are creating, You could write the letter, What an absurd idea, just how am I going to write a letter about a subject that is as mysterious to me as Chinese, When I say that you could write the letter, I mean that I would write it in your name and giving your address, and that way I would be safe from any indiscretion, Oh, that's all right then, I suppose that way your honor wouldn't be placed in jeopardy or your dignity in doubt, Don't be ironic, as I said, it's merely a matter of scruples, Yes, so you said, And you don't believe me, Oh, don't worry, I believe you, Maria da Paz, Yes, speaking, You know I love you, don't you, Well, I think I do when you say you do, then I wonder if it's true, It is true, And did you phone because you couldn't wait to tell me so, or simply to ask me to write that letter, The idea of the letter came up in the course of the conversation, Yes, but you're not expecting me to believe that you had the idea while we were talking, No, I had thought about it vaguely before, Vaguely, Yes, vaguely, Listen, Máximo, Yes, my love, Go ahead and write the letter, Thanks so much for saying yes, I didn't honestly think you would mind, it's such a simple thing, Life, my dear Máximo, has taught me that nothing is simple, it just seems simple sometimes, and it's always when it looks simplest that we should most doubt it, You're being very skeptical, As far as I know, no one is born skeptical, Anyway, if you're in agreement, I'll write the letter in your name, Presumably I'll have to sign it, That won't be necessary, I'll invent a signature myself, At least make it look a bit like mine, Well, I never was much good at copying other people's handwriting, but I'll do my best, Be careful, watch yourself, once a person starts falsifying things there's no telling where it will end, Falsify isn't quite the right word, you probably mean forge, Thank you for the correction, my dear Máximo, but what I was trying to do was find one word that meant both things, As far as I know, there is no one word that combines both forge and falsify, If the action exists, then the word should exist too, All the words we have are in the dictionaries, All the dictionaries put together don't contain

half the terms we would need in order for us to understand each other, For example, For example, I don't know of a word that could describe the confused mixture of feelings I feel inside me at the moment, Feelings about what, Not about what, about whom, About me, Yes, about you, Well, I hope it's nothing very bad, There's a little bit of everything, a potpourri if you like, but don't worry, I wouldn't be able to explain it to you even if I tried, We can return to the subject another day, Does that mean our conversation has come to an end, That's not what I said or what I meant, It really wasn't, well, forgive me then, Although, on second thought, it would perhaps be best if we just leave it for now, there's obviously too much tension between us, sparks fly off every remark that leaves our mouths, That isn't how I wanted it to be, Nor did I, But that's how it is, Yes, that's how it is, That's why we're going to say good-bye like the well-brought-up children we are and wish each other a good night's sleep and sweet dreams, see you soon, Call me whenever you want, Yes, I will, and Maria da Paz, Yes, I'm still here, Just to say that I do care about you, So you said.

Having replaced the receiver on the rest, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He had got what he wanted and had more than enough reason to be pleased with himself, but the fact was that their long, difficult conversation had always been dictated by her even when it appeared not to be, subjecting him to a kind of continual humiliation that never found explicit expression in the words spoken by either of them, and yet those words, one by one, left an increasingly bitter taste in his mouth, which is precisely how people often describe the taste of defeat. He knew he had won, but he was aware too that his victory was in part illusory, as if each advance he had made had been only the mechanical consequence of a tactical withdrawal by the enemy, golden bridges skilfully placed to draw him on, with flags flying and drums and bugles sounding, until there came a point perhaps when he would find himself hopelessly encircled. In order to gain his objectives, he had thrown around Maria da Paz a net of sly, calculating speeches, but the knots with which he thought he was binding her had merely ended up limiting his own freedom of movement. During the six months they had known each other, he had deliberately kept Maria da Paz on the margins of his private life, so as not to let himself become too involved, and now that he had decided to end the relationship, and was only waiting for the right moment to do so, he found himself obliged not only to ask for her help, but to make her an accomplice in actions of whose origins and causes, as well as whose final end, she knew nothing. Common sense would call him an unscrupulous exploiter, but he would reply that the situation he was living through was unique in the world, that there were no antecedents by which to establish the guidelines for socially acceptable behavior, that no law had foreseen the extraordinary circumstance of a person being duplicated, and so, he, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, had to invent, at every turn, the procedures, correct or incorrect, that would lead him to his objective. The letter was just one of those procedures, and if, to write it, he had been obliged to abuse the trust of a woman who said she loved him, it wasn't such a very grave crime, other people had done far worse things and no one was marking them out for public condemnation.

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso put a sheet of paper in the typewriter and paused to think. The letter would have to look as if it came from an admirer, it would have to be enthusiastic, but not too enthusiastic, after all, the actor Daniel Santa-Clara was not exactly a star capable of provoking hysterical outbursts of feeling, the letter should go through the ritual of asking for a signed photograph, even though what Tertuliano Máximo Afonso really wants to know is where the actor lives, as well as his real name, if, as everything seems to indicate, Daniel Santa-Clara is the pseudonym of a man who may, who knows, also be called Tertuliano. Once the letter has been sent, there are two possible hypotheses as to what will happen next, the production company will either respond directly, giving the information requested, or say that it is not authorized to do so, in which case they will probably send the letter on to the person to whom it is really addressed. Is that what will happen, wondered Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. A moment's brief reflection made him see that the last hypothesis was the least likely because it would show a complete lack of professionalism and even less consideration on the part of the company in burdening its actors with the task and with the expense of replying to letters and sending out photographs. Let's hope so, he muttered, the whole thing will fall apart if he sends Maria da Paz a personal reply. For a moment, he seemed to see before him the thunderous collapse of the house of cards that, for a week now, he has been so painstakingly building, but administrative logic and an awareness that there was no other possible route helped him, gradually, to restore his shaken spirits. Writing the letter did not prove easy, which explains why his upstairs neighbor heard the hammering of the typewriter for over an hour. At one point, the phone rang, rang insistently, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso did not pick it up. It was probably Maria da Paz.

HE WOKE LATE. HE HAD SPENT A TROUBLED NIGHT, SHOT through with fleeting, disquieting dreams, a staff meeting at which none of the teachers were present, an endless corridor, a videocassette that refused to fit into the VCR, a cinema with a black screen on which a black film was being shown, a telephone directory with the same name repeated on every line and which he could not read, a parcel with a fish inside, a man carrying a stone on his back and saying, I'm an Amorite, an algebraic equation with people's faces where there should have been letters. The only dream he could remember with any clarity was the one about the parcel, although he had been unable to identify the fish, and now, still barely awake, he consoled himself with the thought that at least it couldn't have been a monkfish, because a monkfish wouldn't have fit inside the box. He got up with some difficulty, as if his joints had stiffened after some excessive and unaccustomed physical effort, and went into the kitchen to get a drink of water, a full glass gulped down with all the urgency of someone who had eaten something salty for supper. He was hungry but didn't feel like preparing breakfast. He went back into the bedroom to fetch his dressing gown, then returned to the living room. The letter to the production company was there on the desk, the final and definitive version of the many versions with which the wastepaper basket was filled almost to overflowing. He reread it and it seemed to him to serve his present purposes, he had not only requested a signed photograph of the actor, he had also, as if in passing, asked for his address. A final comment, which Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was immodest enough to consider an imaginative and strategic masterstroke, suggested that there was an urgent need for a study of the importance of supporting actors, who were, according to the writer of the letter, as essential to the development of filmic action as small tributaries are to the formation of great rivers. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was convinced that such a metaphorical, sibylline conclusion would remove any possibility of the company forwarding the letter to an actor, who, even though his name had appeared in the opening credits of the most recent films he had acted in, was, nevertheless, one of the legion of actors considered to be inferior, subaltern, and incidental, a kind of necessary evil, an indispensable nuisance, who, in the opinion of the producer, always takes up too much space in the budget. If Daniel Santa-Clara were to receive a letter written in these terms, his thoughts would naturally turn to financial and social rewards in keeping with his role as a tributary of the Nile and the Amazon of the major stars. And if that first individual action, begun in order to defend the simple, selfish well-being of one claimant, were to multiply, to spread, to expand into a vast collective action of solidarity, then the pyramid structure of the film industry would collapse like another house of cards, and we would be granted the extraordinary fate or, better still, the historic privilege of witnessing the birth of a new and revolutionary concept of the cinema and of life. There is no danger, however, that such a cataclysm will occur. The letter, signed with the name of a woman called Maria da Paz, will be sent to the appropriate department, where a clerk will call the boss's attention to the ominous suggestion contained in the final paragraph, the boss will at once pass on the dangerous item for consideration by his immediate superior, and, that same day, before the virus slips, by mistake, out into the streets, the few people who know about the letter will be instantly sworn to absolute secrecy, rewarded in advance with appropriate promotions

and substantial increases in salary. A decision will then have to be taken as to what to do with the letter, whether to grant the requests for a signed photograph and for information about where the actor lives, the first purely routine, the second rather unusual, or to behave simply as if it had never been written or had got lost in the confusion of the postal service. The discussion held by the board of directors will take up the whole of the following day, not because it proved difficult to reach initial unanimity, but because every foreseeable consequence became the object of prolonged consideration, and not only those consequences, but others that seemed to be the products of sick imaginations. The final decision will be both radical and clever. Radical because the letter will be burned at the end of the meeting, with the whole board of directors present to witness it and breathe a sigh of relief, clever because it will satisfy the two requests in a way that will guarantee the double gratitude of the writer, the first, purely routine as we said, no problem at all, the second, With reference to your letter, which we read with great interest, those were the terms in which it was put, underlining the exceptional nature of the information being given. This did not exclude the possibility that the writer of the letter, Maria da Paz, would one day meet Daniel Santa-Clara, now that she has his address, and would mention to him her theory about tributaries as applied to the distribution of roles in the dramatic arts, but, as experience in communications has abundantly shown, the mobilizing power of the spoken word, which is in no way inferior to that of the written word and may even, in the short term, prove more effective in marshaling minds and multitudes, has a more limited historical range, given that, when a speech is repeated, it soon runs out of breath and strays from its original aims and intentions. Why else are the laws that rule us written down. It is more likely, though, that, if such a meeting were to take place and if such a matter were to be brought up, Daniel Santa-Clara would pay only scant attention to Maria da Paz's tributarial theories and suggest diverting the conversation to less arid subjects, if we can be forgiven such a flagrant contradiction, given that it was of water that we were speaking and the rivers that carry it away.

Having placed before him one of the letters that Maria da Paz had written to him some time before, and after a few trial runs to loosen up and prepare his hand, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso transcribed as best he could the sober but elegant signature that concluded the letter. He did this out of respect for the childish and somewhat melancholy desire she had expressed, and not because he thought that the more perfect the forgery the more credible the document would appear, a document that, as mentioned above, will, within a matter of a few days, have vanished from this earth, burned to ashes. It makes one feel like saying, All that work for nothing. The letter is already in the envelope, the stamp is in its place, all he needs to do now is to go down to the street and put it in the postbox on the corner. Since today is a Sunday, the postal van won't be picking up the correspondence, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is anxious to be free of the letter as soon as possible. As long as it is here, time will remain as still as a deserted stage, or this, at least, is his vivid impression. The row of videos on the floor provokes in him the same nervous impatience. He wants to clear the stage, to leave no

traces, the first act is over, it is time to remove the props. No more of Daniel Santa-Clara's films and no more anxiety, Will he be in this one, Perhaps he won't appear, Will he have a mustache, Will he wear his hair parted in the middle, no more putting little crosses by names, the puzzle has been solved. It was at this moment that he remembered the call he had made to the first of the Santa-Claras in the phone book, that house where no one had responded. Shall I try again, he wondered. If he did, if someone answered, if they said, yes, Daniel Santa-Clara did live there, the letter that had cost him so much mental labor would become unnecessary, dispensable, he could tear it up and throw it in the wastepaper basket, as useless as the failed drafts that had prepared the way for the final version. He realized that he needed a pause, a respite, even just a week or two, the time it would take for the production company to reply, a period in which he could pretend that he had never seen The Race Is to the Swift or the hotel receptionist, knowing that this false calm, this appearance of tranquility, would have a limit, an imminent expiration date, and that when it was time, the curtain would rise inexorably on the second act. But he realized too that if he didn't try to phone again, he would remain tethered thereafter to the obsessive idea that he had behaved in a cowardly fashion in a fight to which no one had challenged him and into which he had entered of his own free will, having himself provoked it. Searching for a man called Daniel Santa-Clara who did not even know he was the object of a search, this was the absurd situation Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had created, more suited to the plot of a detective novel with no known criminal, and quite unjustifiable in the hitherto uneventful life of a history teacher. Caught thus with his back to the wall, he made an agreement with himself, I'll phone once more, if someone answers and says that Daniel Santa-Clara lives there, I'll throw the letter away and deal with whatever the consequences might be, I'll decide then whether to speak or not, but, if they don't answer, then the letter will be sent off and I'll never phone the number again, come what may. The feeling of hunger he had felt up until then had been replaced by a kind of nervous palpitation in the pit of his stomach, but the decision had been made, he would not go back on it. The number was dialed, the phone rang somewhere in the distance, the sweat started trickling slowly down his face, the phone rang and rang, it was clear there was no one at home, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso defied fate, he gave his adversary one last chance to pick up the phone, until the ringing became a strident victory cry and the telephone fell silent of its own accord. Right, he said out loud, let no one say of me that I failed in my duty. He felt suddenly calmer than he had in a long time. His period of rest had begun, he could go into the bathroom with a clear head, shave, shower unhurriedly, and get dressed carefully, Sundays tend to be dull, gloomy days, but there are some when one feels glad to have been born. It was too late to have breakfast and too early for lunch, he would have to fill the time somehow, he could go out and buy a newspaper and come back, he could look over the lesson he has to teach tomorrow, he could sit down and read a few more pages of A History of Mesopotamian Civilizations, he could, he could, then a light came on in one small corner of his memory, the recollection of one of his dreams of the previous night, the one in which a man was carrying a stone on his back and saying, I'm an Amorite, it would be nice if that stone had been King Hammurabi's famous Code and not just any old stone

picked up from the ground, it's only logical really that historians, having studied so hard, should dream historical dreams. It is hardly surprising that A History of Mesopotamian Civilizations should lead him to King Hammurabi's laws, it was a transition as natural as opening the door into the next room, but the fact that the boulder carried on the back of the Amorite should have reminded him that he hadn't phoned his mother for nearly a week, even the most skilled interpreter of dreams would have been incapable of explaining to us, having excluded outright as insulting and ill intentioned, the easy interpretation that, deep down, and never daring to confess as much to himself, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso thinks of his progenitor as a heavy burden. Poor woman, far away, bereft of news, so discreet and respectful of her son's life, I mean, he's a secondary school teacher, and only in an emergency would she dare to phone, for fear of interrupting a labor that, to some extent, she finds beyond her comprehension, not that she lacks education, not that she didn't study history herself as a child, but what she has always found bewildering is that history can be taught at all. When she used to sit on the benches at school and hear the teacher talking about the events of the past, it seemed to her that all these things were pure imaginings and that if the teacher had those imaginings, she could have them too, just as she occasionally found herself imagining her own life. Finding these events set down in the history book did not change her mind in the least, all the textbook did was collect together the free-flowing fantasies of the person who had written it, and there was clearly little difference between those fantasies and the ones you could find in a novel. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's mother, whose name, Carolina, surname Máximo, finally appears here, is a fervent and assiduous reader of novels. As such, she knows all about telephones that ring unexpectedly and of others that ring when you are desperately hoping they will. This was not the case now, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's mother has just been thinking, I wonder when my son will phone, and there, suddenly, is his voice in her ear, Hello, Mama, how have you been, Oh, fine, fine, pretty much as usual, what about you, Oh, I'm fine too, as always, Have you had a lot of work at school, No more than normal, homework, tests, the occasional staff meeting, And when do your classes end this year, In about two weeks' time, then I'll have a week of exams, Does that mean that you'll be here with me within a month, Of course I'll come and see you, but I won't be able to stay for more than a few days, Why's that, Because I've got some things to sort out here, a few loose ends to tie up, What sort of things, what loose ends, the school closes for the holidays, and holidays, as I understand it, were made for people to rest, Don't worry, I'll rest, but there are some matters I need to sort out first, And are they serious matters, Yes, I believe so, What do you mean, if they're serious, they're serious, it's not a question of belief, It was just a manner of speaking, Has it anything to do with your girlfriend, with Maria da Paz, In a way, You're like a character in a book I've been reading, a woman who always answers questions with another question, You're the one who has been asking the questions, my only question was to ask how you've been, That's because you don't speak to me clearly and directly, I believe so, you say, in a way, you say, I'm not used to you being so mysterious with me, Don't get angry, I'm not getting angry, it's just that I find it odd that, once the holidays start, you won't be coming straight here, it's never happened before as I recall, Look, I'll

tell you all about it later, Are you going on a trip somewhere, Another question, Are you or aren't you, If I was, I would tell you, What I don't understand is why you said that Maria da Paz had something to do with these things that oblige you to stay, It isn't quite like that, perhaps I was exaggerating, Are you thinking of getting married again, Oh, Mama, please, Well, perhaps you should, People don't tend to get married so much these days, you must have gleaned that from your novels, Now I'm not stupid and I know perfectly well the kind of world I'm living in, it's just that I don't think you should keep the girl dangling, But I've never promised her marriage or even suggested we live together, As far as she's concerned, a relationship that's lasted six months is like a promise, you don't know women, No, I don't know the women of your day, And you don't know much about the women of yours either, Possibly, I don't really have that much experience of women, I've been married once, divorced once, and the rest doesn't really count for much, There's Maria da Paz, She doesn't really count for much either, Don't you realize how cruel you're being, Cruel, that's a very solemn word, Yes, I know it sounds like something out of a cheap romance, but cruelty can take many forms, sometimes it even comes disguised as indifference or indolence, shall I give you an example, delaying a decision can become a conscious weapon of mental aggression against other people, Well, I knew you had a talent for psychology, but I had no idea you knew so much, Oh, I don't know a thing about psychology, I've never read a single word about it, but I know a thing or two about people, All right, I'll let you know when the time comes, Don't keep me waiting too long, from now on I won't have a moment's peace, Please don't worry, one way or another everything in this world finds a solution, Sometimes in the worst possible way, Not in this case, Well, I certainly hope not, Take care, Mama, You too, son, take care, Yes, I will. His mother's anxiety dissipated the sense of well-being that had lent a new vivacity to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's spirit after phoning the Santa-Clara who was not at home. Mentioning the serious matters he would have to deal with when school was over had been an unforgivable mistake. True, the conversation had got diverted afterward onto his relationship with Maria da Paz and, at a certain point, seemed set to stay there, but when, to soothe her, he had said that everything in this world finds a solution, his mother's words, Sometimes in the worst possible way, sounded to him now like an augury of disaster, a warning of future misfortunes, as if, in the place of the elderly lady called Carolina Máximo, who also happened to be his mother, a sibyl or a Cassandra had spoken to him from the other end of the line, telling him in so many words, There's still time to stop. For a moment, he considered jumping in his car and making the five-hour journey that would bring him to the small town where his mother lived, telling her everything, then, his soul washed clean of unhealthy miasmas, coming back to his job as a history teacher with no taste for cinema, determined to turn this confusing page of his life and even, who knows, prepared seriously to consider the possibility of marrying Maria da Paz. Les jeux sont faits, rien ne va plus, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso out loud, this man who had never been inside a casino in his life, but who has among his assets as a reader a few famous novels from the belle époque. He put the letter addressed to the production company in one of his jacket pockets and went out. He will forget to post it, have lunch in a restaurant somewhere, and come back home to

drain to the bitter dregs this Sunday afternoon and evening.

TERTULIANO MÁXIMO AFONSO'S FIRST TASK THE FOLLOWING day was to make two parcels out of the cassettes that he would return to the shop. Then he gathered the others together, fastened them with string, and put them away in a cupboard in his bedroom, under lock and key. He methodically tore up the sheets of paper on which he had written the names of the actors, did the same with the various drafts of the letter that he still had in his jacket pocket and which will have to wait a few more minutes before taking its first step along the road that will lead it to the addressee, and, finally, as if he had a pressing reason to erase his fingerprints, he ran a damp cloth over all the furniture in the living room that he had touched during the past few days. He also erased any prints left behind by Maria da Paz, but he did not think of that. The traces he wanted to expunge were not his or hers, they were those left behind by the presence that had wrenched him from sleep that first night. There was no point in telling him that such a presence had existed only in his head, doubtless the fabrication of an anxiety generated in his mind by a dream he had since forgotten, there was no point in suggesting to him that it might have been no more than the super natural consequence of an ill-digested beef stew, there was no point, in short, in demonstrating to him, with all the reasons due to reason, that, even if we were prepared to accept the hypothesis that the products of the mind have a certain capacity to take on material form in the external world, what we absolutely cannot accept is that the impalpable and invisible presence of the cinematic image of the hotel receptionist could have left vestiges of its sweaty fingertips scattered about the apartment. As far as is known, ectoplasm does not perspire. Once this work was completed, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso got dressed, picked up his teacher's briefcase and the two packages, and left. On the stairs, he met his upstairs neighbor, who asked if he needed any help, he thanked her very much, but said that, no, he didn't, and, in turn, inquired after her weekend, so-so, she said, as usual, but that she had heard him working away on his typewriter, and he said that one of these days he would have to buy a computer because they, at least, were quiet, but she said that the noise of the typewriter didn't bother her in the least, on the contrary, it kept her company. Since today was a cleaning day, she asked if he would be coming home before lunch, and he said that he would not, that he would be having lunch at school and wouldn't be back until the afternoon. They said good-bye, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, aware that his neighbor was watching him pityingly, went down the stairs, struggled to keep a grip on both parcels and briefcase, taking great care where he placed his feet so that he wouldn't fall flat on his face and die of embarrassment. His car was parked opposite the postbox. He put the parcels in the trunk, then turned around, at the same time taking the letter out of his pocket. A boy came running past and accidentally bumped into him, causing the letter to slip from Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's fingers and fall onto the pavement. The lad stopped a few steps farther on and apologized but, perhaps afraid he would be told off or punished, did not come back, as he should have done, to pick the letter up and return it. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso made an indulgent gesture, the gesture of one who has decided to accept the apology and forgive the rest, then bent down himself to retrieve the letter. It occurred to him that he could make a wager with himself, leave it where it was and surrender his fate and that of the letter to the hands of chance. The next

passerby might find the letter, see that it had a stamp on it, and, like a good citizen, place it carefully in the postbox, he might open it to see what was inside and then discard it once he had read it, he might not even notice it at all and trample it indifferently underfoot, and throughout the day many more people might do the same, so that it grew steadily dirtier and more crumpled, until someone decided to kick it with the tip of their shoe into the gutter where the street sweeper would find it. The wager did not take place, the letter was picked up and taken to the postbox, and the wheel of fortune was finally set in motion. Now Tertuliano Máximo Afonso will visit the video-rental shop and, with the assistant, go through the videos in the two parcels, and, taking into account those he intends to purchase and those he has left at home, he will then pay what he owes and possibly tell himself that he will never enter that shop again. In the end, much to his relief, the unctuous assistant was not there, and he was attended instead by the new, inexperienced young woman, which is why the process took a little longer than expected, although the customer's facility for mental arithmetic again came in handy when it was time to draw up the final bill. The assistant asked if he wanted to rent or buy any more videos and he replied in the negative, saying that he had finished the study he was engaged in, forgetting that the young woman was not in the shop when he made his famous speech about the ideological signals present in any cinematic narrative, in cinematic masterpieces too, of course, but, above all, in the more ordinary productions, second- or even third-rate movies, those generally ignored by everyone but which are all the more effective because they catch the viewer unawares. It seemed to him that the shop was smaller than when he had entered it for the first time, not even a week ago, it really was incredible how, in such a short space of time, his life had been transformed, at that moment, he felt as if he were floating in a kind of limbo, in a corridor joining heaven and hell, which made him wonder, with some amazement, where he had come from and where he would go to next, because, judging by current ideas on the subject, it cannot be the same thing for a soul to be transported from hell to heaven as to be pushed out of heaven into hell. He was driving toward the school when these eschatological reflections were replaced by an analogy of another type, this time taken from natural history, the entomological section, which made him view himself as a chrysalis in a state of profound withdrawal and undergoing a secret process of transformation. Despite the somber mood that had been with him ever since he got out of bed, he smiled at the comparison, thinking that, were this the case, then, having entered the cocoon as a caterpillar, he would emerge from it a butterfly. Me, a butterfly, he murmured, now I've seen everything. He parked the car not far from the school and consulted his watch, he would still have time for a cup of coffee and to have a quick look through the newspapers, if they hadn't all been taken. He knew he had neglected his lesson preparation but his years of experience would remedy that fault, he had improvised on other occasions and no one had noticed the difference. What he would never do was to go into the classroom and announce to those innocent children point-blank, Right, today we've got a test. That would be an act of disloyalty, the despotism of someone who, having the knife in his hand, does whatever he likes with it and varies the thickness of the cheese slices depending on the whim of the occasion and on established preferences. When he went

into the staff room, he saw that there were still a few newspapers left on the display stand, but in order to get there, he would have to walk past a table at which, surrounded by coffee cups and glasses of water, three colleagues were talking. He could hardly walk straight past, especially when one of them was his friend, the mathematics teacher, to whom he owed so much in terms of understanding and patience. The others were an older woman who taught literature and a young man who taught natural sciences and with whom he had never felt any close bond of friendship. He said good morning, asked if he could join them, and, without waiting for a reply, drew up a chair and sat down. To anyone unfamiliar with the customs of the place, such behavior could appear to verge on bad manners, but the staff-room protocol governing such things had come into being, shall we say, naturally, it had not been written down, but was built on the solid foundations of consensus, and since it had never entered anyone's head to respond negatively to the question, it was best not to bother with a chorus of agreement, some of it sincere, some less so, but accept it as a *fait accompli*. The only delicate point still capable of creating tension between those who were already there and any new arrivals lay in the possibility that the matter under discussion was of a confidential nature, but this too had been resolved by tacit recourse to the question, to that piece of redundancy par excellence, Am I interrupting, to which there was only one socially acceptable reply, Of course not, come and join us. Saying to the newcomer, for example, however politely, Yes, you are interrupting actually, go and sit somewhere else, would cause such a commotion that the intra-relational network of the group would be seriously shaken and placed in jeopardy. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso returned with the cup of coffee he had gone to fetch, sat down, and asked, Any news, Are you referring to news from outside or from inside, asked the mathematics teacher, It's still too early to know about the news from inside, I meant news from outside, since I haven't yet had time to read the newspapers, The wars that were being fought yesterday are still being fought today, said the literature teacher, And there is, needless to say, a high probability or even certainty that another war is just about to start, said the natural sciences teacher, as if they had rehearsed their answers together, How about you, how was your weekend, asked the mathematics teacher, Oh, quiet, peaceful, I spent most of it reading a book I think I've mentioned to you before, about Mesopotamian civilizations, the chapter on the Amorites is fascinating, Well, I went to the cinema with my wife, Ah, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, glancing away, Our colleague here is not a great lover of the cinema, explained the mathematics teacher to the others, Look, I've never said outright that I don't like it, all I said and say again now is that cinema is not one of my cultural interests, I prefer books, My dear friend, there's no need to get aerated about it, it's of no importance, as you know, it was with the very best of intentions that I suggested you watch that film, What does getting aerated mean exactly, asked the literature teacher, as much out of curiosity as to pour oil on troubled waters, To get aerated, said the mathematics teacher, means to get angry, to bridle, or, more precisely, to take the hump, And why, in your opinion, is to take the hump more precise than getting angry or bridling, asked the natural sciences teacher, It's just a personal interpretation really that has its roots in childhood memories, whenever my mother told me off or punished me for some mischief

I'd committed, I would scowl and refuse to talk, I would maintain total silence for hours on end, and then she used to say I had taken the hump, Or were aerated, Exactly, In my house, when I was about that age, said the literature teacher, the metaphorical language for childish sulks was different, In what way, Well, it tended to the asinine, What do you mean, We used to call it tethering the donkey, and don't go looking it up in any dictionary, because you won't find it, so I assume it was exclusive to our family. Everyone laughed, apart from Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, who gave a slightly irritated smile and said, Well, I don't know about it being exclusive to your family, because they used the expression in my house too. More laughter, and peace reigned once more. The literature teacher and the natural sciences teacher got up and said good-bye, see you later, their classrooms are probably farther off, possibly on the upper floor, so those who remained have a few more minutes in which to say, In a person who claims to have spent the last two days serenely reading a history book, remarked the mathematics teacher, I would expect anything but that tormented expression, That's just your imagination, there isn't anything tormenting me, although I might have the face of someone who hasn't slept very much, You can say what you like, but you haven't been the same since you saw that film, What do you mean, I haven't been the same, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso in an unexpectedly alarmed tone of voice, Just what I said, you're different, But I'm the same person, Of course you are, It's true I am a bit worried at the moment about a matter of a sentimental nature which has lately got rather complicated, the kind of thing that could happen to anyone, but that doesn't mean I've turned into another person, And I didn't say you had, nor have I the slightest doubt that you are still called Tertuliano Máximo Afonso and that you work as a teacher of history here in this school, Then I don't know why you keep insisting that I'm not the same person, Only since you saw the film, Don't let's talk about the film, you know my views, All right, But I am the same person, Of course you are, Need I remind you that I've been suffering from depression lately, Or apathy, that was the other name you gave it, Exactly, and that deserves a bit of consideration I think, It has my wholehearted consideration, as well you know, but that isn't what we were talking about, Well, I am the same person, Now you're the one who's insisting, True enough, but it was only a few days ago that I told you I was going through a period of great psychological stress, and it's only natural that this should be apparent in my face and in the way I behave, Of course, But that doesn't mean I've changed so much morally or physically that I resemble someone else, All I said was that you don't seem the same, not that you resembled someone else, There isn't a great deal of difference, Our colleague in literature would say that, on the contrary, the difference is enormous, and she knows about these things, when it comes to subtleties and nuances, literature is almost like mathematics, Alas, I belong in the field of history, where nuances and subtleties don't exist, They would exist if, how can I put it, history could be a portrait of life, You surprise me, it's not like you to resort to such banal rhetoric, You're quite right, in that case history wouldn't be life, but only one of the many possible portraits of life, similar, but never the same. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso glanced away again, then, with an effort of will, turned and looked at his colleague, just to see what might lie hidden behind the apparent serenity of his face. The mathematics teacher held his gaze without

apparently giving it any particular importance, then, with a smile as full of sympathetic irony as it was of frank benevolence, said, One day, I might take another look at that film, maybe I'll manage to find out what it was that so upset you, always supposing the film is the origin of your ills. A shudder ran through Tertuliano Máximo Afonso from head to foot, but in the midst of his confusion, in the midst of his panic, he managed to come up with a plausible response, I wouldn't bother if I were you, what's upset me, to use your word, is a relationship I don't know how to extricate myself from, if you've ever found yourself in a similar situation, you'll know how it feels, but I've got to get to my class now, I'm late, If you don't mind, I'll go with you to the corner of the corridor, even though in the history of that place there has already been at least one dangerous incident, said the mathematics teacher, and I therefore solemnly promise not to repeat the imprudent gesture of placing my hand on your shoulder, Well, you know, today I might not mind at all, Oh, I'm not going to run any risks, you look to me as if you've got your batteries fully charged. They both laughed, the mathematics teacher unreservedly, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso somewhat more stiffly, for the words that had filled him with panic, the worst threat anyone could have made just then, still rang in his ears. They parted at the corner of the corridor and went off to their different destinations. The arrival of the history teacher put to rest the students' fond hope, to which the delay had already given rise, that today there would be no class. Even before he sat down, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had announced that in three days' time, next Thursday, there would be a final piece of written work, This will be a decisive piece of work when it comes to calculating your final mark, he said, as I have decided not to hold oral exams in the remaining last two weeks of term, moreover, this class and the next two classes will be devoted exclusively to revising what we've learned so far, so that you can bring some fresh ideas to your work. This preamble was well received by the most impartial section of the class, for it was clear, thank God, that Tertuliano did not intend spilling any more blood than he could possibly help. From then on, all the students' attention will be focused on the emphasis given by the teacher to each subject covered in the course, for, if the logic of weights and measures is essentially a human thing and good luck one of its variable factors, such changes in communicative intensity might foreshadow, without the teacher noticing the unconscious revelation, the choice of questions for the test. Although it is a well-known fact that no human being, including those who have reached what we term senescence, can live solely on hope, that strange psychic disorder indispensable to normal life, what can we say about these boys and girls who, having lost the hope that there would be no class today, are now engaged in feeding another far more problematic hope, that Thursday's test will be for each of them, and therefore for all of them, the golden bridge over which they will triumphantly cross into the next year. The class was just finishing when a clerk knocked on the door and came in to tell Tertuliano Máximo Afonso that the headmaster had asked if he would be so kind as to go to his office as soon as the lesson ended. The exposition being developed about some treaty or other was dispatched in less than two minutes, so cursorily, in fact, that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso felt bound to say, Don't worry too much about that, it won't be on the test. The students exchanged knowing looks, from which one gleaned that their ideas about

evaluating emphases had finally been confirmed in a case in which the meaning of the words meant less than the dismissive tone in which they had been spoken. Rarely has a class finished in such an atmosphere of concord.

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso put his papers back in his briefcase and left. The corridors were rapidly filling up with students who came bursting out of every door, discussing subjects that had nothing whatsoever to do with what had been taught to them one minute before, here and there, teachers were trying to pass unnoticed amid the choppy sea of heads that surrounded them on every side, dodging as best they could the reefs that rose up before them as they slunk toward their natural harbor, the staff room. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso took a shortcut up to the part of the building where the headmaster had his office, he stopped to speak to the literature teacher whose path crossed his, What we need is a good dictionary of colloquial expressions, she said, tugging at the sleeve of his jacket, Surely most general dictionaries already include most of them, he replied, Yes, but not in any systematic or analytical way, not with the aim of being really exhaustive, for example, recording that expression about tethering the donkey and explaining what it means wouldn't be enough, it would need to range much more widely, to identify in each expression's component parts the analogies, direct and indirect, with the state of mind they are intended to represent, You're quite right, said the history teacher, more in order to seem pleasant than because the subject really interested him, but now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go, the headmaster asked to see me, Oh, you'd better go then, keeping God waiting is the very worst of sins. Three minutes later, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was knocking on the office door, he entered when the green light came on, said good morning, received a good morning in return, and, at a gesture from the headmaster, sat down and waited. He felt no intrusive presence there, either astral or otherwise. The headmaster set aside the papers on his desk and said, smiling, I've been giving a lot of thought to our last conversation, the one about the teaching of history, and I've come to a conclusion, What's that, sir, To ask you to do some work during the school holidays, Work, sir, You could say to me that holidays were made for resting and that it's simply not acceptable to ask a teacher, once the classes are over, to continue to concern himself with school matters, You know perfectly well, sir, that I would never put it in those words, You might say it in other words that meant exactly the same thing, Yes, but I have yet to pronounce any words at all, either the former or the latter, so please tell me what your idea is, Well, I thought we might try to persuade the ministry not to turn the teaching program upside down exactly, that would be expecting too much, and the minister has never been one for revolutions, but to study, organize, and put into practice a little experiment, a pilot study, limited, to begin with, to one school and to a small number of students, preferably volunteers, in which the historical material was studied from the present to the past, rather than from the past to the present, in short, the very thesis that you have for so long defended and of whose excellence you have, I'm pleased to say, finally persuaded me, And this work you want me to do, what form would it take exactly, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, To draw up a solid, well-thought-out proposal to send to the ministry, Me, sir, Now I'm not saying this

to flatter you, but the truth is that I can't think of anyone else in the school better qualified for the job, you've already shown that you've given the matter a great deal of thought, you obviously have very clear ideas about it, and, I say this in all sincerity, it would give me real pleasure if you would take on the task, and the work would, of course, be remunerated, I'm sure we can find room in our budget for such a commission, But I very much doubt that my ideas, as regards either quality or quantity, because, as you know, quantity also counts, would be enough to persuade the ministry, you know them better than I do, Alas, all too well, So, So allow me to insist, because I genuinely think that this would be a good moment to make clear to them that we are a school capable of producing innovative ideas, Even if they tell us to get lost, They might well do that, they might simply relegate the proposal to their files, but there it will be, and someone, someday, will remember it, And we'll just have to wait around until they do, No, meanwhile, we could ask other schools to participate in the project, organize debates, conferences, get the media involved, Until the director-general writes a letter telling us to be quiet, It seems my suggestion doesn't enthuse you, There are few things in this world that do, sir, but that isn't the problem, it's just that I don't know what the coming holidays might hold for me, Sorry, I don't understand, Well, I'm going to have to deal with a number of important problems that have come up recently in my life, and I'm afraid I won't have either the time or the necessary peace of mind to devote myself to a task that would demand all my concentration, In that case, let's just forget about it, Let me think about it a little longer, sir, give me a few days, I promise I'll give you an answer by the end of the week, And am I to hope that it will be a positive one, Possibly, sir, but I can't say for sure, You're obviously very preoccupied about something, I do hope you find a solution to your problems, So do I, How was the class, Oh, it went really well, the class is working hard, Excellent, We're having a written test on Thursday, And on Friday you'll give me your answer, Yes, Give the matter some thought, Yes, I will, There's no need to tell you whom I have in mind to lead the pilot study, Thank you, sir. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went down to the staff room, intending to read the newspapers until it was time for lunch. However, as the hour approached, he began to realize that he couldn't bear to be with other people, that he couldn't stand another conversation like the one this morning, even if it didn't involve him directly, even if, from beginning to end, it was all about such innocent colloquial expressions as to tether the donkey, to have a face as long as Monday, or has the cat got your tongue. Before the bell went, he left and had lunch in a restaurant. He returned to school for his second class, spoke to no one, and was back home before evening. He lay down on the sofa, closed his eyes, tried to empty his mind of thoughts, to sleep if he could, to be like a stone that simply lies where it's left, but not even the enormous mental effort he made afterward to concentrate on the headmaster's request could erase the shadow under which he would have to live until he received an answer to the letter he had written in Maria da Paz's name.

He waited for nearly two weeks. In the meantime, he taught, telephoned his mother twice, prepared the written test for Thursday and sketched out another that he would give to the students of his other class, on Friday he told the headmaster that he would

accept his kind offer, on the weekend he did not leave his apartment, he spoke on the phone to Maria da Paz to find out how she was and if she had had a reply, he answered a call from his colleague the mathematics teacher who wanted to know if there was anything wrong, he finished reading the chapter on the Amorites and moved on to the Assyrians, he watched a documentary on the Ice Age in Europe and another about man's remote ancestors, he thought that this period of his life could be made into a novel, then thought it would be a complete waste of time because no one would believe such a story, he phoned Maria da Paz again, but in such a lackluster voice that she became worried and asked if she could help at all, he told her to come and she came, they went to bed and then went out to supper, and the following day it was her turn to phone him to say that the letter from the production company had arrived, I'm phoning from the bank if you want to drop in, otherwise I can bring it over on my way home. Trembling inside, shaken by excitement, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso only just managed to suppress the question that he should not, on any account, have asked, Did you open it, and this led him to delay for a couple of seconds the categorical answer that would do away with any doubts that might exist over whether he was prepared to share with her the contents of the letter, I'll come to the bank. If Maria da Paz had imagined a tender domestic scene in which she saw herself listening to him read the letter out loud while she sipped the tea she had prepared in the kitchen of the man she loved, she could forget it. We can see her now, sitting at her small desk in the bank, her hand still resting on the receiver she has just replaced, the oblongshaped envelope before her and in it the letter that honesty will not allow her to read because it is not hers, even though it is addressed to her. Less than an hour had passed when Tertuliano Máximo Afonso hurried into the bank and asked to speak to Maria da Paz. No one knew him there, no one would suspect that affairs of the heart and dark secrets existed between him and the young woman walking over to the counter. She had seen him from the back of the large room where she has her post as a worker with numbers, which is why she has the letter already in her hand, Here you are, she says, they did not greet each other, they did not wish each other good afternoon, they did not say, Hi, how are you, nothing of the sort, there was the letter to hand over and it has been handed over, he says, See you later, I'll give you a ring, and she, having fulfilled the role that had fallen to her in the urban postal distribution service, returns to her seat, oblivious of the suspicious glances of an older male colleague who, some time before, had come sniffing around her without success and who, from then on, out of pique, has always kept a beady eye on her. Outside in the street, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is walking quickly, almost running, he left the car in an underground garage three blocks away, he is carrying the letter not in his briefcase but in an inside pocket in his jacket, for fear it might be snatched from him by some small urchin, as boys brought up in the freedom of the streets were once called, then angels with dirty faces, then rebels without a cause, now delinquents who are denied the benefits of either euphemism or metaphor. He is telling himself that he will not open the letter until he gets home, that he is too old to be behaving like an anxious adolescent, but, at the same time, he knows that these adult notions will evaporate once he is inside the car, in the gloom of the garage, with the door closed to defend himself from the morbid curiosity of the world. It

took him a while to find where he had left the car, which only aggravated his state of nervous anxiety, the poor man resembled, if you'll forgive the comparison, a dog abandoned in the middle of the desert, looking forlornly this way and that, with not one familiar smell to guide him home, It was on this level, I'm sure of it, but the fact is he wasn't sure. He did in the end find the car, he had been only a few steps from it on three occasions but had failed to see it. He got in quickly, as if he were being pursued, closed the door, locked it, and turned on the interior light. He has the envelope in his hands, the moment has finally come to know what lies inside, just as the commander of a ship, having reached the point where the coordinates cross, opens the sealed instructions that will tell him where he is to go next. Out of the envelope come a photograph and a sheet of paper. The photograph is of Tertuliano Máximo Afonso but bears the signature of Daniel Santa-Clara beneath the words, Yours truly. As for the sheet of paper, it not only informs him that Daniel Santa-Clara is the stage name of António Claro but, additionally and exceptionally, gives him his private address, Given the special consideration we felt your letter merited, it says. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso remembers the terms in which he wrote the letter and congratulates himself on the brilliant idea of suggesting to the production company that a study should be made of the importance of supporting actors, I threw the mud at the wall and it stuck, he murmured, and at the same time, he realized, without surprise, that his mind has recovered its former calm, that his body is relaxed, no sign of nervousness, no sign of anxiety, the tributary simply flowed into the river and the volume of the river increased, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso knows now which direction to take. He removed a map of the city from the pocket in the driver's door and looked for the street where Daniel Santa-Clara lives. It is in a part of the city he does not know, at least he has no memory of ever having been there, moreover it is far from the center, as he has just discovered from the map, which he has unfolded and which is now resting against the steering wheel. It doesn't matter, he has time, he has all the time in the world. He got out to pay the parking fee, went back to the car, turned out the interior light, and started the engine. His destination, as one can easily guess, is the street where the actor lives. He wants to see the building, to gaze up at the actor's apartment, at the windows, to see what the neighbors are like, what the atmosphere is like, what clothes people wear, how they behave. The traffic is very heavy, the cars move with exasperating slowness, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso does not get impatient, there is no danger that the road he is driving toward will move, it is the prisoner of the city road network that surrounds it on all sides, as the map only confirms. It was while Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was waiting at a red light, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel in time to a wordless song, that common sense got into the car. Good afternoon, it said, Who invited you, was the driver's response, Frankly, I can't remember a single occasion when you've invited me anywhere, Well, I might if I didn't know beforehand what you would say, Like today, Yes, you're going to tell me to think carefully, not to get involved, that it's imprudent in the extreme, that there's no guarantee the devil isn't lurking behind the door, the usual spiel, Well, this time you're wrong, what you're about to do isn't just imprudent, it's stupid, Stupid, Yes, sir, stupid, utterly stupid, Well, I don't see why, Of course you don't, one of the secondary forms of mental blindness is stupidity, Explain

yourself, Well, I don't need you to tell me that you're driving to the street where your Daniel Santa-Clara lives, it's odd, the cat's tail was dangling out of the bag and you didn't even notice, What cat, what tail, stop talking in riddles and get to the point, It's very simple, out of his surname Claro he created the pseudonym Santa-Clara, It's not a pseudonym, it's his stage name, Oh, yes, there was that other fellow who disliked the plebeian vulgarity of pseudonyms so much that he called them heteronyms, And what use would it have been if I had spotted the cat's tail, Not much I agree, you would still have had to find him, but by looking under the name of Claro in the telephone directory, you would have found him in the end, Look, I've got what I need, And now you're going to the street where he lives, you're going to see the building, to gaze up at the apartment where he lives, at the windows, to see what the neighbors are like, what the atmosphere is like, what clothes people wear, how they behave, those, if I'm not mistaken, were your words, They were, Just imagine if, while you're gazing up at the windows, the actor's old lady, or, to put it more respectfully, Antonio Claro's wife, appears at one of them and asks why you don't come up, or, worse still, asks you to go to the pharmacy to buy some aspirin or some cough syrup, Nonsense, If you think that's nonsense, imagine someone walking past and greeting you, not as the Tertuliano Máximo Afonso that you are, but as the António Claro you will never be, More nonsense, All right, if that hypothesis is nonsense, imagine that when you're strolling around, gazing up at the windows or studying the way the locals dress, Daniel Santa-Clara appears before you in the flesh, and the two of you stand there staring at each other just like two china dogs, each one a reflection of the other, except that this reflection, unlike the one in the mirror, will show the left side where the left side is and the right side where the right is, how would you react if that happened. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso did not respond at once, he remained silent for two or three minutes, then he said, The solution would be to stay in the car, Oh, I wouldn't be so sure even then, objected common sense, you might have to stop at a red light, there might be a traffic jam, a truck unloading, an ambulance loading up, and there you would be, on show, like a fish in an aquarium, at the mercy of the inquisitive, adolescent movie buff who lives on the first floor of your building and asks you what your next film will be, So what should I do, That I don't know, that's not part of my job, the role of common sense in the history of your species has never gone beyond advising caution and chicken soup, especially in those cases where stupidity has already taken the floor and looks set to take the reins too, Then I'll just have to disguise myself, As what, Well, I don't know, I'll have to think, It seems to me that, being who you are, your only option is to look like someone else, Yes, I really need to have a think, About time too, And I suppose I might as well go home, If it isn't too much bother, could you just drop me at the door, then I can make my own way after that, Don't you want to come up, You've never asked me up before, Well, I'm asking you now, Thank you, but I shouldn't really accept, Why not, Because it's not healthy for the mind to live cheek by jowl with common sense, eating at the same table, sleeping in the same bed, taking it along to work, and asking its approval or permission before making a move, you've got to take a few risks of your own, Who do you mean, All of you, the human race, But I took a risk getting this letter, and, at the time, you told me off, The way you got that letter is certainly nothing

to be proud of, using another person's honesty the way you did is a form of blackmail at its most repellent, Are you referring to Maria da Paz, Yes, I'm referring to Maria da Paz, in her place, I would have opened the letter, read it, and then rubbed it in your face until you begged forgiveness on your knees, That's how common sense behaves, is it, That's how it should behave, Right, then, see you again sometime, I have to consider my disguise now, The more you disguise yourself, the more you'll look like you. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso found a parking space almost immediately outside the door of the building where he lived, he parked the car, picked up the street map, and got out. On the pavement on the other side of the street, a man was standing, face lifted, gazing at the upper stories of the building opposite. The man did not resemble him facially or physically, his presence there was pure coincidence, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso felt a shiver run down his spine as the thought went through his mind, he couldn't help it, his unhealthy imagination was stronger than he was, that Daniel Santa-Clara might be looking for him, me looking for you, you looking for me. He shrugged off the discomfiting fantasy, I'm seeing ghosts, the guy doesn't even know I exist, yet his legs were still trembling when he went into his apartment and fell exhausted onto the sofa. For a few moments he lay plunged in a kind of torpor, absent from himself, like a marathon runner whose strength has suddenly drained away as he crossed the finishing line. Of the calm energy that had filled him as he left the garage and, afterward, when he was driving to a destination he did not, in the end, reach, all that remained was a very vague memory, like the memory of something not really experienced, or that had been experienced only by a part of him that was now absent. He got up with some difficulty, his legs felt odd, as if they belonged to someone else, and he went into the kitchen to make some coffee. He drank it in slow sips, conscious of the comforting warmth that went down his throat into his stomach, then he washed the cup and saucer and went back into the living room. All his gestures had become slow and deliberate, as if he were busy handling dangerous substances in a chemical laboratory, and yet all he had to do was open the telephone directory at C and confirm the information given in the letter. And then what will I do, he wondered, leafing through the pages until he found it. There were a lot of Claros, but only half a dozen Antónios. Here it was, at last, the thing that had cost him so much effort, so easy that anyone could have done it, a name, an address, a telephone number. He copied the details onto a piece of paper and repeated the question, Now what shall I do. In a reflex reaction, his right hand reached for the phone, he let it rest there while he read and reread what he had written down, then he withdrew his hand, got up, and paced about the apartment, arguing with himself over whether it wouldn't be more sensible to leave the next stage until after the exams were over, at least in that way he would have one less thing to worry about, unfortunately, he had told the headmaster he would write a proposal for that project on the teaching of history, and that was one obligation he couldn't get out of, Sooner or later I'll have to sit down and write a proposal that no one is going to take any notice of, it was madness to take on the project in the first place, but there was no point trying to deceive himself, pretending that he could ever accept the idea of putting off until after his schoolwork the first step on the road that will lead him to António Claro, since Daniel Santa-Clara does not, strictly speaking, exist, he's

a shadow, a puppet, a shifting shape that moves and talks inside a videocassette and returns to silence and immobility once the role he has been taught ends, while the other man, António Claro, is real, concrete, as solid as Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, the history teacher who lives in this apartment and whose name can be found under A in the telephone book, regardless of the fact that some say Afonso isn't a surname at all but a first name. He is sitting at his desk again, he is holding the piece of paper with the notes he wrote on it, his right hand is again resting on the receiver, he looks as if he is finally about to make the phone call, but how very long this man takes to make up his mind, how vacillating, how irresolute he has turned out to be, no one would think he was the same person who only a few hours ago almost snatched the letter from Maria da Paz's hands. Then, abruptly, without thinking, as the only way of overcoming this paralyzing cowardice, he dials the number. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso listens to the phone ringing, once, twice, three times, many times, and just as he is about to hang up, thinking, half relieved, half disappointed, that no one is there, a woman, out of breath, as if she had had to run from the other end of the apartment, said simply, Hello. A sudden muscular contraction tightened Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's throat, he did not reply, giving time for the woman to say again, impatiently, Hello, who is it, at last the history teacher managed to say three words, Good afternoon, madam, but instead of responding in the reserved tone of someone addressing a stranger whose face she cannot even see, the woman said with a smile that shone through every word, If you're trying to fool me, don't bother, Excuse me, stammered Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, I just needed some information, What can a person who knows everything about the apartment he is phoning possibly need to know, All I wanted to know is whether the actor Daniel Santa-Clara lives there, My dear sir, I will be sure to tell the actor Daniel Santa-Clara, when he gets in, that António Claro phoned to ask if they both lived here, Sorry, I don't understand, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso began to say, just to gain time, but the woman broke in, This isn't like you, you don't usually play tricks like this, just tell me what you want, has filming been delayed, is that it, Forgive me, madam, there's been some mistake, my name isn't António Claro, You're not my husband, she asked, No, I'm just someone wanting to know if the actor Daniel Santa-Clara lives at this address, Given my answer, you now know that he does, Yes, but the way you gave the answer left me confused, puzzled, That wasn't my intention, I just thought it was my husband having a joke, You can be quite sure that I am not your husband, Well, I find that very hard to believe, That I'm not your husband, It's your voice, I mean, your voice is exactly like his, It must just be a coincidence, Coincidences like that don't happen, two voices, like two people, might be similar, but not absolutely identical, Perhaps it's your imagination, Every word you say sounds to me as if it were coming out of his mouth, Well, I find that very hard to believe, Would you like to give me your name so that I can tell him you called, No, it's all right, besides, your husband doesn't know me, You're a fan, are you, Not exactly, Nevertheless, he'll want to know, No, I'll phone another day, Listen. The connection was cut, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had slowly replaced the phone on the rest.

THE DAYS PASSED AND TERTULIANO MÁXIMO AFONSO DID NOT phone. He was pleased by the way the conversation with António Claro's wife had gone, and he felt, therefore, confident enough to try again, but on further consideration, he had decided to opt for silence. For two reasons. The first was his realization that he enjoyed the idea of prolonging and increasing the atmosphere of mystery that his phone call must have created, he even amused himself by imagining the dialogue between husband and wife, his doubts about the supposed absolute identity of the two voices, her insistence that she would never have confused them if they hadn't been identical, Well, I just hope you're home next time he calls, then you'll be able to judge for yourself, she would say, and he would say, If he does call again, after all, he's already found out from you what he wanted to know, that I live here, He asked for Daniel Santa-Clara, remember, not António Claro, Yes, that is odd. The second and more pressing reason was that he now accepted as entirely justified his original idea as to the advantages of clearing the decks before taking the next step, in other words, waiting until the classes and the exams were over before, with a cool head, drawing up new strategies for approach and siege. It is true that awaiting him is the dull task the headmaster had asked him to undertake, but during the nearly three months of holiday that lie ahead, he is bound to be able to find both the time and the necessary disposition of mind for such arid studies. In fulfillment of the promise he had made, it is even likely that he will go and spend a few days, though only a few, with his mother, on condition, however, that he can find some sure way of confirming his near certainty that the actor and his wife will not be taking their holidays early, we need only remember the question asked by her when she thought she was speaking to her husband, Has filming been delayed, to conclude, putting two and two together, that Daniel Santa-Clara is making a new film and that, if his career is on the rise, as *The Goddess of the Stage* demonstrated, he must, of necessity, spend much more time working than he did in his early days when he was little more than an extra. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's reasons for delaying the call are, therefore, as we have seen, convincing and substantive. They do not, however, oblige him or condemn him to inactivity. His idea of going to see the street where Daniel Santa-Clara lives, despite the brutal bucket of cold water thrown on the idea by common sense, had not been entirely discarded. He even considered this, shall we say, prospective act of surveillance to be indispensable to the success of subsequent operations, since it constituted a way of gauging the situation, rather like, as used to happen in time of war, sending out a reconnaissance party in order to evaluate the enemy's strength. Fortunately, for his own safety, common sense's providentially sarcastic remarks about the more-than-likely effects of his appearing there barefaced have not been wiped from his memory. He could, it is true, grow a beard or a mustache, place on his nose a pair of dark glasses, wear a hat on his head, but, apart from the hat and the glasses, which can be put on and taken off, he was certain that these hairier ornaments, beard and mustache, whether by some capricious decision on the part of the production company or by some last-minute change to the script, would already be starting to grow on Daniel Santa-Clara's face. Consequently, the inevitable disguise would have to resort to the fakery of all ancient and modern masquerades, this unanswerable necessity overriding the fears he had felt the other day, when he had started imagining the

catastrophes that might have ensued if, thus disguised, he had gone to the production company in person to request information about the actor Santa-Clara. Like everyone else, he knew of the existence of establishments that specialized in the sale and hire of costumes, props, and all the other paraphernalia indispensable both to the art of theatrical trickery and to the protean transformations of the spy. The possibility that he might be mistaken for Daniel Santa-Clara when he made his purchases could be taken seriously only if it were the actors themselves who went to buy false beards, mustaches, and eyebrows, wigs and hairpieces, eye patches for perfectly healthy eyes, warts and moles, stuffing to plump out cheeks, various kinds of padding for either sex, not to mention cosmetics capable of producing chromatic variations at the whim of the client. Certainly not. Any production company worth its salt will have everything it might need in its warehouses and will buy anything else that isn't, and, should there be budget constraints, or if something simply isn't worth buying, then they will rent it, it won't blacken their family's reputation. Honest housewives used to put blankets and overcoats in hock as soon as the warm spring days arrived, and their lives were considered no less deserving of the respect of society, which must, surely, know all about need. There is some doubt as to whether what we have just written, from the word "Honest" to the word "need," was actually generated by Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's own thought processes, but since these words, and what lies between them, represent the holiest and purest of truths, it seemed a shame to pass up the opportunity to set them down. What should finally reassure us, now that it is clear what steps he should take, is the certainty that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso will, without fear, be able to visit the shop selling disguises and props, to choose and purchase the kind of beard that best suits his face, on the absolute condition, however, that a pathetic little beard of the kind generally known as a flea trap, even were it to transform him into an arbiter of elegance, would have to be firmly rejected, without haggling and without succumbing to the temptations of a discount, since the ear-to-ear design and the relative shortness of the hair, not to mention the bare upper lip, would leave revealed to the broad light of day the very features he is trying to conceal. For quite the opposite reason, that is, because it would attract the attention of the curious, any kind of very long beard should also be resisted, even if it isn't of the apostolic variety. The best choice would therefore be a full, fairly thick beard, tending more to the short than to the long. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso will spend hours trying it out in front of the bathroom mirror, sticking on and pulling off the thin film in which the hairs have been implanted, carefully adjusting it to his own sideburns and to the shape of his jaw, eyes, and lips, particularly the latter, since he will have to move them in order to speak and even, who knows, to eat, or even, for one never really does know, to kiss. When he first saw his new physiognomy, he felt a terrible tremor inside him, the intimate, insistent, nervous palpitation in his solar plexus that he knows so well, however, this shock was caused not merely by seeing himself looking entirely different but, and this is much more interesting when we bear in mind the peculiar situation in which he has recently found himself, by his having a whole new sense of himself, as if, finally, he had come face-to-face with his own authentic identity. It was as if, by looking different, he had become more himself. So intense was the sense of

shock, so extreme the feeling of energy rushing through him, so exalted and incomprehensible the joy filling him, that an urgent need to preserve the image made him go out, taking every care not to be seen, and head for a photographic studio far from where he lived in order to have his picture taken. He did not want to subject himself to the erratic lighting and blind mechanisms of a photo booth, he wanted a proper portrait, which it would please him to keep and to contemplate, an image before which he could say to himself, This is me. He paid a surcharge for having the photograph developed on the spot and sat down to wait. To the comment from the assistant who said, It will take a while yet, and suggested he go for a walk to kill time, he replied that he would prefer to wait right there, adding unnecessarily, It's for a present, you see. Now and then, he would raise his hands to his beard, as if to smooth it, and check with his fingers that everything was in place, then go back to the pile of photography magazines set out on a table. When he left, he took with him, as well as the respective enlargement, half a dozen medium-sized portraits, which he had already decided to destroy so as not to have to see himself multiplied. He dropped in at a nearby shopping center, went into a public toilet, and there, safe from prying eyes, removed the beard. If anyone had noticed a bearded man going into the toilets, he would have been hard pushed to swear that it was this same cleanshaven man who has just emerged five minutes later. Generally speaking, one does not notice what a bearded man is carrying, but the telltale envelope he had been clutching in his hand is now hidden between shirt and jacket. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, up until now a placid teacher of history at a secondary school, clearly has talent enough for the exercise of either of these two professional activities, that of the disguised criminal or that of the policeman on his trail. Time will tell which of these two vocations will prevail. When he got home, he burned the six small copies of the enlarged photo in the sink, turned on the tap to wash the ashes down the plughole, and, after smugly studying his new, clandestine image, restored it to the envelope, which he then hid on one of his bookshelves, behind a history of the Industrial Revolution that he himself had never read.

A few more days passed, the school term ended with the last exam and the pinning up of the list of marks, his colleague the mathematics teacher said good-bye to him, I'm off on holiday now, but afterward, if you need anything, phone me, and be careful, be very careful, Don't forget what we agreed, the headmaster told him, and I'll phone you when I get back from holiday to find out how the work's going, but if you do decide to go away, because you do, after all, have a right to some rest, leave me a contact number on your answering machine. Some days later, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso invited Maria da Paz out to supper, his appalling treatment of her had finally begun to weigh on his conscience, not even so much as a formal thank-you for her help, not even some explanation of what the letter had said, even if he had to invent one. They met in the restaurant, she arrived a little late, sat down immediately, and blamed her lateness on her mother, to look at them no one would think they were lovers, or you might perhaps think that they had been lovers until recently and were still not yet used to their new state of mutual indifference, or having to pretend to be indifferent. They exchanged a few

polite words, How are you, How have you been, Are you very busy, Me too, and while Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was once again hesitating as to which way the conversation should go, she anticipated him and jumped in with both feet, Did the letter tell you what you wanted to know, she asked, did it give you all the information you needed, Yes, he said, all too aware that his response was at once true and false, That wasn't my impression, Why's that, Well, I was expecting a bulkier envelope, Sorry, I don't understand, If I remember rightly, the facts you needed were so many and so detailed that they couldn't possibly have fit on one sheet of paper, and that was all the envelope contained, How do you know, did you open it, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso sharply and knowing, even as he said it, what response this gratuitous provocation would receive. Maria da Paz looked him straight in the eye and said serenely, No, I didn't, as you well know, Forgive me, I spoke without thinking, he said, Oh, I'll forgive you if you insist, but I can go no further than that, Further than what, For example, I can't forget that you considered me capable of opening a letter intended for you, Deep down, you know that isn't what I really think, Deep down, I know that you don't know me at all, If I didn't trust you, I would never have asked you if it was all right for the letter to be sent to you, My name was just a mask, a mask for your name, a mask for you, But I explained at the time why I thought that was the best way to proceed, Yes, you explained, And you agreed, Yes, I agreed, So, So, from now on I will be expecting you to show me this information you say you received, not because I'm interested, but simply because I think it's your duty to do so, Now you're the one who distrusts me, Yes, but I'll stop distrusting you if you can tell me how all the facts you asked for could possibly have fit on one sheet of paper, They didn't give me all the facts, Ah, they didn't give you all the facts, That's what I said, Then you'll have to show me what you've got. The food was growing cold on their plates, the sauce on the meat was congealing, the wine was sleeping forgotten in their glasses, and there were tears in Maria da Paz's eyes. For a moment, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso thought what an infinite relief it would be to tell her the whole story from the beginning, about this extraordinary, singular, astonishing, and never-before-seen case of the duplicate man, the unimaginable become reality, the absurd reconciled with reason, the final proof that for God nothing is impossible, and that the science of this century is, as someone said, a fool. If he did so, if he was open with her, then all his previous troubling actions would be explained, including those that had been, as far as Maria da Paz was concerned, aggressive, rude, or disloyal, or that had, in short, offended against the most elementary common sense, that is to say almost all his actions. Then harmony would be restored, all errors and mistakes would be unconditionally and unreservedly forgiven, Maria da Paz would beg him, Don't go on with this madness, it might turn out badly, and he would reply, You sound like my mother, and she would ask, Have you told her, and he would say, No, I just said that I had a few problems at the moment, and she would conclude, Now that you've talked to me about it, let's sort it out together. Not many tables are occupied, they have been given a corner table, and no one is paying them any particular attention, situations like this, couples who come to air their sentimental or domestic grievances between the fish and the meat courses or, worse, because the conflicts have taken longer to resolve, between the aperitif and paying the

bill, form an integral part of the catering trade, whether in restaurants or in cafeterias. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's well-intentioned thought vanished as quickly as it came, the waiter asked if they had finished and took away the plates, Maria da Paz's eyes are almost dry, it's been said thousands of times before that there's no point crying over spilled milk, the problem in this case is what has happened to the jug, which lay shattered on the floor. The waiter brought the coffee and the bill that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had asked for, and a few minutes later, they were in his car. I'll take you home, he had said, Yes, if you wouldn't mind, she had said. They did not speak until they reached the street where Maria da Paz lived. Before they reached the place where he normally dropped her, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso parked the car by the sidewalk and turned off the engine. Surprised by this unusual gesture, she shot him a glance, but still said nothing. Without turning his head, without looking at her, in a tense, determined voice, he said, Every word that has come out of my mouth during these last few weeks, including the conversation we've just had in the restaurant, has been a lie, but don't ask me what the truth is because I can't tell you, So it wasn't statistical data you wanted from the production company, Exactly, And I suppose there's no point expecting you to tell me what the real reason for your interest was, No, Presumably it's something to do with the videos you've got in your apartment, Just be satisfied with what I've told you and stop asking questions and making suppositions, Oh, I can promise you I won't ask you any questions, but I'm free to make all the suppositions I want, however absurd you may think them, You seem oddly unsurprised, Why should I be surprised, You know what I mean, don't make me repeat it, Sooner or later you would have had to tell me, I just didn't expect it to be today, And why would I have had to tell you, Because you're more honest than you think, Although not honest enough to tell you the truth, The reason for that isn't a lack of honesty, something else is keeping your lips sealed, What, A doubt, an anxiety, a fear, What makes you think that, Because I've read it in your face and heard it in your words, But the words were lying, They were, yes, but not the way they sounded, The moment has come to use the phrase politicians always use, I can neither confirm nor deny it, That's just one of those low rhetorical tricks that deceive no one, Why, Because anyone can see that the phrase inclines more toward confirmation than toward denial, Well, I've never noticed that, Neither have I, it only occurred to me now, thanks to you, But I didn't confirm the fear, the anxiety, or the doubt, You didn't deny them either, Now is not the time for word games, Well, it's better than sitting at a restaurant table with tears in your eyes, Forgive me, This time there's nothing to forgive, now I know half of what there is to know, so I can't complain, But all I said was that everything I told you was a lie, That's the half I know, from now on I hope to be able to sleep better, You might not be able to sleep at all if you knew the other half, Don't frighten me, please, There's no reason to be frightened, don't worry, there are no corpses involved, Don't frighten me, It's all right, as my mother usually says, in the end everything finds a solution, Promise me you'll take care, Yes, I promise, Great care, Yes, And if, among all the secrets I'm incapable of imagining, you find one you can tell me about, you will tell me, won't you, however insignificant it may seem to you, It's a promise, but, in this case, it's either all or nothing, Even so, I'll wait. Maria da Paz bent toward him, kissed him

lightly on the cheek, and made to get out of the car. He placed one hand on her arm and stopped her, Stay, come back home with me. She gently pulled away, No, not tonight, you couldn't give me more than you already have, Unless I told you everything, No, not even then. She opened the door, turned once more to say goodbye with a smile, and got out. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso started the engine, waited until she had gone into the building, and then, with a weary gesture, set the car in motion and drove home, where, patient and confident of its power, loneliness was waiting for him.

The following day, about midmorning, he set off for his first reconnoitering of the unknown territory where Daniel Santa-Clara lived with his wife. He was wearing the false beard meticulously fixed to his face and a peaked cap to throw a protective shadow over his eyes, which he decided at the last moment not to conceal behind a pair of dark glasses because, in conjunction with the rest of the disguise, they gave him an outlaw air likely to awaken the suspicions of the whole neighborhood and to be the cause of a full-scale police hunt, with the all-too-foreseeable consequences of capture, identification, and public opprobrium. He was not making this expedition in the expectation of collecting any particularly significant facts, at most he would learn something of the exterior of things, gain a topographical knowledge of places, the street, the building, but little more. It would be the most extraordinary fluke to see Daniel Santa-Clara going into the building, with remnants of makeup still on his face, and wearing the irresolute, perplexed expression of someone who is taking rather too long to emerge from the skin of the character he had been playing an hour before. Real life has always seemed to us more frugal in coincidences than the novel or other forms of fiction, unless we were to allow that the principle of coincidence is the one true ruler of the world, in which case, we should give as much value to the coincidence one actually experiences as to that which is written about, and vice versa. During the half hour that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso spent there, stopping to look in shopwindows and to buy a newspaper, then sitting reading the paper outside a café right next to the building, Daniel Santa-Clara was seen neither entering nor leaving. Perhaps he's resting in the peace of his home with his wife and his children, if he has any, perhaps, as he was the other day, he is busy at a film shoot, perhaps there is no one in the apartment, the children because they have gone to spend the holidays with their grandparents, the mother because, like so many others, she has a job to go to, either to safeguard a position of real or imagined personal independence or because the household finances cannot survive without her material contribution, for the fact is that, however quickly a supporting actor scurries from small role to small role, however often he is selected by the production company that uses him now on a more or less tacitly exclusive basis, the money he can earn will always be subordinated to the rigors of the law of supply and demand, which is never based on the objective needs of the subject but purely on the latter's real or imagined talents and abilities, those that it favors him with recognizing or those that, with unknown and usually negative intent, are attributed to him, forgetting that he might have other, less visible talents and abilities that might be worth putting to the test. This means that Daniel Santa-Clara could become a big star if fortune were to decide to have him noticed by a clever producer who

didn't mind taking a risk, the sort who, while he might occasionally take it into his head to destroy a really first-rate star, has also been known, with great generosity, to polish up the shine on second-rate or even third-rate stars. Letting time do its work has always been the best option ever since the world began, Daniel Santa-Clara is still young, he has a pleasant face, a good physique, and undeniable gifts as an actor, it wouldn't be right for him to have to spend the rest of his life playing hotel receptionists or other such occupations. It is not long since we saw him playing a theater impresario in *The Goddess of the Stage*, at last duly acknowledged in the opening credits, and this could be a sign that he has begun to be noticed. The future, wherever it is, and although it is hardly a novelty to say so, awaits. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, on the other hand, had better not wait around very much longer, for fear that the troubling blackness of his general appearance should become etched on the photographic memory of the waiters in the café, we neglected, by the way, to mention that he is wearing a dark suit and that, as protection against the glare of the sun, he has now had to resort to dark glasses. He left the money on the table, so as not to have to summon the waiter, and walked quickly over to the telephone booth on the other side of the road. From his top jacket pocket he removed a piece of paper bearing Daniel Santa-Clara's telephone number, which he dialed. He didn't want to speak to anyone, just to know if anyone would answer, and who. This time no woman came running from the other end of the apartment, nor did a child tell him Mummy's not home, nor did he hear a voice identical to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's say, Hello. She must be at work, he thought, and he's probably filming, playing a traffic cop or a public-works contractor. He emerged from the telephone booth and looked at his watch. It was nearly lunchtime, neither of them will be coming home, he said, but at that moment, a woman passed, he didn't manage to see her face, she was crossing the street in the direction of the café, she looked as if she was going to sit down at a table outside, but she didn't, she went on, took a few more steps, and entered the building where Daniel Santa-Clara lives. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso made a gesture of barely contained frustration, It must have been her, he muttered, for this man's worst defect, at least since we have known him, has been an excess of imagination, no one would think he was a history teacher, someone who should be interested only in facts, here we have him inventing identities after catching only a brief rear view of the woman who passed him, someone he does not know and has never seen before, either from behind or from in front. To be fair to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso though, despite this tendency to imaginative flights of fancy, he can still manage, at decisive moments, to impose upon himself a calculating coolness that would make the most hardened of stock-exchange speculators turn pale with professional envy. There is, in fact, a simple, not to say elementary, way, although, as with all things, it is necessary first to have had the idea, of finding out if the woman who went into the building was going up to Daniel Santa-Clara's apartment, he would just have to wait a few minutes, to allow time for the lift to reach the fifth floor where Antonio Claro lives, to wait for her to open the front door and go in, two more minutes for her to put her bag down on the sofa and make herself comfortable, it wouldn't be right to make her run as he had the other day, as you could tell from her breathing. The phone rang and rang, rang and rang again, but no one

answered. So it wasn't her, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso as he hung up. He has nothing more to do here, this latest preliminary act of investigation is over, many of the previous ones had been absolutely vital to the success of the operation, others had not really been worth wasting time on, but they had, at least, served to deceive his doubts, anxieties, and fears, to allow him to pretend that marking time was the same as going forward and that retreat was merely an opportunity to think things through. He had left his car on a nearby street and was setting off to find it, his work as a spy had ended, or so we thought, but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, and heaven knows what they'll think, cannot help shooting glances of burning intensity at every woman he passes, well, not every woman, some are excluded as being too old or too young to be married to a thirty-eight-year-old man, Which is my age and, therefore, presumably his age, now it should be said at this point that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's thoughts set off along two different paths, some to question the discriminatory idea underlying his allusion to age differences in marriage and other similar unions, thus upholding the prejudices of social consensus where the fluctuating but deep-rooted concepts of what is proper and improper are generated, and others, the thoughts we mentioned, to dispute the possibility subsequently aired, which is that the history teacher and the actor, based on the fact that each is the spitting image of the other, as established earlier by videographic evidence, are exactly the same age. As regards the first branch of reflections, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had no option but to recognize that every human being, insuperable and private moral impediments apart, has the right to be bound to whomever they like, where and how they like, as long as the other interested party wants this too. As for the second line of thought, this suddenly revived in Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's mind, and for more pressing reasons now, the troubling question of who is the duplicate of whom, rejecting as improbable the hypothesis that both were born, not only on the same day, but also at the same hour, at the same minute, and same fraction of a second, for this would imply that, as well as seeing the light at the very same moment, they would, at that very same moment, both have experienced crying for the first time too. Coincidences are fine as long as they respect the minimum degree of probability demanded by common sense. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is troubled now by the possibility that he might be the younger of the two, that the other man might be the original and he nothing but a mere and, of course, devalued repetition. Obviously, his nonexistent powers of divination do not allow him to peer into the fog of the yet-to-be and see if this will have any influence on a future that we have every reason to describe as impenetrable, but the fact that he was the discoverer of the supernatural miracle we know so well had given rise in his mind, without him noticing, to a kind of sense of primogeniture that, at this moment, is rebelling against the threat, as if an ambitious bastard brother had come to turn him off his throne. Absorbed in these ponderous thoughts, harried by these insidious anxieties, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, still wearing his beard, turned into the street where he lives and where everyone knows him, running the risk that someone might suddenly start shouting that the teacher's car is being stolen and for a determined neighbor to block the way with his own car. Solidarity, however, has lost many of its former virtues, in this case it would be quite appropriate to say fortunately so, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso

proceeded on his way without impediment, and, without anyone giving any sign that they had recognized him or the car he was driving, he left the area and its environs and, now that necessity has made of him a frequent visitor to shopping centers, went into the first one he found. Ten minutes later, he emerged, cleanshaven, apart from the tiny amount of his own beard that had grown since the morning. When he got home there was a message from Maria da Paz on the answering machine, nothing important, just to ask how he was. I'm fine, he murmured, absolutely fine. He promised himself that he would phone her that night, but he probably won't if he decides to take the next step, which cannot be delayed for even a page longer, that of phoning Daniel Santa-Clara.

MAY I SPEAK TO SENHOR DANIEL SANTA-CLARA, ASKED Tertuliano Máximo Afonso when the man's wife answered, You're the same person, I presume, who phoned the other day, I recognize your voice, she said, Yes, I am, May I ask who's calling, That hardly seems necessary, your husband doesn't know me, You don't know him either, but you know his name, That's only natural, he's an actor, and therefore a public figure, So are we all, we are all more or less public figures, it's only the number of spectators that varies, My name is Máximo Afonso, Just a moment. The receiver was placed on the table, then picked up again, the voices of both men will repeat themselves as a mirror repeats itself when placed in front of another mirror, António Claro speaking, how may I help you, My name's Tertuliano Máximo Afonso and I'm a history teacher in a secondary school, My wife said your name was Máximo Afonso, That was just for brevity's sake, my full name is Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, Fine, how may I help you, You have doubtless already noticed that our voices are identical, Yes, Totally identical, So it seems, You see I have already had several occasions now to confirm this, How, By watching some of the films you've appeared in in recent years, the first was a fairly old comedy entitled The Race Is to the Swift, and the last was The Goddess of the Stage, I've probably seen eight or maybe ten in all, Really, I must say I feel rather flattered, I had no idea that the kind of film that I was, for some years, obliged to appear in could be of such interest to a history teacher, although, needless to say, the roles I'm playing now are quite different, Well, I have a good reason for watching them, which is why I would like to talk to you in person, Why in person, It isn't only our voices that are identical, What do you mean, Anyone seeing us together would swear on their own life that we were twins, Twins, More than twins, identical, In what way identical, Identical, quite simply identical, My dear sir, I don't know you and I can't even be sure that your name is what you say it is or that you really are a historian, I'm not a historian, I'm just a history teacher, as for my name I've never had any other, we don't use pseudonyms in teaching, for better or worse, we teach with our faces uncovered, That hardly seems relevant, look, let's just stop the conversation right here, I have things to do, So you don't believe me, No, I don't believe in impossibilities, Do you have two moles on your right forearm, one above the other in a line, Yes, I do, So do I, That doesn't prove anything, Do you have a scar under your left kneecap, Yes, So do I, And how do you know all this if we have never met, For me it was easy, I saw you in a beach scene, I can't remember which film it was now, but there was a close-up, And how am I to know that you have the same moles as I do, the same scar, That depends on you, The impossibilities of a coincidence are infinite, The possibilities are too, it's true that our moles could have been there at birth or developed later, over time, but a scar is always the consequence of an accident that affected a particular part of the body, we both had that accident and, in all probability, on the same occasion, Even admitting that such an absolute likeness could exist, and notice I'm only admitting it as a hypothesis, I can see no reason for us to meet and I don't understand why you've phoned, Out of curiosity, nothing but curiosity, it isn't every day that you find two identical people, Look, I've lived my whole life without knowing it, and I haven't missed knowing it at all, But now you do know, Then I'll pretend I don't, The same thing will happen to you as to me, every time you look at yourself in the mirror you will never be sure whether you are

seeing your own virtual image or my real image, Frankly, I'm starting to think I've been talking to a madman, Remember that scar, if I'm mad, then we probably both are, I'll call the police, Oh, I doubt very much if the police would be interested, all I've done is make two phone calls asking to speak to the actor Daniel Santa-Clara, whom I did not threaten or insult or harm in any way, what crime have I committed exactly, You've upset my wife and myself, anyway, that's enough, I'm going to hang up now, You're quite sure you don't want to meet me, you don't feel the slightest twinge of curiosity, No, I don't feel any curiosity and I don't want to meet you, That's your last word, The first and the last, In that case, I must apologize, I had no evil intentions, Promise me you won't phone again, I promise, We have a right to our peace of mind, to our privacy, Of course, Good, I'm glad you agree, There's just one thing I'm not quite clear about, if you'll allow me, What's that, If we're identical, then will we also die at the same moment, People who are not identical and don't live in the same city die at the same moment every day, That's just coincidence, simple, banal coincidence, This conversation has come to an end, we have nothing more to say, I just hope now you have the decency to keep your word, Look, I promised I wouldn't phone you again at home and I won't, Excellent, Once more, please accept my apology, Apology accepted, Good-bye, Good-bye. There is something strange about Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's calm demeanor, when the natural, logical, human reaction would be, in this order, to slam down the phone, thump the desk in justifiable irritation, and exclaim bitterly, All that work for nothing. Week after week spent drawing up strategies, developing tactics, weighing every new step, pondering the effects of the previous step, maneuvering the sails to take advantage of favorable winds, wherever they came from, and all this to arrive at the end and humbly beg forgiveness, promising, like a child caught red-handed in the pantry, that he will never do it again. Contrary to all reasonable expectations, however, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is pleased. Firstly, because he feels that during the conversation he coped with the situation well, he was never intimidated, he argued, and here the expression is appropriate, as equal to equal, and even, occasionally, leaped nimbly onto the offensive. Secondly, because he considers it simply unthinkable that things will stop here, doubtless a highly subjective view, but one backed up by countless actions which, despite the force of curiosity that should set them immediately in motion, are often delayed, to the point, in some cases, where they appear to have been forgotten for good. Even if the immediate effect of the revelation is not as momentous as it was for Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, it is impossible that António Claro will not, one of these days, take steps, either openly or covertly, to compare one face with the other and one scar with the other. I don't know what to do, António Claro said to his wife after adding to his part of the conversation that of the other man, which she had not been able to hear, he speaks with such confidence it makes me feel like finding out if his story is actually true, If I were you, I would just wipe the matter from my mind, I would repeat to myself a hundred times a day that there cannot possibly be two identical people in the world, until I had convinced myself and could forget all about it, And you wouldn't make any attempt to get in touch with him, No, I don't think so, Why not, I'm not sure really, out of fear I suppose, It's obviously not a very common situation, but I don't see why you should be afraid, The other day, I felt almost dizzy when I

realized it wasn't you on the phone, Well, I can understand that, because listening to him is just like listening to me, What I thought, no, it wasn't a thought, it was more of a feeling, like a wave of panic closing over me, making my skin creep, and I felt that if the voice was the same, then everything else would be too, Not necessarily, we might not be completely identical, He says you are, We would have to prove it, And how would we do that, invite him over here so that you could undress and he could undress, and I, nominated judge by you both, could pronounce sentence, or not pronounce sentence at all, because it turned out that you actually were identical, and if I was to leave the room and come back in afterward, I wouldn't know who was one and who was the other, and if either of you was to go out, to leave this apartment, which one of you would I be left with afterward, tell me that, with you or with him, You'd be able to tell us apart by our clothes, Unless you had swapped, Look, don't worry, we're only talking, nothing like that will happen, Imagine it, though, having to make a decision based on what's outside rather than what's inside, Calm down, And I wonder now what he meant when he talked about how if you were identical, then you would both have to die at the same moment, He didn't state it as a fact, he was merely expressing a thought, a supposition, as if he were asking himself the question, Yes, but why mention it then, out of the blue, He probably did it to shock me, Who is this man, what does he want with us, You know as much as I do about who he is and what he wants, which is nothing, He said he was a history teacher, That must be true, he wouldn't invent that, and he did strike me as an educated man, as for him telephoning us, I would probably have done the same if, instead of him, I had been the one to discover the resemblance, And how are we going to feel now, with that ghostlike presence in the house, every time I look at you, it will be as if I were seeing him, We're still suffering the effects of the shock, the surprise, tomorrow it will all seem much simpler, one more oddity among many, after all, it's not like a cat with two heads or a calf with five legs, we're just a couple of Siamese twins who happen to have been born apart, A little while ago, I spoke of fear, panic, but I realize now that it's something else I'm feeling, What, Well, I'm not sure, a presentiment perhaps, Good or bad, It's just a presentiment, like a closed door behind another closed door, You're trembling, Yes, I am. Helena, for that is her name, although we did not know it until now, responded abstractedly to her husband's embrace, then sat huddled in one corner of the sofa and closed her eyes. António Claro tried to distract her, to cheer her up with a joke, If I ever get top billing, this Tertuliano fellow can be my double, I'll have him do all the dangerous scenes or the boring bits, and I can stay at home, and no one will notice the difference. She opened her eyes, smiled wanly, and said, A history teacher playing someone's double would certainly be a sight to see, the only thing is that cinema doubles come when they're called, and this one has invaded our house, Look, try not to think about it, read a book, watch television, do something, No, I don't feel like reading, still less like watching TV, I'm going to lie down. When Antonio Claro went to bed an hour later, Helena appeared to be sleeping. He pretended to believe her and turned out the light, knowing beforehand that it would take him a while to get to sleep too. He remembered the disquieting dialogue he had had with the intruder, sifting his phrases and even his words for hidden meanings, until the words, which were as tired as he was,

began to grow neutral, to lose their significance, as if they no longer had anything to do with the mental world of the man who was silently, desperately continuing to pronounce them, The infinite possibilities of a coincidence, Those who are identical die together, he had said, and, The virtual image of the person looking at himself in the mirror, The real image of the person looking out at him from the mirror, then the conversation with his wife, her presentiment, her fear, he made a purely private decision, for it was getting late, that the matter would have to be resolved for good or ill, whatever happened, and quickly too, I'll go and talk to him. The decision deceived his mind, tricked the tensions in his body, and sleep, finding the way clear, crept in and lay down. Worn out by an immobility against which every nerve in her body protested, Helena had also finally fallen asleep, and for two hours she managed to rest beside her husband, António Claro, as if no other man had come between them, and she would probably have remained so until dawn if her dream had not startled her awake. She opened her eyes to find the room immersed in a gloom that was almost darkness, she heard her husband's slow, regular breathing, and was suddenly aware that there was another breathing in the house, someone had come in, someone was moving around, perhaps in the living room, perhaps in the kitchen, behind the door that leads into the corridor, anyway, right here. Shaking with fear, Helena reached out her arm to wake her husband, but, at the last moment, reason stopped her. There's no one here, she thought, there can't possibly be anyone out there, it's just my imagination, sometimes dreams do step out of the brain that dreamed them, then we call them visions, phantasmagoria, premonitions, omens, warnings from beyond, the person who was breathing and walking about the house, the person who just sat down on my sofa, the person hidden behind the curtains, isn't that man, but a fantasy I have inside my head, this figure heading straight toward me, touching me with hands identical to those of this other man asleep by my side, looking at me with the same eyes, who would kiss me with the same lips, who in the same voice would say the everyday words and the other, tender, intimate words, those of the spirit and those of the flesh, is a fantasy, nothing but a mad fantasy, a nightmare borne out of fear and anxiety, tomorrow everything will return to its place, I won't need the cockerel to crow to drive away bad dreams, the alarm clock will be enough, everyone knows that no man can be exactly the same as another man in a world in which they make machines to wake us up. A ridiculous conclusion that offended both good sense and a simple respect for logic, but to this woman, who had spent all night wandering among the vaguenesses of obscure thoughts composed of shifting scraps of fog constantly changing form and direction, the conclusion seemed unanswerable and irrefutable. We must even be grateful to absurd reasoning if, in the midst of the bitter night, it restores to us a little serenity, however illusory, and gives us the key with which we can finally, hesitantly, open the door to sleep. Helena opened her eyes before the alarm was due to go off, she silenced it so that her husband would not wake up, and, lying on her back, staring up at the ceiling, she allowed her confused ideas to gradually come to order and to follow the route that would at last draw them all together into rational, coherent thought, free of inexplicable phantasms and all-too-easily explained fantasies. She could hardly believe that given all the real and mythological chimera, the sort that spit fire and have the head of a lion, the

tail of a dragon, and the body of a goat, for the flaccid monsters of her insomnia could have appeared to her in this form too, she could hardly believe that she could have been tormented, like some lewd, not to say indecent, temptation, by the image of another man whom she would not even need to undress in order to know what he was like physically, from head to toe, every inch of him, because an identical man lies beside her now. She was not ashamed of herself because these ideas did not really belong to her, they were the ambiguous fruit of an imagination that, shaken by unusual, violent emotions, had jumped the rails, what matters is that she is lucid and alert now, the mistress of her thoughts and her desires, the hallucinations of the night, be they of the flesh or of the spirit, always dissolve into air with the first light of morning, the light that reorders the world and restores it to its usual orbit, once more rewriting the books of the law. It is time to get up, the travel agency she works for is on the other side of the city, every morning on her way there she thinks how wonderful it would be if she could get them to transfer her to one of the offices in the center, the wretched traffic, at this time of day, more than deserves the term "infernal" coined by someone in some happy moment of inspiration, who knows when, who knows where. Her husband will remain in bed for another hour or two, he has no filming to do today, and the current project, it seems, is coming to an end. Helena slipped out of bed with a lightness that, though natural to her, has been perfected during her ten years as attentive, devoted spouse, then she moved noiselessly about the room while she took clothes off hangers and got dressed, before going out into the corridor. This is where the night visitor had walked, she heard his breathing next to this gap in the door before he came in and hid behind the curtain, no, don't worry, this is not another evil assault made by Helena's imagination, she herself is making fun of her own temptations, so trivial, now that she can compare them with the rosy glow coming in through that window, the one in the living room where, last night, she had felt as frightened as a little girl left alone in a wood in a fairy tale. There is the sofa on which the visitor sat, and it was not by chance that he did so, of all the places where he could have rested, if that was what he wanted, he chose that one, Helena's sofa, as if to share it with her or to appropriate it for himself. There are plenty of reasons to think that the more we try to drive our imaginations away, the more they will amuse themselves by seeking out and attacking those points in our armor that, consciously or unconsciously, we left unprotected. One day, this woman Helena, who is in a hurry and has a professional timetable to keep to, will tell us why she too went and sat down on the sofa, why, during one long minute, she cozily lingered there, and why, having been so resolute when she woke up, she is behaving now as if the dream had taken her in its arms again and was gently rocking her. And why too, dressed and ready to leave, she opened the telephone directory and copied Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's address onto a piece of paper. She pushed open the bedroom door, her husband is still apparently asleep, but his sleep is nothing more than the final, diffuse threshold of wakefulness, she can therefore approach the bed, kiss him on the forehead, and say, I'm off now, and then receive on her mouth his kiss and the other man's lips, good heavens, this woman must be mad, the things she does, the things she thinks of. Are you late, asked António Claro, rubbing his eyes, No, I've still got a couple of minutes, she replied and sat down on the

edge of the bed, What shall we do about this man, What do you want to do, Last night, while I was trying to get to sleep, I thought I should go and talk to him, but now I'm not so sure that would be a good idea, We either open the door to him, or we close it, to be honest, I don't see any other solution, one way or another our life has changed and will never be the same again, The decision is in our hands, But it's not in our hands, or anyone else's, to make what happened unhappen, the arrival of this man is a fact that we can neither erase nor remove, even if we don't let him in, even if we close the door on him, he'll be there waiting on the other side until we can't stand it anymore, You're taking a very grim view of things, perhaps, after all, we can resolve matters with a simple meeting, he proves that he's identical to me, I tell him, yes, sir, you're quite right, and once that's done, it's good-bye and good riddance, please don't bother us again, He'll still be waiting on the other side of the door, Well, we won't open it, He's already come in, he's inside your head and inside mine, We'll forget him eventually, Possibly, but we can't be sure. Helena got up, looked at her watch, and said, I've got to go, I'm going to be late, she took two steps toward the door but still had time to ask, Are you going to phone him, are you going to arrange to meet, Not today, replied her husband, raising himself up on one elbow, or tomorrow, I'll wait a few days, it might not be a bad idea to let indifference and silence do their work, to allow time for the matter to die a natural death, Oh, well, it's up to you, see you later. The apartment door opened and closed, and we will never know if Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was sitting on the stairs outside waiting. António Claro stretched out in bed again, if life really hadn't changed, as his wife claimed it had, he would turn over and sleep for another hour, it seems to be true what the envious say, that actors need a lot of sleep, it must be a consequence of the irregular life they lead, even when they go out at night as rarely as Daniel Santa-Clara. However, five minutes later, António Claro was up, unaccustomed to the early hour, although, to be fair, when his professional duties demand it, this actor, who gives every appearance of being somewhat lazy, is as capable of getting up as the most early-rising of larks. He peered at the sky out of the bedroom window, it was not hard to predict that it was going to be another hot day, then he went into the kitchen to make some breakfast. He thought about what his wife had said, He's inside our heads, but she was like that, peremptory, no, not peremptory exactly, what she has is the gift of concision, of coming out with short, condensed, pithy phrases, using four words to say what others wouldn't be able to say in forty. He wasn't sure if his was the best solution, waiting a while before going on the offensive, either in the form of a secret meeting, face-to-face, without any witnesses who might blab afterward, or in the form of a terse telephone conversation, of the kind that leaves the other party dumbstruck, breathless, nonplussed. However, he doubted the efficacy of his dialectical skills to put a stop, once and for all, to any plans, present or future, that this wretch, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, might have to introduce into their lives the kind of pernicious psychological and conjugal disquiet of which he had implicitly boasted and to which he had explicitly given rise, for example, Helena, last night, having the boldness to declare, Every time I look at you, it will be as if I were seeing him. Only a woman whose moral foundations had been severely shaken would have thrown such words in the face of her own husband unaware of the adulterous element they contained,

diaphanous, it is true, but highly revealing. Meanwhile, going around and around in António Claro's head, although he would doubtless angrily deny this if we so much as mentioned it, is the outline of an idea that, out of pure caution, we will not go so far as to classify as being on a par with a Machiavelli, at least not until its eventual effects, doubtless negative, have been revealed. This idea, which, at the moment, is nothing but a mental sketch, consists, neither more nor less, and however shocking it may seem to us, in working out whether, with skill and cunning, it would be possible to obtain from the resemblance, similarity, or absolute identity, should this be confirmed, some advantage of a personal nature, that is, whether António Claro or Daniel Santa-Clara could find a way of profiting from a business that, at the moment, appears not at all favorable to their interests. Since we cannot, at the moment, expect the person responsible for the idea to illumine the doubtless tortuous routes via which he vaguely imagines that he will reach his objectives, do not count on us, mere transcribers of other people's thoughts and faithful copyists of their actions, to anticipate the next steps of a procession that has still got no farther than the vestibule. What can, however, be excluded from this embryonic plan is the suggestion that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso might serve as the actor Daniel Santa-Clara's double, we must all concur that it would show a grave lack of intellectual respect to ask a history teacher to take part in the hirsute frivolities of the seventh art. António Claro was just taking his last sip of coffee when another idea crossed his synapses, and this was to get in his car and go and have a look at the street and the building where Tertuliano Máximo Afonso lives. Despite no longer being driven by irresistible hereditary instincts, the actions of human beings are repeated with such startling regularity that we believe it would be permissible, without stretching a point, to hypothesize the slow but steady formation of a new kind of instinct, perhaps "sociocultural" would be the right word, which, based on variants of repeated tropisms and in response, of course, to identical stimuli, would mean that any idea that had occurred to one person would, necessarily, occur to someone else. First it was Tertuliano Máximo Afonso coming to this street dramatically disguised, all in black on a brilliant summer's morning, now it is António Claro who is preparing to go to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's street without even considering the complications that might ensue if he appears there barefaced, then, while he is shaving, showering, and getting dressed, the finger of inspiration touches his forehead, reminding him that in a drawer somewhere, stored away in an empty cigar box, as a touching professional souvenir, is the mustache Daniel Santa-Clara wore five years ago when playing the role of receptionist in the comedy *The Race Is to the Swift*. As the wise old proverb almost says, Keep a thing five years and you'll always find a use for it. It will not take long for António Claro to discover where the history teacher lives thanks to the estimable telephone directory, now sitting slightly askew on the bookshelf where they usually keep it, as if it had been replaced by a nervous hand after having been nervously consulted. He has noted down the address in his pocket diary, as well as the telephone number, for, although making use of the latter is not in his plans for the day, if he ever does phone Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's apartment, he wants to be able to do so from wherever he happens to be, without having to depend on a telephone directory that he may have neglected to put back in its place

and which he might then be unable to find when he most needs it. He is ready to leave now, his mustache in position, although not particularly securely since it has lost some of its adhesive qualities over the years, but it is unlikely to fall off at the critical moment, since walking by the teacher's building and having a quick look at it will take him only a matter of seconds. When he was putting the mustache on, using his reflection in the mirror to guide him, he remembered that, five years before, he had had to shave off the natural mustache that at the time adorned the space between his nose and upper lip, merely because the director had thought both its shape and design to be inappropriate for what he had in mind. At this point, let us prepare ourselves for the attentive reader, a direct descendant of those ingenuous but extremely bright young lads who, in the early days of cinema, used to call out to the boy on the screen that the map of the mine was hidden in the hatband of the evil, cynical enemy fallen at his feet, let us prepare ourselves for them to call us to order and denounce as an unforgivable lapse the difference in behavior between the character Tertuliano Máximo Afonso and the character António Claro, since, in identical situations, the former had to go into a shopping center in order to put on and take off his false beard and mustache, while the latter is blithely preparing to leave the house in the equally blithe light of day wearing on his face a mustache that, while it may belong to him, is not in fact his. That attentive reader is forgetting what has already been pointed out during this narrative, that just as Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is, in every respect, the double of the actor Daniel Santa-Clara, so the actor Daniel Santa-Clara, although for different reasons, is the double of Antonio Claro. No one living in the building or in the street will find it strange that the man who entered the building yesterday without a mustache should be leaving it today with one, at most, if they notice at all, they would say, He's obviously already made up for filming. Sitting in his car, with the window open, Antonio Claro consults the route map and the A—Z and learns from them what we know already, that the street where Tertuliano Máximo Afonso lives is on the other side of the city, and, having bade a friendly good morning to a neighbor, he sets off. It will take nearly an hour to reach his destination, he will try tempting fate by driving past the building three times at ten-minute intervals, as if he were looking for a place to park, who knows, some happy coincidence might draw Tertuliano Máximo Afonso down into the street, although, those of us who are fully informed of the duties the history teacher has to fulfill know that, at this precise moment, he is sitting quietly at his desk, working hard on the proposal the headmaster commissioned him to write, as if his future depended on the result of this effort, when the truth is, and this we can tell you now, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso will never again enter a classroom, either in the school to which we have occasionally accompanied him or in any other. The reason will be revealed later. António Claro saw what there was to see, a nondescript street, a building like many others, no one would imagine that in that second-floor apartment, behind those innocent curtains, lives a phenomenon of nature no less extraordinary than the seven heads of the Lernaean Hydra and other such marvels. Whether Tertuliano Máximo Afonso truly merits a description that would exclude him from human normality is something that remains to be seen, for we still do not know which of these two men was the first to be born. If the first-born was Tertuliano Máximo Afonso,

then it is Antonio Claro who deserves the designation phenomenon of nature, since, having come into being second, he appeared in this world on false pretenses to occupy a place not his own, just like the Lernaean Hydra, which is why Hercules killed it. The sovereign equilibrium of the universe would not have been disturbed one iota if António Claro had been born and become an actor in some other solar system, but here, in the same city, and, therefore, as far as an observer watching us from the moon is concerned, right next door, all kinds of disorders and confusions are possible, especially the worst, especially the most terrible. And just in case you think that, because we have known him longer, we harbor some special preference for Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, we would point out that, mathematically speaking, as many inexorable probabilities of his having been the second-born hang over his head as over António Claro's. Nevertheless, however strange to sensitive eyes and ears the following syntactical construction might appear, it is legitimate to say that what will be has been, and all that's lacking now is for it to be written down. António Claro did not drive along the street again, four blocks farther on, he removed Daniel Santa-Clara's mustache, furtively, in case some good citizen should catch him in the act and call the police, then, having nothing else to do, he set off for home, where the script for his next film awaited him for study and annotation. He left the house again only to go for lunch in a nearby restaurant, then took a short nap and resumed work until his wife came home. He was not yet one of the main characters in the film, but his name would appear on the posters that would be placed strategically about the city when the time came, and he was pretty sure that he would garner some critical praise, however brief, for his performance as a lawyer, which is the role he had been given this time. His only difficulty was the enormous number of lawyers in all shapes and sizes who had appeared in films and on television, public and private prosecutors with various styles of legal patter, from the caressing to the aggressive, defense lawyers blessed with varying degrees of eloquence and for whom being convinced of the innocence of their client did not always appear to be of great importance. He would like to create a new kind of lawyer, a person who would be capable of astonishing the judge with his every word and every gesture and of dazzling the public with the sharpness of his ripostes, with his implacable powers of reasoning, with his superhuman intelligence. It was true that none of this was in the script, but the director might allow himself to be persuaded to steer the screenwriter in that direction if the producer put in a good word for him. He would have to think about it. Having muttered to himself that he would have to think about it immediately transported his thoughts to other parts, to the history teacher, to his street, to the building, to the curtained windows, and from there, in retrospect, to last night's phone call, to his conversations with Helena, to the decisions that he would sooner or later have to take, he wasn't so sure now that he could profit from the situation, but, as he has just said, he would have to think about it. His wife arrived slightly later than usual, no, she hadn't been shopping, it was the usual problem, the traffic, you could never predict what might happen, as António Claro knew, for it had taken him an hour to reach Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's street, but I'd better not mention that today, I'm sure she wouldn't understand why I did it. Helena will likewise say nothing either, she is equally sure that her husband

would not understand what she had done.

THREE DAYS LATER, ABOUT MIDMORNING, TERTULIANO MÁximo Afonso's phone rang. It wasn't his mother phoning because she missed him, it wasn't Maria da Paz phoning out of love, it wasn't the mathematics teacher phoning out of friendship, nor was it the headmaster from school wanting to know how the work was going. Hello, this is António Claro, the voice said, Oh, hello, Perhaps I'm phoning too early, No, don't worry, I'm up and working, If I'm interrupting, I can always call later, What I was doing can easily wait for an hour, there's no danger of my losing the thread, Coming straight to the point, then, I've been having a serious think these last few days and I've reached the conclusion that we should meet, That's my view too, it doesn't make sense for two people in our situation not to, My wife had a few doubts about it, but I've managed to persuade her that things couldn't simply stay as they were, Good, The problem is that we can't possibly appear in public together, we would gain nothing by becoming a news item on TV and in the press, especially me, it would be prejudicial to my career if people knew I had a look-alike who even had the same voice as me, More than a look-alike, A twin, More than a twin, That's precisely what I want to confirm, although I confess I find it hard to believe that we are as identical as you say, It's in your power to find out, We'll have to meet, then, Yes, but where, Any ideas, One possibility would be to come to my apartment, but there's the problem of the neighbors, the lady who lives upstairs, for example, knows I haven't gone out, imagine how she would feel if she saw me walking into the building I'm already in, What if I disguise myself, How, With a mustache, No, a mustache wouldn't be enough, she would just ask you, that is, ask me, because she would assume she was talking to me, if I was now a fugitive from the police, She knows you that well, She does my cleaning for me, Ah, I see, no, it clearly wouldn't be very sensible, and then there are the other neighbors too, Exactly, In that case, I think we'll have to meet outside the city, in some deserted place in the country, where no one will see us and where we can talk freely, That sounds like a good idea, Actually, I know just the place, about thirty kilometers out of the city, In which direction, Explaining it over the phone would be impossible, look, I'll send you a sketch map today, giving all the directions, we can meet in, say, four days' time so that we can be sure the letter has arrived, Four days' time brings us to Sunday, As good a day as any, But why thirty kilometers away, You know how it is with cities, just getting out of them takes a while, where the streets end, the factories begin, and where the factories end, the shantytowns begin, not to mention the villages that have already become part of the city without even knowing it, You put it well, Thank you, anyway I'll phone you on Saturday to confirm the meeting, All right, There is one other thing I'd like you to know, What's that, Well, I'll be armed, Why, Because I don't know you and I don't know what other intentions you might have, If you're afraid I'll kidnap you, for example, or eliminate you so that I can be alone in the world with this face that we both have, I can tell you now that I won't have any weapons on me, not even a penknife, No, no, I don't suspect you of that, You'll still be armed though, Just a precaution, All I want to do is prove to you that I'm right, and as for what you say about not knowing me, allow me to object that we're in exactly the same position, it's true you've never seen me, but, up until now, I've only seen you pretending to be someone else, playing a part, so that makes us equal, Let's not argue, we should

go to our meeting calmly, without any previous declarations of war, But I'm not the one who'll be armed, The gun won't be loaded, What's the point of taking it then, if it won't be loaded, Pretend that I'm playing another one of my roles, that of a person drawn into an ambush from which he knows he will emerge alive because someone has given him the script to read, in short, the movies, It's just the opposite in history, you only find out afterward, What an interesting idea, I'd never thought of that before, Nor had I, it only occurred to me now, So we're in agreement, then, we'll meet on Sunday, Yes, I'll await your call, Don't worry, I won't forget, it's been a pleasure talking to you, Same here, Good-bye, Good-bye, and give my regards to your wife. Like Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, António Claro was alone at home. He had warned Helena that he was going to phone the history teacher, but had said he would prefer her not to be there and that he would tell her about the conversation afterward. She didn't try to stop him, she said she thought it a good idea, that she understood his desire to feel comfortable when embarking on a conversation that would clearly not be easy, but what he will never know is that Helena made two phone calls from the travel agency where she works, the first to her own number and the second to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's, as fate would have it, she did so precisely when he and her husband were talking to each other, that way she could be sure that the matter was going ahead, but again she could not have said why she did this, it is becoming more and more evident that, after many more or less failed attempts, the only way to arrive at some proper explanation of our actions would be for us to say why we do the things about which we always say we don't know why we do them. A trusting and conciliatory spirit would presume that, had Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's number not been engaged, António Claro's wife would have hung up without waiting for a reply, she would certainly not announce herself with, Hello, I'm Helena, António Claro's wife, she wouldn't say, I was just phoning to see how you are, such words, in the current situation, would be in a way improper, if not downright indiscreet, given that these two people, even though they have spoken twice, are not on close enough terms for it to seem natural for either of them to inquire about the state of mind or health of the other, neither can we accept as an excuse for such an excess of familiarity the fact that these are perfectly normal, everyday expressions, the kind that, in principle, do not oblige or commit anyone to anything, unless, that is, we were to tune our auditory organ to the complex range of possible underlying subtones, as set out in the exhaustive explanation given elsewhere in this story for the enlightenment of those readers more interested in what lies hidden than in what is shown. As for Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, it was with evident relief that he leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath when the conversation with António Claro came to an end. If asked which of the two, in his opinion, at the point we have now reached, was in charge of the game, he would feel inclined to reply, I am, although he was equally sure that the other man would think he had reason enough to give exactly the same answer if asked the same question. It did not worry him that the place chosen for the meeting was so far from the city, it did not trouble him that António Claro was intending to go armed, even though he was convinced that, contrary to his assurances, the pistol, because it would in all probability be a pistol, would be loaded. In a way that he himself realized to be totally lacking in logic, rationality, and common

sense, he believed that the false beard he would wear would protect him while he was wearing it, basing this absurd belief on the firm idea that he would not take it off when they first met, only later on, when the absolute identity of hands, eyes, eyebrows, forehead, ears, nose, hair, had been agreed to the satisfaction of both. He would take with him a mirror large enough so that, when he does finally remove his beard, their two faces, side by side, could be compared directly, so that their eyes could pass from the face to which they belonged to the face to which they could have belonged, a mirror that would state definitively, If what you can see is identical, then the rest must be too, I really don't think it's necessary for you to take all your clothes off in order to continue the comparison, this isn't a nudist beach or a weight-lifting contest. Calmly and confidently, as if this particular chess move had been foreseen from the start, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso resumed his work, thinking that, just as with his bold proposal for the study of history, people's lives could also be told from front to back, one could wait until they ended and then, gradually, follow the stream back to the source, identifying the tributaries on the way and sailing up them too, aware that each one, even the smallest and feeblest, was, in its time and in itself, a major river, and in this slow, deliberate way, alert to every scintillation on the surface of the water, every bubble risen from the bottom, every sudden downward flurry, every stagnant stillness, reach the end of the narrative and place after the first of all moments the final full stop, and to take the same amount of time that the lives thus told had actually lasted. Let's not hurry, we have so much to say when we fall silent, murmured Tertuliano Máximo Afonso and went back to his work. Halfway through the afternoon, he phoned Maria da Paz and asked if she would like to drop by when she finished work, she said she would but that she couldn't stay long because her mother wasn't well, and then he said not to bother, that family duties came first, and she said, No, I'd like to see you, and he agreed and said, Yes, it would be good to see each other, as if she were his beloved, and we know that she is not, or perhaps she is and he doesn't know it, or perhaps, he stopped at this word because he didn't know how to complete the sentence honestly, what lie or what pretend truth he would say to himself, it's true that his eyes had grown misty with emotion, she wanted to see him, yes, sometimes it's good to have someone who wants to see us and who tells us so, but the treacherous tear, already wiped away with the back of his hand, appeared only because he was alone and because solitude suddenly weighed on him more than in his darkest hours. Maria da Paz duly arrived, they kissed each other on both cheeks, then sat down to talk, he asked if her mother's illness was serious, she said no, fortunately not, just one of those problems that comes with old age, they come and go, go and come, and finally stay. He asked when her holidays began, she said in two weeks' time, but that they probably wouldn't be going away, it all depended on her mother's health. He asked how work was at the bank, and she said, oh, the usual, some days better than others. Then she asked if he didn't get terribly bored, now that the classes were over, and he said no, he didn't actually, the headmaster had set him a task, to draw up a proposal for the ministry on methods of teaching history. She said, How interesting, and then they fell silent, until she asked if he had anything to tell her, and he said no, it wasn't the right time yet, that she must be patient a little longer. She said she would wait as long as she

had to, that the conversation they had had in the car after supper the other night, when he had admitted that he had lied, had been like a door opening only to close again at once, but that at least she had found out that the thing separating them was only a door and not a wall. He said nothing, merely nodded and thought to himself that worse than any wall is a door to which one has never had the key, a key he didn't know where to find, or even if it existed. Then, when he didn't speak, she said, It's getting late, I'd better go, and he said, Don't go yet, But I've got to, my mother's expecting me, Of course, forgive me. She got up, he did too, they looked at each other, they kissed each other on the cheek as they had when she arrived, Good-bye, then, she said, Good-bye, he said, phone me when you get home, Yes, they looked at each other again, then she took the hand he was about to place on her shoulder by way of farewell, and, very gently, as if he were a child, led him into the bedroom.

António Claro's letter arrived on the Friday. Accompanying the map was a handwritten note, unsigned and with no salutation, it said, Let's meet at six in the evening, I hope you don't have too much difficulty finding the place. The writing isn't exactly like mine, but there's very little difference, and it's mainly in the way he writes his capital letters, murmured Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. The map showed a road leading out from the city and, on either side of the road, two villages separated by eight kilometers, and between them, a road off to the right, heading into the countryside toward another village, smaller than the others to judge by the drawing. From there, another narrower road came to a halt about a kilometer farther on, at a house. This was indicated by the word "house," not by a rudimentary drawing, the simple outline that even the least skillful of hands can draw, a roof with a chimney, a facade with a door and a window on either side. Above the word, a red arrow left no room for doubt, Go no farther. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso opened a drawer, took out a map of the city and environs, found and identified the right exit, here's the first village, the road that turns off to the right before reaching the second, the little village up ahead, all that's missing is the final stretch of track. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso looked at the sketch map again, If it's a house, he thought, then I don't need to take a mirror, all houses have mirrors in them. He had imagined that the meeting would take place in open countryside, far from prying eyes, perhaps beneath the protection of some leafy tree, and instead it would take place under a roof, rather like a meeting of acquaintances, with a glass in one hand and some nuts to nibble on. He wondered if Antonio Claro's wife would go too, if she would go there in order to confirm the size and shape of the scars on the left knee, to measure the distance between the two moles on the right forearm and the distance that separates one from the epicondyle and the other from the wrist bone, and then say, Don't leave my sight, so that I don't get you muddled up. He thought not, it wouldn't make sense for any man worthy of the name to go to a potentially difficult, not to say hazardous, meeting, one has only to remember António Claro's gentlemanly warning to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso that he would be armed, and to drag his wife along with him, as if ready to hide behind her skirts at the slightest sign of danger. No, he'll go alone, I won't take Maria da Paz either, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso pronounced these disconcerting words unaware of the

profound difference that exists between a legitimate spouse, adorned with all the inherent rights and duties, and a temporary romantic relationship, however steadfast the aforementioned Maria da Paz's affections have always seemed to us, and given that it is reasonable, if not obligatory, to doubt those of the other party. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso put the city map and the sketch map away in the drawer, but not the handwritten note. He put it in front of him, picked up his pen, and wrote the whole sentence on a piece of paper, in a hand that tried to imitate as closely as possible the other hand, especially the capital letters, which is where the difference was most noticeable. He kept writing, repeating the sentence, until he had covered the whole sheet, and in the last attempt, not even the most experienced of graphologists would have been able to discover even the most insignificant suggestion of forgery, what Tertuliano Máximo Afonso achieved when he quickly copied Maria da Paz's signature is a mere shadow of the work of art he has just produced. From now on, all he will have to find out is how António Claro forms the capital letters from A to H, J to K, and M to Z, and then learn to imitate them. This does not mean, however, that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is nurturing in his mind future projects that involve the person of the actor Daniel Santa-Clara, he is merely, in this particular case, satisfying the taste for study that led him, when still a young man, to the public exercise of the praiseworthy profession of schoolmastering. Just as it is always possible that it might prove useful to know how to stand an egg on its end, so one should not exclude the possibility that being able to produce an accurate imitation of Antonio Claro's capital letters might also serve some purpose in Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's life. As the ancients taught, never say, Of this water I will not drink, especially, we would add, if you have no other water. Since these thoughts were not formulated by Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, it is not in our power to analyze the connection that might nevertheless exist between them and the decision he has just taken and to which he was obviously led by some thought of his own that we failed to catch. This decision reveals the, shall we say, inevitable nature of the obvious, for now that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has the sketch map that will guide him to the location where the meeting will take place, what could be more natural than that it should occur to him to go and inspect the location first, to study its entrances and exits, to take its measure, if we can use that expression, with the added and not insignificant advantage that, by doing so, he will avoid the risk of getting lost on Sunday. The thought that this short journey would distract him for some hours from the painful duty of writing the proposal to the ministry not only brightened his thoughts, it also, in truly surprising fashion, lifted the gloom from his face. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso does not belong to that extraordinary group of people who can smile even when alone, his nature inclines him more to melancholy, to reverie, to an exaggerated awareness of the transience of life, to an incurable perplexity when faced by the genuine Cretan labyrinths of human relationships. He does not properly understand the mysterious workings of a beehive nor why the branch of a tree should spring out where and in the way it does, that is, neither higher up nor lower down, neither thicker nor thinner, but he attributes his difficulty in understanding this to the fact that he does not know the genetic and gestural communication codes used among the bees, still less the flow of information that more or less blindly circulates along the tangled network of

vegetal motorways that link the roots deep down in the earth to the leaves that clothe the tree and which rest in the noonday stillness and stir when the wind moves them. What he absolutely does not understand, however much he cudgels his brain, is why it is that while communication technologies continue to develop in a genuinely geometric progression, from improvement to improvement, the other form of communication, proper, real communication, from me to you, from us to them, should still be this confusion crisscrossed with culs-de-sac, so deceiving with its illusory esplanades, and as devious in expression as in concealment. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso might not perhaps mind becoming a tree, but he will never be one, his life, like that of all humans who have lived and will live, will never know the supreme experience of the vegetal. Supreme, or so we imagine, since, up until now, no one has read the biography or the memoirs of an oak tree, written by the same. Let Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, therefore, concern himself with the things of the world to which he belongs, the world of men and women who shout and boast in every natural and artificial setting, and let him leave in peace the arboreal world, which has quite enough things to cope with, phytopathological diseases, the electric saw, and forest fires, to name but a few. He is preoccupied too with driving the car that is taking him out into the countryside, carrying him away from a city that is the very model of modern difficulties in communication, in the form of vehicles and pedestrians, especially on days like today, Friday afternoon, when everyone is leaving for the weekend. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is leaving, but he will soon be back. The worst of the traffic is behind him now, the road he must take is not very busy, soon he will find himself outside the house where, the day after tomorrow, António Claro will be waiting for him. He has his beard on, carefully stuck to his face, just in case, as he is driving through the last village, someone addresses him as Daniel Santa-Clara and invites him to have a beer, always assuming that the house he has come to see belongs to António Claro or is rented by him, a house in the country, a second home, these supporting actors who work in films certainly live high on the hog if they already have access to luxuries that, not so very long ago, were the privilege of the few. Meanwhile, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is concerned that the narrow road that leads to the house and which is now there before him may have no other use, that is, if it does not go beyond the house and there are no other houses nearby, then the woman who appeared at the window will be asking herself or her neighbor beside her, Where's that car going, there's no one staying at António Claro's house at the moment as far as I know, and I didn't like the look of that man's face, men with beards have usually got something to hide, it's just as well Tertuliano Máximo Afonso didn't hear her, he would have had yet another serious reason to feel worried. There is scarcely room on the tarmac road for two cars to pass, there obviously isn't much traffic here. To the left, the stony ground slopes gently down to a valley where a long, unbroken line of tall trees, which from here look to be ash trees and white poplars, marks the probable course of a river. Even at the prudent speed at which Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is driving, in case a car should suddenly appear coming toward him, a kilometer takes no time at all to cover, and this kilometer is covered already, and this must be the house. The road continues, snaking up two hills set one above the other, then disappearing around the other side, it probably serves other houses that cannot be

seen from here, the distrustful woman seems, after all, to be concerned solely with what is near the village where she lives, what lies beyond her frontiers doesn't interest her. From the broad terrace in front of the house another, even narrower road and in even worse condition leads down toward the valley, That must be another way to get here, thought Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. He is aware that he should not go too near the house, lest some walker or goatherd, for it looks like the kind of area where goats might be kept, should sound the alarm, Stop thief, and in two ticks the police would be there, or, if not them, a detachment of locals armed, as in the old days, with sticks and scythes. He must behave like a traveler just passing through, who has paused for a moment to admire the view and who, now that he's there, casts an appreciative eye over a house whose owners, now absent, are fortunate enough to enjoy this magnificent vista. The house is a simple one-story building, a typical rural dwelling that looks as if it had undergone some careful restoration work, although there are signs of neglect too, as if the owners did not come here very often and only on brief visits. One usually expects a house in the country to have potted plants outside the door and on the window ledges, but this has hardly any, a few dry stalks, the occasional fading flower, and a single brave geranium that continues to do battle against absence. The house is separated from the road by a low wall, and, behind it, raising their branches up above the roof, are two chestnut trees that, judging by their height and their evident great age, must have been there long before the house was built. A solitary place, ideal for contemplative people, for those who love nature for what it is, making no distinction between sun and rain, heat and cold, wind and stillness, between the ease that some of these bring and that others withhold. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso walked around to the back of the house, through a garden that once merited the name but which is now no more than a barely-walled-in space invaded by thistles, a tangle of rampant weeds swamping an atrophied apple tree, a peach tree whose trunk is covered with lichen, and a few thorn apples, or *Datura stramonium*, to give them their Latin name. For António Claro, and perhaps for his wife too, the country house must have been a love of only brief duration, one of those short-lived bucolic passions that occasionally assail city dwellers and which, like loose straw, burn with the lightest touch of a match and are reduced immediately to black ash. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso can now return to his second-floor apartment with a view of the other side of the road and await the phone call that will bring him back here on Sunday. He got into the car, drove back the way he had come, and, to show the woman at the window that no crime committed against another person's property weighed heavy on his conscience, he drove slowly through the village as if he were nudging his way through a herd of goats as calmly accustomed to the streets as they were to the fields where they grazed among the broom and the thyme. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso wondered if, just to satisfy curiosity, it would be worth investigating the shortcut that seemed to lead from the house down to the river, but he soon changed his mind, the fewer people who saw him around these parts, the better. After Sunday, of course, he will never come here again, but it would still be best if people forgot the man with the beard. As he left the village, he accelerated, and in a few minutes he was back on the main road, and less than an hour afterward he was home. He had a bath, which restored him after the heat of the journey, changed his

clothes, and, accompanied by a lemon drink that he took from the fridge, sat down at his desk. He is not going to continue work on the proposal for the ministry, he is, like a good son, going to telephone his mother. He will ask how she's been, she'll say fine, how are you, oh, much as usual, no complaints, I was beginning to wonder why you hadn't phoned, sorry, but I've had a lot to do, in human beings these words are presumably the equivalent of the rapid touches of recognition that ants give to each other with their antennae when they meet on a path, as if they were saying, You're one of us, now we can talk about serious matters. So how are your problems, his mother asked, On the way to being resolved, don't worry, The very idea, as if I had nothing better to do with my life than to worry about you, Well, I'm glad you're not taking it all too seriously, You can't see my face, Come on, now, Mama, calm down, Oh, I'll calm down, but only once you're here, It won't be long now, And what about your relationship with Maria da Paz, how does that stand at the moment, It's not easy to explain actually, You could at least try, Well, I do like her and need her, Other people have got married for lesser reasons, Yes, but I think that my need for her is just a thing of the moment, nothing more, and what if I stop feeling it tomorrow, what will I do then, And what about liking her, That's only to be expected in a man who lives alone and has been lucky enough to meet a nice woman, with a pretty face, a good figure, and who is, as people say, a very caring person, Oh, so not very much then, It's not that it's not much, just that it's not enough, You loved your wife, Did I, I can't remember now, that was six years ago, Six years isn't very long to forget so much, Well, I thought I loved her, and she must have thought the same about me, but it turns out we were both mistaken, that's what tends to happen, And you don't want to make the same mistake with Maria da Paz, No, I don't, For your sake or for hers, For both our sakes, More for your own sake than for hers though, Look, I know I'm not perfect, it will be enough that I save her from the evil I don't want to happen to me, but at least my selfishness, in this case, doesn't mean I don't care about protecting her as well, Perhaps Maria da Paz wouldn't mind taking the risk, Another divorce, my second, her first, no, Mama, absolutely not, It might turn out well, we don't know precisely what awaits us beyond each action we take, True enough, Why do you say it like that, Like what, As if we were sitting in the dark and you had suddenly turned a light on and off, It's just your imagination, Say it again, Say what again, What you said, Why, Repeat it, please, As you wish, true enough, Say just the two words, True enough, No, it wasn't the same, What do you mean it wasn't the same, It just wasn't the same, Come on, Mama, stop imagining things, please, too much imagination is not the best way to gain peace of mind, the words I said just signified agreement, conformity, Thanks, I could work that out for myself, I too used to consult dictionaries when I was young, you know, Now don't get angry, When are you coming, Like I said, soon, We need to have a talk, We can have all the talks you want, Yes, but I just want the one talk, Which one, Don't pretend you don't know, I want to know what's going on, and please don't come with any ready-prepared stories, fair play and cards on the table, that's what I expect from you, That doesn't sound like you talking, It's what your father often used to say, do you remember, All right, I'll put all my cards on the table, And you promise you'll play fair, no tricks, Yes, I'll play fair and there'll be no tricks, That's what I like to hear from my son, We'll see what

you have to say when I lay down the first card in the pack, Oh, I think I've seen just about all there is to see in life, Cherish that illusion until we have that conversation, Is it so very serious, Time will tell when we get there, Well, don't take too long, please, It could be as soon as the middle of next week, Well, I certainly hope so, Take care, Mama, Take care, son. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso put down the receiver, then he let his thoughts wander, as if he were still talking to his mother, Words can be the very devil, there we are thinking we allow out of our mouths only the words that suit us, and suddenly another word slips out, where it came from we don't know, we didn't ask for it to appear, and because of that word, which we often have difficulty remembering afterward, the whole conversation abruptly changes direction, and we find ourselves affirming what we denied before, or vice versa, what happened just now was a perfect example, I hadn't intended to speak to my mother so soon about this whole mad story, if I ever really intended to do so at all, and then, from one moment to the next, how I don't know, she has my formal promise that I'll tell her everything, she's probably already putting a cross on the calendar, for next Monday, just in case I should turn up unannounced, I know her, the day she chooses is the day I should arrive, and it won't be her fault if I don't. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso isn't annoyed, on the contrary, he feels an indescribable sense of relief, as if a weight had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders, he wonders what he has gained by remaining silent all these days and he cannot find a single decent answer, in a while he might be able to come up with a thousand explanations, each more plausible than the last, now all he can think of is getting it off his chest as soon as possible, he'll have the meeting with António Claro on Sunday, in two days' time, so there's nothing stopping him getting in the car on Monday morning and going to show his mother all the cards that make up this puzzle, all of them, because it would be one thing to have told her some time ago, There's a man who looks so like me that even you couldn't tell us apart, and quite a different thing to say, I've met him and now I don't know who I am. At that moment, the tiny fragment of consolation that had been charitably caressing him vanished, and in its place, like a pain that suddenly reasserts itself, fear reappeared. We don't know precisely what awaits us beyond each action we take, his mother had said, and this banal truth, within the grasp of a mere provincial housewife, this trivial truth that forms part of the infinite list of those truths not worth saying because they won't cause anyone any sleepless nights, this truth that belongs to everyone and means the same thing to everyone, can, in certain situations, afflict and frighten more than the worst of threats. Every second that passes is like a door that opens to allow in what has not yet happened, what we call the future, but, to challenge the contradictory nature of what we have just said, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the future is just an immense void, that the future is just the time on which the eternal present feeds. If the future is empty, thought Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, then nothing that one might call Sunday exists, its possible existence depends on my existence, if I were to die now, part of the future or part of possible futures would be canceled out forever. The conclusion Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was about to reach, For Sunday to exist I must continue to exist, was interrupted by the phone. It was António Claro asking, Did you get the map, Yes, I did, Any problems, None, Look, I know I said I'd ring tomorrow, but I thought the

letter must have arrived by now and so I thought I'd just call to confirm the meeting, Fine, I'll be there at six, Don't worry about having to drive through the village, I'll be taking a shortcut that goes straight to the house, that way no one will find it odd seeing two people with the same face driving past, And what about the car, Which car, Mine, Oh, that doesn't matter, if anyone does mistake you for me, they'll just think I've got a new car, besides, I haven't been to the house much lately, All right then, See you the day after tomorrow, Yes, see you on Sunday. After hanging up, it occurred to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso that he should have mentioned he would be wearing a beard. Not that it matters, he will take it off as soon as he gets there. Sunday has just taken a great step forward.

IT WAS FIVE MINUTES PAST SIX WHEN TERTULIANO MÁXIMO Afonso parked the car opposite the house on the other side of the road. António Claro's car was already there, by the entrance, by the wall. Their cars are a whole mechanical generation apart, Daniel Santa-Clara would never have exchanged his car for anything that looked like Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's car. The garden gate stands open, so does the front door, but the windows are closed. Inside stands a barely distinguishable figure, however the voice that emerges from within is clear and precise, as the voice of a film actor should be, Come in, make yourself at home. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went up the four steps and paused on the threshold. Come in, come in, said the voice, don't stand on ceremony, although, judging from what I see, you are not the person I was expecting, I thought I was the actor, but I was wrong. Without a word, very carefully, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso removed his beard and went in. That's what I call a sense of theater, it puts me in mind of those people who like to burst into a room, shouting, I'm here, as if their presence actually mattered, said António Claro, while he emerged from the shadows and stood in the bright light coming in through the open door. They stood stock-still, looking at each other. Slowly, as if painfully dragging itself up from the depths of the impossible, stupefaction wrote itself across Antonio Claro's face, not across Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's face, for he knew what he was going to find. I'm the person who phoned you, he said, I'm here so that you can see with your own eyes that I was not just having fun at your expense when I said we were identical, So I see, stammered António Claro in a voice that no longer resembled that of Daniel Santa-Clara, I had imagined, because you were so insistent, that there was a strong resemblance, but I confess I wasn't prepared for what I have before me now, my own image, Well, now that you have the proof, I'll leave, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, No, no, I asked you to come in, now I'm asking you to sit down so that we can talk, the house is a bit of a mess but these sofas are serviceable enough and I've probably got something to drink too, but no ice, Oh, I wouldn't want to put you to any bother, It's no bother, although you'd get much better service if my wife was here, but it's not hard to imagine what she would be feeling right now, more confused and troubled than I am, that's for sure, Speaking for myself, I have no doubt about it, what I've had to live through these past few weeks I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy, Sit down, please, what would you like to drink, whiskey or brandy, Oh, I'm not a great drinker, but I think I'll have a brandy, just a drop, nothing more. António Claro brought bottles and glasses and poured the visitor a drink, then poured himself three fingers of whiskey without water and sat down on the other side of the small table separating them. I just can't get over it, he said, Oh, I've got past that stage, replied Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, now my only concern is what will happen next, How did you find out, As I told you when I phoned, I saw you in a film, Ah, yes, I remember now, the one where I played a hotel receptionist, Exactly, Then you saw me in other films, Exactly, And how did you track me down, since the name Daniel Santa-Clara isn't in the phone book, Before I could do that, I had to find a way of identifying you among all the other supporting actors who appear in the final credits with no mention of which character they played, Yes, of course, It took time, but I got there in the end, And why did you go to so much trouble, It seems to me that anyone in my position would have done the same,

Yes, I suppose so, it's such an extraordinary situation, you couldn't really ignore it, Then I rang all the people listed in the phone book under the surname Santa-Clara, And they, of course, said they didn't know me, Yes, although one of them mentioned that this was the second time someone had rung him up asking for Daniel Santa-Clara, Someone else, before you, had asked for me, Yes, A female fan perhaps, No, it was a man, How strange, Stranger still, he said the man seemed to be trying to disguise his voice, How odd, why would he want to disguise his voice, No idea, The person you spoke to might have imagined it, Possibly, So how did you find me in the end, I wrote to the production company, Well, I'm surprised they gave you my address, They told me your real name too, Oh, I thought you only found that out when you spoke to my wife on that first occasion, No, the production company told me, As far as I know, at least as regards myself, that's the first time they've done anything like that, Well, I did stick in a paragraph about the importance of supporting actors, maybe that convinced them, That would be more likely to have the opposite effect, Anyway, I got your name, And here we are, Yes, here we are. António Claro drank some of his whiskey, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso took a sip of his brandy, then they looked at each other and immediately looked away. The light from the declining afternoon sun came in through the still-open door. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso pushed his glass to one side and spread his two hands out on the tabletop, his fingers splayed, Let's compare, he said. António Claro took another sip of his whiskey and placed his hands symmetrically opposite, pressing them down hard on the table to conceal the fact that they were shaking. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso seemed to be doing the same. Their hands were identical in every respect, every vein, every wrinkle, every hair, each and every finger, as if they had come out of a mold. The only difference was the gold wedding ring that Antonio Claro was wearing on his ring finger. Let's have a look at the moles on our right forearms, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. He got up, took off his jacket, which he deposited on the sofa, and rolled up his shirtsleeve to his elbow. Antonio Claro had got up too, but, first, he went and closed the front door and turned on the lights in the living room. When he draped his jacket over the back of a chair, there was a dull clunk. Is that your pistol, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, Yes, Oh, I thought perhaps you'd decided not to bring it, It's not loaded, It's not loaded are just three words that say it's not loaded, Do you want me to show you, since you obviously don't believe me, Do what you like. António Claro put his hand into the inside pocket of the jacket and showed him the gun, Here it is. With deft, rapid movements, he removed the empty clip and pulled back the breech to reveal the equally empty chamber. Convinced, he asked, Convinced, And you don't suspect me of having another pistol in another pocket, That would be too many pistols, It would be the right number of pistols if I was planning to get rid of you, And why would the actor Daniel Santa-Clara want to get rid of the history teacher Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, You yourself put your finger on the problem when you wondered out loud what will happen next, Yes, but I was all set to leave right away, you were the one who asked me to stay, That's true, but your withdrawal wouldn't have solved anything, here or at home or teaching your classes or sleeping with your wife, Actually, I'm not married, You would still be my copy, my duplicate, a permanent image of me in a mirror in which I would not be looking at myself,

and that would probably be unbearable, Two bullets would solve the problem before it even presented itself, They would, But the pistol isn't loaded, Exactly, And you haven't got another one in the other pocket, Precisely, Which brings us back to the beginning, to not knowing what will happen next. António Claro had now also rolled up his shirtsleeve, at the distance they were standing one from the other it was not easy to see the marks on their skin, but when they went over to a light, there they were, clear, precise, identical. This is like a science-fiction film written, directed, and acted by clones under orders from a mad philosopher, said António Claro, We still haven't looked at the scars on our knees, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, It hardly seems worth it, we don't need any further proof, hands, arms, faces, voices, everything about us is the same, we'll be taking all our clothes off next. He poured himself more whiskey, he looked at the liquid as if expecting some idea to emerge from it, then said, Why not, yes, why not, Because it would be grotesque, you yourself said that no further proof was needed, Why would it be grotesque, either from the waist up or from the waist up and down, we cinema actors, theater actors too, do little else but take our clothes off, But I'm not an actor, Don't take your clothes off if you don't want to, but I'm going to, it's no big deal, I'm used to it, and if our bodies are the same all over, you'll be seeing yourself even when you're looking at me, said Antonio Claro. He removed his shirt in one movement, he took off his shoes and then his trousers, followed by his underwear and, finally, his socks. He was naked from head to toe, and from head to toe he was Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, history teacher. Not wanting to be left behind, and feeling he had to accept the challenge, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso got up from the sofa and started getting undressed as well, more inhibited in his gestures out of modesty and lack of habit, but when he had done, his body slightly hunched in shyness, he had turned into Daniel Santa-Clara, cinema actor, with the one visible exception of his feet, for he had kept his socks on. They looked at each other in silence, conscious of the utter futility of any word they might utter, gripped by a confused sense of humiliation and loss that drove out any quite natural sense of amazement, as if the shocking sameness of their bodies had stolen something from the identity of each. The first to get dressed was Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. He stood there like someone who thinks it is time to leave, but Antonio Claro said, Would you mind sitting down, there's one last point I'd like to clarify with you, I won't take up much more of your time, What is it, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso as he reluctantly sat down again, I'm talking about the dates when we were born and the time, said An-tónio Claro, taking his wallet out of his jacket pocket and removing his identity card, then handing the card to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso across the table. The latter glanced at it quickly, then gave it back, saying, I was born on the same date, year, month and day, Would you be offended if I asked you to show me your identification, Not at all. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's card passed into António Claro's hands, where it remained for ten seconds before being returned to its owner, who asked, Satisfied, Not yet, we still don't know what time each of us was born, my idea is that we should write down the time on a piece of paper, Why, So that the second person to speak, if we were to do it that way, wouldn't give in to the temptation to subtract fifteen minutes from the time the first one gave, And why wouldn't he add those fifteen minutes, Because any increase would be against the interests of the

second of us to speak, But the piece of paper doesn't guarantee the seriousness of the procedure either, there's nothing to stop me from writing, and this is just an example, that I was born the very first minute of the day, even if that wasn't true, You would be lying, Yes, I would, but either of us, if he chooses, can lie even if we just say out loud the time we were born, You're right, it's a matter of integrity and good faith. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was trembling inside, he had been sure from the very beginning that this moment would arrive, he had simply not imagined that he would be the one to invite the moment to reveal itself, to break the final seal, to reveal the one difference. He already knew what António Claro's answer would be, but he still asked, And what difference would it make telling each other what time we came into the world, Then we would know which of us, you or me, was the duplicate of the other, And what would happen to either of us if we knew that, I haven't the faintest idea, although my imagination, because we actors do have some imagination, tells me that, at the very least, it would be uncomfortable to live knowing that one was the duplicate of another person, And are you prepared, on your part, to run that risk, More than prepared, And no lying, That, I hope, won't be necessary, replied António Claro with a studied smile, an expressive composition of lips and teeth in which frankness and malice, innocence and impudence were united in identical but indiscernible doses. Then he added, Naturally, if you would prefer, we can draw lots to see who should speak first, That's not necessary, you yourself said it was a question of integrity and good faith, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, So what time were you born, At two o'clock in the afternoon. António Claro pulled a regretful face and said, I was born half an hour before or, to put it with absolute chronometrical exactitude, I stuck my head out at thirteen hundred hours twenty-nine minutes, sorry, old pal, but I was already here when you were born, so you are the duplicate. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso drank down the rest of his brandy, got up, and said, It was curiosity that brought me to this meeting, now that my curiosity is satisfied, I'll go, So soon, let's talk a little more, it's still early, in fact, if you haven't anything else to do, we could have supper together, there's a good restaurant near here, you could wear your beard, so there wouldn't be any danger, Thanks for the invitation, but I'll have to say no, we probably wouldn't have much to say to each other, since you are not, I would think, very interested in history, and I've been cured of cinema for the foreseeable future, You're upset because you weren't the first to be born, because I'm the original and you're the duplicate, Upset isn't quite the right word, don't ask me why, but I would simply have preferred that it hadn't happened like this, anyway, I didn't lose out entirely, I still have one small compensation, What compensation is that, The fact that you will gain nothing by going around boasting to all and sundry that, of the two of us, you're the original, if I, the duplicate, am not around for the necessary corroboration, Look, I have no intention of shouting this whole incredible story from the rooftops, after all, I'm a movie actor, not a circus freak, And I'm a history teacher, not a teratological phenomenon, There we agree, So there's no reason whatsoever for us to meet again, Not as far as I'm concerned, All that remains, then, is for me to wish you every happiness in carrying out a role from which you will gain absolutely no advantage, since there will be no audience to applaud you, and I promise you that this particular duplicate will keep well out of the way of scientific curiosity,

however legitimate, and out of the way, too, of the media ghouls, whose interest is equally legitimate, since they live off such stuff, for I suppose you will have heard the phrase custom is nine-tenths of the law, if that were not the case, I can assure you that the Hammurabi Code would never have been written, We'll stay away from each other, That shouldn't be hard in a city as large as the one we live in, and our professional lives are so different that I would never even have known of your existence if it hadn't been for that wretched film, and as for the likelihood of a movie actor taking an interest in a history teacher, that's probably off the scale of mathematical probability, You never know, the probability of us existing as we do was zero, and yet here we are, Well, I will try to imagine that I never saw that film or any of the others, or else remember only that I endured a long, painful nightmare before realizing at last that it wasn't worth it, after all, two identical men, what does it matter, to be perfectly frank the only thing that really worries me at the moment is whether, since we were both born on the same day, we will both die on the same day, What's the point of worrying about that now, Death is always to the point, You seem to be suffering from some morbid obsession, when you phoned me, you said the same thing, and I couldn't see the point even then, At the time, I just said it without thinking, it was one of those expressions out of place and context that slip into a conversation without being called, That wasn't the case just now, Does it bother you, No, not at all, It might bother you if you heard the idea that had just popped into my head, What idea is that, That if we are as identical as we have seen we are today, the logic of the identity that seems to unite us would mean that you will die before me, precisely thirty-one minutes before me, and during those thirty-one minutes, the duplicate will take the place of the original and himself be the original, Well, I hope you enjoy those thirty-one minutes of personal, absolute, and exclusive identity, because that is all you will enjoy from now on, How kind, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. He carefully put on his false beard, patting it delicately into place with his fingertips, his hands no longer trembling, then he said good-bye and headed for the door. There he stopped, turned, and said, Ah, I forgot the most important thing, we've done all the tests except one, What's that, asked António Claro, A DNA test, an analysis of our genetic information, or, put in the simplest of terms, so that anyone can understand it, the decisive argument, the ultimate proof, No way, No, you're right, because that would mean us going to the genetic laboratory together, hand in hand, for them to pare off a bit of nail or extract a drop of blood, and then we would know if our identity was just a chance coincidence of colors and external forms, or if we really are the double proof, the original and the duplicate proof I should say, that the impossibility of this happening was our one remaining illusion, They would classify us as monsters, Or circus freaks, Which would be unbearable for us both, Absolutely, Well, I'm glad we agree on that, We'd have to agree on something, Good-bye, Good-bye.

The sun had sunk behind the mountains that obscured the horizon on the far side of the river, but the light from the cloudless sky was almost undiminished, except where the harsh intensity of the blue had been tempered by a pale, slowly spreading pink. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso started the car and turned the wheel to head off down the

road that went through the village. Looking back at the house, he saw António Claro standing at the door, but he continued on. Neither of them waved good-bye. You're still wearing that ridiculous beard, said common sense, I'll take it off when we get to the main road, and this will be the last time you catch me wearing it, from now on, I'll go around barefaced, let other people disguise themselves if they want to, How do you know it's the last time, Oh, I couldn't honestly say, it's just an idea I have, a feeling, an intuition, Well, I have to confess I didn't expect you to cope so well, you behaved admirably, like a man, But I am a man, Yes, I'm not saying you're not, but in the past your weaknesses have always tended to get the better of your strengths, So a man is anyone who isn't subject to weaknesses, A man is also someone who isn't dominated by them, In that case, a woman capable of overcoming her female weaknesses is a man, or is like a man, In a figurative sense, yes, you could say that, Well, it seems to me that common sense has a very chauvinistic way of expressing itself, That's not my fault, it's just the way I was made, That's hardly a good excuse from someone who does nothing but offer advice and opinions, But I'm not always wrong, This sudden rush of modesty suits you, Look, I would be better than I am, more efficient, more useful, if you helped me, Who, All of you, men and women, after all, common sense is just a kind of arithmetic mean that rises and falls according to the tide, Predictable, you mean, Yes, I am the most predictable of all things, Which is why you were waiting for me in the car, It was time I came back, indeed, I could even be accused of having been away too long, You heard everything, From start to finish, Do you think I was wrong to come and talk to him, That depends on what you mean by wrong or right, besides, it doesn't matter, given the situation you were in, there wasn't really any alternative, This was the only way of drawing a line under the matter, What line, We've agreed between us that there will be no more meetings, Are you trying to tell me that after all the fuss you've made it's going to end just like that, that you'll go back to your work and he to his, you to your Maria da Paz, for as long as that lasts, and he to his Helena or whatever her name is, and everything will be discreetly brushed under the carpet, is that what you're trying to say, There's no reason why it should be any other way, There is every reason why it should be another way, believe you me, It's entirely up to us, If you turned off the engine, the car would continue to move, But we're going downhill, Even if we were on a flat surface, it would still continue to move, although admittedly for much less time, it's called inertia, as you should know, even though it's nothing to do with history, or perhaps it is, now that I think of it, I would say that it is precisely in history that one is most aware of inertia, Don't give opinions about things you know nothing about, a game of chess can be interrupted at any moment, But I was talking about history, And I'm talking about chess, All right, have it your way, one of the players can go on playing alone if he wants to, and, without resorting to tricks, he will inevitably end up winning, whether he plays white or black, because he's playing with all the pieces, Let's say I've got up from the table, left the room, am no longer there, There are still three players remaining, You're referring, I suppose, to Antonio Claro, And to his wife and to Maria da Paz, What's Maria da Paz got to do with it, You have a very poor memory, my friend, you seem to have forgotten that you used her name in your investigations, sooner or later, either through you or someone else, Maria da Paz will find

out all about the plot she is unwittingly involved in, and as for the actor's wife, always assuming she hasn't yet made a move, tomorrow she could be the victorious queen, You have rather too much imagination for common sense, Remember what I said to you a few weeks ago, that only a common sense with the imagination of a poet could have invented the wheel, That isn't quite what you said, It doesn't matter, that's what I'm saying now, You would be better company if you didn't always want to be right, But I've never claimed to be always right, whenever I make a mistake, I'm always the first to hold out my hand for the cane, Possibly, but always with the look on your face of someone who has been the victim of the most terrible miscarriage of justice, What about the horseshoe, What about the horseshoe, Well, I, common sense, also invented the horseshoe, With the imagination of a poet I suppose, Horses would be inclined to say so, All right, that's enough, we're in the realms of fantasy now, What do you think you'll do next, Make two phone calls, one to my mother to tell her that I'll be coming to see her the day after tomorrow and another to Maria da Paz to tell her that the day after tomorrow I'll be going to see my mother and will be away for a week, as you see, nothing could be simpler, more innocent, nothing could be more familiar and domestic. At that moment, a car overtook them at great speed, the driver waved with his right hand. Do you know that man, who is he, asked common sense, He's the man I was talking to, António Claro, Daniel Santa-Clara, the original of which I am the duplicate, I'd have thought you'd recognize him, How can I recognize someone I've never seen, Seeing me is the same as seeing him, But not behind a beard like that, With all this talking I'd forgotten to take it off, there you are, how do I look now, His car is more powerful than yours, Much more powerful, He was gone in an instant, He'll be racing back to tell his wife about our meeting, Possibly, but I wouldn't be so sure, You're a systematic doubting Thomas, No, I'm not, I'm just what you call common sense because you haven't yet found a better name for me, The inventor of the wheel and the horseshoe, In my poetic moments, only in my poetic moments, It's a shame there aren't more of them, When we arrive, just drop me at the end of the street, if you don't mind, Don't you want to come up and have a bit of a rest, No, I'd rather set my imagination to work, because we're certainly going to need it.

When Tertuliano Máximo Afonso woke up the next day, he knew why he had told common sense, as soon as it got into the car, that that would be the last time it would see him wearing the false beard and that, from then on, he would go about barefaced, for everyone to see. Let other people disguise themselves if they want to, had been his categorical words. What at the time might have seemed to the unwary little more than an emotional statement of intent provoked by the justifiable impatience of someone who has been through a series of very tough trials, was, in fact, unbeknownst to us, the seed of an action pregnant with future consequences, like sending off a letter of challenge to the enemy, in the knowledge that things could not possibly stay as they were. Before we go on, however, it would be beneficial to the harmony of the story if we were to devote a few lines to the analysis of any inadvertent contradiction there might be between the action we will describe shortly and the resolutions announced by Tertuliano Máximo Afonso during his brief car journey with common sense. A rapid perusal of the final pages of the previous chapter will immediately reveal the existence of a basic contradiction made manifest in a variety of different expressions, such as those spoken by Tertuliano Máximo Afonso and received with prudent scepticism by common sense, firstly, that he had drawn a line under the matter of the two identical men, secondly, that he and António Claro had agreed they would never meet again, and, thirdly, employing the ingenuous rhetoric of a dramatic final scene, that he had got up from the table, had left the room, was no longer there. That is the contradiction. How can Tertuliano Máximo Afonso say he was no longer there, that he had left the room, had got up from the table when, no sooner has he finished breakfast than we see him rush out to the nearest stationer's and buy a cardboard box in which he will send to António Claro, through the post, the very beard we have just seen him use as a disguise. Should Antonio Claro one day have a need to disguise himself, that's up to him, but this will have nothing to do with the Tertuliano Máximo Afonso who slammed out of the house, saying that he would never be back. When, in two or three days' time, António Claro opens the box at home and finds an immediately-recognizable false beard, he will inevitably say to his wife, What you're seeing here may look like a beard, but it's actually a letter of challenge, and his wife will ask, But how can that be, you don't have any enemies. Antonio Claro will not waste his breath by replying that it's impossible not to have enemies, that enemies are born not out of our will to have them but out of their irresistible desire to have us. In the world of actors, for example, roles with ten lines arouse, with discouraging frequency, the envy of roles with only five lines, that is where it always begins, with envy, and if the roles with ten lines then go on to have twenty and those with five have to content themselves with seven, then the ground has been well manured to encourage the growth of a leafy, prosperous, and lasting enmity. But what role does the beard play in all this, Helena will ask, This beard, as I forgot to mention the other day, is the one that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was wearing when he came to meet me, it's quite understandable really, in fact, I'm grateful to him, I mean, imagine the complications that could have arisen if someone had seen him driving through the village and mistaken him for me, So what are you going to do with it, Well, I could return it with a curt note putting the wretched meddler in his place, but that would mean getting involved in a tit for tat

with unforeseeable consequences, you know how it starts but not how it will end, and I have a career to think about now that I'm getting roles with fifty lines, with the possibility of getting more if everything continues to go as well as the script over there promises it will, If I were you, I would tear it up and throw it away or burn it, after all, dead dogs don't bite, It's hardly a matter of life or death, Besides, I don't think the beard would suit you, This is no joke, It was just a manner of speaking, all I know is that it unsettles my mind, it even troubles my body to know that there is a man in this city who looks exactly like you, although I still can't believe the resemblance can be so exact, But I'm telling you the resemblance is total, absolute, even the fingerprints on our identity cards are identical, I looked, It makes me dizzy just to think about it, Don't let it get to you, take a tranquilizer, Oh, I already have, I've been taking them ever since that man first phoned, Well, I hadn't noticed, You never do notice much about me, That's not true, how could I know you were taking pills if you were doing it secretly, Sorry, my nerves are on edge, it doesn't matter, it will pass, The day will come when we won't even remember this wretched affair, Until that day comes, you'll have to decide what to do with that horrible hairy thing, I think I'll put it with the mustache I wore in that film, Why would you want to keep a beard that has been on someone else's face, That's precisely the point, it does belong to someone else, but the face is the same, It's not the same, It is, If you really want me to go mad, then just keep on saying that your face is his face, Please, calm down, Anyway, how do you square your intention of keeping the beard, as if it were some kind of relic, with calling it a letter of challenge sent by an enemy, which is what you said when you opened the box, I didn't say it came from an enemy, No, but you thought it, Possibly, though I'm not sure it's the right word, the man's never done me any actual harm, He exists, He exists for me just as I exist for him, Yes, but you weren't the one who went looking for him, In his place, I wouldn't have behaved any differently, You would have if you had asked my advice first, Look, I know it isn't exactly a pleasant situation for either of us, but I can't understand why you're getting so inflamed about it, What do you mean inflamed, Any moment now there'll be flames starting from your eyes. Unexpectedly, tears, not flames, started from Helena's eyes. She turned her back on her husband and ran into the bedroom, slamming the door loudly behind her. Anyone of a superstitious bent, and who had witnessed the deplorable conjugal scene we have just described, would probably lose no time in attributing the cause of the conflict to some malign influence emanating from the false beard that Antônio Claro is determined to keep alongside the mustache with which he more or less began his career as an actor. That person would probably shake his head, put on a pitying air, and say in oracular fashion, If you invite your enemy into the house, don't come complaining to me about it afterward, you were warned and you took no notice.

More than four hundred kilometers from here, in his childhood bedroom, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is preparing to go to sleep. Having left the city on Tuesday morning, he spent the whole journey arguing with himself about whether he should tell his mother at least part of what was going on or if, on the contrary, it would make more sense to keep his mouth firmly shut. After fifty kilometers, he decided that it would be best to make a

clean breast of things, after a hundred twenty, he raged against himself for having even been capable of such an idea, after two hundred ten, it seemed to him that a superficial explanation given in an anecdotal tone might be sufficient to satisfy his mother's curiosity, after three hundred fourteen, he called himself a fool and said that surely he knew his mother better than that, at four hundred forty-seven, when he stopped outside the door of the family home, he had absolutely no idea what to do. And now, as he puts on his pajamas, he is thinking that the trip was a grave error, an out-and-out mistake, that he would have been better off not leaving his apartment, staying shut up in his protective shell, waiting. It's true that here he is out of the way, but, no offense to Dona Carolina, who does not deserve such comparisons either on physical or on moral grounds, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso feels as if he had fallen into the wolf's mouth like an unwary sparrow that has flown into the trap without realizing the consequences. His mother did not ask him any questions, she just looked at him expectantly now and then, then immediately looked away again, the look said, I don't mean to be indiscreet, but the message said, If you think you're going to leave here without telling me, you can think again. Lying on his bed, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso goes over and over the problem in his head but reaches no solution. His mother is made of sterner stuff than Maria da Paz, who is satisfied, or so she allows him to believe, with any explanation that he gives her and would wait her whole life, if necessary, for the moment of revelation. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's mother, with every gesture, every movement, when she puts his plate down in front of him, when she helps him on with his jacket, when she hands him a newly laundered shirt, is saying to him, I'm not asking you to tell me everything, you have a right to your secrets, but with one absolute exception, the secrets on which your life, future, and happiness depend, those I want to know, it's my right, and that you cannot deny me. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso turned out the bedside lamp, he had brought some books with him, but tonight his spirit does not want reading matter, and as for the Mesopotamian civilizations, which doubtless would have gently carried him off to the diaphanous threshold of sleep, these were too heavy and so stayed at home on the bedside table, with the bookmark placed at the beginning of the illustrative chapter on King Tukulti-Ninurta I, who flourished, as they say of historical figures, between the thirteenth and twelfth centuries before Christ. The bedroom door, which was only pushed to, opened softly in the darkness. Tomarctus, the household dog, had come in. He came to find out if this master, who only turns up very infrequently, was still here. He is a medium-sized dog, and ink black, not like other dogs that, when seen from up close, are really gray. The strange name was given to him by Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, that's what happens when you have an erudite master, instead of christening the creature with a name that he could pick up easily through direct genetic routes, as must have been the case with Faithful, Pilot, Sultan, or Admiral, names inherited and then transmitted from generation to generation, he gave him the name of a canine said to have lived about fifteen million years ago and that, according to the paleontologists, is the fossil-Adam of these four-legged creatures who run, sniff, and scratch their fleas and who, as is only natural in a friend, occasionally bite. Tomarctus has not come to stay for very long, he will sleep for a few minutes curled at the foot of the bed, then he will get up and take a

turn about the house to see if everything is in order, and then, for the rest of the night, will be the watchful companion of his constant mistress, apart from the odd sortie into the yard to bark and, while he's there, drink some water from his bowl and lift his leg against the bed of geraniums or the rosemary bush. He will return to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's bedroom at first light to check that nothing has moved on this side of the earth either, for what dogs most want in life is for no one to go away. When Tertuliano Máximo Afonso wakes, the bedroom door will be closed, a sign that his mother is already up and about and that Tomarctus has gone out with her. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso looks at his watch, says to himself, It's still early, as long as this last, vague sleep endures his worries can wait.

He would have woken with a start if a mischievous goblin had come to whisper in his ear that something of extreme importance is happening at this same hour in the home of António Claro or, to be more precise, more accurate, in the tortuous innards of his brain. The tranquilizers have proved a boon to Helena, the proof of this is to see how she sleeps, her breathing regular, her face as placid and absent as a child's, but we cannot say the same of her husband, who has not spent the nights well, his thoughts returning again and again to the false beard, wondering what Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's intentions had been in sending it, dreaming about the meeting at the house in the country, waking up in a state of anxiety, sometimes bathed in sweat. Not today though. The night proved as inimical as the previous nights, but dawn came like a savior as all dawns should. He opened his eyes and waited, surprised to find himself watching for something that should have been about to explode, and which did explode, a flash, a bolt of lightning that filled the whole room with light, remembering what Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had said at the beginning of their conversation, I wrote to the production company, that was his reply to the question he had asked, So how did you find me in the end. He smiled with pure pleasure as must all discoverers when they first catch sight of the unknown island, but the exultant thrill of discovery did not last long, these morning ideas generally come with a manufacturer's flaw, we think we have just invented the perpetual-motion machine, and as soon as we turn our backs, it stops. The one thing film companies never have a shortage of is letters asking for actors' photographs and autographs, the big stars, as long as they enjoy the public's favor, receive thousands of them a week, well, when we say "receive," they don't actually receive them in the normal sense of the word, they wouldn't even waste their time looking at them, that's what the staff at the production company are for, they go to the appropriate shelf to find the desired photograph, stick it in an envelope with the dedication already printed on it, the same for everyone, and then it's, hurry up now, it's getting late, next, please. Obviously, Daniel Santa-Clara is no star, indeed, if the company were ever to receive three letters in one day asking for his photograph, it would be an occasion to hang out the flags and declare a national holiday, and such letters are never kept, of course, they all pass through the paper shredder, all those longings and emotions reduced to the misery of a pile of indecipherable little strips. Assuming, however, that the filing clerks at the production company had instructions to record, order, and judiciously classify everything,

so as not to lose a single scrap of that evidence of the public's admiration for their artistes, we must inevitably ask what possible use Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's letter could be to António Claro, or, more precisely, how that letter could contribute to his finding a way out, if such a thing exists, of that complicated, freakish, never-before-seen case of two identical men. It must be said that it was this unrealistic hope, immediately shattered by the logic of the facts, that brought such joy and cheer to Antonio Claro's awakening, and if something of that mood remains, it is only because there is a remote possibility that the part of the letter in which Tertuliano Máximo Afonso mentioned the importance of supporting actors might have been deemed of sufficient interest to merit the honor of a place in the files and even, who knows, the attention of a marketing specialist to whom the human factor would not be entirely a matter of indifference. All this boils down to is a need for the minuscule satisfaction it would afford to Daniel Santa-Clara's ego, via the pen of the history teacher, to have some recognition of the importance of the cabin boys in the running of an aircraft carrier, even if all they've done on the voyage is keep the brasses nice and shiny. That this would be enough to make Antonio Claro decide to visit the production company that morning in order to inquire about a letter written by one Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is, to be perfectly frank, questionable, given the unlikelihood of his finding what he so ingenuously imagined, but there are times in life when an urgent need to drag oneself out of the slough of indecision, to do something, anything, however useless, however superfluous, is the final sign that we are still capable of doing something of our own volition, like looking through the keyhole of a door we have been forbidden to enter. António Claro is already out of bed, he slipped out taking every precaution not to wake his wife, now he is sprawled on the big sofa in the sitting room, with the script of his next film open on his lap, that will be his excuse for going to visit the production company, he who has never needed excuses before nor been asked for them at home, but that's what happens when one's conscience is not entirely easy, There's a point I need to clear up, he will say when Helena finally appears, there seems to be a bit of dialogue missing, the way it reads now, it just doesn't make sense. He will, in fact, be asleep when his wife comes into the living room, but the effect will not be entirely lost, for she thought he had got up to study his role, some people are like that, people whose overly acute sense of responsibility keeps them in a state of permanent unrest, as if, at every moment, they were not doing their duty and were being accused of just that. He had woken up suddenly, he explained in somewhat garbled fashion, had slept badly, and she asked him why he didn't go back to bed, and then he told her how he had found a mistake in the script that could be rectified only by the production company, and she said that there was no need to go rushing over there, he could go after lunch, but that now he should sleep. He insisted and she desisted, saying only that, personally, she would love to be able to slip back in between the sheets again, The holidays begin in two weeks' time, you'll see then how much I sleep, especially with these tablets, it will be paradise, You're not going to spend your whole holiday in bed, are you, he said, My bed is my castle, she replied, I'm safe behind its walls, You should go to a doctor, you never used to be like this, That's understandable, up until now, I've never had two men on my mind at the same time,

You're not serious, are you, Not the way you mean it, no, besides, you must admit it would be pretty ridiculous to feel jealous of a person I don't even know and who, if I have anything to do with it, I never will know. This would be the right moment for Antonio Claro to confess that he isn't going to visit the production company because of any supposed deficiencies in the script, but to read, if he can, a letter written by the second of the men occupying his wife's thoughts, although it is reasonable to presume, given the way in which the human brain works, always ready to slide into some form of delirium, that, at least in these last few agitated days, the second man will have overtaken the first. We recognize, however, that such an explanation, as well as demanding too much effort from António Claro's confused mind, would only complicate the situation still further and would not, in all probability, be received by Helena with great sympathy. António Claro merely said that he wasn't jealous, that it would be stupid to be jealous, he was just worried about her health, We should make the most of your holidays and go somewhere far away from here, he said, To be honest, I'd rather stay at home, and, besides, you've got that film, Yes, but shooting isn't due to start just yet, Even so, We could go and stay at the house in the country, I'll ask someone in the village to tidy up the garden for us, The solitude there is suffocating, Well, let's go somewhere else then, Like I said, I'd rather stay at home, Isn't that just a different kind of solitude, Yes, but I like it here, If that's what you really want, Yes, that's what I really want. There was no more to be said. They ate breakfast in silence, and half an hour later, Helena had left for work. António Claro was not in quite such a hurry, but he nevertheless left soon afterward. He got into his car thinking that he was about to go on the attack. He just didn't know why.

Actors do not often visit the offices of the production company, and this must be the first time that one of them has come to make inquiries about a letter from an admirer, even though this letter differed from the others in that, unusually, it asked not only for a photograph or an autograph but also for an address, António Claro does not know what the letter says, he assumes it merely asks for his home address. António Claro's task would be a difficult one were it not for the fortunate circumstance that he knows one of the department heads, who was at school with him and who received him with open arms and the usual words, So, what brings you here, Well, I was told that someone wrote in asking for my address, and I was just curious to read the letter, he said, Well, I don't deal with such matters myself, but I'll get someone to help you. He spoke to someone over the intercom, explained briefly what was needed, and moments later, a young woman entered, smiling, with her words already prepared, Good morning, I really enjoyed seeing you in your last film, That's very kind of you, Now what would you like to know, It's about a letter written by someone called Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, If all he wanted was a photograph, the letter won't be here, we don't keep those ones, if we did, the files would be bursting at the seams, As far as I know, he asked for my address and made some other rather interesting comment, which is what brings me here today, What did you say his name was, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, he's a history teacher, Do you know him, Yes and no, that is, I've heard of him, How long ago was the letter written, More than two

weeks and less than three, I think, but I'm not sure, Well, I'll look in the letter register first, although, to be honest, the name doesn't ring a bell, Are you in charge of the register, No, a colleague of mine is but she's on holiday, although a name like that must have caused some comment, there can't be too many Tertulianos around nowadays, No, I suppose not, Would you mind coming with me, said the woman. António Claro said good-bye to his friend and followed her, which was certainly no hardship, she had a good figure and was wearing a nice perfume. They walked through a room where several people were working, two of them smiled shyly when they saw him pass, which just goes to show, despite opinions to the contrary, which tend to be governed by ancient class prejudices, that some people do notice supporting actors. They went into an office lined with shelves, almost all of which were filled with large record books. An identical book lay open on the only table. It's like stepping back in time, said António Claro, it's like the archive in a Central Registry Office, Well, it is an archive, but only a temporary one, as soon as the book on the table is full, the oldest of the others will be thrown out, it's not like a real Registry Office, where everything is kept, the living and the dead, Compared with the other room we walked through, though, this is another world, You probably get rooms like this in even the most modern of offices, like a rusty anchor chained to the past and with no purpose in life. Antonio Claro looked at her intently and said, You know, you've come out with a number of interesting comments since we came into this room, Do you think so, Yes, I do, Perhaps it's a bit like a sparrow who suddenly starts singing like a canary, You see, another interesting idea. The woman did not respond, she turned a few pages in the book, going back three weeks, and began running through the list of names with her right index finger, one by one. The third week passed, the second too, we're on the first week, we've reached today's date, and the name of Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has still not appeared. You must have been misinformed, said the woman, no such name has been recorded, which would mean that the letter, if it was written, didn't come through here, it must have got lost en route, Oh dear, I'm putting you to an awful lot of trouble, wasting your time, but, Antonio Claro added sweetly, perhaps we could just go back another week, Of course. The woman turned more pages and sighed. The fourth week had seen a superabundance of requests for photographs, it would take a good while to get to Saturday, but let us raise our hands to heaven and give thanks to God that the requests concerning more important actors are dealt with in a department equipped with computer systems, nothing like the near-incunabular archaism of this mountain of folios reserved for the masses. It took a while for António Claro to realize that the search being carried out by this amiable woman was one he could do equally well himself and that he really should have offered to take her place, especially since the elementary nature of the facts recorded, no more than a list of names and addresses, the sort of thing anyone could find in an ordinary telephone directory, did not demand any degree of confidentiality or discretion that would require them to be kept away from the inquisitive eyes of non-staff members. The woman smiled, thanked him for his offer of help, but did not accept, she couldn't stand idly by watching him work, she said. The minutes passed, the pages passed, it was Thursday already and still no sign of Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. António Claro was beginning to feel uneasy, to curse himself for having thought of coming

here, to wonder what use the wretched letter would be to him if it did turn up, and he could find no answer to justify the awkwardness of the situation, and even the tiny satisfaction his ego had come looking for, like a greedy cat, was rapidly turning into embarrassment. The woman closed the book, I'm terribly sorry, but it isn't here, And I must apologize for giving you so much work and all for nothing, The fact that you were so keen to see the letter means that it can't have been nothing, said the woman generously, I was told there was a paragraph in the letter that might interest me, What paragraph, Oh, I'm not quite sure, but I think it was about the important contribution made by supporting actors to the success of films, or something like that. The woman started, as if, inside her, a memory had shaken her, and asked, Did you say it was about supporting actors, Yes, said António Claro, not wanting to believe that some remnant of hope could yet come from that quarter, But that letter was written by a woman, By a woman, repeated António Claro, feeling his head give a sudden lurch, Yes, by a woman, And what happened to her, to the letter I mean, The first person who read it thought it was pretty eccentric and immediately rushed off to show it to the former head of the department, who, in turn, sent it up to the admin department, And then, It was never sent back, it was either locked up in a safe or put through the shredder by the managing director's secretary, But why, why, Those are two very pertinent questions, probably because of that paragraph, probably because the management did not look kindly on the possibility of a petition going around, inside and outside the company, throughout the country, demanding equality and justice for supporting actors, there would be a revolution in the industry, and imagine what would happen if the demand was taken up by the lower orders, by the supporting players in society as a whole, You mentioned a former head of the department, why former, Because, thanks to his great foresight, he was immediately promoted, So the letter disappeared, vanished, murmured António Claro glumly, The original did, yes, but I kept a copy for my own use, a duplicate, You kept a copy, echoed António Claro, aware that the shudder that had just run through him had been caused not by the first word, copy, but by the second, duplicate, It struck me as such an extraordinary idea that I decided to commit a minor infraction of staff regulations, And do you have that letter with you, No, I have it at home, Ah, at home, If you'd like a duplicate, I'd be more than happy to send you one, after all, the letter was intended for the actor Daniel Santa-Clara, whose legal representative you are, I really don't know how to thank you and let me just say again what a pleasure it's been to meet you and talk to you, Well, I have my moments, today you found me in a good mood, or perhaps it's because I felt as if I were a character in a book, What book, what character, Oh, it doesn't matter, let's get back to real life, and leave aside fantasies and fictions, tomorrow I'll make you a photocopy of the letter and post it to you at home, Look, I don't want to put you to any more trouble, I can always drop by, Absolutely not, imagine what people here would think if I was seen passing you a bit of paper, Would your reputation be at risk, asked António Claro, with just the hint of a mischievous smile, Worse than that, she said tartly, my job would be at risk, Forgive me, I must have seemed indiscreet, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, No, I suppose not, you merely mistook the meaning of the words, which is a common-enough occurrence, that's the purpose of the filters that get

woven into us over time and through continual listening, What filters are those, They act like voice-sieves, and any words, as they pass through, leave behind them a kind of sediment, and to find out what those words actually intended to communicate, you have to analyze the sediment carefully, It seems an awfully complicated process, On the contrary, the necessary procedures happen instantaneously, like on a computer, but they never get in each other's way, there's a strict order to be followed, from start to finish, it's all a matter of training, Or a natural gift, like perfect pitch, You don't need quite that degree of accuracy, you just have to be capable of hearing the word, the acuteness lies elsewhere, but don't go thinking it's roses all the way, sometimes, and I'm speaking for myself here, I don't know how it is with other people, I get home and it feels as if my filters were all clogged up, it's just a shame that the showers we take for our outsides can't be used to clean up our insides too, You know I'm beginning to think that this sparrow isn't singing like a canary, but like a nightingale, Good heavens, there's an awful lot of sediment there, exclaimed the woman, Listen, I'd like to see you again, So I thought, my filter just told me so, Really, I'm serious, But not serious enough, Look, I don't even know your name, Why do you want to know, Don't get annoyed, it's normal for people to introduce themselves, When there's a reason, And isn't there, asked António Claro, To be perfectly honest, I can't see one, What if I come here again needing your help, That's simple enough, you just ask my boss to call the clerk who helped you this time, although you'll probably get my colleague, the one who's on holiday at the moment, So I won't be hearing from you again, No, but I'll keep my promise, you'll receive the letter from the person who asked for your address, And that's all, That's all, replied the woman. António Claro went to thank his former school friend, they chatted for a while, then he asked, What's the name of the clerk who helped me, Maria, why, Oh, no reason really, that doesn't tell me any more than I knew before, And what did you know before, Nothing.

THE ARITHMETIC WAS EASY ENOUGH TO DO. IF SOMEONE TELLS US that they wrote a letter and that letter subsequently turns up bearing the signature of another person, there are only two hypotheses to choose from, either the second person wrote the letter at the request of the first, or the first person, for reasons António Claro does not know, forged the name of the second person. And that's that. Whatever the truth may be, bearing in mind that the sender's address on the letter is not that of the first person but that of the second, to whom the reply from the production company had clearly been addressed, bearing in mind that all the steps taken as a result of knowing the letter's contents were taken by the first person and not a single step taken by the second, the conclusions to be drawn from this case are not just logical but transparent. Firstly, as is obvious, patent, and manifest, the two parties agreed between them to carry out this piece of epistolary mystification, secondly, for reasons that António Claro again does not know, the aim of the first person was to remain in the shadows until the last possible moment, as he had succeeded in doing. Antonio Claro went over and over these very elementary deductions during the three days it took for the letter sent by the enigmatic Maria to reach him. The letter was accompanied by a card bearing the following handwritten words, but no signature, I hope this proves useful to you. This was precisely the question that António Claro was asking himself, And now what do I do. Nevertheless, it must be said that were we to apply the theory of filters and word-sieves to the current situation, we would notice the presence of lees, of a residue, a deposit or sediment, as Maria chose to describe it, the same Maria whom Antonio Claro dared to call, although only he will know with what intentions, first, a canary and then a nightingale, anyway, now that we are trained in the analytical process, we would say that the above-mentioned sediment betrays the existence of a purpose, perhaps still undefined, diffuse, but which we would bet our boots would not have arisen if the letter received had been signed not by a woman but by a man. This means that if Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had, for example, a close male friend and had worked out this crafty trick with him, Daniel Santa-Clara would have simply torn up the letter because he would consider it an unimportant detail vis-à-vis the fundamental issue, that is, the complete identity that brought them together and, at this rate, will very probably drive them apart. Alas, the letter is signed by a woman, Maria da Paz is her name, and António Claro, who, in his professional life, has never been cast as the elegant seducer, or even as a lowlier class of cad, does his best to find some balancing compensations in real life, although not always with very auspicious results, as we have recently had occasion to verify in that episode with the assistant at the production company, we should perhaps point out that the reason we have made no previous reference to his amatory propensities is simply because they did not seem relevant to the events being recounted at the time. Since, however, human actions, generally speaking, are determined by a concurrence of impulses flowing from all the cardinal and collateral points of the instinctive being, we still are, along, of course, with a few rational factors that, against all the odds, we still manage to slip into the motivational web, and since, in these actions, the pure and the sordid are present in equal parts, and honesty counts as much as prevarication, we would not be using António Claro fairly if we refused to accept, however provisionally, the explanation he would

doubtless offer us regarding the evident interest he is showing in the signatory of the letter, that is, his natural and very human curiosity to know what kind of relationship exists between Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, the letter's intellectual author, and, or so he thinks, its material author, this Maria da Paz. We have had many opportunities to observe that António Claro does not lack perspicacity or vision, but the truth is that not even the most subtle of investigators to have left their mark on the science of criminology would have ever imagined that, in this strange matter, and against all the evidence, especially the documentary evidence, the moral author and the material author were one and the same. Two obvious hypotheses cry out for consideration, in ascending order of gravity, either they are simply friends or they are simply lovers. António Claro inclines to the latter hypothesis, firstly, because it fits in with the sentimental plots to which he is a mere witness in the films he usually appears in, and secondly and consequently, because he finds himself then in familiar territory and with a prepared script. It is time we asked if Helena knows what is going on, if António Claro has bothered to tell her about his visit to the production company, about the search through the register and his conversation with the intelligent and aromatic Maria, if he showed her or is going to show her the letter signed by Maria da Paz, if, in short, given that she is his wife, he will share with her his dangerously fluctuating thoughts. The answer is no, three times no. The letter arrived yesterday morning, and António Claro's one concern was to find a place to put it where no one else would find it. There it is, pressed between the pages of a history of the cinema that has not caught Helena's interest since she very cursorily read it during the first few months of their marriage. Out of respect for the truth, we should say that, as yet, and despite the enormous amount of thought he has given to the matter, António Claro has still not produced a satisfactory plan of action deserving of the name. However, the privilege we enjoy of knowing everything that is going to happen up until the very last page of this story, apart from those things that might still need to be invented, allows us to say that tomorrow, the actor Daniel Santa-Clara will make a phone call to Maria da Paz's apartment, purely to find out if anyone is there, we are, don't forget, in high summer, the holiday period, but he will not say a word, not a single sound will issue from his lips, total silence, lest there should be any confusion, on the part of the person at the other end, between his voice and that of Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, for in that case, he would probably have no option but to pretend, to assume his identity, with, bearing in mind the current state of affairs, entirely unforeseeable consequences. However unexpected this may seem, in a few minutes' time, before Helena gets back from work, and, again, to find out if he is away, he will phone the history teacher's apartment, but this time he will not lack for words, António Claro has his speech already prepared, regardless of whether there is someone there to listen to him or whether he has to speak to the answering machine. This is what he will say, this is what he is saying, Hello, it's António Claro here, I don't suppose you were expecting a call from me, in fact, I'd be surprised if you were, I assume you're not at home, perhaps you're off enjoying a holiday in the country somewhere, it's only natural, it is, after all, the holiday season, anyway, whether you're there or not, I wanted to ask you a big favor, to phone me as soon as you get back, I genuinely think we have a lot more to say to each other, I believe we should

meet, not at my house in the country, which is, frankly, too out-of-the-way, but somewhere else, somewhere discreet where we will be safe from prying eyes, which would do us no good at all, anyway, I hope you agree, the best time to call me is between ten in the morning and six o'clock in the evening, any day except Saturday and Sunday, but, please note, only until the end of next week. He did not add, Because from then on, Helena, that's my wife's name, I don't know if I've mentioned it before, will be at home on holiday, but even though I'm not shooting a film, we won't be going anywhere. That would be tantamount to admitting that she doesn't know what's going on, and where there is no trust, nonexistent in the present case, no sensible, well-balanced person would lay bare the secrets of his married life, especially in view of the gravity of the situation. An-tónio Claro, whose sharp wits have been shown to be in no way inferior to those of Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, realizes that the roles they have been playing up until now have been switched and that, from now on, he will be the one who has to disguise himself, and what had, at first sight, appeared to be a tardy and gratuitous provocation on the part of the history teacher, sending him, like a slap in the face, that false beard, did, it appears, have meaning and purpose, was born out of some presentiment. António Claro, not Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, will be the one who has to go in disguise to wherever their next meeting place will be. And just as Tertuliano Máximo Afonso came to this street, wearing a false beard, in order to catch a glimpse of António Claro and his wife, so António Claro, complete with false beard, will go to the street where Maria da Paz lives to find out what kind of woman she is, and will follow her to the bank and occasionally even to within sight of where Tertuliano Máximo Afonso lives, thus he will be her shadow for however long is necessary and until the compelling force of what is written and what might be written disposes otherwise. After what has been said, it will come as no surprise that António Claro should go to the chest of drawers where he keeps the box containing the mustache that, in times past, adorned the face of Daniel Santa-Clara, a disguise clearly inadequate for the present situation, the same empty cigar box that for some days now has also been home to the false beard that António Claro is going to wear. Also in times past, there lived a king considered to be very wise and who, in a moment of easy philosophical inspiration, stated, one assumes with all the solemnity due to his position, that there was nothing new under the sun. We should never take these phrases too seriously, just in case we should still be saying them when everything around us has changed and the sun itself is not what it once was. The movements and gestures people make, on the other hand, have not changed very much, not just since the third king of Israel, but since that immemorial day when a human face first saw itself in the smooth surface of a pond and thought, That's me. Now, here, where we are, where we have our existence, even after the passing of four or five million years, those primeval gestures continue to be monotonously repeated, oblivious to any changes in the sun and in the world illumined by that sun, if we need further proof that this is so we have only to watch as, before the smooth surface of his bathroom mirror, António Claro adjusts the beard that once belonged to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso with the same care, with the same concentration of mind, and perhaps with the same tremor of fear with which, not many weeks ago, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, in another bathroom and

before another mirror, had drawn António Claro's mustache on his own face. Less sure of themselves than their brutish common ancestor, they did not fall into the ingenuous temptation of saying, That's me, for fears have changed a lot since then and doubts have changed even more, now, here, instead of a confident affirmation, all that emerges from our mouth is the question, Who's that, and probably not even another four or five million years will be enough to provide an answer. António Claro took off the beard and put it back in the box, Helena will be home soon, tired from work, even more silent than usual, moving about the apartment as if it were not her home, as if the furniture were unfamiliar to her, as if the corners and edges of the furniture did not recognize her and, like zealous guard dogs, growled threateningly at her as she passed. A single word from her husband might perhaps change things, but we know that neither António Claro nor Daniel Santa-Clara will say it. Perhaps they don't want to, perhaps they can't, all fate's reasons are human, purely human, and anyone who, basing themselves on the lessons of the past, says otherwise, be it in prose or in verse, doesn't know what he or she is talking about, if you'll forgive such a bold opinion.

The following day, after Helena had gone out, António Claro phoned Maria da Paz's house. He did not feel particularly nervous or excited, silence would be his protective shield. The voice that answered was flat, with the hesitant fragility of someone recovering from some physical ailment, and yet although everything indicated that the voice belonged to a woman of a certain age, it did not sound as frail as that of an old woman, or, if you prefer euphemisms, an elderly lady. She did not say much, Hello, hello, who is it, say something, will you, hello, hello, honestly, how rude, a person can't even get any peace in her own home, and she hung up, but Daniel Santa-Clara, although he does not orbit the solar system of the really famous actors, has an excellent ear, for relationships in this case, and so it was easy for him to work out that the elderly woman, if she isn't the mother, is the grandmother, and if she isn't the grandmother, she's the aunt, excluding out of hand, because it bears no relation to actuality, that tired old literary cliché of the old-servant-who-never-got-married-out-of-love-for-her-master-and-mistress. Obviously, given his method of approach, he still doesn't know if there are any men at home, a father, a grandfather, an uncle, or a brother, but António Claro need not worry overmuch about such a possibility, since, in every respect, in sickness and in health, in life and in death, he will appear before Maria da Paz not as Daniel Santa-Clara, but as Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, who, while they may not fling wide the doors for him, either as friend or lover, must at least enjoy the advantages of a tacitly acknowledged relationship. Were we to ask António Claro what his preference would be, in accordance with the objectives he has in mind, as to the nature of the relationship between Tertuliano Máximo Afonso and Maria da Paz, whether they are lovers or friends, we have no doubt whatsoever as to his reply, that if the relationship were merely one of friendship, it would not hold half the attraction for him as it would if they were lovers. As we can see, the plan of action that Antonio Claro has been working on has not only advanced greatly as regards the setting of objectives, it is also beginning to grow in strength as regards the motivation it previously lacked, although that strength, unless we

have made a grave error of interpretation, seems to be based entirely on malevolent ideas of personal revenge that the situation, as we see it, neither promised nor in any way justified. True, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso did challenge Daniel Santa-Clara directly when, without a word, and that, perhaps, was the worst thing, he sent him the false beard, but with a little common sense, the matter could have ended there, António Claro could have shrugged and said to his wife, The man's a fool, if he thinks he can provoke me that easily, he's very much mistaken, throw it in the bin, will you, and if he's stupid enough to repeat this nonsense, then we'll call the police and put a stop to this whole story once and for all, whatever the consequences. Unfortunately, common sense does not always appear when it is needed, and its brief absences have often resulted in some major dramas and in some of the most terrifying of catastrophes. The proof that the universe was not as well-thought-out as it should have been lies in the fact that the Creator ordered the star that illumines us to be called the sun. Had the king of the stars borne the name Common Sense, imagine how enlightened the human spirit would be now, both by day and by night, because, as everyone knows, the light we call moonlight comes not from the moon but always and solely from the sun. It's worth considering that the reason so many theories about the origin of the universe have been created since the birth of speech and the word is that all of them, one by one, have failed miserably, with a regularity that augurs rather ill for the one that, with a few variations, is currently in vogue. Let us return, however, to António Claro. It is clear that he wishes, as soon as possible, to meet Maria da Paz, and that, for entirely wrongheaded reasons, he has become obsessed with revenge, and, as you will no doubt already have noticed, there is no power in heaven or on earth that will dissuade him from this. Obviously, he cannot go and stand outside the building where she lives and ask every woman who goes in or out, Are you Maria da Paz, nor could he entrust himself to the hands of chance and fortune and, for example, walk up and down her street once, twice, three times and, on the third occasion, address the first woman he saw, You look like Maria da Paz, you can't imagine what a pleasure it is finally to meet you, I'm a movie actor and my name's Daniel Santa-Clara, allow me to invite you to a coffee, it's just across the road, I'm sure we're going to have lots to talk about, ah, the beard, yes, I congratulate you on your perspicacity, on not being deceived, but I ask you, please, don't be alarmed, keep calm, when we can meet in some more private place, a place where I can remove the beard without danger, you will see before you a person you know well, intimately I believe, and whom I, without a flicker of envy, would congratulate were he here, our very own Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. The poor woman would be utterly overwhelmed by the prodigious transformation, which would, however, be quite inexplicable at this point in the narrative, for it is vital to keep in mind the fundamental, guiding idea that things should patiently await their moment and not push or reach over the shoulders of those who arrived first, shouting, I'm here, although we would not entirely reject the hypothesis that if, occasionally, we did let them through, certain potential evils might lose some of their virulence or vanish like smoke in the air, for the banal reason that they had missed their turn. This outpouring of thoughts and analyses, this benevolent scattering of reflections and their offshoots over which we have been lingering, should not make us lose sight of the prosaic reality that, deep down,

what Antônio Claro wants to know is if Maria da Paz is worth it, if she is really worth all the trouble he is going to. If she was unattractive, as thin as a rail, or, on the contrary, suffering from an excess of fat, neither of which, we hasten to add, would constitute any great obstacle if love were playing a part, then, we would see Daniel Santa-Clara taking a rapid step backward, as must have happened so often in the past, during encounters based on friendships formed through correspondence, the ridiculous stratagems, the ingenuous means of identification, I'll be carrying a blue parasol in my right hand, I'll be wearing a white flower in my buttonhole, and, in the end, no parasol and no flower, perhaps one person waiting in vain at the arranged spot, perhaps neither, the flower thrown hastily into the gutter, the parasol hiding a face that preferred not to be seen. Daniel Santa-Clara, however, need not worry, Maria da Paz is young, pretty, elegant, with a nice figure and a good character, that last attribute, though, is irrelevant to the matter at hand, for, nowadays, the scales on which the fate of the parasol or the destiny of the flower were once decided are not particularly sensitive to considerations of this nature. Meanwhile, Antônio Claro has an important problem to resolve if he does not want to spend hours and hours hanging about on the pavement outside Maria da Paz's building, waiting for her to appear, with fatal and dangerous consequences arising from the natural apprehensions of the neighbors, who would, in no time, be phoning the police to alert them to the suspicious presence of a bearded man who certainly wasn't there just to keep the building propped up. He must have recourse, therefore, to reason and to logic. It is likely that Maria da Paz works, that she has a regular job and leaves and returns at regular hours. Like Helena. But Antônio Claro does not want to think about Helena, he tells himself that the two things have nothing to do with each other, that whatever happens with Maria da Paz will not put his marriage at risk, you could almost call it a whim, of the kind to which men are said to be so easily prone, if, in the present case, the right words were not vengeance, revenge, retaliation, retribution, redress, reprisal, rancor, vindictiveness, if not the very worst of them all, hatred. Good heavens, how ridiculous, where will it all end, cry those happy people who have never come face-to-face with a copy of themselves, who have never suffered the terrible affront of receiving in the post a false beard in a box without even a pleasant, good-humored note to soften the blow. What is, at this moment, going through Antônio Claro's head will show to what extent, and contrary to the most elementary good sense, a mind dominated by base feelings can make its own conscience fall in with them, slyly forcing it to reconcile the worst actions with the best reasons and to use both to justify each other, in a kind of double game in which the same player will always win or lose. What Antônio Claro has just thought, incredible though it may seem, is that taking Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's lover to bed under false pretenses would, as well as being a way of returning the slap in the face with a still more resounding one, be the most extreme way, now can you imagine anything more absurd, of avenging his wife Helena's wounded dignity. However hard we pleaded, Antonio Claro would be unable to explain what extraordinary offenses these were that could, theoretically, be avenged only by a new and no less shocking offense. This has now become in him an *idée fixe*, and there is nothing to be done. It is something of an achievement that he is still capable of returning to his interrupted

reasoning, when he recalled that Helena was similar to Maria da Paz in having work obligations, a regular job, and particular hours for leaving and returning. Instead of walking up and down the street in the hope of some highly unlikely chance encounter, what he should do is get there really early, stand somewhere inconspicuous, wait for Maria da Paz to come out, and then follow her to work. What could be easier, one might think, and yet how wrong one would be. The first problem is that he does not know if Maria da Paz, on leaving her building, will turn left or right, and therefore to what extent the position he chooses to keep watch from, as regards both the direction she chooses to take and the place where he will leave his car, will complicate or facilitate the task of following her, not forgetting, and here is the second and no less serious problem, the possibility that she may have her own car parked outside the door, which would not give him enough time to run back to his car and join the traffic without losing sight of her. What will probably happen is that he will fail completely on the first day, return on the second to fail in one respect but succeed in another, and then trust that the patron saint of detectives, impressed by his pertinacity, will take it upon himself to make the third day a perfect and definitive triumph in the art of following a trail. António Claro will still have one other problem to resolve, relatively insignificant, it is true, compared with the enormous difficulties already overcome, but which will have to be dealt with using a remarkable degree of tact and spontaneity. Apart from when he has to drag himself from between the sheets when obliged to do so by work, an early-morning shoot or one taking place outside the city, Daniel Santa-Clara, as you will have noticed, prefers to remain snug in his bed for one or two hours after Helena has left for the day. He will, therefore, have to come up with a good explanation for the unusual fact that he intends to get up at the crack of dawn, not on one day, but on two, possibly even three, when, as we know, he is currently resting professionally, waiting for the call for action on *The Trial of the Charming Thief*, in which he will play the part of a lawyer's assistant. Telling Helena that he has a meeting with the producers wouldn't be a bad idea if his investigations into Maria da Paz were concluded in one day, but, given the circumstances, the likelihood of this happening is remote to say the least. On the other hand, he does not necessarily need to carry out his inquiries on consecutive days, in fact, when he thinks about it, this could even prove inappropriate for the purpose he has in mind, since the appearance of a bearded man three days in a row on the street where Maria da Paz lives, quite apart from arousing the suspicion and alarm of the neighbors, as we said earlier, could provoke the anachronistic, and thus doubly traumatic, rebirth of childish nightmares just when we were convinced that the advent of television had once and for all erased from the imaginations of modern children the terrible threat that the bearded bogeyman represented to generation upon generation of innocent infants. Thinking along these lines, António Claro rapidly reached the conclusion that there was no sense in worrying about hypothetical second and third days before he even knew what the first might have to offer. He will therefore tell Helena that he has a meeting tomorrow with the producers, I have to be there by eight at the latest, That's awfully early, she will say, although without a great deal of interest, Yes, I know, but it has to be at eight because the director's leaving for the airport at noon, Fine, she said and went into the kitchen, closing

the door behind her, to decide what to make for supper. She had more than enough time, but she wanted to be alone. She had said the other day that her bed was her castle, she could equally well have said that the kitchen was her fortress. Meanwhile, deft and silent as the charming thief, António Claro went and opened the drawer where he kept the box containing the false beard and mustache, removed the beard, and, silent and deft, hid it under one of the cushions on the big sofa in the living room, on the side where they hardly ever sit. So that it doesn't get too squashed, he thought.

It was a few minutes after eight o'clock the following morning when he parked the car almost opposite the door out of which he expected Maria da Paz to emerge, on the other side of the street. It seemed that the patron saint of detectives had been there all night, saving the place for him. Most of the shops are still closed, some of them, according to the notices fixed on the doors, for the purpose of staff holidays, there are not many people about, a queue of them, shorter rather than long, is waiting for the bus. António Claro soon realized that his laborious musings on how and where he should place himself in order to spy on Maria da Paz had been not only a waste of time, but also a useless waste of mental energy. Inside the car, reading the newspaper, is where he is least at risk of attracting attention, he'll just look like he's waiting for someone, which is true but can't be spoken out loud. A few people, mainly men, occasionally emerge from the building under surveillance, but none of the women correspond to the image that António Claro, without realizing it, had been forming in his mind with the help of a few female characters from films in which he has taken part. It was half past eight on the dot when the building door opened and a pretty, young woman, pleasing to look at from head to toe, came out, accompanied by an elderly lady. That's them, he thought. He put down his newspaper, turned on the engine, and waited, as restless as a horse in the starting gate before the pistol sounds. The two women continued slowly along on the right-hand side of the pavement, the younger giving her arm to the older, there is no doubt about it, they are mother and daughter and probably live alone. The old lady is the one who answered the phone yesterday, and by the way she's walking, she must have been ill, but the other one, I would bet anything you like that the other one is the famous Maria da Paz, and she's got a pretty good body, yes, sir, the history teacher has excellent taste. The two of them were moving off, and António Claro didn't know what to do. He could follow them and come back when they got into the car, but then he would risk losing them. What shall I do, shall I stay or go, where's she taking the old biddy, his rather nervous state is to blame for this somewhat discourteous expression, António Claro does not normally talk like that, it just came out. Ready for anything, he leaped out of the car and strode after the two women. When they were about thirty meters away, he slowed his pace and tried to match his speed to theirs. To avoid getting too close, he had to stop now and then and pretend he was looking in the shop windows. He was surprised to find that the slowness was beginning to irritate him, as if he saw in it an obstacle to future actions that, although not yet fully defined in his head, would, in any case, brook no impediment. The false beard was making him itch, the walk seemed endless, and he hadn't even gone very far, about three hundred meters in all, the next corner brought the

end of the journey, Maria da Paz helps her mother up the steps of the church, kisses her good-bye, and is now walking back the way she came, with the nimble step of certain women who walk as if they were dancing. António Claro crossed over to the other side of the street and paused farther on outside a shop in whose window, shortly afterward, the slender figure of Maria da Paz would pass. Alertness is all now, a moment of indecision could ruin everything, if she gets into one of these cars and he doesn't manage to reach his quickly enough, then he can kiss all his carefully laid plans good-bye until the next time. What António Claro does not know is that Maria da Paz doesn't own a car, she is calmly going to wait for the bus that will drop her close to the bank where she works, so the detectives' handbook, completely up-to-date as regards the latest technology, had forgotten that, of the five million people in this city, some of them would have lagged behind in acquiring their own means of transport. The queue had not grown much, Maria da Paz joined it, and António Claro, so as not to stand too close, allowed three people to go ahead of him, the false beard covers his face but not his eyes, his nose, his eyebrows, head, hair, or ears. Someone educated in the esoteric doctrines would choose to add the soul to the list of things that a beard does not cover, but on this point we will remain silent, we would not want to add fuel to a debate that has been going on pretty much since time began and which will go on for a long time yet. The bus arrived, Maria da Paz managed to find a free seat, António Claro will stand in the aisle, at the back. It's worked out well, he thought, this way we can travel together.

WHAT TERTULIANO MÁXIMO AFONSO TOLD HIS MOTHER was that he had met someone, a man, who was so like him that anybody who did not know them intimately would be bound to confuse them, that he had had a meeting with this man and regretted having done so, because it was one thing to see yourself repeated, with a few tiny differences, in one or two genuine twin brothers, since it's all in the family, but to come face to face with a stranger you've never seen before and for a moment to find yourself doubting who's one and who's the other, I'm sure, at least at first sight, that even you wouldn't be able to tell which of the two was your son, and if you got it right, it would be pure chance, Even if they brought me ten men identical to you, all dressed the same, and you were stuck in the middle of them, I would point straight to my son, maternal instinct never fails, There's nothing in the world that can properly be called maternal instinct, I mean, say we'd been separated when I was born and didn't meet until twenty years later, are you sure you'd still be able to recognize me, Well, I don't know about recognize, because the little wrinkled face of a newborn baby is not the same as the face of a young man of twenty, but I bet you anything you like that something inside me would make me look at you twice, And the third time, perhaps, you might look the other way, Yes, possibly, but from that moment on, I might feel a kind of ache in my heart, And what about me, would I look at you twice, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, Probably not, said his mother, but that's because children are all such ungrateful creatures. They both laughed, and she asked, And is this why you've been so worried, Yes, it was such a shock, it's hard to believe that anything like it can ever have happened before, even genetics itself, I imagine, would deny it, to start with I had nightmares about it, it was like an obsession, And how are things now, Fortunately, common sense stepped in to lend a hand and made us realize that, having lived this long in ignorance of each other's existence, that was all the more reason to remain apart now that we had met, you see we couldn't even bear to be together, we could never be friends, Enemies more like, There was a point when I thought that might happen, but the days passed, things returned to normal, and now, all that's left is like the vague recollection of a bad dream that time will gradually erase from my memory, Let's hope so. Tomarctus was lying at Dona Carolina's feet, his neck outstretched so that his head was resting on his folded paws, as if he were asleep. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso looked at him for a few moments and said, I wonder what the dog would do if he was confronted by me and by that man, which of us he would see as his master, He'd know you by your smell, That's assuming we don't both smell the same, and I can't be sure of that, There must be some differences, Possibly, People's faces might look very similar, but not their bodies, I mean, I don't suppose you both stood naked in front of a mirror, comparing everything, down to your toenails, No, of course not, Mama, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso said quickly, and it wasn't really a lie, because he and António Claro hadn't actually stood in front of a mirror together. The dog opened his eyes, closed them, then opened them again, he must have thought it was time he got up and went out into the yard to see if the geraniums and the rosemary had grown since last he looked. He stretched, first his front legs and then his back legs, extending his spine as much as he could, then he walked over to the door. Where are you off to, Tomarctus, asked the master who only appeared from time to time. The dog paused on the

threshold, turned his head in expectation of some intelligible order, and when this was not forthcoming, went out. And what about Maria da Paz, have you told her what's been going on, asked Dona Carolina, No, I didn't want to burden her with worries that even I have found hard to bear, Well, I can understand that, but I would equally well have understood if you had told her, It seemed best not to, And will you tell her now, now that it's all over, It's not worth it, one day when she could see how worried I was, I did promise to tell her what was going on, I said I couldn't tell her then but that one day I would, And now it looks like that day will never come, It's best to leave things as they are, In some situations, the worst thing you can do is leave things as they are, it just makes them stronger, It can also serve to let them rest and make them leave us in peace, If you cared about Maria da Paz, you'd tell her, But I do care about her, Not enough, though, if you sleep in the same bed as a woman who loves you but you're not open with her, what business have you to be there, You defend her as if you knew her, Even though I've never seen her, I do know her, You only know what I've told you, and that can't be much, The two letters in which you mentioned her, a few remarks you've made over the phone, that's all I needed, To know that she's the right woman for me, Well, I could have put it like that if I could also say that you were the right man for her, And you don't think I was, or that I am, Possibly not, The best solution, then, the simplest, would be to end the relationship, You said it, I didn't, Let's be logical, Mama, if she's right for me but I'm not right for her, why would you be so keen for us to get married, So that she's still there when you wake up, But I'm not asleep, I'm not a sleepwalker, I have my life, my work, There's a part of you that has been asleep ever since you were born, and my fear is that one day you'll be in for a nasty awakening, You've got the makings of a Cassandra, Mama, What's that, The question isn't what, but who, Teach me then because, as I understand it, teaching someone who doesn't know something is an act of charity, All right then, Cassandra was the daughter of Priam, the king of Troy, and when the Greeks placed a wooden horse outside the gates of the city, she began crying out that the city would be destroyed if the horse was brought inside, it's explained in detail in Homer's Iliad, the Iliad s a poem, Yes, I've heard of it, but what happened next, The Trojans thought she was mad and ignored her prophecies, And then, The city was attacked, looted, and reduced to ashes, So this Cassandra woman was right, History has taught me that Cassandra is always right, And you said I had the makings of a Cassandra, Yes, I did and I'll say it again, as lovingly as a son who has a witch for a mother can, So you're one of those unbelieving Trojans whose fault it was that Troy was burned, In this case, there is no Troy to be burned, How many Troys with other names and in other places were burned after that, Too many to count, You don't want to be another one, do you, There's no wooden horse standing outside the door of my apartment, But if ever there is one, heed the voice of this old Cassandra, and don't let it in, All right, I'll be sure to listen for any neighing, The only thing I ask is that you don't meet that man again, will you promise, Yes, I promise. Tomarctus the dog felt it was time to rejoin them, he had been sniffing around the rosemary and the geraniums in the yard, but these had not been his last port of call. He had gone into Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's bedroom, seen the open suitcase on the bed, and had been a dog for long

enough to know what this meant, which is why he did not lie down at the feet of his mistress, who never goes away, but at the feet of this other person who is about to leave.

After all the doubts as to the most prudent way to tell his mother about the thorny problem of his absolute twin, or to use a more popular and somewhat vulgar expression, his spitting image, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was now reasonably convinced that he had managed to get around the difficulty without leaving behind him too many anxieties. He had been unable to prevent the subject of Maria da Paz from resurfacing, but he was surprised when he remembered something that had happened during the conversation, at the point where he had said that it would be best to finish the relationship once and for all, for, precisely at that moment, when he had uttered that apparently irremissible sentence, he had felt a kind of inner lassitude, a half-conscious longing for abdication, as if a voice in his head were trying to make him see that his obstinacy was nothing but the last redoubt behind which he was still struggling with a repressed desire to raise the white flag of unconditional surrender. If that's true, he thought, I'm under a strict obligation to reflect seriously on the matter, to analyze this fear and indecision that is probably just left over from my first marriage, and to resolve once and for all, for my own sake, what it means to care about a person so much that you want to live with her, because the truth is I didn't even think about it when I got married, and the same truth requires me to confess that, deep down, what frightens me is the possibility of failing again. These praiseworthy resolutions occupied Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's journey, alternating with fleeting images of António Claro, whom his thoughts, oddly enough, refused to represent as being as identical as he actually was, as if, against all the evidence of the facts, they were refusing to accept his existence. He also remembered fragments of the conversations he had had with him, especially the conversation in the house in the country, but with a strange sense of distance and indifference, as if none of it had anything to do with him, as if it were a story he had read once in a book of which all that remained were a few loose pages. He had promised his mother he would never meet António Claro again and so it would be, no one would be able to accuse him tomorrow of having taken a single step in that direction. His life is going to change. He will phone Maria da Paz as soon as he gets home. I should have called her while I was away, an unforgivable lack of consideration on my part, even if only to find out how her mother was, that was the very least I could have done, especially when she might well be about to become my mother-in-law. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso smiled at a prospect that, only twenty-four hours before, would have set his nerves jangling, the holiday has clearly been good for mind and body, it has clarified his ideas, he's a new man. He arrived in the late afternoon, parked the car outside the door of the apartment building, and then, nimble, lithe, and in the best of moods, as if he had not just driven more than four hundred kilometers nonstop, he walked up the stairs as lightly as an adolescent, not even noticing the weight of his suitcase, which, as is only natural, was heavier returning than it had been going, and he very nearly danced into his apartment. In accordance with the traditional conventions of the literary genre known in Portuguese as the romance, or

novel, and which will continue to be called thus until someone comes up with a term more in keeping with its current configuration, this cheery description, organized as a simple sequence of narrative events in which, quite deliberately, not a single negative note was struck, would be cunningly placed there in preparation for a complete contrast, which, depending on the writer's intentions, could be dramatic, brutal, or terrifying, for example, a murder victim lying on the floor in a pool of blood, a convention of souls from the next world, a swarm of furious drones in heat who mistake the history teacher for the queen bee, or, worse still, all of this combined into a single nightmare, for, as has been demonstrated ad nauseam, the imagination of the Western novelist knows no limits, or, rather, it hasn't since the days of the aforementioned Homer, who, when one thinks about it, was the very first novelist. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's apartment opened its arms to him like a second mother, and with the voice of the air it murmured, Come, my son, here I am waiting for you, I am your castle and your fortress, no power can prevail over me, because I am yours even when you are absent, and even if I lay in ruins, I would still be the place that once was yours. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso put his suitcase down on the floor and turned on the overhead light. The living room was tidy, there wasn't a speck of dust on the furniture, it is a great and solemn truth that men, even those who live alone, never manage to separate themselves entirely from women, and we are not thinking now of Maria da Paz, who, for her own personal and dubious reasons would, despite everything, agree, but the upstairs neighbor, who spent all morning yesterday here cleaning, with as much care and attention as if the apartment were hers, or with more care, probably. The light on the answering machine is blinking. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso sits down to listen. The first call to leap out at him was from the headmaster, hoping that he was enjoying the holidays and wanting to know how the proposal for the ministry was getting on, Not, of course, that this should in any way affect your legitimate right to a rest after such a hard school year, the second brought him the slow, paternal voice of the mathematics teacher, nothing important, just to ask how his depression was faring and suggesting that a long, leisurely trip around the country, in good company, would perhaps be the best therapy for what ailed him, the third call was the one that António Claro had left the other day, the one that began, Hello, it's António Claro here, I don't suppose you were expecting a call from me, it was enough for his voice to ring out around that previously tranquil living room for it to become clear that the traditional conventions of the novel we mentioned above are not, after all, merely a hackneyed solution used by unimaginative narrators, but a literary resultant of the great cosmic equilibrium, because the universe, which, ever since it began, has been a system entirely lacking any form of organizing intelligence, has, nevertheless, had more than enough time to learn through its own infinitely multiplying experiences, and, as is evident from the endless spectacle of life, has produced an infallible compensatory mechanism that will require only a little more time to prove that any slight delay in the functioning of its gears has not the slightest impact on what really matters, for it makes no odds whether one has to wait a minute or an hour, a year or a century. Let us remember the excellent mood in which Tertuliano Máximo Afonso arrived home, let us remember, again, that in accordance with the traditional conventions of the novel, backed up by the clear

existence of that universal compensatory mechanism to which we have just made such well-founded reference, he should have come face-to-face with something that would simultaneously destroy his happiness and plunge him into the depths of despair, pain, fear, of everything that we know one can meet when turning a corner or putting a key in a door. The monstrous terrors we described earlier were mere examples, it could have been those terrors or it could have been something far worse, and yet it was none of them, the apartment opened its maternal arms to the owner, said a few pleasing words, of the kind all houses are capable of saying, but which, mostly, their inhabitants do not know how to hear, in short, let us waste no more words, it seemed that nothing could spoil Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's happy return home. Pure illusion, pure confusion, pure fantasy. The wheels of the cosmic machinery had been transported into the electronic workings of the answering machine, waiting for a finger to come and press the button that would open the door of the cage of the last and most terrible of monsters, not the bloody corpse on the floor, not the incorporeal convention of ghosts, not the buzzing, libidinous cloud of drones, but the studied, persuasive voice of António Claro, his urgent entreaties, please, can we meet again, please, we have lots of things to say to each other, when we, here, on this side, are witnesses to the fact that, only yesterday, at this very hour, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was promising his mother never to have anything to do with the man, either by meeting him in person or by phoning him to tell him that what's done is done and asking him, please, to leave him in peace and quiet. We energetically applauded that decision, but let us for a moment, and to do so we have only to put ourselves in his shoes, let us feel compassion for the nervous state in which the phone message has left poor Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, his forehead once more bathed in sweat, his hands again shaking, and the entirely new feeling that the roof is about to fall in on him at any moment. The light on the answering machine is still blinking, a sign that there are still one or two more messages inside. Reeling from the shock of hearing António Claro's message, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had stopped the tape and now trembles to know what other messages there might be, possibly that same voice, scornfully taking his agreement as read, arranging the day, hour, and place of another meeting. He got up from the chair, and from the dejected state into which he had fallen, he went into the bedroom to get some fresh clothes but then changed his mind, what he most needs is a cold shower that will shake him up and reinvigorate him, that will wash away down the drain the black clouds hanging over his head and so dimming his reason that it has not even occurred to him until now that the next message, or at least one of them, might be from Maria da Paz. The idea has just now occurred to him, and it was as if a long-delayed blessing had just descended from the shower, as if another purifying shower, not the one enjoyed by those three naked women on the balcony, but the one enjoyed by this man, shut up alone in the precarious safety of his apartment, were, with the flow of water and soap, compassionately freeing his body from grime and his soul from fear. He thought about Maria da Paz with a kind of nostalgic serenity, as a ship might think of its last port of call before it set out on its voyage around the world. Washed and dried, refreshed and dressed in clean clothes, he returned to the living room to hear the remaining messages. He began by erasing those left by the headmaster and

the mathematics teacher, which were not worth preserving, then, frowning, he listened again to António Claro's, which he also removed with a sharp tap on the appropriate button, and, finally, he settled down to listen to what might follow. The fourth call was made by someone who chose not to speak, it lasted an eternity of thirty seconds, but from the other end came not a whisper, no music played in the background, there was not even the slightest inadvertent exhalation, far less any deliberate, heavy breathing, as deployed in the cinema to raise audience anxiety levels. Don't tell me it's that same guy again, thought Tertuliano Máximo Afonso angrily, while he waited for the person to hang up. It wasn't him, it couldn't be, anyone who had just left such a prolix message would clearly not make another, totally silent call. The fifth and final message was from Maria da Paz, It's me, she said, as if there were no other person in the world who could say, It's me, knowing they would be recognized, I assume you'll be coming home about now, I hope you've had a good rest, I did think you might phone me from your mother's house, but I should have known better than to expect such things from you, anyway, it doesn't matter, I just wanted to leave you a few friendly words of welcome, give me a call when you feel like it, whenever you want to, but not because you feel obliged to, that would be bad for you and for me, sometimes, I imagine how wonderful it would be if you were to phone me just because you felt like it, like someone who suddenly feels thirsty and goes and drinks a glass of water, but I know that would be asking too much of you, never pretend a thirst you don't feel, sorry, I didn't mean to say all this, I just wanted to say that I hoped you'd got home safely and were in good health, oh, and while we're on the subject, my mother is much better, she's started going to Mass again and does her own shopping, in a few days, she should be as good as new, I send you a kiss, and an other, and another. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso rewound the tape and replayed the message, at first, with the smug smile of someone listening to praise and flattery which he appears to feel perfectly confident that he deserves, gradually, though, his face grew serious, then thoughtful, then worried, he had suddenly remembered what his mother had said, I just hope she's there when you wake up, and these words are echoing around in his mind now like the last warning of a Cassandra grown weary of being ignored. He looked at his watch, Maria da Paz should be back from the bank. He gave her another fifteen minutes and then rang. Hello, she said, It's me, he said, At last, Yes, I got back less than an hour ago, just time enough to have a shower and to be sure that I'd catch you at home, You heard the message I left you, Yes, Oh, dear, because I have the feeling I said things I shouldn't have said, For example, Well, I can't remember exactly what, but it was as if I were asking you for the nth time just to notice me, and however much I swear it won't happen again, I always end up saying the same humiliating things, Don't use that word, it's really not fair on you or even on me, Call it what you like, but I see clearly now that this situation can't go on, otherwise I'll end up losing the little self-respect I still have, It will go on, What, are you telling me that our misunderstandings will continue as they have until now, that there'll be no end to my pathetic conversations with a wall that doesn't even give back an echo, No, I'm telling you I love you, Look, I've heard you say those words before, especially in bed, before, during, but never afterward, But it's true, I do love you, Please, please, don't torment me anymore, Listen, All right, I'm listening, all

I've ever wanted is to listen to you, Our life is going to change, I don't believe you, Believe me, you have to, And you take care what you say to me, don't give me hopes today that you can't or won't want to fulfill tomorrow, Neither of us knows what the future will bring, that's why I'm asking you now, on this particular day, to give me your trust, And why come to me today asking me for something you have already, Because I want to live with you, I want us to live together, It can't be true what I've just heard, I must be dreaming, Well, I'm quite happy to say it again if you want me to, On condition that you use exactly the same words, Because I want to live with you, I want us to live together, This is just not possible, people don't change from one hour to the next, what's been going on in that head and heart of yours for you to be asking me to come and live with you, when up until now your one concern has been to make it absolutely clear that nothing could be further from your thoughts and that I shouldn't get my hopes up, People can change from one hour to the next but still be the same person, So you really do want us to live together, Yes, And you love Maria da Paz enough to want to live with her, Yes, Tell me again, Yes, yes, yes, That's enough, you're making me breathless, I might explode, Be careful, please, I want you in one piece, Do you mind if I tell my mother, she's spent her whole life waiting for this happy moment, Of course I don't mind, although she's not exactly crazy about me, The poor thing had her reasons, you kept stalling, you wouldn't make a decision, she wanted her daughter to be happy, and I didn't show much evidence of that, mothers are all the same, Do you want to know what my mother said yesterday when we were talking about you, What, She said I just hope she's still there when you wake up, Presumably those were the words you needed to hear, They were, You woke up and I was still here, I don't know for how much longer, but I was, Tell your mother she can sleep easy from now on, But I won't be able to sleep a wink, When can we see each other, Tomorrow, as soon as I leave work, I'll take a taxi and come straight there, You will hurry, Yes, right into your arms. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso put down the phone, closed his eyes, and heard Maria da Paz laughing and shouting, Mama, Mama, then saw the two women embracing and instead of shouts there were murmurs, instead of laughter, tears, sometimes we ask ourselves why happiness took so long to arrive, why it didn't come sooner, but appears suddenly, as now, when we've given up hope of it ever arriving, it's likely then that we won't know what to do, and rather than it being a question of choosing between laughter and tears, we will be filled by a secret anxiety to which we might not know how to respond at all. As if returning to forgotten habits, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went into the kitchen to see if he could find something to eat. The eternal cans, he thought. Stuck to the fridge was a note that said in large letters, in red so that they wouldn't be missed, there's soup in the fridge, it was from his upstairs neighbor, bless her, for once the cans could wait. Exhausted by the journey, worn out by emotion, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went to bed before eleven o'clock. He tried to read a page about Mesopotamian civilizations, but twice the book fell from his hands, in the end, he turned out the light and settled down to sleep. He was just drifting slowly off when Maria da Paz came and whispered in his ear, How wonderful it would be if you were to phone me just because you felt like it. She would probably have said the rest of the sentence too, but he had already got out of bed,

pulled on his dressing gown over his pajamas, and was dialing her number. Maria da Paz asked, Is that you, and he replied, Yes, it's me, I was thirsty and I've come to ask for a glass of water.

CONTRARY TO WHAT MOST PEOPLE THINK, MAKING A DECISION is one of the easiest decisions in the world, as is more than proved by the fact that we make decision upon decision throughout the day, there, however, we run straight into the heart of the matter, for these decisions always come to us afterward with their particular little problems or, to make ourselves quite clear, with their rough edges needing to be smoothed, the first of these problems being our capacity for sticking to a decision and the second our willingness to follow it through. Not that either one or the other is lacking in Tertuliano Máximo Afonso as regards his relationship with Maria da Paz, we were witnesses to the fact that, in recent hours, this has undergone a huge qualitative change, as people say nowadays. He has decided to live with her and is absolutely sure about that, and if this decision has not yet taken concrete shape, or been actioned, which is another thing people say nowadays, it is because the shift from word to action also has its difficulties, its rough edges, it is vital, for example, for the spirit to summon up sufficient strength to push the indolent body into fulfilling its duty, not to mention the prosaic matter of logistics, which cannot be resolved from one moment to the next, for example, who should live in whose apartment, if Maria da Paz should move into her beloved's modest home or if Tertuliano Máximo Afonso should move into his beloved's more ample abode. Cuddled up on the sofa or lying in bed, the engaged couple's latest thinking on the subject, despite the natural resistance each one feels when it comes to abandoning the domestic shell to which they are accustomed, has led them to opt for the second alternative, given that there would be plenty of space in Maria da Paz's apartment for Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's books, but not enough space in Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's apartment for Maria da Paz's mother. On this front, things could not be going better. The trouble is that while Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, after pondering all the advantages and dangers, did finally tell his mother about the extraordinary case of the duplicate men, albeit smoothing some of the rougher, more jagged edges, there is no sign of his keeping the promise he made to Maria da Paz when, having admitted that he had lied to her about his reasons for writing the letter to the production company, he had postponed revealing to her the information that would make his half confession full, sincere, and conclusive. He did not mention it, and she did not ask, and the few words that would open that final door, Do you remember, my love, when I lied to you, Do you remember, my love, when you lied to me, could not be spoken, and had this man or this woman been given ample time to bring the whole painful business to a close, they would probably both have justified their silence by saying that they did not wish to spoil the happiness of these hours with a tale of cruelty and genetic perversity. It will not be long before we discover the tragic consequences of leaving unexcavated a second-world-war bomb in the belief that it was too old ever to explode. Cassandra was right, the Greeks will burn Troy.

For two days now, determined to finish once and for all the proposal that the headmaster had asked him to write for the ministry of education, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has barely looked up from his desk. Although no date has yet been set for his move to Maria da Paz's apartment, he wants to be free of the task as soon as possible so

that there are no complications when he moves to his new home, he will have quite enough to do, what with sifting through papers and imposing order on his many books. So as not to distract him, Maria da Paz has not phoned him, and he prefers it like that, in a way it is as if he were saying good-bye to his previous life, to the solitude, peace, and privacy of his apartment, which, oddly enough, the noise of the typewriter does not disturb. He had lunch at his usual restaurant and came straight back, another few days and he should finish, all he will have to do then is correct it and type it out again, yes, retype the whole thing, one thing is sure, sooner rather than later, he will have to do as most of his colleagues have already done and buy a computer and a printer, it's embarrassing to be still digging with a spade when the very latest in plows and plowshares are the norm. Maria da Paz will initiate him into the mysteries of computers, she has studied the subject and understands them, in the bank where she works, every desk has a computer on it, it isn't like it used to be in the old-fashioned registry offices. The doorbell rang. Who can it be at this hour, he wondered, annoyed at the interruption, it isn't his upstairs neighbor's day to come in and clean, the postman leaves any mail in the box downstairs, and only a few days ago, the men from the water, gas, and electric companies called to read their respective meters, perhaps it's one of those young men trying to sell him an encyclopedia that describes the habits of the monkfish. The doorbell rang again. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso opened the door, before him stood a bearded man, and this man said, It's me, although I may not look like me, What do you want, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso in a low, tense voice, I just want to talk to you, replied Antonio Claro, I asked you to phone me when you got back from holiday and you didn't, Anything we had to say to one another has already been said, Possibly, but I still have something to say to you, Sorry, I don't understand, That's only natural, but you can't expect me to say it here on the landing, outside your front door, with the risk that the neighbors might hear, Whatever it is, I'm not interested, On the contrary, I think you'll be very interested indeed, it's about your lady friend, Maria da Paz is her name I believe, What's happened, Nothing as yet, but that's precisely what we have to talk about, If nothing has happened, then there's nothing to be said, Nothing's happened yet, I said. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso opened the door wider and stood to one side, Come in, he said. António Claro entered the apartment and, since the other man seemed reluctant to move from where he was standing, asked, Aren't you going to offer me a chair, I think we would talk better sitting down. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso looked distinctly irritated and, without a word, went into the living room that also served as his study. Antonio Claro followed, looked around as if choosing the best place, and decided on the armchair, then, as he carefully removed the false beard, said, I suppose this is where you were sitting when you saw me for the first time. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso did not reply. He remained standing, his stiff posture a clear protest, Say what you have to say and then get out of my sight, but António Claro was in no hurry, If you don't sit down, he said, I'll have to stand up and I'd really rather not. He looked serenely about himself, taking in the books, the engravings on the walls, the typewriter, the scattered papers on the desk, the phone, then he said, I see you were working, I've obviously chosen a bad moment to come and talk to you, but, given the urgency of the matter that brings me here, I had no option, And what was it that brought

you here uninvited, As I said at the front door, it's about your lady friend, What have you got to do with Maria da Paz, More than you might imagine, but before I explain how, why, and to what extent, let me show you this. From his inside jacket pocket he took a piece of paper folded in four, which he unfolded and offered to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, holding it with the very tips of his fingers as if about to drop it, I would urge you to take this letter and read it, he said, unless you want to force me to be rude and throw it on the floor, besides, it won't be new to you, you must surely remember mentioning it to me when we met at my house in the country, the only difference was that, at the time, you said that you yourself had written it, when, in fact, the signature is that of your friend. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso glanced at the piece of paper and returned it, How did you get this, he asked, sitting down, It took quite a bit of work, but it was worth it, replied António Claro, adding, In every sense, Why, Well, I have to admit that, initially, I was prompted to consult the production company's filing system by a rather base emotion, namely, a little touch of vanity, narcissism I think it's called, in short, I wanted to see what you had written about supporting actors in a letter of which I was the subject, But that was just a pretext, a way of finding out your real name, that's all, And you succeeded, It would have been better if they had never replied, Too late, my friend, too late, you've opened Pandora's box and now you have to live with the consequences, you have no alternative, There are no consequences, the matter is dead and buried, That's what you think, What do you mean, You're forgetting your friend's signature, Oh, I can explain that, How, It just seemed to me that it would be best if I remained out of sight, Now it's my turn to ask you what you mean, Just that I wanted to remain in the shadows until the last moment, and then make a surprise appearance, You certainly did that, Helena hasn't been the same since, it really shook her up, knowing that there's another man in the city exactly like her husband has left her nerves in shreds, although now, with the help of tranquilizers, she's feeling a little better, but only a little, Look, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset her, You should have foreseen that, all you had to do was put yourself in my place, But I didn't know you were married, Even so, imagine, just as an example, that I was to leave here and go and tell your friend Maria da Paz that you, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, and I, António Claro, are alike, exactly alike, even down to the size of our penises, think of the shock to the poor woman, Don't you dare, Oh, don't worry, I haven't told her and I won't either. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso leaped to his feet, What does that mean, I haven't told her and I won't either, what do those words mean, That's a futile question, a rhetorical question, a question intended to gain time or because you don't know what else to say, Just cut the crap and answer my question, You can keep your violent tendencies for later, but just for your own good, I should tell you that I know enough karate to be able to knock you down in five seconds, admittedly, I've rather neglected my training lately, but I'm more than a match for someone like you, just because we're identical and have the same-size penis doesn't mean we're equal in strength, Get out of here right now, or I'll call the police, Why not call the television, the photographers, the press, in a matter of minutes we'll be a worldwide sensation, Let me just remind you that if this got out, your career would be ruined, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso in warning tones, Possibly, but the career of a supporting actor is of no importance

to anyone but himself, That's enough of a reason for putting a stop to this right now, just go away, forget what happened, and I'll try and do the same, All right, but this operation, let's call it Operation Oblivion, will only start in twenty-four hours' time, Why's that, The name of the reason is Maria da Paz, the same Maria da Paz you got so worked up about just now and whom you seem to want to sweep under the carpet to stop her name from being mentioned again, Look, Maria da Paz has nothing to do with all this, So much so that I would bet anything you like she doesn't even know of my existence, How can you be sure, Well, I can't, it's a supposition, but you're not denying it, It seemed best, I didn't want the same thing to happen to her as happened to your wife, Oh, you're all heart, well, it's in your hands to prevent that from happening, Sorry, I don't understand, Let's stop beating about the bush, shall we, you asked me a question and since then you've been going around and around in order not to hear the answer I gave you, Go away, Believe me, I have no intention of staying, Go away now, at once, Fine, I'll go and present myself to your lady friend in the flesh and tell her what you didn't tell her either because you lacked the courage or for some other reason known only to you, If I had a gun here, I'd kill you, Maybe you would, but this isn't the cinema, my friend, in life, things are much simpler, even when it comes to murderers and murder victims, Just say what you've got to say, will you, have you spoken to her, tell me, Yes, I have, on the phone, And what did you say, Oh, I invited her to go for a drive with me today to look at a house in the country that's for rent, Your house in the country, Exactly, my house in the country, but don't worry, the person who talked to your friend Maria da Paz wasn't António Claro but Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, You're mad, what diabolical plot is this, what do you want, Do you really want me to tell you, Yes, I demand that you do, All right, I intend spending the night with her, that's all. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso advanced on António Claro, his fists clenched, but he tripped over the coffee table between them and would have fallen if the other man had not caught him at the last moment. He flailed and struggled, but Antonio Claro nimbly immobilized him with an armlock, Get this into your head before you get hurt, he said, you're no match for me. He pushed him onto the sofa and sat down again. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso eyed him resentfully, at the same time rubbing his sore arm. I didn't mean to hurt you, said António Claro, but it was the only way to avoid a repetition of that ridiculous old cliché, two men fighting over a woman, Look, Maria da Paz and I are going to be married, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso said, as if this were an argument of irrefutable authority, That doesn't surprise me, when I spoke to her, I got the impression that you were really serious about each other, in fact, I had to use all my experience as an actor to hit just the right tone, but I can assure you that at no point did she doubt she was talking to you, and I see now why she was so excited about my invitation to go and look at the house, she was already imagining herself living there, Her mother's been ill and I doubt very much she would leave her on her own, Yes, she mentioned that, but it didn't take me long to persuade her, after all, a night passes quickly enough. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso fidgeted about on the sofa, furious with himself for apparently having admitted in so many words that António Claro might actually carry out his intentions. Why are you doing this, he asked, realizing, again too late, that he had just taken another step along the road to resignation, It's hard to

explain really, but I'll try, replied Antonio Claro, perhaps it's revenge for the disruption your appearance has caused in my married life and which you can't even begin to imagine, perhaps it's the whim of a Don Juan, of a serial philanderer, perhaps, and this is certainly the most likely reason, it's pure rancor, Rancor, Yes, rancor, you said only minutes ago that if you had a gun, you would kill me, that was your way of saying that there is one too many of us in the world, and I entirely agree, there is one too many of us in the world, and I can't really stress that enough, the matter would be resolved already if that pistol I took with me to our meeting had been loaded and I had had the courage to fire it, but, of course, we're decent folk, we're afraid of prison, and so, since I wasn't capable of killing you, I'll kill you another way, by screwing your girlfriend, the sad thing is she'll never know, she's going to think all the time that she's making love with you, all the tender, passionate words she speaks will be addressed to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso and not to Antonio Claro, let that be some consolation to you. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso did not reply, he quickly lowered his eyes so that the other man would not be able to read the thought that had just crossed his brain from side to side. He had suddenly felt as if he were playing a game of chess, waiting for António Claro's next move. He seemed to have allowed his shoulders to slump, as if vanquished, when the other man said, glancing at his watch, It's time I was going, I still have to drop by Maria da Paz's house to collect her, but he straightened up with renewed energy when he heard the man add, Obviously, I can't go as I am, I need your clothes and your car, if I'm going to wear your face, I'll have to wear everything else of yours as well, Sorry, I don't understand, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, adopting an air of perplexity, then, Ah, yes, of course, you can't risk her thinking it odd that you should be wearing that suit or asking where you got the money to buy a car like that, Exactly, So you want me to lend you my clothes and my car, That's what I said, And what would you do if I refused, Something very simple, I would pick up the phone and tell Maria da Paz everything, and if you had the unfortunate idea of trying to stop me, you can be quite sure that I could put you to sleep in less time than it takes to say knife, so be careful, we've managed to avoid violence so far, but if it becomes necessary, I won't hesitate, All right, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, what clothes will you need, a suit and tie or something similar to what you have on now, summer wear, Something casual, like this. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso left the room, went into his bedroom, opened the wardrobe, opened drawers, and in less than five minutes he was back with everything the other man would need, a shirt, trousers, a sweater, socks and shoes. Get dressed in the bathroom, he said. When Antonio Claro returned, he saw on the coffee table a wristwatch, a wallet, and his identity papers, The documentation for the car is in the glove compartment, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, and here are the keys, and the house keys too, just in case I'm not in when you come back to change your clothes, because I assume you will want to change your clothes, Yes, I'll be back by midmorning, I promised my wife I wouldn't be home later than midday, replied António Claro, Presumably you've given her a good reason for spending the night away from home, Work commitments, it's not the first time, and António Claro, suddenly confused, was asking himself why the hell he was giving all these explanations when, ever since he first entered this apartment, he had been the authoritative one, the one in perfect control

of the situation. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso said, You shouldn't take your documents with you, or your watch, or the keys to your apartment or the car, you shouldn't have any personal items on you, nothing that can identify you, women, as well as being naturally curious, or so people say, always notice details, What about the keys to your apartment, you're bound to need them, No, take them, don't worry, my upstairs neighbor has duplicates, or copies, if you prefer that word, she does my cleaning for me, Ah, I see. Antônio Claro could not shake off the feeling of disquiet that had replaced the unshakable coolness with which he had guided the tortuous dialogue in the direction that interested him. He had done this, but now it seemed to him that he had got diverted at some point in the discussion or that he had been pushed off the path by a subtle lateral touch which he had failed even to notice. The moment when he had to pick up Maria da Paz was approaching, but apart from that pressing matter, on which the clock, so to speak, was ticking, there is another, still more urgent private matter that is closing on him, Go on, get out of here, one should know how to make a timely withdrawal even from the greatest victories. Antônio Claro hurriedly set down on the coffee table, side by side, his identity papers, the keys to his apartment and those to his car, his wristwatch, his wedding ring, a handkerchief bearing his initials, a comb, adding, unnecessarily, that the documentation for the car was in the glove compartment, then he asked, Do you know my car, I left it parked very close to the door downstairs, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso said that he did, I saw it parked outside your house in the country, And where's yours, You'll find it on the corner of the street, on your left when you leave the building, it's a blue two-door sedan, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, completing this information with the make of the car and the registration number, just in case there should be any confusion. The false beard lay on the arm of the chair in which Antônio Claro was sitting. Aren't you going to take it with you, asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, You were the one who bought it, you keep it, the face I'm leaving with now is the same one I'll have to return with tomorrow when I come here to change my clothes, replied Antônio Claro, recovering a little of his previous authority and adding sarcastically, Until then, I will be Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, history teacher. They looked at each other for a few seconds, yes, now the words with which Tertuliano Máximo Afonso received Antonio Claro when he arrived were true, and would be forever, Anything we had to say to one another has already been said. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso noiselessly opened the front door and stood aside to allow his visitor to leave, then slowly, and equally carefully, he closed it again. One would naturally assume that he did this in order not to arouse the malicious curiosity of his neighbors, but if Cassandra had been here, she would have reminded us that it is precisely in this way that one lowers the lid on a coffin. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went back into the living room, sat down on the sofa, closed his eyes, and leaned back. For a whole hour, he did not move, but, contrary to what you might think, he was not asleep, he was simply allowing time for his old car to leave the city. He thought about Maria da Paz without pain, merely as someone who was slowly disappearing off in the distance, he thought about Antônio Claro as an enemy who had won the first battle, but who, if there is any justice left in this world, will lose the second. The afternoon light was fading, his car would already have left the main road, they would probably take the shortcut that

avoids going through the village, now they are stopping outside the house in the country, António Claro has taken a key out of his pocket, this was one key he could not have left at Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's apartment, he will tell Maria da Paz that it was given to him by the owner, except, of course, he doesn't know that we're going to spend the night here, He's a fellow teacher, completely trustworthy, but I still wouldn't confide my private affairs to him, wait here a moment, and I'll go and check that everything's as it should be. Maria da Paz was about to wonder to herself what could possibly not be as it should be in a country house for rent, but a kiss from Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, one of those deep, overwhelming kisses, distracted her, and afterward, during the minutes while he was not there, she was drawn to the beauty of the countryside, the valley, the dark line of poplars and ash trees that follows the course of the river, the hills in the background, the sun almost touching the highest ridge. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, the one who has just got up from the sofa, can guess what Antonio Claro is doing inside, coolly looking for anything that might give him away, a few film posters, but there's no danger in those, he will leave them where they are, after all, a teacher might well be a movie buff, the worst culprit was that photo of him and Helena that stood on a table in the hallway. At last, he reappeared at the front door and called to her, You can come in now, there were some old curtains on the floor which made the house look really shabby. She got out of the car, ran happily up the steps, and the door slammed shut behind her, at first sight, this could seem to show a regrettable lack of consideration, but one must bear in mind that the house is isolated, there are no neighbors near or far, and besides, it is our duty to be understanding, the two people who have just gone into the house have far more interesting matters to deal with than worrying about the noise a door might make as it closes.

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso picked up from the floor, where it had fallen, the photocopy of the letter that António Claro had brought with him, then he opened the drawer in his desk in which he had kept the reply from the production company and, with those two pieces of paper in his hand, plus the photograph of himself wearing the false beard, went into the kitchen. He put them in the sink, held a lighted match to them, and observed the swift work of the fire, the flame chewing and swallowing the papers, then vomiting them up in the form of ash, the rapid scintillations that kept nibbling at them even when the flame, still rising up here and there, appeared to have gone out. He turned the charred remnants this way and that until they were entirely consumed, then he turned on the tap and washed every last bit of ash down the drain. Afterward, he went into his bedroom, took the videos out of the wardrobe where he had hidden them, and returned to the living room. Antonio Claro's clothes, which he had brought from the bathroom, were piled on the seat of the armchair. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso got undressed. He wrinkled his nose in disgust as he pulled on the underpants worn by the other man, but there was no alternative, he was driven by necessity, which is one of the names adopted by fate when it suits it to go in disguise. Now that he had become the double of Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, he had no option but to become the António Claro that Antonio Claro had left behind. When, in his turn, he comes back tomorrow to recover

his clothes, António Claro will be able to go out into the street only as Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, and will have to remain Tertuliano Máximo Afonso until his own clothes, the ones he left here or others elsewhere, restore to him his identity as António Claro. Whether he likes it or not, clothes do indeed make the man. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went over to the table on which António Claro had left his personal belongings and methodically concluded his work of transformation. He began with the wrist-watch, slipped the wedding ring onto his ring finger, put the comb and the handkerchief bearing the initials AC into one trouser pocket, the keys to his apartment and to his car in the other, and, in his back pocket, the identity papers that, in case of doubt, will provide indisputable proof that he is António Claro. He is ready to leave, all that's lacking is the final touch, the false beard that Antonio Claro was wearing when he entered the apartment, it's almost as if he knew it would be needed, but no, the beard was just waiting there for a coincidence, because sometimes coincidences take years to arrive and, at others, come running along in Indian file, one after the other. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went to the bathroom to complete his disguise, what with all the putting on and taking off, and being passed from one face to another, the beard no longer sticks very well, it threatens to arouse the suspicions of the first lynx-eyed glance from some agent of authority or the systematic distrust of some fearful citizen. It finally stuck more or less to his skin, now it just has to last until Tertuliano Máximo Afonso finds a rubbish bin in some reasonably deserted place. There the false beard will end its brief but agitated history, and there in the darkness, among the fetid remains, the videos will find their rest. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso walked back into the living room, looked around to see if he had forgotten anything he might need, then went into the bedroom, on the bedside table is the book about ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, there is no reason why he should keep it with him, but, nevertheless, he picks it up, why should Tertuliano Máximo Afonso feel the need for the company of the Amorites and the Assyrians if in less than twenty-four hours he will be home again. *Alea jacta est*, he murmured to himself, there is nothing more to discuss, what will be will be, there's no escape. The Rubicon is this door that is closing, these stairs he is going down, these footsteps leading to that car, this key opening the door, this engine carrying it smoothly out into the street, the die is cast, it's in the hands of the gods. The month is August, the day is Friday, there isn't much traffic or people around, the street he is heading for was so far away and is now suddenly near. It has been dark for more than half an hour. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso parked the car outside the building. Before getting out, he looked up at the windows and saw not a single light. He hesitated, asked himself, Now what do I do, to which reason responded, I really don't understand this indecision, if you are, as you hoped to appear to be, António Claro, what you have to do is go calmly upstairs to your apartment, and if the lights are out, there must be some reason for it, after all, none of the other windows are lit either, and since you're not a cat and can't see in the dark, you'll simply have to turn them on, always supposing that, for some unknown reason, there isn't someone waiting for you, or, rather, since we all know the reason, just remember you told your wife that work commitments meant you had to spend tonight away from home, so now you just have to get on with it. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso crossed the street, with the book on the Mesopotamians under

his arm, opened the street door, got into the lift, and saw that he had company, Good evening, I was expecting you, said common sense, Oh, I should have known you'd turn up, What's the idea of coming here, Don't act the innocent, you know as well as I do, To take vengeance, to hit back, to sleep with your enemy's wife, now that yours is in bed with him, Exactly, And then what, Nothing, it will never occur to Maria da Paz that she's slept with the wrong man, And what about these people, They're going to get the rough end of this tragicomedy, Why, You're common sense, you should know, Well, I lose some of my qualities in lifts, When António Claro comes home tomorrow he's going to have great difficulty explaining to his wife how it is he managed to sleep with her and, at the same time, be away working outside the city, Well, I had no idea you were capable of such a diabolical plan, Human, my friend, just human, the devil doesn't make plans, anyway, if men were good, he wouldn't even exist, And tomorrow, Oh, I'll think up an excuse to leave early, And that book, What this, I'm not sure really, perhaps I'll leave it here as a souvenir. The lift stopped on the fifth floor, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso asked, Are you coming with me, No, I'm common sense, there's no place for me in there, See you later, Oh, I very much doubt that.

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso pressed his ear to the door. Not a sound came from within. He should behave naturally, as if he were the man of the house, but his heart was beating so violently it was shaking his whole body. He wasn't going to have the courage to go on. Suddenly the lift started to descend, Who can that be, he thought, frightened, and, without further hesitation, put the key in the door and went in. The house was in darkness, but the vague, tenuous luminosity, presumably coming in through the windows, began slowly to pick out contours, to give form to objects. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso felt the wall by the door for a light switch. Nothing stirred in the apartment, There's no one here, he thought, I can have a proper look around, yes, it's vital he gets to know the apartment that will be his for one night, perhaps all alone, what if, for example, Helena has family in the city and, taking advantage of her husband's absence, has gone to visit them, what if she will only be back tomorrow, then the plan that common sense termed diabolical will fall flat, like the most banal of mental pranks, like a house of cards blown down by a child. Life has its ironies, they say, when the truth is that life is the most obtuse of all known things, one day someone must have said to it, Keep straight on, straight ahead, don't leave the path, and ever since then, foolish and incapable of learning the lessons it boasts of teaching us, it has done nothing but blindly follow the orders it was given, knocking down everything in its path, not even stopping to see the damage it has caused or to ask our forgiveness, not even once. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso searched the apartment from end to end, turned on and switched off lights, opened and closed doors, wardrobes, drawers, in which he encountered men's clothes, the troubling sight of women's underwear, the pistol, but he touched nothing, he just wanted to know where he was, what relation there is between the rooms in the house and what he can see of its inhabitants, exactly as happens with maps, they tell you where you should go but don't guarantee you'll arrive. When he had finished his inspection, when he could find his way around the whole apartment with his eyes shut, he went and sat down on what

must be António Claro's sofa and waited. All he asks is for Helena to come, let Helena come through that door and see me, so that someone can bear witness to the fact that I had the courage to come here, that's all I want basically, a witness. It was just past eleven when she arrived. Alarmed to find all the lights on, she called from the front door, Is that you, Yes, it's me, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, his throat dry. The next moment she walked into the living room, What happened, I wasn't expecting you home until tomorrow, they exchanged a brief kiss between question and answer, The work was postponed, said Tertuliano Máximo Afonso and immediately had to sit down again because his legs were trembling, possibly out of nerves, possibly because of that kiss. He barely heard the woman say to him, I went to see my parents, How are they, he managed to ask, Fine, came the reply, and then, Have you had supper, Yes, don't worry, Well, I'm tired, I'm going to bed, what's this book, Oh, I bought it because of a historical film I'm going to be in, It's been used, someone's written notes in it, Yes, I found it in a secondhand bookstore. Helena left the room, and a few minutes later there was silence again. It was late when Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went into the bedroom. Helena was asleep. On the pillow were the pajamas he must put on. Two hours later, he was still awake. His penis lay inert. Then the woman opened her eyes, Can't you sleep, she asked, No, Why, I don't know. Then she turned to him and put her arms around him.

THE FIRST TO WAKE IN THE MORNING WAS TERTULIANO MÁXIMO Afonso. He was naked. The bedspread and the sheet had slipped onto the floor on his side of the bed, leaving one of Helena's breasts exposed. She appeared to be sleeping deeply. The morning light, barely tempered by the thick curtains, filled the whole room with a glittering penumbra. It must be hot outside. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso felt his penis grow hard, unsatisfied again. That was when he thought of Maria da Paz. He imagined another room, another bed, her prone body, of which he knew every inch, and António Claro's prone body, identical to his, and suddenly it seemed to him that he had reached the end of the road, that ahead of him, blocking the way, was a wall with a sign on it saying, STOP, abyss, and then he saw that he could not go back, that the road he had traveled had disappeared, and all that remained was the little space on which his feet were standing. He was dreaming and he did not know it. An anxiety that immediately became terror made him start violently awake just as the wall was shattering, and its arms, for worse things have been seen than a wall growing arms, were dragging him toward the precipice. Helena was clutching his hand, trying to calm him, It's all right, it was a nightmare, it's over, you're here now. He was panting, gasping for breath, as if the fall had suddenly emptied his lungs of air. That's it, calm down, said Helena again. She was leaning on one elbow, her breasts exposed, the thin bedspread outlining the curve of her waist, her thigh, and the words she was saying fell on the body of this suffering man like fine rain, the kind that touches the skin like a caress or a watery kiss. Gradually, like a cloud of steam flowing back to its place of origin, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's terrified spirit returned to his exhausted mind, and when Helena asked, So what was this bad dream about, tell me, this confused man, this builder of labyrinths in which he himself is lost, who is lying now beside a woman who, although known to him in the sexual sense, is otherwise entirely unknown, spoke of a road that had ceased to have a beginning, as if his own steps as they were taken had devoured the very substances, whatever they might be, that give or lend duration to time and dimension to space, of the wall, which in cutting across time, cut across both, of the place where his feet had stood, those two small islands, that minuscule human archipelago, one here, the other there, and of the sign on which was written stop, abyss, remember, who warns you is your enemy, as Hamlet could have said to his uncle and stepfather, Claudius. She had listened to him surprised, slightly perplexed, she was not used to hearing her husband express such thoughts, still less in the tone in which they had been spoken, as if each word were accompanied by its double, like an echo in an inhabited cave, in which it is impossible to know who is breathing, who has just spoken in a murmur, who has just sighed. She liked the idea that her feet were also two small islands, and that very close to hers rested another two, and that the four together could constitute, did constitute, had constituted a perfect archipelago, if there is such a thing as perfection in this world and if these sheets are the ocean where it chose to be anchored. Are you feeling calmer now, she asked, Yes, he said, I don't think there could be anything better than this, It's odd, last night you came to me as you never have before, you entered me with a tenderness that I thought afterward was mingled with desire and tears, and joy too, a moan of pain, a plea for forgiveness, Well, if that's what you felt, that's how it must have been, Unfortunately, some things happen and are never

repeated, Others are repeated over and over, Do you think so, someone once said that if you give a person roses, then you can never again give them anything else but roses, Perhaps we should try, Now, Yes, seeing that we're naked, That's a good reason, Good enough, although probably not the best. The four islands joined together, the archipelago re-formed, the sea beat wildly against the cliffs, if there were shouts up above, they came from the mermaids riding the waves, if there were moans none were moans of pain, if someone asked forgiveness, may they be forgiven now and ever after. They rested briefly in each other's arms, then, with one last kiss, she slipped out of the bed, Don't get up, sleep for a while longer, I'll make breakfast.

Tertuliano Máximo Afonso did not sleep. He had to leave that apartment quickly, he couldn't risk António Claro coming home earlier than he had said, before midday had been his actual words, what if things at the house in the country had not gone as he expected and he was already racing back here, angry with himself, eager to bury his frustration in the peace of his own home, where he will tell his wife about his work, inventing, to justify his bad mood, setbacks that did not exist, arguments that did not take place, agreements that were not made. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's difficulty lies in not being able to leave just like that, he has to give Helena an excuse that will not arouse her distrust, remember that up until now she has had no reason to think that the man with whom she slept and took pleasure last night is not her husband, and where is he going to find the nerve to tell her now, having concealed the information until the last moment, that he has urgent business to deal with on a morning like this, a summer Saturday, when the logical thing, bearing in mind the sublime heights of harmony reached by this couple, and to which we were witness, would be to stay in bed to continue their interrupted conversation, along with anything more interesting that might occur. Helena will soon appear with the breakfast, it's been such an age since they had breakfast together like this, in the intimacy of a bed still redolent of love's particular fragrances, that it would be unforgivable to waste an opportunity that, in all probability, at least all the probabilities we know about, is clearly conspiring to be the last. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso thinks and thinks and thinks, and, as he thinks and thinks, because what we would term the paradoxical energy of the human soul can reach such extremes, the need to leave grows fainter and fainter, less urgent, and, at the same time, imprudently brushing aside all foreseeable risks, a wild desire to be an eyewitness to his definitive triumph over António Claro is growing in strength inside him. To be there in the flesh and prepared to face whatever the consequences might be. Let him come and find him here, let him rant, let him rage, let him use violence, whatever he does, nothing will be able to lessen the extent of his defeat. He knows that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso wields the ultimate weapon, it will be enough for that thousand-times-cursed history teacher to ask him where he has been and for Helena, finally, to know the sordid side of the prodigious adventure of these two men identical down to the moles on their arms, the scars on their knees, and the size of their penises, and from this day forward, identical too in their couplings. An ambulance may have to come and collect Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's battered body, but his aggressor's wound, that will never heal. These base thoughts of

revenge produced by the brain of this man lying in bed waiting for his breakfast might have gone no further, were it not for the aforementioned paradoxical energy of the human soul, or, to give it another name, the possible emergence of feelings of an unusual nobility, of a gentlemanly nature all-the-more-worthy of applause given their otherwise entirely deplorable personal antecedents. Incredible though it may seem, the man who, out of moral cowardice, out of fear that the truth would be revealed, allowed Maria da Paz to fall into the arms of António Claro, is the same man who not only is prepared to carry out the most difficult task of his entire life, but has also realized that it is his strict duty not to leave Helena alone in the delicate situation of having one husband by her side and seeing another walk in through the front door. The human soul is a box out of which a clown is always ready to spring, making faces and sticking out his tongue, but there are times when that same clown merely peers at us over the edge of the box, and if he sees that, by chance, we are behaving in a just and honest fashion, he merely nods approvingly and disappears, thinking that we are not yet an entirely lost cause. Thanks to the decision he has just made, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has removed from his record a few of his minor faults, but he will have to suffer greatly before the ink in which the others were written begins to fade from the brown paper of memory. People often say, Let time do its work, but what we always forget to ask is if there will ever be enough time. Helena came in carrying the breakfast just as Tertuliano Máximo Afonso was getting up, Don't you want to have breakfast in bed, she asked, and he said no, he would prefer to be seated comfortably on a chair rather than constantly having to keep one eye cocked for the slithering tray, the sliding cup, the smears left behind by the melting butter, and the crumbs that creep into the folds of the sheets and always end up in the skin's most delicate crevices. He tried to make this speech sound as comical and good-humored as he could, but its sole objective was to disguise Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's new and pressing preoccupation, which is this, that if António Claro does turn up, at least he won't find us in the marriage bed nibbling sinfully on scones and toast, that if António Claro does turn up, at least he will find his bed made and his room aired, that if Antonio Claro does turn up, at least he will find us properly washed, combed, and dressed, because as with appearances so it is with vice, since we're walking hand in hand with it, and there seems no way of avoiding this or any real advantage in doing so, we might as well make vice pay occasional homage to virtue, even if only in form, besides, it's highly unlikely it would be worth asking any more of it than that.

It's getting late, it's gone half past ten. Helena has left to do some shopping, she said, Bye, and gave him a kiss, a warm and still consoling remnant of the bonfire of passion that had, in recent hours, illicitly joined and inflamed this man and this woman. Now, sitting on the sofa, with the book about ancient Mesopotamian civilizations open on his lap, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is waiting for Antonio Claro to arrive, and, being someone whose imagination frequently throws off the fetters, he imagined that the said António Claro and his wife might have met in the street and come up the stairs to sort out this tangle once and for all, Helena protesting, You're not my husband, my husband's at home, that's him sitting over there, you're the history teacher who has been trying to

ruin our lives, and António Claro assuring her, No, I'm your husband, he's the history teacher, look at the book he's reading, he's the biggest impostor in the world he is, and she, cutting and ironic, Oh, yes, so perhaps you can explain why it is that he's the one wearing the wedding ring and not you. Helena has just come back alone with the shopping and it's now eleven o'clock. In a while, she will ask, Are you worried about something, and he'll deny it, No, whatever gave you that idea, and she'll say, Well, in that case, I don't understand why you keep looking at the clock, and he will reply that he doesn't know why either, it's just a tic, perhaps he's nervous about something, If they gave me the role of King Hammurabi, my career as an actor would really take off. Half past eleven came, a quarter to twelve, and still no António Claro. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's heart is like a furious horse dealing kicks in every direction, panic tightens his throat and screams at him that there's still time, Look, while she's in the other room, seize your opportunity and make your escape, you've still got nearly ten minutes, but be careful, don't use the lift, take the stairs and look both ways before you set foot in the street. It's midday, the clock in the living room slowly counted out the beats as if wanting to give António Claro one last chance to appear, to keep his promise, even if he did so only at the very last second, although there's no point in Tertuliano Máximo Afonso trying to deceive himself, If he hasn't come now, he won't be coming at all. Anyone can be late, the car can break down, you can get a puncture, these are things that happen every day and from which no one is exempt. From now on, every minute will be an agony, then it will be the turn of puzzlement, perplexity, and, inevitably, the thought, All right, he's been delayed, seriously delayed, but what are phones for, why doesn't he phone to say that the differential has broken, or the gearbox, or the fan belt, which are all things that can happen to a worn-out old car like his. Another hour passed and not a sign of António Claro, and when Helena came to announce that lunch was on the table, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso said he wasn't hungry, she should eat alone, and, anyway, he needed to go out. She wanted to know why, and he could have retorted that they weren't married and that he was therefore under no obligation to tell her what he was or wasn't going to do, but the moment to place all his cards on the table and begin to play fairly had not yet arrived, and so he merely said that he would explain everything later, a promise that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso always has on the tip of his tongue and which he keeps, when he does keep it, only partially and late, ask his mother, ask Maria da Paz, from whom we also have no news. Helena asked if he thought perhaps he should change his clothes, and he said yes, what he was wearing really wasn't suitable for what he had to do, a suit, jacket, and trousers would be more appropriate, after all, I'm not a tourist and I'm not off to spend the summer in the country. Fifteen minutes later, he left, Helena accompanied him to the lift, in her eyes was the warning glimmer of tears to come, and before Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had even had time to reach the street, she was sobbing, repeating over and over that question as yet unanswered, What's wrong, what's wrong.

As Tertuliano Máximo Afonso climbed into the car, his first thought was to get away from there, to go and park in some quiet spot where he could reflect seriously on the situation, impose order on the confusion that has been jostling about in his mind for the

last twenty-four hours, and decide what to do. He started the engine and only had to turn the corner to understand that he did not need to reflect at all, all he had to do was phone Maria da Paz, why on earth didn't I think of it before, presumably because I was shut up in that apartment and therefore unable to make a phone call. A couple hundred meters farther on he found a telephone booth. He stopped the car, hurriedly entered the booth, and dialed the number. It was suffocatingly hot inside. The female voice at the other end asking, Who is it, was not her familiar voice, I wanted to speak to Maria da Paz, he said, Yes, but who is it, I'm a colleague of hers, from the bank where she works, Maria da Paz is dead, she died this morning in a car accident, she was with her fiancé and they both died, it's a tragedy, a real tragedy. In an instant, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's whole body, from head to toe, was bathed in sweat. He babbled some words the woman could not understand, What did you say, yes, what had he said, a few words that he no longer remembers or ever will remember, that he has forgotten forever, and, without realizing what he was doing, like an automaton whose power supply has suddenly been turned off, he dropped the receiver. Standing utterly still inside the furnace of the telephone booth, he could hear one word, just one, echoing in his ears, Dead, but other words soon came to take its place, and these screamed, You killed her. António Claro didn't kill her with his reckless driving, always supposing that was the cause of the accident, he, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, killed her, his moral weakness killed her, the will that made him blind to everything but revenge killed her, it was said that one of them, either the actor or the history teacher, was superfluous in this world, but you weren't, you weren't superfluous, there is no duplicate of you to come and replace you at your mother's side, you were unique, just as every ordinary person is unique, truly unique. They say you can hate someone only if you hate yourself, but the worst of all hatreds must be the hatred that cannot bear another person to be the same, worse still if that sameness should ever become total. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso staggered like a drunkard out of the booth, got into the car as if he were hurling himself inside, and sat there, staring blankly ahead, until he could stand it no longer and tears and sobs shook his chest. At this moment, he loves Maria da Paz as he had never loved her nor ever would love her in the future. The grief he feels is for her newborn absence, but an awareness of his guilt is creating a suppurating wound that will secrete pus and filth forever after. Some people looked at him with the gratuitous, impotent curiosity that does neither good nor ill in the world, but one person did come over and ask if he could help in any way, but he said no, thank you, and, having thanked him, wept still more bitterly, it was as if someone had come and placed a hand on his shoulder and said, Be patient, in time your sorrow will pass, it's true, in time everything does pass, but there are cases when time takes time to let the grief abate, and there have been and will be cases, fortunately few, in which the grief never abated and time did not pass. He sat on like this until he had no more tears to shed, until time decided to start moving again and to ask, And now what, where will you go, and it was then that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, in all probability transformed into António Claro for the rest of his life, realized that he had nowhere to go. In the first place, the apartment he used to call his own belonged to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is dead, in the second place, he can't drive from here to the apartment

that was António Claro's and tell Helena that her husband is dead because, as far as she is concerned, he is Antonio Claro, and finally, there is Maria da Paz's apartment, to which he had never even been invited, he could go there only to offer his useless sympathies to a poor mother bereft of her daughter. The natural thing at this point would be for Tertuliano Máximo Afonso to think of another mother, who, already informed of the sad news, will likewise be weeping the inconsolable tears of maternal orphanhood, but the unshakable consciousness that, as far as he is concerned, he is and always will be Tertuliano Máximo Afonso and that he is, therefore, alive, must have temporarily blocked out what, in other circumstances, would certainly have been his first impulse. Meanwhile, he will still have to find an answer to the question that has been left hanging, And now what, where will you go, one of the easier difficulties to resolve in any city, whether a vast metropolis like this or not, with hotels and boardinghouses to suit all tastes and purses. That is where he will have to go, and not just for a few hours to find shelter from the heat and to be free to weep. It was one thing to have spent the previous night with Helena, when doing so was just a move in the game, if you're going to sleep with my wife, then I'll sleep with yours, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, as demanded by the law of talion, never applied more appropriately than in this case, for our present-day word "identical" means the same as the Latin etymon talis, from which the term "talion" comes, for not only were the crimes committed identical, those who committed them were identical too. It was one thing, then, if you will allow us to return to the beginning of the sentence, to have spent the night with Helena when no one could possibly have guessed that death was about to enter the game and declare checkmate, it would be quite another thing, knowing as he does that António Claro is dead, even if tomorrow's newspapers say that the dead man's name was Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, to spend a second night with her, thus compounding one deceit with a still-worse deceit. We human beings, although we are still animals, some of us more than others, do have a few decent feelings, sometimes even a remnant or a beginning of self-respect, and this Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, who, on so many occasions, has behaved in ways that justified our severest criticism, will not dare to take the step that, in our eyes, would condemn him forever. He will, therefore, go in search of a hotel and see what tomorrow brings. He started the car and drove toward the center, where he will have more choices, all he needs is a modest, two-star hotel, it's only for one night, And who can say that it will only be for one night, he thought, where will I sleep tomorrow, and after that, and after that, and after that, for the first time, the future seemed to him a place in which there will definitely still be a need for history teachers, but not this one, in which the actor Daniel Santa-Clara will have no option but to give up his promising career, and in which it will be necessary to find some point of equilibrium between having been and continuing to be, it is doubtless comforting to have our consciousness tell us, I know who you are, but our own consciousness might start to doubt both us and its own words if it were to notice, all around, people asking each other the awkward question, Who's he. The first person to have the opportunity to display this public curiosity was the clerk at the hotel reception when he asked Tertuliano Máximo Afonso for some proof of identity, thank heavens he didn't ask him his name first, because Tertuliano Máximo Afonso could easily have said,

out of sheer force of habit, the name that has been his for the last thirty-eight years and which now belongs to a mangled corpse waiting in a cold morgue somewhere for the autopsy that no accident victim can escape. The identity card he handed to the clerk bears the name of An tónio Claro, the face in the photograph is the same as the face the receptionist has before him and which he would scrupulously examine were there any reason to go to such lengths. There isn't, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has signed the guest book, in these cases all that's required is a scrawl that bears some resemblance to the proper signature, he has the key to the room in his hand, he has already said that he has no luggage with him, and to support a truth that no one has asked him to justify, he explained how he had missed his plane and left his suitcases at the airport, which is why he is staying only one night. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso may have changed his name, but he continues to be the same person whom we accompanied to the video shop, who always talks more than is necessary, who does not know how to be natural, fortunately, the receptionist has other things to think about, the telephone ringing, a few foreigners who have just arrived weighed down with suitcases and travel bags. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso went up to his room, made himself comfortable, and went to the bathroom to relieve his bladder, apart from having missed his plane, as he had told the receptionist, he appeared to have no other worries, but that was before he lay down on the bed, intending to rest a little, for his imagination immediately placed before him a car reduced to a pile of scrap metal and, inside it, wretchedly bleeding, two mangled bodies. The tears returned, the sobs returned, and who knows how long he would have gone on like this if, suddenly, the shocking thought of his mother had not irrupted into his disoriented brain. He sat bolt upright, placed his hand on the phone, at the same time heaping insults on himself, I'm a fool, a half-wit, an idiot, an imbecile, an utter cretin, how could it not have occurred to me that the police were bound to go to my apartment, that they would ask the neighbors if I had any relatives, that my upstairs neighbor would give them my mother's address and telephone number, how could something so very obvious not have crossed my mind, how was it possible. No one answered. The telephone rang and rang, but no one came to ask, Who is it, so that Tertuliano Máximo Afonso could at last say, It's me, I'm alive, the police made a mistake, I'll explain later. His mother wasn't at home, and this fact, unusual in any other circumstances, could mean only one thing, that she was on her way to the city, that she had hired a taxi and was on her way, she might even have arrived, in which case, she would have gone to ask the upstairs neighbor for the key and will now be weeping out her grief, my poor mother, how right you were to warn me. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso dialed his own phone number, and again no one answered. He tried to think calmly, to clarify his muddled mind, even if the police had been exceptionally diligent, they would need time to carry out and conclude their investigations, one must remember that this city is a seething mass of five million restless inhabitants, that there are many accidents and even more victims of accidents, that it is necessary to identify them, to go in search of their families, no easy task when there are negligent people who go about the streets without so much as a piece of paper on them warning, In case of accident, call so-and-so. Fortunately, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is not such a person, nor, it would seem, was Maria da Paz, in their respective

address books, on the page reserved for personal information, was everything necessary for a perfect identification, at least as regards any initial requirements, which almost always end up being the last requirements too. No one, apart from a criminal, would be wandering around with false documents or documents stolen from another person, and so it is legitimate to conclude, with respect to the present case, that what the police took to be the truth was the truth, and since there was no reason to doubt the identity of one of the victims, why on earth should there be any doubts about the other one. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso rang again, and again there was no reply. He is no longer thinking about Maria da Paz, now he just wants to know where Carolina Máximo is, taxis these days are powerful machines, not like the old clunkers of yesteryear, and, in a dramatic situation like this, there would be no need to bribe the driver with the promise of a tip if he put his foot down, in four hours she should be here, and given that it's a Saturday and everyone's away on holiday, with the traffic on the roads reduced to a minimum, she should have arrived at his apartment already, so that she could ease her son's disquiet. He rang again, and this time, unexpectedly, the answering machine came on, This is Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, please leave a message, it was a terrible shock, he had been in such a state of nerves before that he hadn't noticed the machine had not come on, and now it was as if he had suddenly heard a voice not his own, the voice of a dead stranger that, tomorrow, so as not to upset the sensitive, will have to be replaced by the voice of someone living, an operation of removal and replacement that happens every day in thousands and thousands of places all over the world, although we may prefer not to think about it. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso needed a few seconds to calm himself and recover his own voice, then, tremulously, he said, Mama, it's not true what they've told you, I'm alive and well, I'll tell you later what happened, but I repeat, I'm alive and well, I'm going to give you the name of the hotel I'm staying at, the room number, and the telephone number, call me as soon as you get there and don't cry anymore, don't cry, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso might have said these last words a third time, if he himself had not burst into tears, tears for his mother, for Maria da Paz, whose memory was back with him again, and tears of pity for himself too. Exhausted, he fell back on the bed, he felt weak, as helpless as a sick child, he remembered that he had not had any lunch, and the idea, instead of arousing his appetite, made him feel so violently sick that he had to get up and run to the bathroom, where his retchings summoned up from his stomach nothing but a little bitter foam. He went back into the room, sat down on the bed with his head in his hands, allowing his thoughts to drift like a small cork boat heading downstream and which, now and again, when it bumps against a rock, changes direction for a moment. It was thanks to this half-conscious daydreaming that he remembered something important he should have told his mother. He rang his own number, fearing that the machine would again play tricks on him and refuse to work, and he gave a great sigh of relief when the answering machine, after a few seconds' hesitation, whirled into life. He left only a short message, he said, Don't forget, the name is António Claro, and then, as if he had just discovered a weighty bit of evidence that would contribute to a definitive elucidation of the shifting, unstable identities under discussion, he added the following information, The dog's name is Tomarctus. When his mother arrives, he won't need to recite to her the

names of his father and of his grandparents, of his aunts and uncles on both sides, he won't have to mention the arm he broke when he fell out of the fig tree, or his first girlfriend, or the bolt of lightning that demolished the chimney when he was ten years old. In order for Carolina Máximo Afonso to be absolutely sure that the child of her heart is there before her, there will be no need for that marvelous maternal instinct of hers or for any scientific, confirmatory DNA tests, the name of the dog will be enough.

It was nearly an hour before the phone rang. Startled, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso leaped up, hoping to hear his mother's voice, but the voice he heard was that of the clerk at the reception desk, Senhora Carolina Claro is here to speak to you, Oh, it's my mother, he stammered, I'll be right down, I'll be right down. He ran out of the room, at the same time telling himself, I must get a grip on myself, I mustn't be overly affectionate, the less fuss we make the better. The slowness of the lift helped to moderate the rush of emotions, and it was a fairly acceptable Tertuliano Máximo Afonso who appeared in the foyer and embraced the elderly lady, who, either instinctively or after long reflection in the taxi that had brought her there, prudently returned these displays of filial affection without any of the vulgar, passionate exuberance that finds expression in phrases such as, Oh, my sweet boy, although in the present drama, Oh, my poor boy would be more suited to the situation. The embraces, tears, and sobs had to wait until they got to the room, until the door had closed and the son risen from the dead could say, Mama, and she had no words to say other than those that managed to emerge from her grateful heart, It's you, it's you. This woman, however, is not the easily pleased type, for whom a hug is enough to make her forget an offense, an offense, in this case, not against her, but against reason, respect, and common sense too, lest it be said that we have forgotten how much the latter had tried to do to prevent the story of the duplicate men from ending in tragedy. Carolina Máximo will not use that term, she will say only, There are two people dead, now tell me from the beginning how all this happened, and without concealing anything, please, the time for half-truths is over, and that applies to half-lies too. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso drew up a chair for his mother to sit on, sat down on the edge of the bed, and began his story. From the beginning, as she had requested. She didn't interrupt him, and only twice did she look shocked, once when António Claro was saying that he was going to take Maria da Paz to the house in the country in order to make love with her, and again when her son explained how and why he had gone to Helena's apartment and what had happened there. She moved her lips as if to say, Madness, but the word did not come out. Night had fallen, darkness covered the features of both. When Tertuliano Máximo Afonso stopped speaking, his mother asked the inevitable question, And now what, Now, Mama, the Tertuliano Máximo Afonso I was is dead, and the other one, if he wants to continue to be part of life, will have no option but to be António Claro, And why not just tell the truth, why not say what happened, why not put everything back in its rightful place, You've heard what happened, Yes, so, Do you really think, Mama, that those four people, the dead and the living, should be brought out into the public gaze for the pleasure and amusement of the world's fierce curiosity, and what would we gain with that, the dead wouldn't come back to life and the living would

start to die there and then, So what shall we do, You will go to the funeral of the false Tertuliano Máximo Afonso and you'll mourn for him as if he were your son, and Helena will go too, but no one must know why she is there, And you, As I said, I'm António Claro, when I turn on the light, the face you will see will be his, not mine, But you're my son, Yes, I'm your son, but I won't be able to be your son in the town where I was born, as far as the people there are concerned, I'm dead, and when you and I want to meet, it will have to be in a place where no one even knows of the existence of a history teacher called Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, And Helena, Tomorrow I'll go and ask her forgiveness and give her back this watch and this wedding ring, And for this two people had to die, Yes, people I killed, and one of them an innocent victim, entirely innocent. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso got up and turned on the light. His mother was crying. For a few minutes they remained silent, avoiding each other's gaze. Then, dabbing at her eyes with a damp handkerchief, his mother murmured, Old Cassandra was right, you should never have let the wooden horse in, There's nothing to be done about it now, No, there's nothing to be done about it, and there'll be nothing to be done about it in the future either, we'll all be dead. After a brief silence, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso asked, Did the police give you any details about the accident, They said that the car left its lane and drove straight into a truck coming in the opposite direction, they also told me that they would have died instantly, That's odd, What is, Well, I had the impression he was a good driver, Something must have happened, They might have skidded, there could have been oil on the road, They didn't say anything about that, just that the car left its lane and drove straight into the truck. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso sat down again on the edge of the bed, looked at his watch, and said, I'm going to ask reception to get a room for you, we'll have supper and you can stay here tonight, No, I'd rather go back to your place, after we've eaten, you can call a taxi, But I can take you, no one will see me, And how are you going to take me when you have no car, I've got his car, his mother shook her head sadly and said, His car, his wife, all that's lacking now is for you to have his life too, Well, I'll have to find a better life for myself, but now, please, let's go and eat something, and let the tragedy rest for a while. He held out his hands to help her up, then he put his arms around her and said, Remember to erase the messages I left on the answering machine, we can't be too careful, not like cats that hide in a box but forget to put their tail in. When they had finished supper, his mother said again, Call me a taxi, No, I'll take you home, You can't risk being seen, besides, just the thought of getting in that car makes me shudder, All right, but I'll come with you in the taxi and then come back here, Look, I'm old enough to go alone, don't insist. When she left, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso said, Try to get some rest, Mama, you need it, Probably neither of us will be able to sleep, neither you nor I, she replied.

She was right. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, at least, did not close his eyes for hours and hours, he kept seeing the car leaving its lane and hurtling toward the truck's huge snout, Why, he asked himself, why did he lose control like that, perhaps a tire blew, no, that can't be it, the police would have mentioned it, true, the car has been in constant use for a good few years, but I took it in for a full service only three months ago and they

found nothing wrong with it, either mechanical or electrical. He fell asleep toward dawn, but his sleep was short-lived, just after seven o'clock he was startled awake by the thought of something urgent he had to do, the visit to Helena presumably, but it was still too early for that, what could it be then, a light suddenly went on in his head, the newspaper, he needed to see what was in the newspaper, an accident like that, just outside the city, was news. He leaped out of bed, pulled on his clothes, and rushed down to reception. The night porter, not the receptionist who had attended him the previous day, eyed him suspiciously, and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had to say, I'm just going to buy a newspaper, in case the man thought that this agitated guest was trying to leave without paying. He did not have to go far, there was a newspaper kiosk on the corner. He bought three papers, there must be something about the accident in one of them, and strode back to the hotel. He went up to his room and started leafing through them anxiously, looking for the section on road accidents. It was reported only in the third newspaper. There was a photograph showing the car's ruinous state. With his whole body shaking, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso read the article, skipping over the details to get to the essential facts, Yesterday, at around 9:30 A.M., on the outskirts of the city, there was a head-on collision between a car and a truck. The car's two occupants, So-and-So and So-and-So, immediately identifiable from the papers they had on them, were dead by the time the ambulance arrived. The driver of the truck suffered only minor injuries to his face and hands. Questioned by the police, who do not hold him in any way responsible for the accident, he stated that when the car was still some distance from him, before it left its lane, it had seemed to him that the two occupants were grappling with each other, although he could not be entirely sure because of the glare on the windscreen. Information acquired later on by our reporter revealed that the two unfortunate travelers were engaged to be married. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso read the item again, at the time that it happened, he thought, he was still in bed with Helena, and then, inevitably, he connected António Claro's early-morning drive back with what the truck driver had said. What went on between them, he wondered, what could have happened at the house in the country for them still to be arguing in the car, no, more than arguing, grappling, as the sole eyewitness to the accident had said with such vivid exactitude. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso looked at his watch. It was a few minutes to eight, Helena would already be up, Or perhaps not, she probably took a sleeping pill so as to be able to sleep, or, more accurately, to escape, poor Helena, as innocent as Maria da Paz had been, little does she know what awaits her. It was nine o'clock when Tertuliano Máximo Afonso left the hotel. He had asked reception to supply him with shaving equipment, he has had breakfast and is now on his way to say to Helena the word that is still needed for the incredible story of the duplicate men to come to an end once and for all and for normal life to resume its course, leaving, as usual, its victims behind it. If Tertuliano Máximo Afonso were fully aware of what he is about to do, of the blow he is about to deliver, he might well run away without a word of explanation or justification, perhaps leave things in their current state to rot, but his mind is somehow fogged, under the influence of a kind of anesthesia that dulls the pain and is now pushing him beyond his own will. He parked the car opposite the building, crossed the road, and got into the lift. He is carrying

the newspaper rolled up under his arm, the bringer of tragic news, the voice and word of fate, he is the worst of Cassandras, the one whose sole duty is to say, It happened. He did not want to open the front door with the key he has in his pocket, there is no room now for vengeance, revenge, retribution. He rang the bell like that seller of books boasting of the sublime cultural virtues of the encyclopedia in which the habits of the monkfish are so minutely described, but what he wants now, with every fiber of his being, is for the person who opens the door to him to say, even if she's lying, No, thank you, I've already got one. The door opened and Helena appeared in the half dark of the corridor. She looked at him in astonishment, as if she had lost all hope of ever seeing him again, she showed him her poor, drawn face, the dark circles under her eyes, clearly the pill she had taken to escape from herself had failed. Where have you been, she stammered, what happened, I've been in utter torment since yesterday, since you left. She stepped forward into his arms, which did not open, but which, purely out of pity, did not repel her, and then they went in together, she still clinging to him, and he, awkward, gauche, like a clumsy puppet. He did not speak, he will not utter a word until she is sitting on the sofa, and what he has to say will appear to be the innocuous statement of someone who has gone out into the street to buy a newspaper and now, with no apparent hidden motive, says only, I've brought you the news, and he will show her the open page, will point out the place where the tragedy occurred, Here it is, and she will not notice his coldness, she will carefully read what is written, will look away from the photo of the crushed car and mutter sadly when she has done, How awful, but she said this only because she is a woman with a kind heart, the misfortune does not really touch her directly, indeed, in contradiction to the apparent solidarity of her words, there was something like relief, clearly involuntary, but to which the words spoken afterward give intelligible expression, That's terrible, it brings me no joy at all, on the contrary, but at least it puts an end to the confusion. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso had not sat down, he was standing before her, the way messengers always stand when still on duty, because there is more news to give, the very worst news. For Helena, the newspaper is already a thing of the past, the concrete present, the palpable present is this, her husband returned to her, António Claro is his name, he is going to tell her what he did yesterday afternoon and night, what important matters could have made him leave her without a word from him for so many hours. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso realizes that he cannot wait a minute longer, if he does, he will have to remain silent forever. He said, The man who died was not Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. She looked at him with troubled eyes, then uttered five words that would prove of little use to her, What, what did you say, and he said again, without looking at her, The man who died was not Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. Helena's disquiet was suddenly transformed into outright fear, Who was it then, Your husband. There was no other way of telling her, there was not a single preparatory speech in the world that would have helped, it was pointless and cruel trying to apply a bandage before there was a wound to bind up. Wild with despair, Helena was still trying to fend off the catastrophe breaking over her head, But the documents the newspaper mentioned belonged to that awful man, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso took his wallet out of his jacket pocket, opened it, removed António Claro's identity card and held it out to her.

She took it, looked at the photograph, looked at the man in front of her, and understood everything. The evidence of the facts took shape in her mind like a rush of harsh light, the monstrousness of the situation overwhelmed her, for one brief moment she seemed about to lose consciousness. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso stepped forward, grasped her hands, and she, opening eyes that were like one vast teardrop, drew back abruptly, then, all strength gone, left them there, convulsive weeping saved her from fainting, sobs were now pitilessly shaking her chest, This is just how I cried, he thought, this is how we all cry when faced by a situation about which we can do nothing. Now what, she asked from the depths of the pool in which she was drowning, I'll disappear from your life forever, he said, you'll never see me again, I'd like to ask your forgiveness, but I daren't, it would be adding insult to injury, You weren't the only guilty one, No, but I bear most responsibility, I'm guilty of cowardice and because of that two people are dead, Was Maria da Paz really your fiancée, Yes, Did you love her, Yes, I cared about her deeply, we were going to be married, And yet you allowed her to go with him, As I said, out of cowardice, out of weakness, And you came here to have your revenge, Yes. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso straightened up and took a step back. Repeating the same movements that António Claro had performed forty-eight hours before, he took off the wristwatch, which he placed on the table, then he put the wedding ring down beside it. He said, I'll return the suit I'm wearing by post. Helena picked up the ring and looked at it as if for the first time. Distractedly, as though trying to remove the invisible mark left behind, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso rubbed the ring finger on his left hand with the index finger and thumb of his right hand. Neither of them thought, neither of them will ever think that the lack of that ring on António Claro's finger could have been the direct cause of two deaths, and yet that is how it was. Yesterday morning, at the house in the country, Antonio Claro was still asleep when Maria da Paz woke up. He was lying on his right side, with his left hand resting at eye level on her pillow. Maria da Paz's thoughts were confused, oscillating between a sense of languid physical well-being and a spiritual unease for which she could find no explanation. The light, steadily growing in intensity and seeping in through the gaps in the rustic window shutters, was gradually filling the room. Maria da Paz sighed and turned to look at Tertuliano Máximo Afonso. His left hand almost covered his face. On his ring finger was the round white mark that wedding rings leave on the skin after years of wear. Maria da Paz shuddered, her eyes must be deceiving her, or else she was having the worst of nightmares, this man identical to Tertuliano Máximo Afonso is not Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso has not worn a ring since his divorce, the mark on his finger has long since faded. The man is sleeping placidly. Maria da Paz slipped gingerly from the bed, picked up her scattered clothes, and left the room. She got dressed in the hallway, still too stunned to think clearly, incapable of coming up with an answer to the question going around and around in her head, Am I mad. The man who had brought her here and with whom she had spent the night was not Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, of that she was sure, but if it wasn't him, who could it be, and how could there possibly be two people in the world so exactly alike that they could be mistaken for each other, in their body, in their gestures, in their voice. Little by little, like someone looking for and finding the right pieces for a jigsaw puzzle, she began to relate events and

actions, she remembered Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's equivocal words, his evasive answers, the letter from the production company, the promise he had made to her that, one day, he would tell her everything. She could go no further, she would still not know who this man was, unless he told her. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's voice came from the bedroom, Maria da Paz. She did not reply, and the voice insisted, insinuating, caressing, It's still early, come back to bed. She got up from the chair in which she had been slumped and went toward the bedroom. She went no farther than the door. He said, What's the idea of getting dressed, come on, take your clothes off and jump in, the party's not over yet, Who are you, asked Maria da Paz, and before he could reply, Where did you get that mark on your ring finger. Antonio Claro looked at his hand and said, Oh, that, Yes, that, you're not Tertuliano, No, I'm not, I'm not Tertuliano, Who are you then, For the moment, you'll have to make do with knowing who I'm not, but when you see your friend again, you can ask him, Oh, I will, I need to know just who I've been deceived by, By me, in the first place, but he helped, or, rather, the poor man had no option, your fiancé is not exactly a hero. António Claro got out of bed completely naked and came toward Maria da Paz, smiling, What does it matter which one I am, stop asking questions and come to bed. In despair, Maria da Paz screamed, You bastard, and fled into the living room. António Claro appeared shortly afterward, dressed and ready to leave. He said coolly, I've no patience with hysterical women, I'll drop you off at your house and that'll be that. Thirty minutes later, at high speed, the car collided with the truck. There was no oil on the road. The one eyewitness told the police that, although he couldn't be absolutely sure because of the glare on the windscreen, it seemed to him that the car's two occupants were grappling with each other.

At last, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso said, I hope there comes a time when you can forgive me, and Helena replied, Forgive is just a word, Words are all we have, Where are you going now, Somewhere or other, to pick up the pieces and try and hide the scars, As António Claro, Yes, the other one is dead. Helena said nothing, her right hand was resting on the newspaper, her wedding ring glinted on her left hand, the same hand that was still holding in the tips of its fingers the ring that had been her husband's. Then she said, There's one person who can still call you Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, Yes, my mother, Is she here in the city, Yes, There's another person too, Who, Me, You won't be able to, we'll never see each other again, That depends on you, Sorry, I don't understand, I'm telling you to stay with me, to take the place of my husband, to be for all intents and purposes António Claro, to continue his life, since you were the one who took it from him, You mean I should stay here, that we should live together, Yes, But we don't love each other, Possibly not, You might come to hate me, Possibly, Or I might come to hate you, It's a risk I'm willing to take, it would be another unique case in the world, a widow divorcing her husband, But your husband must have family, parents, siblings, how can I pretend to be him, That's all right, I'll help you, But he was an actor, I'm a history teacher, Those are some of the pieces you're going to have to put back together, but there's a time for everything, We might grow to love each other, Possibly, Because I don't think I could hate you, Nor I you. Helena got up and went over to Tertuliano Máximo

Afonso. It seemed that she was about to kiss him, but no, the very idea, a little respect, please, there is, after all, a time for everything. She took his left hand and slowly, very slowly, to allow time for time to arrive, she slipped the ring onto his finger. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso drew her gently to him and they stood like that, almost embracing, almost together, on the edge of time.

ANTÓNIO CLARO'S FUNERAL TOOK PLACE THREE DAYS LATER. Helena and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso's mother had gone to play their respective parts, one to mourn a son who was not hers, the other to pretend that the dead man was a stranger. He had stayed at home, reading the book about ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, the chapter on the Aramaeans. The telephone rang. Without even thinking that it could be one of his new parents or siblings, Tertuliano Máximo Afonso picked up the receiver and said, Hello. At the other end, a voice identical to his exclaimed, At last. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso shuddered, António Claro must have been sitting in this same chair on the night when he, Tertuliano, had phoned him. Now the conversation is going to repeat itself, time has changed its mind and turned back. Is that Senhor Daniel Santa-Clara, asked the voice, Yes, speaking, Good, I've been looking for you for weeks, and I've finally found you, How may I help you, Well, I'd like to meet you, Why, You have doubtless already noticed that our voices are identical, They do seem to be rather similar, No, not similar, identical, As you wish, It isn't only our voices that are identical, What do you mean, Anyone seeing us together would swear that we were twins, Twins, More than twins, identical, In what way identical, Identical, quite simply identical, Let's just stop this conversation right here, I have things to do, So you don't believe me, No, I don't believe in impossibilities, Do you have two moles on your right forearm, beside each other, Yes, I do, So do I, That doesn't prove anything, Do you have a scar under your left kneecap, Yes, So do I. Tertuliano Máximo Afonso took a deep breath, then asked, Where are you, In a telephone booth not far from your apartment building, And where can I meet you, It will have to be in some isolated spot, where there will be no witnesses, Of course, after all, we're not circus freaks. The voice at the other end suggested meeting in a park on the outskirts of the city and Tertuliano Máximo Afonso agreed, But you can't drive into the park, he remarked, All the better, said the voice, Yes, that's my view too, There's a wooded part just beyond the third lake, I'll wait for you there, Unless I get there first, When, Now, in an hour or so, Good, Good, repeated Tertuliano Máximo Afonso, putting down the receiver. He grabbed a bit of paper and scribbled, I'll be back, but did not sign it. Then he went into the bedroom and opened the drawer containing the pistol. He put the clip into the stock of the gun and transferred a cartridge into the chamber. He changed his clothes, clean shirt, tie, trousers, jacket, his best shoes. He stuck the pistol in his belt and left.

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SEEING

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For Pilar, every single day
For Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, who lives on

Let's howl, said the dog
—The Book of Voices

TERRIBLE VOTING WEATHER, REMARKED THE PRESIDING OFFICER OF polling station fourteen as he snapped shut his soaked umbrella and took off the raincoat that had proved of little use to him during the breathless forty-meter dash from the place where he had parked his car to the door through which, heart pounding, he had just appeared. I hope I'm not the last, he said to the secretary, who was standing slightly away from the door, safe from the sheets of rain which, caught by the wind, were drenching the floor. Your deputy hasn't arrived yet, but we've still got plenty of time, said the secretary soothingly, With rain like this, it'll be a feat in itself if we all manage to get here, said the presiding officer as they went into the room where the voting would take place. He greeted, first, the poll clerks who would act as scrutineers and then the party representatives and their deputies. He was careful to address exactly the same words to all of them, not allowing his face or tone of voice to betray any political and ideological leanings of his own. A presiding officer, even of an ordinary polling station like this, should, in all circumstances, be guided by the strictest sense of independence, he should, in short, always observe decorum.

As well as the general dampness, which made an already oppressive atmosphere still muggier, for the room had only two narrow windows that looked out onto a courtyard which was gloomy even on sunny days, there was a sense of unease which, to use the vernacular expression, you could have cut with a knife. They should have postponed the elections, said the representative of the party in the middle, or the p.i.t.m., I mean, it's been raining non-stop since yesterday, there are landslips and floods everywhere, the abstention rate this time around will go sky-high. The representative from the party on the right, or the p.o.t.r., nodded in agreement, but felt that his contribution to the conversation should be couched in the form of a cautious comment, Obviously, I wouldn't want to underestimate the risk of that, but I do feel that our fellow citizens' high sense of civic duty, which they have demonstrated before on so many occasions, is deserving of our every confidence, they are aware, indeed, acutely so, of the vital importance of these municipal elections for the future of the capital. Having each said their piece, the representative of the p.i.t.m. and the representative of the p.o.t.r. turned, with a half-sceptical, half-ironic air, to the representative of the party on the left, the p.o.t.l., curious to know what opinion he would come up with. At that precise moment, however, the presiding officer's deputy burst into the room, dripping water everywhere, and, as one might expect, now that the cast of polling station officers was complete, the welcome he received was more than just cordial, it was positively enthusiastic. We therefore never heard the viewpoint of the representative of the p.o.t.l., although, on the basis of a few known antecedents, one can assume that he would, without fail, have taken a line of bright historical optimism, something like, The people who vote for my party are not the sort to let themselves be put off by a minor obstacle like this, they're not the kind to stay at home just because of a few miserable drops of rain falling from the skies. It was not, however, a matter of a few miserable drops of rain, there were bucketfuls, jugfuls, whole nils, iguaçús and yangtses of the stuff, but faith, may it be eternally blessed, as well as removing mountains from the path of those who benefit from its influence, is capable of plunging into the most torrential of waters and emerging from them bone-dry.

With the table now complete, with each officer in his or her allotted place, the presiding officer signed the official edict and asked the secretary to affix it, as required by law, outside the building, but the secretary, demonstrating a degree of basic common sense, pointed out that the piece of paper would not last even one minute on the wall outside, in two ticks the ink would have run and in three the wind would have carried it off. Put it inside, then, out of the rain, the law doesn't say what to do in these circumstances, the main thing is that the edict should be pinned up where it can be seen. He asked his colleagues if they were in agreement, and they all said they were, with the proviso on the part of the representative of the p.o.t.r. that this decision should be recorded in the minutes in case they were ever challenged on the matter. When the secretary returned from his damp mission, the presiding officer asked him what it was like out there, and he replied with a wry shrug, Just the same, rain, rain, rain, Any voters out there, Not a sign. The presiding officer stood up and invited the poll clerks and the three party representatives to follow him into the voting chamber, which was found to be free of anything that might sully the purity of the political choices to be made there during the day. This formality completed, they returned to their places to examine the electoral roll, which they found to be equally free of irregularities, lacunae or anything else of a suspicious nature. The solemn moment had arrived when the presiding officer uncovers and displays the ballot box to the voters so that they can certify that it is empty, and tomorrow, if necessary, bear witness to the fact that no criminal act has introduced into it, at dead of night, the false votes that would corrupt the free and sovereign political will of the people, and so that there would be no electoral shenanigans, as they're so picturesquely known, and which, let us not forget, can be committed before, during or after the act, depending on the efficiency of the perpetrators and their accomplices and the opportunities available to them. The ballot box was empty, pure, immaculate, but there was not a single voter in the room to whom it could be shown. Perhaps one of them is lost out there, battling with the torrents, enduring the whipping winds, clutching to his bosom the document that proves he is a fully enfranchised citizen, but, judging by the look of the sky right now, he'll be a long time coming, if, that is, he doesn't end up simply going home and leaving the fate of the city to those with a black car to drop them off at the door and pick them up again once the person in the back seat has fulfilled his or her civic duty.

After the various materials have been inspected, the law of this country states that the presiding officer should immediately cast his vote, as should the poll clerks, the party representatives and their respective deputies, as long, of course, as they are registered at that particular polling station, as was the case here. Even by stretching things out, four minutes was more than enough time for the ballot box to receive its first eleven votes. And then, there was nothing else for it, the waiting began. Barely half an hour had passed when the presiding officer, who was getting anxious, suggested that one of the poll clerks should go and see if anyone was coming, voters might have turned up to find the door blown shut by the wind and gone off in a huff, grumbling that the government might at least have had the decency to inform people that the elections had been

postponed, that, after all, was what the radio and television were for, to broadcast such information. The secretary said, But everyone knows that when a door blows shut it makes the devil of a noise, and we haven't heard a thing in here. The poll clerk hesitated, will I, won't I, but the presiding officer insisted. Go on, please, and be careful, don't get wet. The door was open, the wedge securely in place. The clerk stuck his head out, a moment was all it took to glance from one side to the other and then draw back, dripping, as if he had put his head under a shower. He wanted to proceed like a good poll clerk, to please the presiding officer, and, since it was the first time he had been called upon to perform this function, he also wanted to be appreciated for the speed and efficiency with which he had carried out his duties, who knows, with time and experience, he might one day be the person presiding over a polling station, higher flights of ambition than this have traversed the sky of providence and no one has so much as batted an eye. When he went back into the room, the presiding officer, half-rueful, half-amused, exclaimed, There was no need to get yourself soaked, man, Oh, it doesn't matter, sir, said the clerk, drying his cheek on the sleeve of his jacket, Did you spot anyone, As far as I could see, no one, it's like a desert of water out there. The presiding officer got up, took a few uncertain steps around the table, went into the voting chamber, looked inside and came back. The representative of the p.i.t.m. spoke up to remind the others of his prediction that the abstention rate would go sky-high, the representative of the p.o.t.r. once more played the role of pacifier, the voters had all day to vote, they were probably just waiting for the rain to let up. This time the representative of the p.o.t.l. chose to remain silent, thinking what a pathetic figure he would be cutting now if he had actually said what he was going to say when the presiding officer's deputy had come into the room, It would take more than a few miserable drops of rain to put off my party's voters. The secretary, on whom all eyes were expectantly turned, opted for a practical suggestion, You know, it might not be a bad idea to phone the ministry and ask how the elections are going elsewhere in the city and in the rest of the country too, that way we would find out if this civic power cut was a general thing or if we're the only ones whom the voters have declined to illumine with their votes. The representative of the p.o.t.r. sprang indignantly to his feet, I demand that it be set down in the minutes that, as representative of the p.o.t.r., I strongly object to the disrespectful manner and the unacceptably mocking tone in which the secretary has just referred to the voters, who are the supreme defenders of democracy, and without whom tyranny, any of the many tyrannies that exist in the world, would long ago have overwhelmed the nation that bore us. The secretary shrugged and asked, Shall I make a note of the representative of the p.o.t.r.'s comments, sir, No, I don't think that will be necessary, it's just that we're all a bit tense and perplexed and puzzled, and, as we all know, in that state of mind, it's very easy to say things we don't really believe, and I'm sure the secretary didn't mean to offend anyone, why, he himself is a voter conscious of his responsibilities, the proof being that he, as did all of us, braved the elements to answer the call of duty, nevertheless, my feelings of gratitude, however sincere, do not prevent me asking the secretary to keep rigorously to the task assigned to him and to abstain from any comments that might shock the personal or political sensibilities of the other people here. The representative of

the p.o.t.r. made a brusque gesture which the presiding officer chose to interpret as one of agreement, and the argument went no further, thanks, in large measure, to the representative of the p.i.t.m., who took up the secretary's proposal, It's true, he said, we're like shipwreck victims in the middle of the ocean, with no sails and no compass, no mast and no oars, and with no diesel in the tank either, Yes, you're quite right, said the presiding officer, I'll phone the ministry now. There was a telephone on another table and he walked over to it, carrying the instruction leaflet he had been given days before and on which were printed, amongst other useful things, the telephone numbers of the ministry of the interior.

The call was a brief one, It's the presiding officer of polling station number fourteen here, I'm very worried, there's something distinctly odd going on, so far, not a single voter has turned up to vote, we've been open for more than an hour, and not a soul, yes, sir, I know there's no way of stopping the storm, yes, sir, I know, rain, wind, floods, yes, sir, we'll be patient, we'll stick to our guns, after all, that's why we're here. From that point on the presiding officer contributed nothing to the dialogue apart from a few affirmative nods of the head, the occasional muted interjection and three or four phrases which he began but did not finish. When he replaced the receiver, he looked over at his colleagues, but without, in fact, seeing them, it was as if he had before him a landscape composed entirely of empty voting chambers, immaculate electoral rolls, with presiding officers and secretaries waiting, party representatives exchanging distrustful glances as they tried to work out who might gain and who might lose from this situation, and, in the distance, the occasional rain-soaked poll-clerk returning from the door to announce that no one was coming. What did the people at the ministry say, asked the representative of the p.i.t.m., They don't know what to make of it either, after all, it's only natural that the bad weather would keep a lot of people at home, but apparently pretty much the same thing is happening all over the city, that's why they can't explain it, What do you mean pretty much, asked the representative of the p.o.t.r., Well, a few voters have turned up at some polling stations, but hardly any really, no one's ever known anything like it, And what about the rest of the country, asked the representative of the p.o.t.l., after all, it's not only raining in the capital, That's what's so odd, there are places where it's raining just as heavily as it is here and yet, despite that, people are still turning out to vote, I mean, obviously there are more voters in areas where the weather is good, speaking of which, the forecasters are saying that the weather should start to improve later on this morning, It might go from bad to worse, you know what they say, rain at midday either gets much worse or clears away, warned the second clerk, who had not, until then, opened his mouth. There was a silence. Then the secretary put his hand into one of his jacket pockets, produced a mobile phone and keyed in a number. While he was waiting for someone to answer, he said, It's a bit like the mountain and Mahomet, since we can't ask the voters, whom we don't know, why they haven't come in to vote, let's ask our own families, whom we do know, hi, it's me, yes, how come you're still there, why haven't you been to vote, I know it's raining, my trouser legs are still sopping wet, oh, right, sorry, I forgot you'd told me you'd be over after lunch, sure, I only phoned because things are a

bit awkward here, oh, you've no idea, if I told you that not a single voter has yet come in to vote, you probably wouldn't believe me, right, fine, I'll see you later then, take care. He turned off the phone and remarked ironically, Well, at least one vote is guaranteed, my wife will be coming this afternoon. The presiding officer and the clerks looked at each other, they were obviously supposed to follow the secretary's example, but not one of them wanted to be the first to do so, that would be tantamount to admitting that when it came to quick thinking and self-confidence the secretary won hands down. It did not take long for the clerk who had gone over to the door to see if it was raining to conclude that he would have to eat a lot of bread and salt before he could compete with the secretary we have here, capable of casually pulling a vote out of a mobile phone like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Seeing that the presiding officer, in one corner, was now calling home on his mobile, and that the others, using their own phones, were discreetly, in whispers, doing likewise, this same clerk privately applauded the honesty of his colleagues who, by not using the phone provided in principle for official use only, were nobly saving the state money. The only person who, for lack of a mobile phone, had to resign himself to waiting for news from the others was the representative of the p.o.t.l., of whom it should be said that, living as he did alone in the city, with his family in the provinces, the poor man had no one to call. The conversations gradually came to an end, one after the other, the longest being that of the presiding officer, who appears to be demanding that the person he is talking to come immediately to the polling station, we'll see if he has any luck with that, but the fact is he's the one who should have spoken first, but, then, if the secretary decided to get in ahead of him, too bad, he is, as we've already seen, a bit of a smart aleck, if he had as much respect for hierarchy as we do, he would have merely suggested the idea to his superior. The presiding officer let out the sigh that had long been trapped within his breast, put the phone away in his pocket and asked, So, what did you find out. The question, as well as being superfluous, was, how can we put it, just the teensiest bit dishonest, firstly, because, when it comes down to it, everyone would have found out something, however irrelevant, secondly, because it was obvious that the person asking the question was taking advantage of the authority inherent in his position to shirk his duty, since it was up to him, in voice and person, to initiate any exchange of information. If we bear in mind the sigh he uttered and the rather querulous tone we thought we detected at one point in the phone conversation, it would be logical to suppose that the dialogue, presumably with a member of his family, had not proved to be as placid and instructive as his perfectly justifiable interest as a citizen and as a presiding officer deserved, and that he does not feel sufficiently calm to launch into some hastily concocted extemporaneous comment, and is now sidestepping the difficulty by inviting his subordinates to have their say first, which, as we also know, is another, more modern way of being the boss. What the clerks and party representatives said, aside from the representative of the p.o.t.l, who, having no information of his own, is there in a purely listening capacity, was that their family members either didn't fancy getting a soaking and were waiting for the heavens to clear once and for all, or, like the secretary's wife, were intending to come and vote in the afternoon. Only the clerk who had gone over to the door earlier on seemed pleased with himself, his face bore the complacent

expression of one who has reason to be proud of his own merits, which, translated into words, came down to this, No one answered at my house, which can only mean that they're on their way here now. The presiding officer resumed his seat and the waiting began again.

Nearly an hour later, the first voter arrived. Contrary to the general expectation, and much to the dismay of the clerk who had gone over to the door earlier on, it was a stranger. He left his dripping umbrella at the entrance to the room and, still wearing his plastic cape glistening with water and his plastic boots, went over to the table. The presiding officer looked up at him with a smile on his lips, for this voter, a man of advanced years, but still robust, signaled a return to normality, to the usual line of dutiful citizens moving slowly and patiently along, conscious, as the representative of the p.o.t.r. had put it, of the vital importance of these municipal elections. The man handed his identity card and voter's card to the presiding officer, the latter then announced in a sonorous, almost joyful voice the number on the card and its owner's name, the clerks in charge of the electoral roll leafed through it and, when they found both name and number, repeated them out loud and drew a straight line against the entry to indicate that the man had voted, then, the man, still dripping, went into a voting booth clutching his ballot paper, returned shortly afterward with the piece of paper folded into four, handed it to the presiding officer, who slipped it solemnly into the ballot box, retrieved his documents and left, taking his umbrella with him. The second voter took another ten minutes to appear, but from then on, albeit unenthusiastically, one by one, like autumn leaves slowly detaching themselves from the boughs of a tree, the ballot papers dropped into the ballot box. However long the presiding officer and his colleagues took to scrutinize documents, a queue never formed, there were, at most, at any one time, three or four people waiting, and three or four people, try as they might, can never make a queue worthy of the name. I was quite right, commented the representative of the p.i.t.m., the abstention rate will be enormous, massive, there'll be no possible agreement on the result after this, the only solution will be to hold the elections again, The storm might pass, said the presiding officer and, looking at his watch, he murmured as if he were praying, It's nearly midday. Resolutely, the man to whom we have been referring as the clerk who had gone over to the door earlier on got up and said to the presiding officer, With your permission, sir, since there are no voters here at present, I'll just pop out and see what the weather's doing. It took only an instant, he was there and back in a twinkling, this time with a smile on his face and bearing good news, It's raining much less now, hardly at all really, and the clouds are beginning to break up too. The poll clerks and the party representatives very nearly embraced, but their happiness was not long-lived. The monotonous drip-drip of voters did not change, one came, then another, the wife, mother and aunt of the officer who had gone over to the door came, the elder brother of the representative of the p.o.t.r. came, so did the presiding officer's mother-in-law, who, showing a complete lack of respect for the electoral process, informed her crestfallen son-in-law that her daughter would only be coming later in the afternoon and added cruelly, She said she might go to the cinema, the deputy presiding officer's parents came, as well

as other people who were members of none of their families, they entered looking bored and left looking bored, the atmosphere only brightened somewhat when two politicians from the p.o.t.r. arrived and, minutes later, one from the p.i.t.m., and, as if by magic, a television camera appeared out of nowhere, filmed a few images and returned into nowhere, a journalist asked if he could put a question, How's the voting going, and the presiding officer replied, It could be better, but now that the weather seems to be changing, we're sure the flow of voters will increase, The impression we've been getting from other polling stations in the city is that the abstention rate is going to be very high this time, remarked the journalist, Well, I prefer to take a more optimistic line, a more positive view of the influence of meteorology on the way the electoral mechanisms work, and as long as it doesn't rain this afternoon, we'll soon make up for what this morning's storm tried to steal from us. The journalist left feeling contented, it was a nice turn of phrase, he could even use it as a subtitle to his article. And because the time had come to satisfy their stomachs, the electoral officers and the party representatives organized themselves so that, with one eye on the electoral roll and the other on their sandwiches, they could take turns to eat right there.

It had stopped raining, but nothing seemed to indicate that the civic hopes of the presiding officer would be satisfactorily fulfilled by a ballot box in which, so far, the votes barely covered the bottom. All those present were thinking the same thing, the election so far had been a terrible political failure. Time was passing. The clock on the tower had struck half past three when the secretary's wife came in to vote. Husband and wife exchanged discreet smiles, but there was also just a hint of an indefinable complicity, which provoked in the presiding officer an uncomfortable inner spasm, perhaps the pain of envy, knowing that he would never exchange such a smile with anyone. It was still hurting him in some fold of his flesh when, thirty minutes later, he glanced at the clock and wondered to himself if his wife had, in the end, gone to the cinema. She'll turn up, if she ever does, at the last possible moment, he thought. The ways of warding off fate are many and almost all are useless, and this one, forcing oneself to think the worst in the hope that the best will happen, is one of the most commonplace, and might even be worthy of further consideration, although not in this case, because we have it from an unimpeachable source that the presiding officer's wife really has gone to the cinema and, at least up until now, is still undecided as to whether to cast her vote or not. Fortunately, the oft-invoked need for balance which has kept the universe on track and the planets on course means that whenever something is taken from one side, it is replaced by something else on the other, something that more or less corresponds, something of the same quality and, if possible, the same proportions, so that there are not too many complaints about unfair treatment. How else can one explain why it was that, at four o'clock in the afternoon, an hour which is neither late nor early, neither fish nor fowl, those voters who had, until then, remained in the quiet of their homes, apparently blithely ignoring the election altogether, started to come out onto the streets, most of them under their own steam, but others thanks only to the worthy assistance of firemen and volunteers because the places where they lived were still flooded and impassable,

and all of them, absolutely all of them, the healthy and the infirm, the former on foot, the latter in wheelchairs, on stretchers, in ambulances, headed straight for their respective polling stations like rivers which know no other course than that which flows to the sea. It will probably seem to the sceptical or the merely suspicious, the kind who are only prepared to believe in miracles from which they hope to gain some advantage, that the present circumstance has shown the above-mentioned need for balance to be utterly wrong, that the trumped-up question about whether the presiding officer's wife will or will not vote is, anyway, far too insignificant from the cosmic point of view to require compensation in one of Earth's many cities in the form of the unexpected mobilization of thousands and thousands of people of all ages and social conditions who, without having come to any prior agreement as to their political and ideological differences, have decided, at last, to leave their homes in order to go and vote. Those who argue thus are forgetting that not only does the universe have its own laws, all of them indifferent to the contradictory dreams and desires of humanity, and in the formulation of which we contribute not one iota, apart, that is, from the words by which we clumsily name them, but everything seems to indicate that it uses these laws for aims and objectives that transcend and always will transcend our understanding, and if, at this particular point, the scandalous disproportion between something which might, but for now only might, have seen the ballot box deprived of, in this case, the vote cast by the presiding officer's supposedly unpleasant wife and the tide of men and women now on the move, if we find this difficult to accept in the light of the most elementary distributive justice, prudence warns us to suspend for the moment any definitive judgement and to watch with unquestioning attention how events, which have only just begun to unfold, develop. Which is precisely what the newspaper, radio and television journalists, carried away by professional enthusiasm and by an unquenchable thirst for news, are doing now, racing up and down, thrusting tape-recorders and microphones into people's faces, asking What was it made you leave your house at four o'clock to go and vote, doesn't it seem extraordinary to you that everyone should have come out onto the street at the same time, and receiving in return such abrupt or aggressive replies as, It just happened to be the time I'd decided to go and vote, As free citizens, we can come and go as we please, we don't owe anyone an explanation, How much do they pay you to ask these stupid questions, Who cares what time I leave or don't leave my house, Is there some law that obliges me to answer that question, Sorry, I'm only prepared to speak with my lawyer present. There were polite people too, who replied without the reproachful acrimony of the examples given above, but they were equally unable to satisfy the journalists' devouring curiosity, merely shrugging and saying, Look, I have the greatest respect for the work you do and I'd love to help you publish a bit of good news, but, alas, all I can tell you is that I looked at my watch, saw it was four o'clock and said to the family Right, let's go, it's now or never, Why now or never, That's the funny thing, you see, that's just how it came out, Try to think, rack your brains, No, it's not worth it, ask someone else, perhaps they'll know, But I've asked fifty people already, And, No one could give me an answer, Exactly, But doesn't it strike you as a strange coincidence that thousands of people should all have left their houses at the same time to go and vote, It's certainly a

coincidence, but perhaps not that strange, Why not, Ah, that I don't know. The commentators, who were following the electoral process on the various television programmes and, for lack of any firm facts on which to base their analyses, were busily making educated guesses, inferring the will of the gods from the flight and the song of birds, regretting that animal sacrifice was no longer legal and that they were thus prevented from poring over some creature's still twitching viscera to decipher the secrets of chronos and of fate, these commentators woke suddenly from the torpor into which they had been plunged by the gloomy prospects of the count and, doubtless because it seemed unworthy of their educational mission to waste time discussing coincidences, hurled themselves like wolves upon the fine example of good citizenship that the population of the capital were, at that moment, setting the rest of the country by turning up en masse at polling stations just when the specter of an abstention on a scale unparalleled in the history of our democracy had seemed to be posing a grave threat to the stability not just of the regime but, even more seriously, of the system itself. The statement emanating from the ministry of the interior did not go quite that far, but the government's relief was evident in every line. As for the three parties involved in the election, the parties on the right, in the middle and on the left, they, having first made rapid calculations as to the losses and gains that would result from this unexpected influx of voters, issued congratulatory statements in which, along with other stylistic niceties, they affirmed that democracy had every reason to celebrate. With the national flag draped on the wall behind them, the president in his palace and the prime minister in his mansion both expressed themselves in similar terms, give or take a comma. At the polling stations, the lines of voters, standing three deep, went right round the block and as far as the eye could see.

Like all the other presiding officers in the city, the one at polling station number fourteen was all too aware that he was living through a unique moment in history. When, late that night, after the ministry of the interior had extended the deadline for voting by two hours, a period that had to be extended by a further half an hour so that the voters crammed inside the building could exercise their right to vote, when, at last, the poll clerks and the party representatives, exhausted and hungry, stood before the mountain of ballot papers that had been emptied out of the two ballot boxes, the second one had been an emergency requisition from the ministry, the immensity of the task that lay before them made them tremble with an emotion we would not hesitate to describe as epic or heroic, as if the nations honored ghosts, brought back to life, had magically rematerialized in those ballot papers. One of the ballot papers belonged to the presiding officer's wife. She had been propelled out of the cinema by some strange impulse, she had then spent hours in a queue that advanced at a snail's pace, and when she finally found herself face to face with her husband, when she heard him speak her name, she felt in her heart something that was perhaps the shadow of a former happiness, only the shadow, but even so, she felt it had been worth going there just for that. It was gone midnight when the counting finished. The number of valid votes did not quite reach twenty-five percent, with the party on the right winning thirteen percent, the party in the

middle nine percent and the party on the left two and a half percent. There were very few spoiled ballots and very few abstentions. All the others, more than seventy percent of the total votes cast, were blank.

FEELINGS OF CONFUSION AND STUPEFACTION, BUT ALSO OF MOCKERY AND SCORN swept the country from north to south. The provincial town councils, where the elections had taken place without incident or upset, apart from the occasional delay caused by the bad weather, and which had obtained results that differed little from the norm, the usual number of straightforward voters, the usual number of inveterate abstainers, and no very significant number of spoiled or blank votes, these councils, who had felt humiliated by the display of centralist triumphalism that had been paraded before the rest of the country as an example of the purest electoral public spirit, could now return that slap in the face and laugh at the foolish presumption of those ladies and gentlemen who thought they were the cat's meow simply because they happened to live in the country's capital. The words Those ladies and gentlemen, pronounced with a curl of the lips that oozed disdain with every syllable, if not with every letter, were directed not at the people who had remained at home until four in the afternoon and then suddenly rushed out to vote as if they had received some irresistible order, but at the government who had hung out the flags too soon, at the political parties who had pounced on the blank votes as if they were a vineyard to be harvested and they were the harvesters, at the newspapers and the other media for the ease with which they moved from applause on the capitoline hill to having people hurled from the tarpeian rock, as if they themselves did not play an active part in the genesis of such disasters.

The provincial scoffers were right to some extent, but not as right as they thought there were. Beneath the political agitation that is racing through the capital like a gunpowder trail in search of a bomb one can sense a disquiet that avoids being spoken out loud, unless in a discussion amongst peers, or between individuals and their closest friends, members of a political party and the party machinery, or the government and itself. What will happen when the election is held again, that is the question everyone is asking in a quiet, controlled whisper, so as not to wake the sleeping dragon. There are those who feel that the best plan would be to resist sticking the spear between the creature's ribs and leave things as they are, with the p.o.t.r. in government and the p.o.t.r. on the city council, to pretend that nothing has happened, to imagine, for example, that the government has declared a state of emergency in the capital and that, consequently, all constitutional guarantees are suspended, and then, after a time, when the dust has settled and the whole tragic incident has entered the list of long-forgotten past events, to prepare for new elections, starting with a carefully planned electoral campaign, full of solemn oaths and promises, at the same time trying to prevent, at all costs, without worrying too much about any minor or major illegalities, the possibility of the repetition of a phenomenon which a celebrated expert on such matters has already rather harshly dubbed socio-political teratology. There are also those who take an entirely different view, they protest that the laws are sacred, that what is written is there to be obeyed, regardless of who gets hurt in the process, and that if we follow the path of subterfuges and take the short-cut of under-the-table deals we will be heading straight for chaos and an end to conscience, in short, if the law stipulates that in the event of a natural disaster, the elections should be repeated eight days later, then they must be

repeated eight days later, that is, on the following Sunday, and may god's will be done, since that is what he's there for. It should be noted, however, that when expressing their opinions, the political parties prefer not to take too many risks, in the spirit of trying to please everyone all the time, they say yes, but then again no. The leaders of the party on the right, which is in government and runs the city council, start by assuming that this undoubted trump card will hand them victory on a silver platter, and so they have adopted a tactic of serenity tinged with diplomacy, trusting to the judgement of the government upon whom it is incumbent to see that the law is respected, As is only logical and natural in a long-standing democracy like ours, they conclude. The leaders of the party in the middle also want the law to be obeyed, but are asking the government for something which they know to be totally impossible, that is, the establishment and application of rigorous measures to ensure that the next election takes place absolutely normally and, presumably, produces absolutely normal results, In order, they allege, that there will be no repetition in this city of the shameful spectacle it has just presented to the country and to the world. As for the party on the left, they have gathered together all their top people and, after a long debate, drawn up and published a statement in which they express their firm and genuine hope that the approaching election will bring into being the necessary political conditions for the advent of a new era of development and social progress. They don't actually say that they're hoping to win the next election and take over the city council, but the implication is there. That night, the prime minister went on television to announce to the people that, in accordance with the current legislation, the municipal elections would be held again on the following Sunday, and a new period of electoral campaigning, of four days only, would begin at midnight and end at midnight on Friday. Putting on a grave face and speaking with great emphasis, he added that the government was sure that the capital's population, when called upon to vote again, would exercise their civic duty with the dignity and decorum they had always shown in the past, thus declaring null and void the regrettable event during which, for reasons that have yet to be clarified, but into which investigations are already fairly well advanced, the usual clear judgement of the city's electorate had become unexpectedly confused and distorted. The message from the president will be kept back until the close of the campaign on Friday night, but its concluding phrase has already been chosen, Sunday, my dear compatriots, will be a fine day.

And it really was a fine day. From early morning on, with the protecting sky in all its splendor and the golden sun blazing forth against a backdrop of crystalline blue, to use the inspired words of a television reporter, the voters started leaving their homes and heading for their respective polling stations not in a blind mass as had appeared to happen a week before, but with each person setting out alone, and so conscientiously and diligently that even before the doors were opened there were already long, long queues of citizens awaiting their turn to vote. Not everything, alas, was pure and honest at these gatherings. There was not a single queue, not one amongst the more than forty that formed at various points of the city, that did not have amongst them one or more spies whose mission was to listen and record the comments of the people present, the

police authorities being convinced that, as happens, for example, in doctors' waiting rooms, a prolonged wait will always sooner or later loosen tongues, revealing, even if only by the merest slip, the secret intentions of the electorate. The great majority of the spies are professionals and belong to the secret service, but some are volunteers, patriotic amateurs of espionage who offered to help out of a desire to serve, without remuneration, as it said in the sworn declaration they signed, whilst others, quite a few, were attracted merely by the morbid pleasure of being able to denounce someone. The genetic code of what, somewhat unthinkingly, we have been content to call human nature, cannot be reduced to the organic helix of deoxyribonucleic acid, or dna, there is much more to be said about it and it has much more to tell us, but human nature is, figuratively speaking, the complementary spiral that we have not yet managed to prise out of kindergarten, despite the multitude of psychologists and analysts from the most diverse schools and with the most diverse abilities who have broken their nails trying to draw its bolts. These scientific considerations, whatever their value now or in the future, should not allow us to forget today's disquieting realities, like the one we have just seen, for not only are there spies in the queues, trying to look nonchalant as they listen and secretly record what people say, there are also cars that glide quietly past the queues, apparently looking for a place to park, but which carry inside them, invisible to our eyes, high-definition video cameras and state-of-the-art microphones capable of projecting onto a screen the emotions apparently hidden in the diverse murmurings of a group of people who believe, individually, that they are thinking of something else. The word has been recorded, as has the emotion behind it. No one is safe. Up until the moment when the doors of the polling stations were opened and the queues began to move, the recorders had captured only insignificant phrases, the most banal of comments on the beauty of the morning and the pleasant temperature or about the hurried breakfast they had eaten, brief exchanges on the important subject of what to do with the children while their mothers came to vote, Their father is looking after them at the moment, we're just going to have to take turns, first me, then him, I mean, obviously we'd rather have come to vote together, but it was just impossible, and, as the saying goes, what can't be cured must be endured, We've left our youngest with his older sister, she's not reached voting age yet, yes, this is my husband, Pleased to meet you, Nice to meet you too, It's a lovely morning, isn't it, It's almost as if it had been laid on deliberately, Well, I suppose it was bound to happen some time. Despite the auditory acuity of the microphones passing and repassing, white car, blue car, green car, red car, black car, with their aerials bobbing in the morning breeze, nothing overtly suspicious raised its head from beneath the skin of such innocent, ordinary expressions as these, or so, at least, it appeared. However, one did not need to have a doctorate in suspicion or a degree in distrust to notice something unusual about those last two phrases, about someone having laid on the lovely morning deliberately, and especially the second phrase, about how it was bound to happen some time, ambiguities which were perhaps unwitting, perhaps unconscious, but, for that very reason, potentially even more dangerous and therefore worth contrasting with a detailed analysis of the tone of voice in which those words had been uttered, but, above all, with the range of frequencies they generated, we are referring here to subtones, which, if

recent theories are to be believed, must be taken into consideration, otherwise, the degree of comprehension of any oral discourse will inevitably be insufficient, incomplete and limited. The spy who happened to be there had been given very precise instructions on what to do in such cases, as had all his colleagues. He must not allow himself to become separated from the suspect, he must place himself in third or fourth position behind him in the queue of voters, he must, as a double guarantee, and regardless of the sensitivity of his concealed recording equipment, commit to memory the voter's name and number when the presiding officer said them out loud, he must then pretend to have forgotten something and withdraw discreetly from the queue, go out into the street and phone headquarters to tell them what had happened, and, having done that, return to the hunting ground and take up another place in the queue. This activity cannot, strictly speaking, be compared to an exercise in target shooting, what they are hoping for here is that chance, destiny, luck, or whatever you want to call it, will place the target in front of the shot.

As the hours passed, information rained down upon the center of operations, but none of it revealed in a clear-cut and consequently irrefutable manner the intentions of the voter thus caught, all that appeared on the list were phrases of the kind described above, and even the phrase that seemed more suspicious than all the others, Well, I suppose it was bound to happen some time, would lose much of its apparent slipperiness once restored to its context, a conversation between two men about the recent divorce of one of them, not that they spoke of it explicitly, in order not to arouse the curiosity of the people nearby, but which had concluded thus, with a touch of rancor, a touch of resignation, and with a tremulous sigh that came forth from the divorced man's breast and that should have led any sensitive spy, assuming, of course, that sensitivity is a spy's best attribute, to come down clearly on the side of resignation. The fact that the spy may not have considered this worthy of note, and that the recording equipment may not have captured it, can be put down to mere human failure and to technological blips which any good judge, knowing what men are like, and not unaware either of the nature of machines, would have to take into account, even if, and, although at first sight this may appear shocking, it would, in fact, be magnificently just, even if in the documents bearing on the case there was not the slightest indication of the accused's non-culpability. Were this innocent man to be interrogated tomorrow, we tremble at the mere thought of what could happen to him, Do you admit that you said to the person you were with Well, I suppose it was bound to happen some time, Yes, I do, Now, think carefully before answering, what were you talking about when you said that, About my separation from my wife, Separation or divorce, Divorce, And what were or are your feelings about that divorce, Half-angry, half-resigned, More angry or more resigned, More resigned, I guess, Don't you think, in that case, that the natural thing would have been to utter a sigh, especially since you were talking to a friend, Well, I can't be sure I didn't sigh, I really don't remember, Well, we know that you didn't, How can you know that, you weren't there, Who told you we weren't there, Maybe my friend remembers hearing me sigh, you'd have to ask him, You obviously don't care much for your friend, What do you mean,

Summoning your friend and getting him into all kinds of trouble, Oh, I wouldn't want that, Good, Can I go now, Certainly not, don't be in such a hurry, you still haven't answered the question we asked you, What question, What were you really thinking about when you said those words to your friend, But I've already told you, Give us another answer, that one won't do, It's the only answer I can give because it's the true one, That's what you think, Unless you want me to make one up, Yes, do, we don't mind at all if you come up with answers which, with time and patience, could be made to fit the proper application of certain techniques, that way, you'll end up saying what we want to hear, Tell me what the answer is then, and let's be done with it, Oh, no, that wouldn't be any fun at all, who do you think we are, sir, we have our scientific dignity to consider, our professional conscience to defend, it's very important to us that we should be able to demonstrate to our superiors that we deserve the money they pay us and the bread that we eat, Sorry, you've lost me, Don't be in such a hurry.

The impressive serenity of the voters in the streets and in the polling stations was not mirrored by an identical state of mind in ministerial offices and at party headquarters. The question that most worries them all is what the abstention rate will be this time, as if therein lay the way to salvation out of the tricky social and political situation in which the country has been plunged for over a week now. A reasonably high abstention rate, or even above the maximum recorded in the previous elections, as long as it wasn't too high, would signify a return to normality, to the known routine of those voters who had never seen the point of voting and are noticeable by virtue of their persistent absence, or those others who preferred to make the most of the good weather and go and spend the day at the beach or in the country with their family, or those who, for no other reason than invincible idleness, stayed at home. If the crowds outside the polling stations, which were as large as they had been for the previous election, showed, without any room for doubt, that the percentage of abstentions was going to be extremely low, possibly non-existent, what most confused the authorities, and was nearly driving them crazy, was the fact that the voters, with very few exceptions, responded with impenetrable silence to the questions asked by the people running exit polls on how they had voted, It's just for statistical purposes, you don't have to identify yourself, you don't have to give your name, they insisted, but even that did not convince the distrustful voters. A week earlier, journalists had at least managed to get answers out of them, although it's true that these had been given in impatient or ironic or scornful tones and were really another way of saying nothing at all, but at least there had been an exchange of words, one side had asked the question and the other had pretended to give an answer, but it was nothing like this dense wall of silence, as if it were built around a mystery shared by everyone and which everyone had sworn to defend. To many people it will seem astonishing, not to say impossible, this coincidence of behavior amongst so many thousands of people who do not know each other, who do not think the same, who belong to different social classes or strata, who, in short, despite being politically to the right or in the middle or to the left, or, indeed, nowhere at all, resolved individually to keep their mouth shut until the votes were counted, thus leaving the unveiling of the secret until later. This, with

great hopes of being right, was what the interior minister wanted to tell the prime minister, this was what the prime minister hastened to pass on to the president, who, being older, more experienced and more case-hardened, who had, in brief, seen more of life, merely replied sardonically, If they're not prepared to talk now, give me one good reason why they should talk later. The only reason this bucket of cold water from the nation's supreme arbiter did not cause the prime minister or the interior minister to lose all hope and to fall into the grip of despair was because they had nothing else to cling to, even if only for a short time. The interior minister had preferred not to mention that, fearing possible irregularities in the electoral process, a concern which the facts themselves, meanwhile, proved to be entirely unfounded, he had ordered the posting at all polling stations of two plain-clothes policemen, each from a different police department, both being authorized to oversee the count, and each of whom was charged also with keeping an eye on his or her colleague, just in case there should be any kind of complicity between them, be it honorably political in nature or a deal struck at the market of petty treacheries. In this way, what with spies and vigilantes, recording devices and video cameras, they appeared to have everything under control, safe from any malign interference that might sully the purity of the electoral process, and now that the game was over, all that remained for them to do was to wait, arms folded, for the final verdict of the ballot boxes. When the presiding officer of polling station number fourteen, to whose workings we had the great pleasure of devoting, in homage to those dedicated citizens, an entire chapter, even down to the personal problems of certain of its members, and when the presiding officers of all the other polling stations, from number one to number thirteen, from number fifteen to number forty-four, at last emptied out the votes onto the long rows of benches that had served them as tables, the impetuous rumble of an avalanche was heard all over the city. It was a foreshadowing of the political earthquake that would soon follow. In homes, in cafés, in pubs and in bars, in all the public places where there was a television or a radio, the capital's inhabitants, some more calmly than others, awaited the final result of the count. No one confided in their nearest and dearest as to how they had voted, the closest of friends kept silent on the matter, and even the most talkative people seemed to have forgotten their words. Finally, at ten o'clock that night, the prime minister appeared on television. His face looked drawn, he had dark circles under his eyes, the result of a whole week of sleepless nights, and beneath the healthy glow of make-up he was pale. He was holding a piece of paper in his hand, but he didn't really read from it, he just glanced at it from time to time so as not to lose the thread of his speech, Dear fellow citizens, he said, the result of the elections carried out today in our country's capital was as follows, the party on the right, eight percent, the party in the middle, eight percent, the party on the left, one percent, abstentions, none, spoiled votes, none, blank votes, eighty-three percent. He paused to take a sip from the glass of water beside him, then went on, While we realize that today's vote is both a confirmation and an exacerbation of the trend established last Sunday and while we are in unanimous agreement as to the need for a serious investigation into the first and last causes of these troubling results, the government considers, after due consultation with his excellency the president, that its legitimacy in office was not called

into question, not only because the election just held was merely a local election, but also because it declares and believes that its pressing and urgent duty is to carry out an in-depth investigation into the anomalous events of the last seven days, events in which we have all been both astonished witnesses and bold participants, and it is with profound sorrow that I say this, for those blank votes which have struck a brutal blow against the democratic normality of our personal and collective lives did not fall from the skies or rise up from the bowels of the earth, they were in the pockets of eighty-three out of every one hundred voters in this city, who placed them in the ballot boxes with their own unpatriotic hands. Another sip of water, this time more necessary, for his mouth had suddenly gone dry, There is still time to rectify this mistake, not by means of another election, which, given the current state of affairs, might prove not only useless but counter-productive, but through a rigorous examination of conscience, which, from this public platform, I urge on all the inhabitants of the capital, some so that they may better protect themselves from the terrible threat hanging over their heads, others, be they guilty or innocent in their intentions, so that they can either turn from the evil into which they have been dragged by who knows who or else risk becoming the direct target of the sanctions foreseen under the state of emergency whose declaration the government will be seeking from his excellency the president, after, of course, initial consultation with parliament, which has been convened tomorrow in extraordinary session, and from whom we expect to obtain unanimous approval. A change of tone, arms slightly spread, hands raised to shoulder height, The nation's government feels sure that in coming here, like a loving father, to remind that section of the capital's population who strayed from the straight and narrow of the sublime lesson to be learned from the parable of the prodigal son and by saying to them that there is no fault that cannot be forgiven a heart that is truly contrite and wholly repentant, the government is merely giving expression to the fraternal will of the rest of the country, of all those citizens who, with praiseworthy civic feeling, properly fulfilled their electoral duties. The prime minister's final flourish, Honor your country, for the eyes of the country are upon you, complete with drumrolls and bugle blasts, unearthed from the attics of the mustiest of nationalistic rhetoric, was ruined by a Good night that rang entirely false, but then that is the great thing about ordinary words, they are incapable of deceit.

In towns, houses, bars, pubs, cafés, restaurants, associations or party headquarters where voters from the party on the right, the party in the middle and even the party on the left were gathered together, the prime minister's message was much discussed, although, as is only natural, in different ways and from diverse points of view. Those most satisfied with his performance, and that barbaric term is theirs not the narrator's, were those of the p.o.t.r., who, with knowing looks and winks, congratulated themselves on their leader's excellent technique, an approach that is often rather curiously described as carrot-and-stick, and which, in olden times, was mainly applied to asses and mules, but which modernity, with notable success, has turned to human use. Some, however, the blustering, braggadocio types, felt that the prime minister should have finished his speech at the point where he announced the imminent declaration of a state of

emergency, that everything he said afterward was entirely unnecessary, that the only thing the rabble understands is the big stick, start with half-measures and you'll get nowhere, never give your enemy so much as the time of day, and other outspoken expressions in the same vein. Their colleagues argued that it really wasn't like that, that their leader must have his reasons, but these pacifists, always so ingenuous, were unaware that the intemperate reaction of their intransigent colleagues was, in fact, a tactical maneuver, the aim of which was to keep alive the combative mood of the party members. Be prepared for everything, had been the slogan. Those in the p.i.t.m., as members of the principal opposition party, were in agreement with the main thrust of the speech, that is, the urgent need to find out who was responsible and to punish the culprits or conspirators, but they felt that the declaration of a state of emergency was entirely disproportionate, especially as they had no idea how long it would last, and besides, it was arrant nonsense to take away the rights of someone whose only crime had been to exercise one of those rights. What will happen, they wondered, if a citizen takes it into his head to go to the constitutional court, The truly intelligent and patriotic thing to do, they added, would be to form a government of national salvation consisting of representatives from all the parties, because, if this really is a collective emergency, declaring a state of siege isn't going to resolve it, the p.o.t.r. have just gone off at the deep end and will very likely drown. The members of the p.o.t.l. ridiculed any idea that they could possibly form part of a coalition government, what they were really concerned about was coming up with an interpretation of the election result that would disguise the disastrous drop in the party's percentage of the poll, for, having polled five percent in the last election and two and a half in the first round of this one, they now found themselves with a miserable one percent and a very bleak future. The results of their analysis culminated in the preparation of a statement which would suggest that, since there was no objective reason to think that the blank votes had constituted an attempt on the security of the state or on the stability of the system, the desire for change thus expressed could correctly be read as coinciding, quite by chance, with the progressive proposals contained in the p.o.t.l.'s manifesto. Nothing more and nothing less.

There were also people who just turned off the television as soon as the prime minister had finished speaking and, before going to bed, sat around talking about their lives, and there were others who spent the rest of the evening tearing up and burning papers. They weren't conspirators, they were simply afraid.

TO THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE, A CIVILIAN WHO HAD NEVER EVEN DONE his military service, the declaration of a state of emergency seemed pretty small beer, he had wanted a proper, full-blooded state of siege, a state of siege in the literal sense of the word, hard, implacable, like a moving wall capable of isolating the source of the sedition and then crushing it in one devastating counter-attack, Before the pestilence and the gangrene spread to the part of the country that's still healthy, he warned. The prime minister acknowledged the extreme seriousness of the situation, and that the country had been the victim of a vile assault on the very foundations of representative democracy, the minister of defense, however, begged to differ, I would compare it, rather, to a depth charge launched against the system, Quite so, but I think, and the president agrees with me on this, that, without losing sight of the dangers of the immediate situation, and in order to be able to vary the means and objectives of any action taken as and when it proves necessary, it would be preferable to begin by using methods which, while more discreet and less ostentatious, are possibly more effective than sending the army out onto the streets, closing the airport and setting up road blocks at all routes out of the city, And what methods would those be exactly, asked the minister of defense, making not the slightest attempt to disguise his annoyance, Nothing that you don't know about already, after all, the armed forces have their own espionage system, We call ours counter-espionage, Which comes to the same thing, Ah, I see what you're getting at, Good, I knew you'd understand, said the prime minister, at the same time gesturing to the interior minister, who spoke next, Without going into actual operational detail, which, as I'm sure you'll understand, is confidential, not to say top secret, the plan drawn up by my ministry is based, in general terms, on a broad and systematic infiltration of the population by specially trained agents, which may help us to uncover the reasons behind what has happened and equip us to take the necessary measures to destroy the evil ab ovo, Ab ovo, you say, as far as I can see, it's already hatched, remarked the justice minister, It was just a manner of speaking, replied the interior minister, sounding slightly irritated, then he went on, The time has come to inform this council of ministers, in complete and utter confidence, if you'll forgive the redundancy, that the espionage services under my orders, or rather, who answer to the ministry for which I am responsible, do not exclude the possibility that what happened may have its real roots abroad, and that what we are seeing may be only the tip of the iceberg of a gigantic, global destabilization plot, doubtless anarchist in inspiration, and which, for reasons we still do not comprehend, has chosen our country as its first guinea pig, Sounds a bit odd to me, said the minister of culture, to my knowledge, anarchists have never, even in the realm of theory, proposed committing acts of this nature and of this magnitude, That, said the minister of defense sarcastically, may be because my dear colleague's knowledge dates back to the idyllic world of his grandparents, and, strange though it may seem, things have changed quite a lot since then, there was a time when nihilism took a rather lyrical and not too bloody form, but what we are facing today is terrorism, pure and unadulterated, it may wear different faces and expressions, but it is, essentially, the same thing, You should be careful about making such wild claims and such facile extrapolations, commented the justice minister, it seems risky to me, not to say,

outrageous, to label as terrorism, especially pure and unadulterated terrorism, the appearance in the ballot boxes of a few blank votes, A few votes, a few votes, spluttered the minister of defense, rendered almost speechless, how, I'd like to know, can you possibly call eighty-three out of every hundred votes a few votes, what we have to grasp, what we have to take on board, is that each one of those votes was like a torpedo striking below the water line, My knowledge of anarchism may be out of date, I don't deny it, said the minister of culture, but, as far as I'm aware, although I certainly don't consider myself an expert on naval battles either, torpedoes always strike below the water line, they don't have much option, that is what they were made to do. The interior minister suddenly sprang to his feet, perhaps to defend his colleague, the defense minister, from this sneering comment, perhaps to condemn the lack of political empathy evident at the meeting, but the prime minister brought his hand down hard on the table, demanding silence, The ministers of culture and of defense can continue elsewhere the academic debate in which they appear to be so hotly engaged, but I would just like to remind you that the reason we are gathered together in this room, which, even more than parliament, represents the heart of democratic power and authority, is in order to take decisions that will save the country from the gravest crisis it has faced in centuries, that is the challenge we face, I believe, therefore, that, confronted by this enormous task, we should call a halt to any further verbal poppycock or, indeed, to squabbles over interpretation, as being unworthy of our responsibilities. There was a pause, which no one dared to interrupt, then he continued, Meanwhile, I would like to make it perfectly clear to the minister of defense that the fact that, during this first stage of dealing with the crisis, the president has favored the application of the plan drawn up by the relevant staff at the ministry of the interior does not mean and never could mean that the possibility of declaring a state of siege has been entirely rejected, everything will depend on what direction events take, on the reactions of the population in the capital, on the response of the rest of the country, and on the not always predictable behavior of the opposition, especially, in this case, the p.o.t.l., who now have so little to lose that they won't mind betting the little that remains to them on some high-risk move, Oh, I don't think we need worry ourselves too much about a party that could only manage one percent of the votes, remarked the interior minister, with a scornful shrug, Did you read their statement, asked the prime minister, Of course I did, reading political statements is part of my job, one of my duties, it's true that there are those who pay assistants to chew their food for them first, but I belong to the old school, and I only trust my own head, even if I'm wrong, You're forgetting that ministers are, in the final analysis, the prime minister's advisors, And it's an honor to be one, sir, the difference, the vast difference, is that we bring you your food ready digested, That's all very fine, but let's leave gastronomy and the chemistry of the digestive processes for now and go back to the p.o.t.l.'s statement, give me your opinion, what did you think of it, It's a crude, naive version of the old saying that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, And when applied to the present case, Applied to the present case, sir, it's a case of if they're not your votes, then try to make it look as if they are, Even so, it's as well to remain on the alert, their little trick just might work on the more left-leaning segment of the population, Although we

have no idea at the moment which segment that is, said the justice minister, it seems to me that what we are refusing to face up to, frankly and openly, is that the vast majority of that eighty-three percent are our own voters or the p.i.t.m.'s voters, and that we should be asking ourselves why it is that they cast those blank votes, that's the crux of the matter, not whatever wise or naive arguments the p.o.t.1. might come up with, Yes, when you think about it, replied the prime minister, our tactic is not so very different from the one the p.o.t.1. is using, that is, if most of the votes aren't yours, then pretend they don't belong to your opponents either, In other words, piped up the minister of transport and communications from the corner of the table, we're all up to the same tricks, A somewhat flippant way of summing up the situation in which we find ourselves, and note that I am speaking here from a purely political viewpoint, but one not entirely lacking in sense, said the prime minister and drew the discussion to a close.

The rapid implementation of the state of emergency, like a kind of solomonic sentence dictated by providence, swiftly cut the gordian knot that the media, especially the newspapers, had, with more or less skill and with more or less delicacy, been trying to undo ever since the unhappy results of the first elections and, even more dramatically, of the second, although they always took great care not to draw too much attention to their efforts. On the one hand, it was their duty, as obvious as it was elementary, to condemn, with an energy tinged with civic indignation, in editorials and in specially commissioned opinion pieces, the unexpected and irresponsible behavior of an electorate who, apparently rendered blind to the superior interests of the nation as a whole by some strange and dangerous perversion, had complicated public life to an unprecedented degree, corraling it into a dark alleyway from which not even the brightest spark was able to see a way out. On the other hand, they had to weigh and measure every word they wrote, to ponder susceptibilities, to take, as it were, two steps forward and one step back, lest their readers should turn against a newspaper that had started calling them traitors and lunatics after years and years of perfect harmony and assiduous readership. The declaration of the state of emergency, by allowing the government to assume the relevant powers and to suspend at the stroke of a pen all constitutional guarantees, removed that uncomfortable weight, that threatening shadow hanging over the heads of editors and administrators. With freedom of expression and communication strictly regulated, with censorship always peering over the editor's shoulder, they had the very best of excuses and the most complete of justifications. We would really love, they would say, to provide our esteemed readers with the opportunity, which is also their right, to have access to news and opinions untrammelled by unreasonable interference and intolerable restrictions, especially during the extremely delicate times we are living through, but that is the way things are, and only someone who has worked in the honorable profession of journalism can know how painful it is having to work under virtual twenty-four-hour surveillance, but then, between you and me, the people who bear the greatest responsibility for what is happening are the voters in the capital, not the voters in the provinces, but, alas, to make matters worse, and despite all our pleading, the government will not allow us to produce a censored version for the capital and an

uncensored one for the rest of the country, why, only yesterday, a high-up ministry official was telling us that censorship proper is like the sun, which, when it rises, rises for everyone, this is hardly news to us, we know the way the world works, and it is always the just who have to pay for the sinners. Despite all these precautions as regards both form and content, it soon became clear that the public's interest in reading newspapers had greatly declined. Driven by an understandable urge to try and please everyone, some newspapers thought they could combat the absence of readers by plastering their pages with naked bodies, whether male or female, together or alone, singly or in pairs, at rest or in action, disporting themselves in modern gardens of delight, but the readers, grown impatient with images whose minimal and not particularly arousing variations in color and configuration had, even in remote antiquity, been considered banal commonplaces of man's exploration of the libido, continued, out of apathy, indifference and even nausea, to cause print-runs and sales to plummet. Likewise, the search for and the exhibition of rather grubby intimacies, of all kinds of scandals and outrages, the old game of public virtues masking private vices, the jolly carousel of private vices elevated to the status of public virtues, which, until recently, had never lacked for spectators or for candidates willing to strut their stuff, failed to have a favorable impact on the day-to-day balance sheet of debit and credit, which was at an irremediably low ebb. It really seemed as if the majority of the city's inhabitants were determined to change their lives, their tastes and their style. Their great mistake, as they would soon begin to see, had been casting those blank votes. They wanted a clean-up and they would get one.

This was the firm view of the government and, in particular, of the ministry of the interior. The process of selecting the agents, some from the secret service, others from public bodies, who would surreptitiously infiltrate the bosom of the masses, had been swift and efficient. Having revealed, under oath, as evidence of their exemplary character as citizens, the name of the party for whom they had voted and the nature of that vote, having signed, again under oath, a document in which they expressed their active rejection of the moral plague that had infected a large part of the population, the first action of all agents, of both sexes, it must be said, so that it cannot be alleged, as it so often is, that all evil things are the work of man, who were organized into groups of forty as if in a class and led by teachers trained in the discrimination, recognition and interpretation of electronic recordings of both sound and image, their first action, as we were saying, consisted in sifting through the enormous quantity of material gathered by spies during the second ballot, the material collected by those who had stood in the queues listening and by those who, wielding video cameras and microphones, had driven slowly past them in cars. By starting off with this operation of rummaging around in the informational intestines, the agents were given, before they launched themselves with enthusiasm and the keen nose of a gun dog into action and work in the field, an immediate taste of a behind-closed-doors investigation the tone of which we had occasion to provide a brief but elucidatory example some pages back. Simple, ordinary expressions, such as, I don't generally bother to vote, but here I am, Do you think it'll turn out to have been worth all the bother, The pitcher goes so often to the well that, in

the end, it leaves its handle there, I voted last week too, but that day I could only leave home at four, This is just like the lottery, I almost always draw a blank, Still, you've got to keep trying, Hope is like salt, there's no nourishment in it, but it gives the bread its savor, for hours and hours, these and a thousand other equally innocuous, equally neutral, equally innocent phrases were picked apart syllable by syllable, reduced to mere crumbs, turned upside down, crushed in the mortar by the pestle of the question, Explain to me again that business about the pitcher, Why did the handle come off at the well and not on the way there or back, If you don't normally vote, why did you vote this time, If hope is like salt, what do you think should be done to make salt like hope, How would you resolve the difference in color between hope, which is green, and salt, which is white, Do you really think that a ballot paper is the same as a lottery ticket, What did you mean when you used the word blank, and then, What pitcher, Did you go to the well because you were thirsty or in order to meet someone, What does the handle of the pitcher symbolize, When you sprinkle salt on your food, are you thinking that you're actually sprinkling hope, Why are you wearing a white shirt, Tell me, was the pitcher a real pitcher or a metaphorical one, And what color was it, black, red, Was it plain or did it have a design on it, Was it inlaid with quartz, Do you know what quartz is, Have you ever won a prize in the lottery, Why is it that, during the first election, you only left home at four, when it had stopped raining two hours before, Who is that woman beside you in this photo, What are the two of you laughing about, Don't you think that an important act like voting requires all responsible voters to wear a grave, serious, earnest expression or do you consider democracy to be a laughing matter, Or perhaps you think it is a crying matter, Which do you think, a laughing matter or a crying matter, Tell me about that pitcher again, why didn't you consider gluing the handle back on, there are glues made specially for the purpose, Does that pause mean that you, too, are lacking a handle, Which one, Do you like the age in which you happen to live, or would you prefer to have lived in another, Let's go back to salt and hope again, how much would you have to add before the thing you were hoping for became inedible, Do you feel tired, Would you like to go home, I'm in no hurry, haste is a bad counselor, if a person doesn't think through the answers he or she is going to give, the consequences can be disastrous, No, you're not lost, the very idea, you obviously haven't yet quite grasped that, here, people don't lose themselves, they find themselves, Don't worry, we're not threatening you, we just don't want you to rush, that's all. At this point, with the prey cornered and exhausted, they would ask the fateful question, Now I want you to tell me how you voted, that is, which party you gave your vote to. Since five hundred suspects picked from the queues of voters had been summoned to be interrogated, a situation in which anyone could have found himself given the patent insubstantiality of an accusation based on the kind of phrases, of which we have just given a convincing example, captured by all those directional microphones and tape-recorders, the logical thing, bearing in mind the relative breadth of the statistical universe questioned, would be that the replies would be distributed, albeit with a small and natural margin of error, in the same proportion as the votes cast, that is, forty people declaring proudly that they had voted for the party on the right, the party in government, an equal number seasoning their reply with just a pinch of

defiance by affirming that they had voted for the only opposition party worthy of the name, that is, the party in the middle, and five, no more than five, pinned down, backs to the wall, I voted for the party on the left, they would say firmly, but in the tone of someone apologizing for a stubborn streak which they are helpless to correct. The remainder, that enormous remainder of four hundred and fifteen replies should have said, in accordance with the modal logic of surveys, I cast a blank vote. That clear response, shorn of the ambiguities of presumption or prudence, would be the one given by a computer or a calculator and would be the only one that their inflexible, honest natures, that of the computer and the machine, would have allowed themselves, but we are dealing here with human beings, and human beings are known universally as the only animals capable of lying, and while it is true that they sometimes lie out of fear and sometimes out of self-interest, they also occasionally lie because they realize, just in time, that this is the only means available to them of defending the truth. To judge by appearances, therefore, the ministry of the interior's plan had failed, indeed, during those first few moments, the confusion amongst the advisors was both shameful and complete, there seemed no possible way round the unexpected obstacle, unless orders were given for all those people to be tortured, which, as everyone knows, is unacceptable in democratic but right-wing states skilful enough to achieve the same ends without resorting to such rudimentary, medieval methods. It was whilst embroiled in this complicated situation that the interior minister showed both political nous and a rare tactical and strategic flexibility, possibly, who knows, an indication of greater things to come. He took two decisions, both of them important. The first, which would later be denounced as perversely machiavellian, took the form of an official note from the ministry distributed to the mass media via the unofficial state agency and which, in the name of the whole government, offered heartfelt thanks to the five hundred exemplary citizens who, in recent days, had come forward of their own volition and presented themselves to the authorities, offering their loyal support and any help they could give that would advance the on-going investigations into abnormal factors uncovered in the last two elections. As well as this elementary expression of gratitude, the ministry, anticipating questions, warned families that they should not be surprised or worried by the lack of news from their absent loved ones, because in that very silence lay the key that could guarantee their personal safety, given the maximum degree of secrecy, red/red, that had been accorded to this delicate operation. The second decision, for internal eyes and use only, was a complete inversion of the plan drawn up earlier, which, as you will recall, predicted that the mass infiltration of investigators into the bosom of the masses would be the means, par excellence, that would lead to the deciphering of the mystery, the enigma, the charade, the puzzle, or whatever you care to call it, of those blank ballot papers. From now on, the agents would work in two numerically unequal groups, the smaller group would work in the field, from which, if truth be told, they no longer expected great results, the larger group would continue with the interrogation of the five hundred people retained, not detained you notice, increasing, as and when, the physical and psychological pressure to which they were already being subjected. As the old saying has been telling us now for centuries, Five hundred birds in the hand are worth five

hundred and one in the bush. Confirmation of this was not long in coming. When, after the application of great diplomatic skill, after many digressions and much testing of the water, the agent in the field, that is, in the city, managed to ask the first question, Would you mind telling me who you voted for, the reply he was given, like a message learned by heart, was, word for word, the one given in law, No one can, under any pretext, be forced to reveal his or her vote or be questioned about this by any authority. And when, in the nonchalant tone of someone who did not consider the subject to be of much importance, he asked the second question, Forgive my curiosity, but did you by any chance cast a blank vote, the reply he was given skilfully reduced the scope of the question to a simple academic matter, No, sir, I didn't, but if I had I would be just as much within the law as if I had voted for one of the parties listed or had made my vote void by drawing a caricature of the prime minister, casting a blank vote, mister questioner, is an unrestricted right, which the law had no option but to allow the electorate, it is clearly stated that no one can be persecuted for having cast a blank vote, but just to set your mind at rest, I repeat that I was not one of those who did so, I was just talking for talking's sake, it was merely an academic hypothesis, that's all. Normally speaking, hearing such a response twice or three times would be of no particular significance, all it would show was that there are a few people in the world who know the law of the land and make a point of telling you, but being forced to listen to it, unruffled, without so much as raising an eyebrow, a hundred times, a thousand times, like a litany learned by heart, was more than patience could bear for someone who, having been painstakingly prepared for this delicate task, found himself unable to carry it out. It is not, therefore, surprising that the electorate's systematically obstructive behavior caused some of the agents to lose control and to resort to insult and aggression, encounters from which, indeed, they did not always emerge unscathed, given that they were acting alone in order not to frighten off their prey and that it was not unusual, especially in so-called dodgy areas, for other voters to pitch in and help the aggrieved party, with easily imagined consequences. The reports that the agents sent back to the center of operations were discouragingly thin on content, not a single person, not one, had admitted to having cast a blank vote, some pretended not to understand, others said they'd talk another day when they had more time, but they had to rush off now, before the shops shut, but the worst of all were the old, devil take 'em, for it seemed that an epidemic of deafness had sealed them all inside a soundproof capsule, and when the agent, with disconcerting ingenuity, wrote the question down on a piece of paper, the cheeky so-and-sos would either say that their glasses were broken or that they couldn't make out the writing or, quite simply, that they didn't know how to read at all. There were other, wilier agents, however, who, taking the idea of infiltration seriously, in its literal sense, frequented bars, bought people drinks, lent money to penniless poker players, went to sports events, especially football and basketball, where people mingle more in the stands, and got chatting to their fellow spectators, and, in the case of football, if there was a goal-less draw, they would, with sublime cunning, refer to it knowingly as a blank result, just to see what happened. Pretty much nothing happened. Sooner or later, the moment would come to ask the questions, Would you mind telling

me which party you voted for, Forgive my curiosity, but did you by any chance cast a blank vote, and then the familiar answers would be repeated, either solo or in chorus, Me, the very idea, Us, don't be silly, and they would immediately adduce the legal reasons, with all their articles and clauses, and so fluently that it was as if all the city's inhabitants of voting age had been through an intensive course in electoral law, both domestic and foreign.

As the days passed, it became noticeable, in a way that was, at first, imperceptible, that the word blank, as if it had suddenly become obscene or rude, was falling into disuse, that people would employ all kinds of evasions and periphrases to replace it. A blank piece of paper, for example, would be described instead as virgin, a blank on a form that had all its life been a blank became the space provided, blank looks all became vacant instead, students stopped saying that their minds had gone blank, and owned up to the fact that they simply knew nothing about the subject, but the most interesting case of all was the sudden disappearance of the riddle with which, for generations and generations, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and neighbors had sought to stimulate the intelligence and deductive powers of children, You can fill me in, draw me and fire me, what am I, and people, reluctant to elicit the word blank from innocent children, justified this by saying that the riddle was far too difficult for those with limited experience of the world. It seemed, therefore, that the high political office promised to the interior minister had been cut short at birth, that he was fated, after having come so close to touching the sun, to be drowned ignominiously in the hellespont, but another idea, as sudden as a lightning flash illuminating the night, made him rise again. All was not lost. He ordered back to base the agents confined to fieldwork, blithely dismissed those on short-term contracts, gave the secret police a thorough dressing-down and set to work.

It was clear that the city was a termites' nest of liars and that the five hundred he had in his power were also lying through all the teeth they had in their head, but there was one difference between these two groups, the former were free to enter and leave their homes, and, elusive and slippery as eels, could appear as easily as they could disappear, only to reappear later on and again vanish, whereas dealing with the latter was the easiest thing in the world, it was enough just to go down into the ministry cellars, all five hundred were not there, of course, there wasn't room, most were distributed around other investigatory units, but the fifty or so kept under permanent observation should be more than enough for an initial attempt. The reliability of the machine may have been called into question by certain sceptical experts and some courts may even have refused to admit as evidence the results obtained from the tests, but the interior minister was nonetheless hopeful that the use of the machine might at least give off a small spark that would help him find his way out of the dark tunnel into which the investigation had stuck its head. His plan, as you will no doubt have guessed, was to bring back into the fray the famous polygraph, also known as the lie detector, or, in more scientific terms, a machine that is used to record, simultaneously, various psychological

and physiological functions, or, in more descriptive detail, an instrument for registering physiological phenomena of which an electrical recording is made on a sheet of damp paper impregnated with potassium iodide and starch. Connected to the machine by a tangle of wires, armbands and suction pads, the patient does not suffer, he simply has to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and to cease to believe in the universal assertion, the old, old story, which, since the beginning of time, has been drummed into us, that the will can do anything, for you need look no further than the following example, which denies it outright, because that wonderful will of yours, however much you may trust it, however tenacious it may have been up until now, cannot control twitching muscles, cannot staunch unwanted sweat or stop eyelids blinking or regulate breathing. In the end, they'll say you lied, you'll deny it, you'll swear you told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and that might be true, you didn't lie, you just happen to be a very nervous person, with a strong will, it's true, but you are nevertheless a tremulous reed that shivers in the slightest breeze, so they'll connect you up to the machine again and it will be even worse, they'll ask if you're alive and you'll say, of course I am, but your body will protest, will contradict you, the tremor in your chin will say no, you're dead, and it might be right, perhaps your body knows before you do that they are going to kill you. It would be unlikely that this could happen in the cellars of the ministry of the interior, the only crime these people have committed is to cast a blank vote, and that would have been of no importance if they had merely been the usual suspects, but there were a lot of them, too many, almost everyone, who cares if it's your inalienable right when they tell you it's to be used only in homeopathic doses, drop by drop, you can't come here with a pitcher filled to overflowing with blank votes, that's why the handle dropped off, we always thought there was something suspicious about that handle, if something that could always carry a lot was satisfied with carrying little, that shows a most praiseworthy modesty, what got you into trouble was ambition, you thought you could fly up to the sun and, instead, you fell headfirst into the dardanelles, you will recall that we said the same about the interior minister, but he belongs to a different race of men, the macho, the virile, the bristly-chinned, those who will not bow their head, let's see now how you escape the hunter of lies, let's see what revealing lines your large and small transgressions will leave on that strip of paper impregnated with potassium iodide and starch, and you thought you were something special, this is what the much-vaunted supreme dignity of the human being can be reduced to, a piece of damp paper.

Now the polygraph is not a machine equipped with a disc that goes backward and forward and tells us, depending on the case, He lied, He didn't lie, if that were the case, being a judge with the ability to condemn and absolve would be the easiest thing in the world, police stations would be replaced by departments of applied mechanical psychology, lawyers, for lack of clientele, would pull down the shutters, the courts would be abandoned to the flies until some other use had been found for them. A polygraph, as we were saying, cannot go anywhere without help, it needs to have by its side a trained technician who can interpret the lines on the paper, but this doesn't mean that the

technician must be a connoisseur of the truth, all he has to know is what is there before his eyes, that the question asked of the patient under observation has produced what we might innovatively call an allergographic reaction, or in more literary but no less imaginative terms, the outline of a lie. Something, nevertheless, would have been gained. At least it would be possible to proceed to an initial selection, wheat on the one side, tares on the other, and restore to liberty and family life, thereby freeing up the detention centers, those people, finally vindicated, who, without being contradicted by the machine, responded No to the question Did you cast a blank vote. As for the rest, those who had the guilt of electoral transgressions weighing on their conscience, any mental reserves of the jesuitical kind or spiritual introspection of the zen variety would prove useless to them, for the polygraph, implacable, unfeeling, would immediately sniff out a falsehood, whether they denied casting a blank vote or claimed to have voted for such and such a party. One can, if the circumstances are favorable, survive one lie, but not two. Just in case, the interior minister had given orders that whatever the result of the tests, for now, no one would be released, Leave them be, one never knows how far human malice will go, he said. And he was right, the wretched man. After many dozens of meters of squiggled-on, scribbled-on paper, on which had been recorded the tremors of the souls of everyone observed, after questions and answers repeated hundreds of times, always the same, always identical, one secret service agent, still a young lad, with little experience of temptation, fell with the innocence of a newborn lamb for the challenge thrown out to him by a pretty young woman who had just been submitted to the polygraph test and been declared to be deceitful and false. This mata-hari said, That machine is useless, Useless, why, asked the agent, forgetting that dialogue did not form part of the task with which he had been entrusted, Because in a situation like this, when everyone is under suspicion, all you would have to do is to say the word Blank, nothing more, without even bothering to find out if the person had voted, to provoke negative reactions, turmoil, anxiety, even if the person being examined was the purest, most perfect personification of innocence, Oh, come off it, I don't believe that, retorted the agent confidently, anyone at peace with his conscience would simply tell the truth and pass the polygraph test easily, We're not robots or talking stones, mister agent, said the woman, and within every human truth there is always an element of anxiety or conflict, we are, and I am not referring simply to the fragility of life, we are a small, tremulous flame which threatens at any moment to go out, and we are afraid, above all, we are afraid, You're wrong there, I'm not afraid, I've been trained to overcome fear in all circumstances and, besides, I am not by nature a scaredy-cat, I wasn't even as a child, responded the agent, In that case, why don't we try a little experiment, suggested the woman, you let yourself be connected up to the machine and I'll ask the questions, You're mad, I'm the one with the authority here and, besides, you're the suspect, not me, So you are afraid, No, I'm not, Then connect yourself up to that machine and show me what it means to be a truthful man. The agent looked at the woman, who was smiling, he looked at the technician, who was struggling to conceal a smile, and said, All right, then, once won't hurt, I agree to submit to the experiment. The technician attached the wires, tightened the armbands, adjusted the suction pads, I'm ready when you are. The woman

took a deep breath, held the breath in her lungs for three seconds and then, in a rush, uttered one word, Blank. It wasn't a question, more of an exclamation, but the needles moved, leaving a mark on the paper. In the pause that followed, the needles did not stop completely, they continued moving, making tiny traces, like the ripples made by a stone thrown into the water. The woman was looking at the needles, not at the bound man, but when she did turn and look him in the eye, she asked in a gentle, almost tender voice, Tell me, please, did you cast a blank vote, No, I didn't, I never did and never will cast a blank vote, replied the man vehemently. The needles moved rapidly, precipitately, violently. Another pause. Well, asked the agent. The technician took a while to respond, the agent repeated, Well, what does the machine say. The machine says that you lied, sir, said the embarrassed technician, That's impossible, cried the agent, I told the truth, I didn't cast a blank vote, I'm a professional secret service agent, a patriot trying to defend the interests of the nation, there must be something wrong with the machine, Don't waste your energy, don't try to justify yourself, said the woman, I believe you told the truth, that you didn't cast a blank vote and never will, but that, I must remind you, is not the point, I was just trying to demonstrate to you, successfully as it turns out, that we cannot entirely trust our bodies, It's all your fault, you made me nervous, Of course it was my fault, it was the temptress eve's fault, but no one came to ask us if we were feeling nervous when they hooked us up to that contraption, It's guilt that makes you feel nervous, Possibly, but go and ask your boss why it is that you, who are innocent of all our evils, behaved like a guilty man, There's nothing more to be said, replied the agent, it's as if what happened just now never happened at all. Then, addressing the technician, Give me that strip of paper, and remember, say nothing, if you do, you'll regret you were ever born, Yes, sir, don't worry, I'll keep my mouth shut, So will I, said the woman, but at least tell the minister that no amount of cunning will do any good, we will all continue to lie when we tell the truth, and to tell the truth when we lie, just like him, just like you, now just imagine if I had asked if you wanted to go to bed with me, what would you have said then, what would the machine have said.

THE DEFENSE MINISTER'S FAVORITE EXPRESSION, A DEPTH CHARGE launched against the system, partially inspired by the unforgettable experience of an historic trip he had made aboard a submarine, a trip that had lasted all of half an hour and had taken place in flat calm seas, began to gain in strength and to attract attention when the interior minister's plans, despite one or two minor successes of no appreciable significance to the situation as a whole, revealed themselves to be impotent when it came to achieving the main aim, namely, persuading the inhabitants of the city, or, more precisely, the degenerates, delinquents and subversives who had cast the blank votes, to acknowledge the error of their ways and to beg for the mercy and the penance of a new election to which, at the chosen moment, they would rush en masse to purge themselves of the sins of a folly which they would swear never to repeat. It had become clear to the whole government, with the exception of the ministers of justice and culture, who both had their doubts, that there was an urgent need to tighten the screw still further, especially given that the declaration of a state of emergency, for which they had both had such high hopes, had produced no perceptible shift in the desired direction, for, since the citizens of this country were not in the healthy habit of demanding the proper enforcement of the rights bestowed on them by the constitution, it was only logical, even natural, that they had failed even to notice that those rights had been suspended. As a consequence, a state of siege proper was declared, one not purely for show, but complete with a curfew, the closure of theaters and cinemas, constant army street patrols, a prohibition on gatherings of more than five people, and an absolute ban on anyone entering or leaving the city, along with a simultaneous lifting of the restrictive, although far less rigorous, measures still in force in the rest of the country, a clear difference in treatment that would make the humiliation of the capital all the more explicit and damning. What we are trying to tell them, said the minister of defense, and let's hope they finally get the message, is that, having shown themselves to be unworthy of trust, they will be treated accordingly. The interior minister, forced somehow to disguise the failure of his secret agents, thoroughly approved of the immediate declaration of a state of siege, and, to show that he still had a few cards in his hand and had not withdrawn from the game entirely, he informed the council of ministers that, after an exhaustive investigation, and in close collaboration with interpol, he had reached the conclusion that the international anarchist movement, If it exists to do anything more than to write a few jokes on walls, and he paused briefly for the knowing laughter of his colleagues, then, feeling equally pleased himself and with them, completed the sentence, Had absolutely nothing to do with the election boycott of which we have been the victims, and that this is, therefore, merely an internal matter, Forgive me saying so, said the minister of foreign affairs, merely does not seem to me the most appropriate of adverbs, and I must remind this council that a number of other states have expressed their concern to me that what is happening here could cross the border and spread like a modern-day black death, You mean blank death, don't you, said the prime minister with a placatory smile, In that case, the minister of foreign affairs went on unperturbed, we can, quite correctly, speak of depth charges launched against the stability of the democratic system, not simply, not merely, of one country, this country, but of the entire planet. The interior minister sensed that the role of major

national figure to which recent events had elevated him was slipping from his grasp, and in order not entirely to lose his grip, having first thanked the minister of foreign affairs and, with great magnanimity, acknowledged the truth of what had been said, he was now keen to show that he, too, was capable of the most subtle of semiological interpretations, It is interesting to observe, he said, how the meanings of words change without our noticing, how we often use them to mean precisely the opposite of what they used to mean and which, in a way, like a fading echo, they still continue to mean, That's just a normal consequence of the semantic process, muttered the minister of culture, And what has that got to do with blank ballot papers, asked the minister for foreign affairs, Oh, it has nothing to do with blank ballot papers, but it has everything to do with the state of siege, declared the interior minister triumphantly, You've lost me, said the minister of defense, It's quite simple, It may be simple for you, but I don't understand, For example, what does the word siege mean, it's all right, that's a purely rhetorical question, I don't expect an answer, we all know that siege means blockade or encirclement, isn't that right, As sure as two and two are four, Therefore, declaring a state of siege is tantamount to saying that the country's capital is besieged, blockaded or encircled by an enemy, when the truth is that the enemy, if I may call it that, is not outside but inside. The other ministers looked at each other, the prime minister pretended not to be listening and started shuffling through some papers. But the minister of defense was about to triumph in this semiological battle, There's another way of looking at it too, What's that, That in unleashing this rebellion, and I don't think I'm exaggerating when I call what is happening a rebellion, the capital's inhabitants were, and quite right too, besieged or blockaded or encircled, the choice of term is, to be frank, a matter of complete indifference to me, May I remind our dear colleague and the council as a whole, said the minister for justice, that, when they decided to cast their blank votes, the citizens were only doing what the law explicitly allows them to do, therefore, to speak of rebellion in such a case is, as well as being, I imagine, a grave semantic error, and you will forgive me, I hope, for venturing into an area of which I know nothing, is also, from the legal point of view, a complete nonsense, Rights are not abstractions, retorted the minister of defense, people either deserve rights or they don't, and these people certainly don't, anything else is just so much empty talk, You're quite right, said the minister of culture, rights aren't abstractions, they continue to exist even when they're not respected, Now you're getting philosophical, Has the minister of defense got anything against philosophy, The only philosophy I'm interested in is military philosophy, and then only if it leads us to victory, I am, gentlemen, a barrack-room pragmatist, and my approach, whether you like it or not, is to call a spade a spade, but now, just so that you don't start looking down on me as someone of inferior intelligence, I would appreciate it if you could explain to me, as long as it's not a question of demonstrating that a circle can be transformed into a square of an equal area, how a right, if it isn't respected, can still continue to exist, Very simple, that right exists potentially in the duty of others to respect and comply with it, No offence, but civic sermons and demagoguery will get us nowhere, slap a state of siege on them and see how they like it, Unless it backfires on us, of course, said the minister of justice, How exactly, That I don't know yet, we'll just have to wait, no one had even

dared to imagine that what is happening in our country could ever happen anywhere, but there it is, like a tight knot we can't undo, here we are gathered round this table to make decisions which, despite all the proposals put forward as sure solutions to the crisis, have, until now, achieved nothing, let's just wait, we'll find out soon enough how people will react to the state of siege, Sorry, but I can't just let that comment pass unchallenged, spluttered the interior minister, the measures we took were unanimously approved by this council and, as far as I recall, no one present at that meeting brought to the debate any different or better proposals, the burden of the catastrophe, yes, I'll call it a catastrophe and I'll call it a burden, even though some of my fellow ministers may think I'm exaggerating, as that smug, ironic air of theirs so clearly demonstrates, the burden of the catastrophe, I say again, has fallen, firstly, as is only right, on his excellency the president and on the prime minister, and secondly, given the responsibilities inherent in the posts we occupy, on the minister of defense and on myself, as for the others, and I refer in particular to the minister of justice and the minister of culture, who have been so kind as to shine the light of their intellects upon us, I have yet to hear a single idea that was worth considering for longer than it took us to listen to it, The light with which, according to you, I was kind enough to illuminate this council, was not my own, but the light of the law and nothing but the law, replied the minister of justice, And as regards my own humble person and my part in this wholesale ticking-off, said the minister of culture, given the miserable budget I'm allotted, you can hardly expect more, Ah, now I understand those anarchist leanings of yours, said the interior minister tartly, sooner or later, you always come out with the same old gibes.

The prime minister had run out of papers to shuffle. He tapped his pen lightly on his glass of water, calling for attention and silence, I hate to interrupt this interesting debate of yours, from which, although I may well have seemed somewhat distracted, I feel I have learned a great deal, because, as experience should teach us, there is nothing like a good argument to release accumulated tension, especially in a situation like this, which is constantly reminding us that we have to do something, although quite what we don't know. He paused very deliberately, pretended to consult some notes, then went on, So, now that we are all calm and relaxed, with our spirits less inflamed, we can, at last, approve the proposal put forward by the minister of defense, namely, the declaration of a state of siege for an indeterminate period and with immediate effect from the moment it is made public. There was a more or less general murmur of assent, albeit with variations of tone whose origins were impossible to identify, despite the minister of defense taking his eyes on a rapid panoramic excursion to catch any note of disagreement or muted enthusiasm. The prime minister went on, Experience, alas, has also taught us that when the time comes for them to be acted upon even the most perfect and polished of ideas can fail, whether because of some last-minute hiccup, or because of a gap between expectation and reality, or because, at some critical point, the situation got out of control, or because of a thousand other possible reasons that it is not worth our while going into right now and for which we would not have time, it is therefore vital always to have at the ready a replacement or complementary idea, which would prevent, as might well

happen in this case, the emergence of a power vacuum, or to use another more alarming expression, of street power, either of which would have disastrous consequences. Accustomed to the prime minister's rhetoric, which took the form of three steps forward and two steps back, or, put another way, sitting firmly on the fence, his ministers were patiently awaiting his final, concluding, definitive word, the one that would explain everything. It did not come. The prime minister took a sip of water, dabbed at his lips with a white handkerchief which he took from his inside jacket pocket, made as if to consult his notes, but instead, at the last moment, pushed them to one side and said, If the results of the state of siege fall below expectations, that is, if they prove incapable of restoring the citizens to democratic normality, to the balanced, sensible use of an electoral law which, due to an imprudent lack of attention by the legislators, left the door open to something which, without fear of paradox, it would be reasonable to classify as a legal abuse, then I would like to inform this council now that I, as prime minister, foresee the application of another measure which, as well as providing psychological reinforcement of the measure we have just taken, I am referring, of course, to the declaration of a state of siege, could, I feel sure, by itself reset the troubled needle of our country's political scales and put an end once and for all to the nightmare situation into which we have been plunged. Another pause, another sip of water, another dab with the handkerchief, then he went on, You might well ask why, in that case, we do not simply implement that measure now instead of wasting our time setting up a state of siege which, as we well know, will make every aspect of life very difficult for the capital's population, both the guilty and the innocent, and that question is not without relevance, there are, however, important factors that cannot be ignored, some purely logistical in nature, others not, the main one being the effect, which it would be no exaggeration to describe as traumatic, of the sudden introduction of this extreme measure, which is why I feel we should opt for a gradual sequence of actions, of which the state of siege will be the first. The prime minister again shuffled his papers, but did not, this time, touch his glass of water, I understand your curiosity on the subject, he said, but I will say nothing further about the matter now, except to inform you that I was received in audience this morning by his excellency the president of the republic, to whom I presented my idea, which received his entire and unconditional support. You will learn more later, now, before closing this productive meeting, I ask all of you, in particular the ministers of defense and of the interior, who will, together, shoulder responsibility for the complex actions required to impose and carry out the declaration of the state of siege, to work diligently and energetically toward the same desired end. The armed forces and the police, whether acting within the ambit of their specific areas of competence or in joint operations, always observing the most rigorous mutual respect and avoiding any arguments over precedence that would prove prejudicial to our aims, are charged with the patriotic task of leading the lost sheep back to the fold, if you will allow me to use an expression so beloved of our forefathers and so deeply rooted in our pastoral traditions. And remember, you must do everything possible to ensure that those who are, for the moment, only our opponents do not instead become the enemies of the nation. May god go with you and guide you on your sacred mission so that the sun of concord may once

more light the consciences of our fellow citizens and so that peace may restore to their daily lives the harmony that has been lost.

While the prime minister was appearing on television to announce the establishment of a state of siege, invoking reasons of national security resulting from the current political and social instability, a consequence, in turn, of the action taken by organized subversive groups who had repeatedly obstructed the people's right to vote, units of infantry and military police, supported by tanks and other combat vehicles, were, at the same time, occupying train stations and setting up posts at all the roads leading out of the capital. The main airport, about twenty-five kilometers to the north of the city, was outside the army's specific area of control and would, therefore, continue to function without any restrictions other than those foreseen at times of amber alert, which meant that planes carrying tourists would still be able to land and take off, although journeys made by those native to the country, while not, strictly speaking, prohibited, would be strongly discouraged, except in special circumstances to be examined on a case-by-case basis. Images of these military operations invaded the houses of the capital's bewildered inhabitants with, as the reporter put it, the unstoppable force of a straight punch. Images of officers giving orders, of sergeants yelling at their men to carry out these orders, of sappers erecting barriers, of ambulances and transmitters, of spotlights lighting up the highway as far as the first bend, of waves of soldiers, armed to the teeth, jumping out of trucks and taking up positions, as well equipped for an immediate hard-fought battle as for a long war of attrition. Families whose members worked or studied in the capital merely shook their heads at this war-like display and murmured, They must be mad, but others, who, every morning, despatched a father or a son to a factory on one of the industrial estates that surround the city and who waited every evening to welcome them back, now asked themselves how and on what they were going to live if they were not allowed to leave or enter the city. Perhaps they'll issue safe-conduct passes to those with jobs outside, said an old man, who had retired so many years ago that he still used terminology from the days of the franco-prussian wars or other ancient conflicts. Yet the wise old man was not so very wrong, the proof being that, the following day, business associations were quick to bring their well-founded anxieties to the government's notice, While we unreservedly and with an unwavering sense of patriotism support the energetic measures taken by the government, they said, as being a necessary campaign of national salvation to oppose the harmful effects of thinly disguised subversive acts, allow us, nonetheless, and with the greatest respect, to ask the competent authorities for the urgent issue of passes to our employees and workers, at the risk, if such a provision is not made at once, of causing grave and irreversible damage to our industrial and commercial activities, with the subsequent, inevitable harm this would cause to the national economy as a whole. On the afternoon of that same day, a joint communiqué from the ministries of defense, the interior and finance, expressed the national government's understanding and sympathy for the employers' legitimate concerns, but explained that any such distribution of passes could never be carried out on the scale desired by businesses, moreover, such liberality on the part of the government would inevitably imperil the security and efficacy

of the military units charged with guarding the new frontier around the capital. However, as a demonstration of their openness and readiness to avoid the very worst problems, the government was prepared to give such documents to any managers and technical teams who were judged to be vital to the regular running of the companies, who would then have to take full responsibility for the actions, criminal or otherwise, inside and outside the city, of the people chosen to benefit from this privilege. Assuming the plan was approved, these people would have to gather each workday morning at designated places in order to be transported in buses under police escort to the city's various exit points, where more buses would take them to the factories or other premises where they worked and whence they would have to return at the end of the day. The cost of these operations, from the hiring of buses to the remuneration paid to the police for providing the escorts, would have to be covered by the companies themselves, an outlay that might well be made tax-deductible, although a firm decision on this could only be taken after a feasibility study had been carried out by the ministry of finance. As you can imagine, the complaints did not stop there. It is a basic fact of life that people cannot live without food and drink, now, bearing in mind that the meat came from outside, that the fish came from outside, that the vegetables came from outside, that, everything, in short, came from outside, and that what this city could, on its own, produce or store away would not provide enough even for one week, it would be necessary to lay on supply systems very like those that would provide businesses with technicians and managers, only far more complex, given the perishable nature of certain products. Not to mention the hospitals and the pharmacies, the kilometers of ligatures, the mountains of cotton wool, the tons of pills, the hectoliters of injectable fluids, the many gross of condoms. And then there's the petrol and the diesel to think about, how to transport them to the service stations, unless someone in the government has had the machiavellian idea of punishing the inhabitants of the capital twice over by making them walk. It took only a few days for the government to realize that there is more to a state of siege than meets the eye, especially if there is no real intention of starving the besieged population to death as was the usual practice in the distant past, that a state of siege is not something that can be cobbled together in a moment, that you need to know exactly what your objectives are and how to achieve them, to weigh the consequences, to evaluate reactions, ponder the problems, calculate the gains and the losses, if only to avoid the vast mountain of work that suddenly faces the ministries, overwhelmed by an unstoppable flood of protests, complaints and requests for clarification, for almost none of which they can provide answers, because the instructions from on high had looked only at the general principles of the state of siege and had shown a complete disregard for the bureaucratic minutiae of its implementation, which is where chaos invariably finds a way in. One interesting aspect of the situation, which the satirical vein and sardonic eye of the capital's wits could not help but notice, was the fact that the government, the de facto and de jure besieger, was, at the same time, one of the besieged, not just because its chambers and antechambers, its offices and corridors, its departments and archives, its filing cabinets and stamps, were all in the very heart of the city, and, indeed, formed an organic part of it, but also because some of its members, at least three ministers, a few secretaries of

state and under-secretaries, as well as a couple of directors-general, lived on the outskirts, not to mention the civil servants who, morning and evening, in one way or another, had to use the train, metro or bus if they did not have their own transport or did not want to submit themselves to the complexities of urban traffic. The stories that were told, not always sotto voce, explored the well-known theme of the hunter hunted or the biter bit, but did not restrict themselves to such childishly innocent comments, to the humor of a belle époque kindergarten, there was a whole kaleidoscope of variations, some of them utterly obscene and, from the point of view of the most elementary good taste, reprehensibly scatological. Unfortunately, and here we have further proof of the limited range and structural weakness of all sarcastic remarks, lampoons, burlesques, parodies, satires and other such jokes with which people hope to wound a government, the state of siege was not lifted and the problems of supply remained unresolved.

The days passed, and the difficulties continued to increase, they grew worse and multiplied, they sprang up underfoot like mushrooms after rain, but the moral strength of the population did not seem inclined to humble itself or to renounce what it had considered to be a just stance and to which it had given expression through the ballot box, the simple right not to follow any consensually established opinion. Some observers, usually foreign correspondents hurriedly despatched to cover the events, as they say in the jargon of the profession, and therefore unfamiliar with local idiosyncrasies, commented with bemusement on the complete lack of conflict amongst the city's inhabitants, even though they had observed what later proved to be agents provocateurs at work, trying to create the kind of unstable situations which might justify, in the eyes of the so-called international community, the leap that had not yet been taken, that is, the move from a state of siege to a state of war. One of these commentators, in his desire to be original, went so far as to describe this as a unique, never-before-seen example of ideological unanimity, which, if it were true, would make the capital's population a fascinating case, a political phenomenon worthy of study. Whichever way you looked at it, the idea was complete nonsense, and had nothing to do with the reality of the situation, for here, as anywhere else on the planet, people differ, they think differently, they are not all poor or all rich, and, even amongst the reasonably well-off, some are more so and some are less. The one subject on which they were all in agreement, with no need for any prior discussion, is one with which we are already familiar, and so there is no point going over old ground. Nevertheless, it is only natural that one would want to know, and the question was often asked, both by foreign journalists and by local ones, what singular reason lay behind the fact that there had, until now, been no incidents, no fights, no shouting matches or fisticuffs or worse amongst those who had cast blank votes and those who had not. The question amply demonstrates how important a knowledge of the elements of arithmetic is for the proper exercise of the profession of journalist, for they need only have recalled that the people casting blank votes represented eighty-three percent of the capital's population and that the remainder, all told, accounted for no more than seventeen percent, and one must not forget the debatable thesis put forward by the party on the left, according to which a blank vote and a vote for them were,

metaphorically speaking, one bone and one flesh, and that if the supporters of the party on the left, and this is our own conclusion, did not all cast blank votes, although it is clear that many did in the second poll, it was simply because they had not been ordered to do so. No one would believe us if we were to say that seventeen people had decided to take on eighty-three, the days when battles were won with the help of god are long since gone. Natural curiosity would also lead one to ask two questions, what happened to the five hundred people plucked from the queues of voters by the ministry of the interior's spies and who subsequently underwent the torment of interrogation and the agony of seeing their most intimate secrets revealed by the lie detector and, the second question, what exactly are those specialist secret service agents and their less qualified assistants up to. On the first point, we have only doubts and no way of resolving them. There are those who say that the five hundred prisoners are, in accordance with that popular police euphemism, still helping the authorities with their inquiries in the hope of clarifying the facts, others say that they are gradually being freed, although only a few at a time so as not to attract too much attention, however, the more sceptical observers believe a third version, that they have all been removed from the city and are now in some unknown location and that, despite the dearth of results obtained hitherto, the interrogations continue. Who knows who is right. As for the second point, about what the secret service agents are up to, that we do know. Like all honest, worthy workers, they leave home every morning, tramp the city from end to end, and when they think the fish is about to bite, they try a new tactic, which consists of dropping all the circumlocutions and saying point-blank to the person they're with, Let's talk frankly now, like friends, I cast a blank vote, did you. At first, those questioned merely gave the answers described above, that no one was obliged to reveal how they voted, that no one can be questioned about it by any authority, and if one of them had the excellent idea of demanding that the impertinent questioner should identify himself and declare there and then on whose power and authority he was asking the question, then we would be treated to the pleasurable spectacle of seeing a secret service agent all in a fluster and scampering off with his tail between his legs, because, of course, it wouldn't occur to anyone that he would actually open his wallet and show them the card that would prove who he was, complete with photograph, official stamp and edged with the national colors. But, as we said, that was at the beginning. After a while, the general consensus deemed that, in such situations, the best attitude to take was to ignore the person asking the question and simply turn your back on them, or, if they proved extremely insistent, to say loudly and clearly Leave me alone, or, if preferred, and with more chance of success, to tell them, even more simply, to go to hell. Naturally, the reports sent by the secret service agents to their superiors camouflaged these rebuffs and disguised these setbacks, instead restating the stubborn and systematic absence of any collaborative spirit amongst the suspect sector of the population. You might think that things had reached a point very like that of two wrestlers endowed with equal strength, one pushing this way, the other pushing that, and while it was true that they had not moved from the spot where they had started, neither had they managed to advance even an inch, and, consequently, only the final exhaustion of one of them would give victory to the other. In the opinion of the

person in charge of the secret services, this stalemate would be rapidly resolved if one of the wrestlers were to receive help from another wrestler, which, in this particular situation, would mean abandoning, as futile, the persuasive techniques employed up until then and adopting, without reserve, dissuasive methods that did not exclude the use of brute force. If the capital, for its own many faults, finds itself under a state of siege, if it is up to the armed forces to impose discipline and proceed accordingly in the case of any grave disruption of the social order, if the high command take responsibility, on their word of honor, not to hesitate when it comes to making decisions, then the secret services will take it upon themselves to create suitable focal points of unrest that would justify a priori the harsh crackdown which the government, very generously, has tried, by all peaceful and, let us repeat the word, persuasive means, to avoid. The insurrectionists would not be able to come to them later with complaints, assuming they wanted to and assuming they had any. When the interior minister took this idea to the inner council, or emergency council, which had been formed meanwhile, the prime minister reminded him that he still had one weapon as yet undeployed in the resolution of the conflict and only in the unlikely event of that weapon failing would he consider this new plan or any others that happened to arise. Whilst the interior minister expressed his disagreement laconically, in four words, We are wasting time, the defense minister needed far more to guarantee that the armed forces would do their duty, As they always have throughout our long history, giving no thought to the sacrifice entailed. And that was how the delicate matter was left, the fruit, it seemed, was not yet ripe. Then it was that the other wrestler, grown tired of waiting, decided to risk taking a step. One morning, the streets of the capital were filled by people wearing stickers on their chest bearing the words, in red letters on a black background, I cast a blank vote, huge placards hung from windows declaring, in black letters on a red background, We cast blank votes, but the most astonishing sight, waving above the heads of the advancing demonstrators, was the endless stream of blank, white flags, which would lead one unthinking correspondent to run to the telephone and inform his newspaper that the city had surrendered. The police loudspeakers bellowed and screamed that gatherings of more than five people were not allowed, but there were fifty, five hundred, five thousand, fifty thousand, and who, in such a situation, is going to bother counting in fives. The police commissioner wanted to know if he could use tear-gas and water-cannon, the general in charge of the northern division if he was authorized to order the tanks to advance, the general of the southern airborne division if the conditions were right to send in paratroopers, or if, on the contrary, the risk of them landing on rooftops made this inadvisable. War was, however, about to break out.

Then it was that the prime minister revealed his plan to the government, who had been brought together in plenary session and with the president in the chair, The time has come to break the back of the resistance, he said, let's call a halt to all the psychological game-playing, to the espionage, the lie detectors and the other technological contraptions, since, despite the interior minister's worthy efforts, these methods have all proved incapable of solving the problem, I must add, by the way, that I

also consider inappropriate any direct intervention by the armed forces, given the more than likely inconvenience of a mass slaughter which it is our duty to avoid at all costs, what I have to offer you instead is neither more nor less than a proposed multiple withdrawal, a series of actions which some may perhaps feel to be absurd, but which I am sure will lead us to total victory and a return to democratic normality, these actions are, namely, the immediate removal of the government to another city, which will become the country's new capital, the withdrawal of all the armed forces still in place, and the withdrawal of all police forces, this radical action will mean that the rebel city will be left entirely to its own devices and will have all the time it needs to understand the price of being cut off from the sacrosanct unity of the nation, and when it can no longer stand the isolation, the indignity, the contempt, when life within the city becomes a chaos, then its guilty inhabitants will come to us hanging their heads and begging our forgiveness. The prime minister looked about him, That is my plan, he said, I submit it to you for your examination and discussion, but, needless to say, I am counting on your unanimous approval, desperate diseases must have desperate remedies, and if the remedy I am prescribing is painful to you, the disease afflicting us is, quite simply, fatal.

IN WORDS THAT CAN BE GRASPED BY THE INTELLIGENCE OF THOSE CLASSES, who, though less educated, are nonetheless not entirely ignorant of the gravity and diversity of the many and various ailments that threaten the already precarious survival of the human race, what the prime minister had proposed was neither more nor less than a flight from the virus that had attacked the majority of the capital's inhabitants and which, given that the worst is always waiting just behind the door, might well end up infecting all the remaining inhabitants and even, who knows, the whole country. Not that he and his government were themselves afraid of being contaminated by the bite of this subversive insect, for apart from a few clashes between certain individuals and a few very minor differences of opinion, which were, anyway, more to do with means than ends, we have had ample proof of the unshakeable institutional cohesion of the politicians responsible for the running of a country which, without a word of warning, had been plunged into a disaster never before seen in the long and always troubled history of the known world. Contrary to what certain ill-intentioned people doubtless thought or suggested, this was not the coward's way out, but rather a strategic move of the first order, unparalleled in its audacity, one whose future results can almost be touched with the hand, like ripe fruit on a tree. Now all that was needed for the task to be crowned with success was that the energy put into carrying out the plan should be up to the resolve of its aims. First, they will have to decide who will leave the city and who will stay. Obviously, his excellency the president and the whole of the government down to under-secretary level will leave, along with their closest advisors, the members of the national parliament will also leave so that the legislative process suffers no interruption, the army and the police will leave, including the traffic police, but all the members of the municipal council will remain, along with their leader, the fire fighters' organizations will stay too, so that the city does not burn down because of some act of carelessness or sabotage, just as the staff of the city cleansing department will stay in case of epidemic and, needless to say, the authorities will ensure continued supplies of water and electricity, those utilities so essential to life. As for food, a group of dieticians, or nutritionists, have already been charged with drawing up a list of basic dishes which, while not bringing the population to the brink of starvation, would make them aware that a state of siege taken to its ultimate consequences would certainly be no holiday. Not that the government believed things would go that far. It would not be many days before the usual delegations appeared at a military post on one of the roads out of the city, bearing the white flag, the flag of unconditional surrender not the flag of insurgency, the fact that both are the same color is a remarkable coincidence upon which we will not now pause to reflect, but there will be plenty of reasons to return to the matter later on.

After the plenary meeting of the government, to which we assume sufficient reference was made on the last page of the previous chapter, the inner ministerial cabinet or emergency council discussed and took a handful of decisions which will, in the fullness of time, be revealed, always assuming, as we believe we have warned on a previous occasion, that events do not develop in a way that renders those decisions null and void or requires them to be replaced by others, for, as it is always wise to remember,

while it is true that man proposes, it is god who disposes, and there have been very few occasions, almost all of them tragic, when both man and god were in agreement and did all the disposing together. One of the most hotly disputed matters was the government's withdrawal from the city, when and how it should be done, with or without discretion, with or without television coverage, with or without military bands, with or without garlands on the cars, with or without the national flag draped over the bonnet, and an endless series of details which required repeated discussions about state protocol which had never, not since the founding of the nation itself, known such difficulties. The final plan for the withdrawal was a masterpiece of tactics, consisting basically of a meticulous distribution of different itineraries so as to make things as hard as possible for any large concentrations of demonstrators who might gather together to express the city's possible feelings of displeasure, discontent or indignation at being abandoned to its fate. There was one itinerary for the president, one for the prime minister and one for each member of the council of ministers, a total of twenty-seven different routes, all under the protection of the army and the police, with assault vehicles stationed at crossroads and with ambulances following behind the cortèges, ready for all eventualities. The map of the city, an enormous illuminated panel over which, with the help of military commanders and expert police trackers, they had labored for forty-eight hours, showed a red star with twenty-seven arms, fourteen turned toward the northern hemisphere, thirteen toward the southern hemisphere, with an equator dividing the capital into two halves. Along these arms would file the black automobiles of the public institutions, surrounded by bodyguards and walkie-talkies, antiquated contraptions still used in this country, but for which there was now an approved budget for modernization. All the people involved in the various phases of the operation, whatever the degree of their participation, had to be sworn to absolute secrecy, first with their right hand placed on the gospels, then on a copy of the constitution bound in blue morocco leather, and finally, completing this double commitment, by uttering a truly binding oath, drawn from popular tradition, If I break this oath may the punishment fall upon my head and upon that of my descendants unto the fourth generation. With secrecy thus sealed for any leaks, the date was set for two days hence. The hour of departure, which would be simultaneous, that is, the same for everyone, was three o'clock in the morning, a time when only the seriously insomniac are still tossing and turning in their beds and saying prayers to the god hypnos, the son of night and twin brother of thanatos, to help them in their affliction by dropping on their poor, bruised eyelids the sweet balm of the poppy. During the remaining hours, the spies, who had returned en masse to the field of operations, did nothing but pound, in more than one sense, the city's squares, avenues, streets and sidestreets, surreptitiously taking the population's pulse, probing ill-concealed intentions, connecting up words heard here and there, in order to find out if there had been any leak of the decisions taken by the council of ministers, in particular the government's imminent withdrawal, because any spy worthy of the name must take it as a sacred principle, a golden rule, the letter of the law, that oaths are never to be trusted, whoever made them, even an oath sworn by the very mother who gave them life, still less when instead of one oath there were two, and less still when instead of two there were three. In this case, however, they had no alternative

but to recognize, with a certain degree of professional frustration, that the official secret had been well kept, an empirical truth that tallied with the ministry of the interior's central system of computation, which, after much squeezing, sieving and mixing, shuffling and reshuffling of the millions of fragments of recorded conversations, found not a single equivocal sign, not a single suspicious clue, not even the tiniest end of a thread which, if pulled, might have at its other end a nasty surprise. The messages despatched by the secret service to the ministry of the interior were wonderfully reassuring, as were the messages sent to the defense ministry's colonels of information and psychology by the highly efficient military intelligence, who, without the knowledge of their civilian competitors, were carrying out their own investigation, indeed, both camps could have used that expression which literature has made into a classic, All quiet on the western front, although not, of course, for the soldier who has just died. Everyone, from the president to the very least of government advisors, gave a sigh of relief. The withdrawal, thank god, would take place quietly, without any undue trauma to a population who had perhaps already, in part, repented their entirely inexplicable seditious behavior, but who, despite this, in a praiseworthy display of civic-mindedness, which augured well for the future, seemed to have no intention of harming, either in word or deed, their legitimate leaders and representatives at this moment of painful, but necessary, separation. This was the conclusion drawn from all the reports, and so it was.

At half past two in the morning everyone was ready to cut the ropes still attaching them to the president's palace, to the prime minister's mansion and to the various ministerial buildings. The gleaming black automobiles were lined up waiting, the trucks containing all the files were surrounded by security guards armed to the teeth and who were, incredible though it may seem, capable of spitting poisoned darts, the police outriders were in position, the ambulances were ready, and inside, in the offices, the fugitive leaders, or deserters, whom we should, in more elevated language, describe as tergiversators, were still opening and closing the last cupboards and drawers, sadly gathering up a final few mementos, a group photograph, another bearing a dedication, a ring made out of human hair, a statuette of the goddess of happiness, a pencil sharpener from schooldays, a returned cheque, an anonymous letter, an embroidered handkerchief, a mysterious key, a redundant pen with a name engraved on it, a compromising piece of paper, another compromising piece of paper, but the latter is only compromising for a colleague in the next department. A few people were almost in tears, men and women barely able to control their emotions, wondering if they would ever return to the beloved places that witnessed their rise up the hierarchical ladder, others, to whom the fates had proved less helpful, were dreaming, despite previous disappointments and injustices, of different worlds and new opportunities that would place them, at last, where they deserved to be. At a quarter to three, when the army and the police were already strategically stationed along all twenty-seven routes, not forgetting the assault vehicles guarding all the major crossroads, the order was given to dim the street lights as a way of covering the retreat, however harshly that last word may grate on the ear. In the streets along which the cars and trucks would have to pass, there was not a soul, not

one, not even in plain clothes. As for the continual flow of information from the rest of the city, this remained unchanged, no groups were gathering, there was no suspicious activity, and any nightbirds returning to their homes or leaving them did not seem a cause for concern, they were not carrying flags over their shoulders or concealing bottles of petrol with bits of rag protruding from the neck, they weren't whirling clubs or bicycle chains above their heads, and if the occasional one appeared to stray from the straight and narrow, there was no reason to attribute this to deviations of a political nature, but to perfectly forgivable alcoholic excesses. At three minutes to three, the engines of the cars in the convoys were started up. At three o'clock on the dot, precisely as planned, the retreat began.

Then, O surprise, O astonishment, O never-before-seen prodigy, first confusion and perplexity, then disquiet, then fear, dug their nails into the throats of the president and the prime minister, of the ministers, secretaries of state and under-secretaries, of the deputies, security men and police outriders, and even, although to a lesser degree, of the ambulance staff, who were, by their profession, accustomed to the worst. As the cars advanced along the streets, the façades of the buildings were lit up, one by one, from top to bottom, by lanterns, lamps, spotlights, torches, candelabra when available, even perhaps by old brass oil lamps, every window was wide open and aglow, letting out a great river of light like a flood, a multiplication of crystals made of white fire, marking the road, picking out the deserters' escape route so that they would not get lost, so that they would not wander off down any short-cuts. The first reaction of those in charge of convoy security was to throw caution to the wind and say put your foot down and drive like crazy, and that is what began to happen, to the irrepressible joy of the official drivers, who, as everyone knows, hate pootling along at a snail's pace when they've got two hundred horsepower in their engine. The burst of speed did not last long. That brusque, precipitate decision, like all decisions born of fear, meant that, on nearly every route, further ahead or further back, minor collisions took place, usually it was the vehicle behind bumping into the one in front, fortunately without any very grave consequences for the passengers, a bit of a fright and that was all, a bruise on the forehead, a scratch on the face, a ricked neck, nothing which, tomorrow, would justify the awarding of a medal for injuries sustained, a croix de guerre, a purple heart or some other such monstrosity. The ambulances raced ahead, the medical and nursing staff eager to help the wounded, there was terrible confusion, deplorable in every way, the convoys ground to a halt, telephone calls were made to find out what was happening on the other routes, someone was demanding loudly to be told exactly what the situation was, and then, on top of that, there were those lines of buildings lit up like Christmas trees, all that was missing were the fireworks and the merry-go-rounds, it was just as well that no one appeared at the windows to enjoy the free entertainment down in the street, to laugh, to mock, to point a finger at the colliding cars. Short-sighted subalterns, the sort who are only interested in the present moment, which is nearly all of them, would certainly think like that, as perhaps would a few under-secretaries and advisors with little future, but never a prime minister, certainly not one as far-sighted as this one has shown himself to

be. While a doctor was dabbing at the prime minister's chin with some antiseptic and wondering to himself if it would be going too far to give the injured man an anti-tetanus injection, the prime minister kept thinking about the tremor of unease that had shaken his spirit as soon as the first lights in the buildings came on. It was, without a doubt, enough to upset even the most phlegmatic of politicians, it was, without a doubt, troubling, unsettling, but worse, much worse, was the fact that there was no one at those windows, as if the official convoys were foolishly fleeing from nothing, as if the army and the police, along with the assault vehicles and the water cannon, had been spurned by the enemy and been left with no one to fight. Still somewhat stunned by the collision, but with a plaster on his chin, and having refused with stoical impatience the anti-tetanus injection, the prime minister suddenly remembered that his first duty should have been to phone the president and ask him how he was, to inquire after the well-being of the presidential person, and that he should do this now, without more ado, lest the president, out of sheer mischief and political astuteness, should get in first, And catch me with my pants down, he muttered, not thinking about the literal meaning of the phrase. He asked his secretary to make the call, another secretary responded, the secretary at this end said that the prime minister wished to speak to the president, the secretary at the other end said one moment, please, the secretary at this end passed the phone to the prime minister and, he, as was only fitting, waited, How are things over there, asked the president, A few dents, but nothing serious, replied the prime minister, We've had no problems at all, Not even any collisions, Just a few bumps, Nothing grave, I hope, No, this armor-plating is pretty much bomb-proof, Alas, sir, no armor-plated vehicle is bomb-proof, You don't need to tell me that, for every breastplate there's a spear and for every armor-plated vehicle a bomb, Are you hurt, Not a scratch. The face of a police officer appeared at the car window, indicating that they could drive on, We're on the move again, the prime minister told the president, Oh, we've barely had to stop at all, replied the president, May I say something, sir, Of course, Well, I must confess to feeling worried, much more so than on the day of the first election, Why, These lights that came on just as we were leaving and which will, in all probability, continue to light our way along the whole route, until we're out of the city, the complete absence of people, I mean, there isn't a soul to be seen at any of the windows or in the streets, it's odd, very odd, I'm beginning to think that I may have to consider something which, up until now, I have always rejected, that there is some purpose behind all this, an idea, a planned objective, because things are happening as if the population really were obeying some plan, as if there were some central co-ordination, Oh, I don't think so, prime minister, you know better than I do that the anarchist conspiracy theory doesn't hold water at all, and that the other theory positing an evil foreign state bent on destabilizing our country is equally invalid, We thought we had everything completely under control, that we were masters of the situation, and then they spring a surprise on us that no one could possibly have imagined, a real coup de théâtre, What do you think you'll do, For the moment, continue with our plan, if future circumstances require us to introduce any alterations, we will only do so after an exhaustive examination of the new data, whatever they may be, as for the fundamentals, though, I don't feel we need to make any changes, And in your

opinion, the fundamentals are what, We discussed this and reached an agreement, sir, our aim is to isolate the population and then leave them to simmer, sooner or later there are bound to be fights, conflicts of interest, life will become increasingly difficult, the streets will fill up with rubbish, imagine, sir, what the place will be like when the rains come, and, as sure as I'm prime minister, there are bound to be serious problems with the supply and distribution of foodstuffs, problems which, if necessary, we will take care to create, So you don't think the city will be able to hold out for very long, No, I don't, besides, there's another important factor, possibly the most important of all, What's that, However hard people have tried and continue to try, it's impossible to get everyone to think the same way, It seems to have worked this time, It's too perfect to be real, sir, And what if there really is, as you have just admitted as a hypothesis, some secret organization, a mafia, a camorra, a cosa nostra, a cia or a kgb, The cia isn't a secret organization, sir, and the kgb no longer exists, Well, I shouldn't think that will make much difference, but let's just imagine something similar or, if that were possible, even worse, something more machiavellian, invented to create this near-unanimity around, well, to be perfectly honest, I don't know quite what, Around the blank ballot papers, sir, the blank ballot papers, That, prime minister, is a conclusion I could have reached on my own, what interests me is what I don't know, Of course, sir, But you were saying, Even if I were forced to accept, in theory and only in theory, the possible existence of a clandestine organization out to destroy state security and opposed to the legitimacy of the democratic system, these things can't be done without contacts, without meetings, without secret cells, without incentives, without documents, yes, without documents, you yourself know that it is impossible to do anything in this world without documents, and we, as well as having not a scrap of information about any of the activities I have just mentioned, have also failed to find even a page from a diary saying Onward, comrades, le jour de gloire est arrivé, Why would it be in French, Because of their revolutionary tradition, sir, What an extraordinary country we live in, a place where things happen that have never happened on any other part of the planet, But this is not the first time, as I'm sure I need not remind you, sir, That is precisely what I meant, prime minister, There is not the faintest possibility of a link between the two incidents, Of course not, one was a plague of white blindness and the other a plague of blank ballot papers, We still haven't found an explanation for the first plague, Or for this one either, We will, sir, we will, If we don't come up against a brick wall first, Let us remain confident, sir, confidence is fundamental, Confident in what, in whom, In the democratic institutions, My dear fellow, you can reserve that speech for the television, only our secretaries can hear us now, so we can speak plainly. The prime minister changed the subject, We're leaving the city now, sir, Yes, we are too over here, Would you mind just looking back for a moment, sir, Why, The lights, What about them, They're still on, no one has turned them off, And what conclusions do you think I should draw from these illuminations, Well, I don't rightly know, sir, the natural thing would be for them to go out as we progressed, but, no, there they are, why, I imagine that, seen from the air, they must look like a huge star with twenty-seven arms, It would seem I have a poet for prime minister, Oh, I'm no poet, but a star is a star is a star, and no one can deny it, sir, So what next, The government isn't

just going to sit around doing nothing, we haven't run out of munitions yet, we've still got some arrows in our quiver, Let's hope your aim is true, All I need is to have the enemy in my sights, But that is precisely the problem, we don't know where the enemy is, we don't even know who they are, They'll turn up, sir, it's just a matter of time, they can't stay hidden for ever, As long as we don't run out of time, We'll find a solution, We're nearly at the frontier, we'll continue our conversation in my office, see you there later, at about six o'clock, Of course, sir, I'll be there.

The frontier was the same at all the exit points from the city, a heavy, movable barrier, a pair of tanks, one on either side of the road, a few huts, and armed soldiers in battledress and with daubed faces. Powerful spotlights lit up the scene. The president got out of his car, returned the commanding officer's impeccable salute with a polite though slightly disdainful gesture, and asked, How are things here, Nothing to report, sir, absolute calm, Has anyone tried to leave, No, sir, You are, I assume, referring to motorized vehicles, to bicycles, to carts, to skateboards, To motorized vehicles, sir, And people on foot, Not a single one, You will, of course, already have considered the possibility that any fugitives might not come by road, We have, sir, but they still wouldn't manage to get through, as well as the conventional patrols guarding the area between us and the two closest exit points on either side, we also have electronic sensors that would pick up a mouse if we had them adjusted to detect anything that small, Excellent, you're familiar, I'm sure, with what is always said on these occasions, the nation is watching you, Yes, sir, we are aware of the importance of our mission, You will, I assume, have received orders on what to do if there is any attempt at a mass exodus, Yes, sir, What are they, First, tell them to stop, That much is obvious, Yes, sir, And if they don't, If they don't, then we fire into the air, And if, despite that, they continue to advance, Then the squad of riot police assigned to us would take action, And what would they do, Well, sir, that depends, they would either use tear-gas or attack with water cannon, the army doesn't do that kind of thing, Do I note a hint of criticism in your words, It's just that I don't think that is any way to carry on a war, sir, An interesting observation, and if the people do not withdraw, They must withdraw, sir, no one can withstand tear-gas attacks and water cannon, Just imagine that they do withstand it, what are your orders in that situation, To shoot at their legs, Why their legs, We don't want to kill our compatriots, But that could well happen, Yes, sir, it could, Do you have family in the city, Yes, sir, What if you saw your wife and children at the head of the advancing multitude, A soldier's family knows how to behave in all situations, Yes, I'm sure, but just try to imagine, Orders must be obeyed, sir, All orders, Up until today, it has been my honor to have obeyed all the orders given to me, And tomorrow, Tomorrow, I very much hope not to have to come and tell you, sir, So do I. The president took two steps in the direction of his car, then asked suddenly, Are you sure your wife did not cast a blank vote, Yes, sir, I would put my hand in the fire, sir, Really, It's a manner of speaking, sir, I just meant that I'm sure she would have fulfilled her duty as a voter, By voting, Yes, But that doesn't answer my question, No, sir, Then answer it, No, sir, I can't, Why not, Because the law does not allow me to, Ah. The president stood looking at the officer for a long time, then

said, Goodbye, captain, it is captain, isn't it, Yes, sir, Good night, captain, perhaps we'll see each other again sometime, Good night, sir, Did you notice that I didn't ask if you had cast a blank vote, Yes, sir, I did. The car sped away. The captain put his hands to his face. His forehead was dripping with sweat.

THE LIGHTS STARTED TO GO OUT AS THE LAST ARMY TRUCK AND THE last police van left the city. One after the other, like someone saying goodbye, the twenty-seven arms of the star gradually disappeared, leaving the vague route map of deserted streets marked only by the dim street lamps that no one had thought to restore to their normal level of brightness. We will find out how alive the city is when the intense black of the sky begins to dissolve into the slow tide of deep blue which anyone with good eyesight would already be able to make out rising up from the horizon, then we will see if the men and women who inhabit the different floors of these buildings do, indeed, set off to work, if the first buses pick up the first passengers, if the metro trains race, thundering, through the tunnels, if the shops open their doors and remove the shutters, if newspapers are delivered to kiosks. At this early morning hour, while they wash, get dressed and drink their usual breakfast cup of coffee, people are listening to the radio which is announcing, in excited tones, that the president, the government and the parliament left the city in the early hours, that there are no police left in the city, and that the army has withdrawn too, then they turn on the television, which, in identical tones, gives them the same news, and both radio and television, with only the briefest of intervals, continue to report that, at seven o'clock precisely, an important message from the president will be broadcast to the whole country, and, in particular, of course, to the capital's obstinate inhabitants. Meanwhile, the kiosks have not yet opened, so there is no point in going out into the street to buy a newspaper, just as it is not worth searching the web, the worldwide web, although some more up-to-date citizens have already tried, for the president's predictable stream of invective. Official secrecy, while it may occasionally be plagued by leaks and disclosures, as demonstrated a few hours earlier by the synchronized switching on of lights in buildings, exercises extreme rigor when it comes to any higher authorities, who, as everyone knows, will, for the most frivolous of motives, not only demand swift and detailed explanations from those found wanting, they will, from time to time, also chop off their heads. It is ten minutes to seven, many of those people still lazing about should, by rights, be out in the street on their way to work, but not all days are alike, and it seems that public servants have been given permission to arrive late, and, as for private businesses, most of them will probably remain closed all day, just to see where all this leads. Caution and chicken soup never hurt anyone, in good health or bad. The world history of crowds shows us that, whether it's a specific breach of public order, or merely the threat of one, the best examples of prudence are generally given by those businesses and industries with premises on the streets, a nervous attitude which we have a duty to respect, given that they are the areas of professional activity who have most to lose, and who inevitably do lose, in terms of shattered shop windows, robberies, lootings and acts of sabotage. At two minutes to seven, with the lugubrious face and voice required by the circumstances, the television and radio presenters finally announce that the president is about to address the nation. The image that follows, as a way of setting the scene, shows the national flag flapping lazily, languidly, as if it were, at any moment, about to slip helplessly down the pole. There obviously wasn't much wind on the day they took its picture, remarked one inhabitant. The symbolic insignia seemed to revive with the opening chords of the national anthem, the gentle breeze had suddenly

given way to a brisk wind that must have blown in from the vast ocean or from some triumphant scene of battle, if it blows any harder, even just a little bit harder, we're sure to see valkyries on horseback with heroes riding pillion. Then, as it faded into the distance, the anthem took the flag with it, or the flag took the anthem with it, the order doesn't matter, and then the president appeared to the people, seated behind a desk, his stern eyes fixed on the teleprompter. To his right, standing to attention, the flag, not the one just mentioned, but an indoor flag, arranged in discreet folds. The president interlaced his fingers, perhaps to disguise some involuntary tic, He's nervous, said the man who had remarked upon the lack of wind, I want to see his expression when he explains the low trick they've just played on us. The people awaiting the president's imminent oratorical display could not, for one moment, imagine the efforts expended on preparing the speech by the president of the republic's literary advisors, not so much as regards any actual statements made, which would merely involve plucking a few strings on the stylistic lute, but the form of address with which, according to the norm, the speech should begin, the standard words that usually introduce tirades of this type. Indeed, given the delicate nature of his message, it would be little short of insulting to say My dear compatriots, or Esteemed fellow citizens, or even, were it the moment for playing, with just the right amount of vibrato, the bass string of patriotism, that simplest and noblest mode of address, Men and women of Portugal, that last word, we hasten to add, only appears due to the entirely gratuitous supposition, with no foundation in objective fact, that the scene of the dire events it has fallen to us to describe in such meticulous detail, could be, or perhaps could have been, the land of the aforesaid Portuguese men and women. It was merely an illustrative example, nothing more, for which, despite all our good intentions, we apologize in advance, especially given that they are a people with a reputation around the world for having always exercised their electoral duties with praiseworthy civic discipline and religious devotion.

Now, returning to the home that we have made into our observation post, we should say that, contrary to one's natural expectations, not a single listener or viewer noticed that none of these usual forms of address issued from the president's mouth, neither this, that or the other, perhaps because the plangent drama of the first words tossed into the ether, I speak to you with my heart in my hands, had made the president's literary advisors realize that the introduction of any of the aforementioned refrains would have been superfluous and inopportune. It would, indeed, have been quite incongruous to begin by saying affectionately, Esteemed fellow citizens or My dear compatriots, as if he were about to announce that tomorrow the price of petrol will go down by fifty percent, only to proceed to present to the eyes of a horror-struck audience a bleeding, slippery, still pulsating internal organ. What the president was about to say, goodbye, goodbye, see you another day, was common knowledge, but, understandably enough, people were curious to see just how he was going to extricate himself. Here then is the whole speech, without, of course, given the impossibility of transcribing them into words, the tremor in the voice, the grief-stricken face, the occasional glimmer of a barely repressed tear, I speak to you with my heart in my hands, I speak to you as one torn asunder by the pain

of an incomprehensible rift, like a father abandoned by his beloved children, all of us equally confused and perplexed by the extraordinary chain of events that has destroyed our sublime family harmony. And do not say that it was us, that it was me, that it was the government of the nation, along with its elected deputies, who were the ones to break away from the people. It is true that this morning we withdrew to another city which, from henceforth, will be the country's capital, it is true that we imposed on the city that was but no longer is the capital a rigorous state of siege, which will, inevitably, seriously hamper the smooth functioning of an urban area of such importance and of such large physical and social dimensions, it is true that you are currently besieged, surrounded, confined inside the perimeter of the city, that you cannot leave it, and that if you try, you will suffer the consequences of an immediate armed response, but what you will never be able to say is that it is the fault of those to whom the popular will, freely expressed in successive, peaceful, honest, democratic contests, entrusted the fate of the nation so that we could defend it from all dangers, internal and external. You are to blame, yes, you are the ones who have ignominiously rejected national concord in favor of the tortuous road of subversion and indiscipline and in favor of the most perverse and diabolical challenge to the legitimate power of the state ever known in the history of nations. Do not find fault with us, find fault rather with yourselves, not with those who spoke in my name, I am referring, of course, to the government, who again and again asked you, nay, begged and implored you to abandon your wicked obstinacy, whose ultimate meaning, despite the enormous investigatory efforts set in train by the state authorities, remains to this day impenetrable. For centuries and centuries, you were the head of the country and the pride of the nation, for centuries and centuries, in times of national crisis and collective anxiety, our people were accustomed to turn their eyes to this city, to these hills, knowing that thence would come the remedy, the consoling word, the correct path to the future. You have betrayed the memory of your ancestors, that is the harsh truth that will for ever torment your consciences, yes, stone upon stone, they built the altar of the nation, and, shame on you, you chose to tear it down. With all my soul, I want to believe that your madness will prove a transitory one, that it will not last, I want to think that tomorrow, a tomorrow which I pray to heaven will not be long in coming, that tomorrow remorse will seep gently into your hearts and you will become reconciled with legality and with that root of roots, the national community, returning, like the prodigal son, to the paternal home. You are now a lawless city. You will not have a government to tell you what you should and should not do, how you should and should not behave, the streets will be yours, they belong to you, use them as you wish, there will be no authority to stop you in your tracks and offer you sound advice, but equally, and listen carefully to my words, there will be no authority to protect you from thieves, rapists and murderers, that will be your freedom, and may you enjoy it. You may mistakenly imagine that, guided by your free will and by your every whim, you will be able to organize and defend your lives better than we did using the old methods and the old laws. A very grave mistake on your part. Sooner or later, you will be obliged to find leaders to govern you, if they do not irrupt like beasts out of the inevitable chaos into which you will fall and impose their own laws upon you. Then you will realize the tragic nature of your self-

deception. Perhaps you will rebel as you did in the days of authoritarian rule, as you did in the grim days of dictatorship, but do not delude yourselves, you will be put down with equal violence, and you will not be called upon to vote because there will be no elections, or if there are, they will not be free, open and honest like the elections you scorned, and so it will be until the day when the armed forces who, along with myself and the national government, today decided to abandon you to your chosen fate, are obliged to return to liberate you from the monsters you yourselves have engendered. All your suffering will have been futile, all your stubbornness in vain, and then you will understand, too late, that rights only exist fully in the words in which they are expressed and on the piece of paper on which they are recorded, whether in the form of a constitution, a law or a regulation, you will understand and, one hopes, be convinced, that their wrong or unthinking application will convulse the most firmly established society, you will understand, at last, that simple common sense tells us to take them as a mere symbol of what could be, but never as a possible, concrete reality. Casting a blank vote is your irrevocable right, and no one will ever deny you that right, but, just as we tell children not to play with matches, so we warn whole peoples of the dangers of playing with dynamite. I will close now. Take the severity of my warnings not as a threat, but as a cautery for the foul political suppuration that you have generated in your own breast and in which you are steeped. You will only see and hear from me again when you deserve the forgiveness which, despite all, we still wish to bestow on you, I, your president, the government which, in happier times, you elected, and those of our people who remain healthy and pure and of whom you are not at present worthy. Until that day, goodbye, and may the lord protect you. The grave, sad face of the president disappeared and in his place stood the raised flag. The wind shook it furiously about as if it were shaking a lunatic, while the anthem repeated the bellicose chords and the martial accents that had been composed in times of unstoppable patriotic pride, but which now sounded somewhat cracked. The man certainly talks well, said the oldest member of the family, and of course he's quite right when he says children shouldn't play with matches, because, as everyone knows, they'll only pee their beds afterward.

The streets, which, up until then, had been almost deserted, with most of the shops and businesses closed, filled up with people within a matter of minutes. Those who had stayed at home leaned out of the windows to watch the concourse, which is not to say that everyone was heading in the same direction, they resembled, rather, two rivers, one flowing up and one flowing down, and they waved to each other from river to river, as if the city were celebrating, as if it were a local holiday, and, contrary to the fugitive president's ill-intentioned prognostications, there were no thieves or rapists or murderers. Here and there, on some floors of some buildings, the windows remained closed, and, where there were blinds, these were kept grimly drawn, as if the families who lived there were the victims of a painful bereavement. On those floors, no bright lights had been lit in the early hours, at most, the inhabitants would have peered out from behind their curtains, hearts tight with fear, for the people who lived there had very firm political views, they were the people who had voted, both in the first election and the second, for

the parties they had always voted for, the party on the right and the party in the middle, they had no reason now to celebrate, on the contrary, they feared attack by the ignorant masses who were singing and shouting in the streets, feared that the sacrosanct doors of their homes would be kicked in, their family memories besmirched, their silver stolen, Let them sing, they'll be crying soon enough, they said to each other to give themselves courage. As for those who voted for the party on the left, the only reason they are not standing at their windows applauding is because they have already joined the crowds, as evidenced in this very street by the occasional flag which, now and then, as if testing the waters, rises above the fast-flowing river of heads. No one went to work. The newspapers in the kiosks sold out, all of them carried the president's speech on the front page, along with a photograph taken while he was giving it, probably, to judge by the pained expression on his face, at the moment when he said he was speaking with his heart in his hands. Very few wasted time reading about something they knew already, most people were more interested in the views of the newspaper editors, the editorialists, the commentators, or some last-minute interview. The main headlines drew the attention of the curious, they were huge, enormous, others, on the inside pages, were normal size, but they all seemed to have sprung from the brain of the same genius of headline synthesis, allowing one blithely to dispense with reading the news item that followed. The headlines were by turns sentimental, Capital City Orphaned Overnight, ironic, Electoral Bombshell Blows Up In Voters' Faces or Blank Voters Blanked By Government, pedagogical, State Teaches Lesson To Insurrectionist Capital, vengeful, Time For A Settling Of Accounts, prophetic, Everything Will Be Different From Now On or Nothing Will Ever Be The Same Again, alarmist, Anarchy Just Around The Corner or Suspicious Maneuvers On Frontier, rhetorical, An Historic Speech For An Historic Moment, fawning, Dignified President Defies Irresponsible Capital, war-like, Army Surrounds City, objective, Withdrawal Of Government Agencies Takes Place Without Incident, radical, City Council Should Assume Total Control, and tactical, Solution Lies In Municipalist Tradition. There were only a few references to the marvellous star, the one with the twenty-seven arms of light, and these were stuck in willy-nilly amongst all the other news, not even graced with a headline, not even an ironic one, not even a sarcastic one, along the lines of And They Complain About The Price Of Electricity. Some of the editorials, while approving of the government's attitude, All Power To Them, urged one of them, dared to express certain doubts about the alleged fairness of the prohibition on leaving the city that had been imposed on the inhabitants, Once again, as always, the just are going to have to pay for the sinners, the honest for the criminals, the worthy men and women of this city who, having scrupulously fulfilled their duty as voters by voting for one of the legally constituted parties that make up the framework of political and ideological options recognized and endorsed by society, now find their freedom of movement restricted because of a freak majority of troublemakers whose one characteristic, some say, is that they don't know what they want, but who, in fact, as we understand it, know perfectly well what they want and are now preparing for a final assault on power. Other editorials went further, calling for the abolition, pure and simple, of the secret ballot and proposing that in future, when the situation returned to normal, as, somehow or other, it was bound

to do, every voter should have a record card on which the presiding officer, having first ascertained before the ballot paper was put in the box how the person had voted, would note down, for all legal intents and purposes, both official and personal, that the bearer had voted for this or that party, And which I, the undersigned, hereby declare and confirm to be true. Had such a record card existed, had a legislator, aware of the possibility of the dissolute use of the vote, dared to take that step, bringing together form and content of a totally transparent democratic system, all the people who had voted for the party on the right or the party in the middle would now be packing their bags in order to emigrate to their true homeland, the one that always has its arms wide open to receive those it can most easily clasp to its bosom. Convoys of cars and buses, of minibuses and removal vans, bearing the flags of the different parties and honking rhythmically, p.o.t.r., p.i.t.m., would soon be following the government's example and heading toward the military posts on the frontier, with girls and boys sticking their bottoms out of the windows or yelling at the foot soldiers of the insurrection, You'd better watch your backs, you miserable traitors, You'll get the beating of your life when we come back, you frigging bandits, You rotten sons-of-bitches, or yelling the worst possible insult in the vocabulary of democratic jargon, Illegals, illegals, illegals, which would not, of course, be true, because the people they were abusing would have at home or in their pocket their very own voter's record card, where, ignominiously, as if branded with irons, would be written or stamped I cast a blank vote. Only desperate remedies can cure desperate diseases, concluded the editorialist seraphically.

The celebrations did not last long. It's true that no one actually got around to going to work, but an awareness of the gravity of the situation soon muted the demonstrations of joy, someone even asked, What have we got to be happy about, when they've just put us in isolation as if we were plague victims in quarantine, with an army out there with their rifles cocked, ready to fire at anyone who tries to leave the city, what possible reason have we got to be happy. And others said, We must organize ourselves, but they didn't know how or with whom or why. Some suggested that a group should go and talk to the leader of the city council to offer him their loyal support, to explain that the people who cast the blank votes had not done so in order to bring down the system and to take power, they wouldn't know what to do with it anyway, that they had voted the way they voted because they were disillusioned and could find no other way of making it clear just how disillusioned they were, that they could have staged a revolution, but then many people would undoubtedly have died, something they would never have wanted, that all their lives they had patiently placed their vote in the ballot box, and the results were there for all to see, This isn't democracy, sir, far from it. Others were of the opinion that they should consider the facts more carefully, that it would be best to let the council have the first word, if we go to them with all these explanations and ideas, they'll think there's some political organization behind it, pulling the strings, and we're the only ones who know that isn't true, they're in a tricky situation too, mind, the government has left them holding a real hot potato, and we don't want to make it any hotter, one newspaper proposed that the council should assume full authority, but what authority, and how, the

police have left, there isn't even anyone to direct the traffic, we certainly can't expect the councillors to go out into the streets and do the work of the very people they used to give orders to, there's already talk of the refuse collectors going on strike, if that's true, and we shouldn't be surprised if it is, it can only be seen as a provocation, either on the part of the council itself or, more likely, under orders from the government, they're going to do everything possible to make our lives more difficult, we have to be prepared for anything, including or, perhaps, especially, those things that now seem impossible to us, after all, they're holding the whole deck of cards, not to mention the cards up their sleeves. Others, of a pessimistic and fearful bent, felt that there was no way out of the situation, that they were doomed to failure, it'll all pan out the way it always does, with every man for himself and to hell with the others, the moral imperfection of the human race, as we have often said before, is hardly a novelty, it's historical fact, as old as the hills, it might seem now that we're all very supportive of each other, but tomorrow the bickering will start, and the next stage will be open war, discord, confrontation, while they sit back and enjoy it from their ringside seats, laying bets on how long we'll hold out, it'll be fine while it lasts, my friend, but defeat is certain and guaranteed, I mean, let's be reasonable, who could possibly have thought that something like this would get us what we wanted, people en masse casting blank votes and completely unprompted, it's madness, the government hasn't quite got over its surprise yet and is still trying to catch its breath, but the first victory has gone to them, they've turned their backs on us and told us we're nothing but a pile of shit, which, in their opinion, is what we are, and then there's the pressure from abroad to consider too, I bet you anything you like that right now governments and political parties all around the world are thinking of nothing else, they're not stupid, they can see how easily this could become a fuse, light it here and wait for the explosion over there, but then, if all we are to them is a pile of shit, then let's be shit all the way, shoulder to shoulder, because they're bound to get splattered with some of the shit that we supposedly are.

The next day, the rumor was confirmed, the refuse trucks did not go out onto the streets, the refuse collectors had announced an all-out strike and had made public a demand for more pay which a council spokesperson had immediately pronounced completely unacceptable, still less at a time like this, he said, when our city is grappling with an entirely unprecedented crisis from which it is difficult to see a way out. In the same alarmist vein, a newspaper which, from its inception, had specialized in acting as an amplifier of all governmental strategies and tactics, regardless of the government's party colors, whether from the middle, the right or any shade in between, published an editorial signed by the editor himself in which he stated that it was highly likely that the rebellion by the capital's inhabitants would end in a bloodbath if, as everything seemed to indicate, they refused to abandon their stubborn stance. No one, he said, could deny that the government's patience had been stretched to unthinkable limits, no one could expect them to do more, if they did, we would lose, possibly for ever, that harmonious binomial authority-obedience in whose light the happiest of human societies had always bloomed and without which, as history has amply shown, none of them would have been feasible.

The editorial was read, extracts were broadcast on the radio, the editor was interviewed on television, and then, at midday exactly, while all this was going on, from every house in the city there emerged women armed with brooms, buckets and dustpans, and, without a word, they started sweeping their own patch of pavement and street, from the front door as far as the middle of the road, where they encountered other women who had emerged from the houses opposite with exactly the same objective and armed with the same weapons. Now, the dictionaries state that someone's patch is an area under their jurisdiction or control, in this case, the area outside somebody's house, and this is quite true, but they also say, or at least some of them do, that to sweep your own patch means to look after your own interests. A great mistake on your part, O absentminded philologists and lexicographers, to sweep your own patch started out meaning precisely what these women in the capital are doing now, just as their mothers and grandmothers before them used to do in their villages, and they, like these women, were not just looking after their own interests, but after the interests of the community as well. It was possibly for this same reason that, on the third day, the refuse collectors also came out onto the street. They were not in uniform, they were wearing their own clothes. It was the uniforms that were on strike, they said, not them.

THE INTERIOR MINISTER, WHOSE IDEA THE STRIKE HAD BEEN, WAS NOT at all pleased to learn of the refuse collectors' spontaneous return to work, a stance which, in his ministerial understanding of the matter, was not a demonstration of solidarity with the admirable women who had made cleaning their streets a question of honor, a fact unhesitatingly recognized by any impartial observer, but bordered, rather, on criminal complicity. As soon as he received the bad news, he phoned the leader of the city council and commanded him to bring to book those responsible for disregarding orders and to force them to obey, which, in plain language, meant going back on strike, under penalty, if their insubordination continued, of all the punitive consequences foreseen by the laws and regulations, from suspension without pay to outright dismissal. The council leader replied that problems always seem much easier to resolve when seen from a distance, but the person on the ground, the person who actually has to deal with the workers, must listen to them closely before making any decisions, For example, minister, just imagine that I was to give that order to the men, I'm not going to imagine anything, I'm telling you to do it, Yes, minister, of course, but at least allow me to imagine it, for example, I can imagine giving them the order to go back on strike and them telling me to go and take a running jump, what would you do in that case, if you were in my position, how would you force them to do their duty, In the first place, no one would tell me to take a running jump, in the second place, I am not and never will be in your position, I am a minister, not a council leader, and while I'm on the subject, I would just like to say that I would expect from a council leader not only the official and institutional collaboration to which he is, by law, committed and which is my natural due, but also an esprit de corps which, it seems to me, is currently conspicuous by its absence, You can always count on my official and institutional collaboration, minister, I know my obligations, but as for esprit de corps, perhaps we'd better not talk about that just now, let's see how much of it is left when this crisis is over, You're running away from the problem, council leader, No, I'm not, minister, I simply need you to tell me how I am supposed to force the workers to go back on strike, That's your problem, not mine, Now it's my esteemed party colleague who is trying to run away from the problem, Never in my entire political career have I run away from a problem, Well, you're running away from this one, you're trying to run away from the obvious fact that I have no means at my disposal by which to carry out your order, unless you want me to call in the police, but, in that case, I would remind you that the police are not here, they left the city along with the army, both of them carried off by the government, besides, I'm sure we would agree that it would be a gross abnormality to use the police to persuade workers to go on strike, when, in the past, they have always been deployed to break strikes up, by infiltration or other less subtle means, Well, I'm astonished to hear a member of the party on the right talking like that, Minister, in a few hours' time it will be dark, and I will have to say that it is night, I would have to be either stupid or blind to say then that it is day, What has that got to do with the strike, Whether you like it or not, minister, it is night now, pitch-black night, we know that something is happening that goes far beyond our understanding, that exceeds our meagre experience, but we are behaving as if it were the same old bread, made with the usual flour and cooked in the usual oven, but it's simply not true, You know, I will

seriously have to consider asking you to tender your resignation, If you do, it will be a weight off my shoulders, and you can count on my profound gratitude. The interior minister did not reply at once, he allowed a few seconds to pass in order to recover his composure, then he asked, So what do you think we should do, Nothing, My dear fellow, in a situation like this, you cannot ask a government to do nothing, Allow me to say that in a situation like this, a government doesn't govern, it just looks as if it were governing, There I must disagree, we've managed to do a few things since this whole thing began, Yes, we're like a fish on a hook, we thrash about, we shake the line, we tug at it, but we cannot understand how a little piece of bent wire could be capable of catching us and keeping us trapped, we might yet escape, I'm not saying we won't, but we risk ending up with the hook stuck in our gut, Frankly, I'm confused, There is only one thing to do, What's that, didn't you just say there was no point in our doing anything, Just pray that the prime minister's strategy works, What strategy, Leave them to simmer, he said, but I'm afraid even that could rebound against us, Why, Because they are the ones doing the cooking, So we do nothing, Let's be serious, minister, would the government be prepared to put an end to this farcical state of siege by ordering the army and the air force in to attack the city, to wound and kill ten or twenty thousand people just to set an example, and then put three or four thousand more in prison, accused of no one quite knows what because no real crime has been committed, This isn't a civil war, all we want is to make people see reason, to show them the error into which they have fallen or were made to fall, that's what we need to do, to make them realize that the unfettered use of the blank ballot paper would make the democratic system unworkable, The results so far haven't, it would seem, been exactly brilliant, It will take time, but people will, in the end, see the light, Why, minister, I had no idea you had mystical tendencies, My dear fellow, when situations become as complicated and as desperate as this, we tend to grab hold of anything, I'm even convinced that some of my colleagues in government, if they thought it would do any good, wouldn't be averse to going on a pilgrimage to a shrine, candle in hand, to make a vow, While we're on the subject, I would appreciate you and your candle visiting a few shrines here of a rather different nature, Meaning, Can you please tell the newspapers and the television and radio people not to pour more petrol on the bonfire, if we don't act sensibly and intelligently, this whole thing could explode, you must have heard that the editor of the government newspaper was stupid enough to admit the possibility that this could all end in a bloodbath, It's not a government newspaper, If you'll allow me to say so, minister, I would have preferred to hear some other comment from you, The little man went too far, he overstepped the mark, it's what always happens when someone tries to do more than he was asked to do, Minister, Yes, What shall I do about the council refuse collectors, Let them work, that way the city council will look good in the eyes of the populace and that could prove useful to us in the future, besides, the strike was, of course, only one element in the strategy, and certainly not the most important, It wouldn't be good for the city, now or in the future, if the city council were to be used as a weapon of war against its citizens, In a situation like this, the council can't afford to remain on the sidelines, the council is, after all, part of this country and no other, But I'm not asking you to let us remain on the sidelines, all I ask is that the

government doesn't put any obstacles in my way when it comes to exercising my responsibilities, that it should, at no point, give the public the impression that the city council is merely a tool, if you'll forgive the expression, of its repressive policies, firstly, because it isn't true, and secondly, because it never will be, Um, I'm afraid I don't quite understand or perhaps I understand all too well, One day, minister, although when I don't know, this city will once again be the country's capital, That's possible, but by no means certain, it depends how far they want to take their rebellion, Be that as it may, it is vital that this council, whether with me as leader or with someone else, should never be seen, however indirectly, to be an accomplice in or a co-author of a bloody repression, the government that orders such a repression will have no alternative but to take the consequences, but the council, this council, belongs to the city, the city does not belong to the council, I hope I have made myself clear, minister, You've made yourself so clear that I'm going to ask you a question, Feel free, minister, Did you cast a blank vote, Could you repeat the question, please, I didn't quite hear, I asked if you cast a blank vote, I asked if the ballot paper you put in the box was blank, Who can say, minister, who can say, When all this is over, I hope we can meet and have a long conversation, As you wish, minister, Goodbye, Goodbye, What I'd really like to do is come over there and give you a clip round the ear, Alas, I'm too old for that, minister, If you ever become interior minister, you will learn that clips round the ear and other such correctives have no age limit, Don't let the devil hear you, minister, The devil has such good hearing he doesn't need things to be spoken out loud, Well, god help us then, There's no point asking him for help either, he was born stone-deaf.

Thus ended this illuminating and prickly conversation between the interior minister and the council leader, with each having bandied about points of view, arguments and opinions which will, in all probability, have disoriented the reader, who must now doubt that the two interlocutors do in fact belong, as he or she thought, to the party on the right, the very party which, as the administrative power, is carrying out a vile policy of repression, both on a collective level, with the capital city submitted to the humiliation of a state of siege ordered by the country's own government, and on an individual level, with harsh interrogations, lie detectors, threats and, who knows, the very worst kinds of torture, although the truth impels us to say that if any such tortures were carried out, we could not bear witness to them, we were not there, not, however, that this means very much, for we were not present either at the parting of the red sea, and yet everyone swears that it happened. As for the interior minister, you must already have noticed that in the armor of the indomitable fighter, which he tries so hard to appear to be when locked in combat with the defense minister, there is a subtle fault, or to put it more colloquially, a crack big enough to poke your finger through. Were that not so, we would not have been witness to the successive failures of his plans, and the speed and facility with which the blade of his sword grows blunt, as this dialogue has just confirmed, for while he came in like lion, he went out like a lamb, if not something worse, one has only to look, for example, at the lack of respect evident in his categorical statement that god was born stone-deaf. As regards the council leader, we are, to use the words of the

interior minister, pleased to note that he has seen the light, not the one the minister would like the capital's voters to see, but the light that those casters of blank votes hope that someone will begin to see. The most common occurrence in this world of ours, in these days of stumbling blindly forward, is to come across men and women mature in years and ripe in prosperity, who, at eighteen, were not just beaming beacons of style, but also, and perhaps above all, bold revolutionaries determined to bring down the system supported by their parents and to replace it, at last, with a fraternal paradise, but who are now equally firmly attached to convictions and practices which, having warmed up and flexed their muscles on any of the many available versions of moderate conservatism, become, in time, pure egotism of the most obscene and reactionary kind. Put less respectfully, these men and these women, standing before the mirror of their life, spit every day in the face of what they were with the sputum of what they are. The fact that a politician belonging to the party on the right, a man in his forties, who has spent his whole life under the parasol of a tradition cooled by the air-conditioning of the stock exchange and lulled by the steamy zephyr of the markets, should have been open to the revelation, or, indeed, manifest certainty, that there was some deeper meaning behind the gentle rebellion in the city he had been appointed to administer, is something that is both worthy of record and deserving of our gratitude, so unaccustomed have we become to such singular phenomena.

It will not have gone unnoticed, by particularly exacting readers and listeners, that the narrator of this fable has paid scant, not to say non-existent, attention to the place in which the action described, albeit in rather leisurely fashion, is taking place. Apart from the first chapter, in which there were a few careful brushstrokes applied to the area of the polling station, although, even then, these were applied only to doors, windows and tables, and with the exception of the polygraph, that machine for catching liars, everything else, which is quite a lot, has passed as if the characters in the story inhabited an entirely insubstantial world, were indifferent to the comfort or discomfort of the places in which they found themselves, and did nothing but talk. In the room in which the government of the country has, more than once, and occasionally with the presence and participation of the president, gathered to debate the situation and take the necessary measures to pacify minds and restore peace to the streets, there would doubtless be a large table around which the ministers would sit on comfortable, upholstered chairs, and on which there were bound to be bottles of mineral water and glasses to match, pencils and pens in different colors, markers, reports, books on legislation, notebooks, microphones, telephones, and all the usual paraphernalia one finds in places of this calibre. There would be ceiling lights and wall lights, there would be padded doors and curtained windows, there would be rugs on the floor, there would be paintings on the walls and perhaps an antique or modern tapestry, there would, inevitably, be a portrait of the president, a bust representing the republic and the national flag. None of this has been mentioned, nor will it be mentioned in future. Even here, in the more modest, but nonetheless spacious office of the leader of the city council, with a balcony overlooking the square and a large aerial photograph of the city hanging on the main wall, there

would be ample opportunity to fill a page or two with detailed descriptions, and to make the most of that generous pause in order to take a deep breath before confronting the disasters to come. It seems to us far more important to observe the anxious lines furrowing the brow of the council leader, perhaps he is thinking that he said too much, that he gave the interior minister the impression, if not the stark certainty, that he had joined the ranks of the enemy, and that, by his imprudence, he would, perhaps irremediably, have compromised his political career inside and outside the party. The other possibility, as remote as it is unimaginable, would be that his reasoning might have given the interior minister a push in the right direction and caused him to rethink entirely the strategies and tactics with which the government hopes to put an end to the sedition. We see him shake his head, a sure sign that, having swiftly examined the possibility, he has discarded it as being foolishly ingenuous and dangerously unrealistic. He got up from the chair where he had remained seated throughout his conversation with the minister and went over to the window. He did not open it, he merely drew back the curtain a little and gazed out. The square looked as it always did, various passers-by, three people sitting on a bench in the shade of a tree, the café terraces and their customers, the flower-sellers, a woman and a dog, the newspaper kiosks, buses, cars, the usual scene. I need to go out, he thought. He went back to his desk and phoned his chief administrative officer, I'm going out for a while, he said, tell any councillors who are in the building, but only if they ask for me, as for the rest, I leave you in charge, Certainly, sir, I'll tell your driver to bring the car round to the front door, Yes, if you would, but tell him that I won't be needing him, I'll drive myself, Will you be coming back to the town hall today, Yes, I hope so, but I'll let you know if I decide otherwise, Very well, How are things in the city, Oh, nothing very grave to report, the news we've received has been no more serious than usual, a few traffic accidents, the occasional bottleneck, a minor fire in which no one was hurt, a failed bank robbery, How did they manage, now that there are no police, The robber was an amateur, and the gun, although it was a real one, wasn't loaded, Where have they taken him, The people who disarmed him took him to a fire station, Whatever for, they haven't any facilities for detaining prisoners, Well, they had to put him somewhere, So what happened next, Apparently, the firemen spent an hour giving him a good talking-to and then let him go, There wasn't much else they could do, I suppose, No, sir, there wasn't, Tell my secretary to let me know when the car arrives, Yes, sir. The council leader leaned back in his chair, waiting, and his brow was again deeply furrowed. Contrary to the predictions of the gloom-mongers, there had been no more robberies, rapes or murders than before. It seemed that the police were, after all, not essential for the city's security, that the population itself, spontaneously and in a more or less organized manner, had taken over their work as vigilantes. The robbery at the bank was a case in point. No, the robbery at the bank, he thought, was irrelevant, the man had obviously been very nervous and unsure of himself, a mere novice, and the bank employees had seen that they were in no danger, but tomorrow it might be different, what am I saying, tomorrow, today, right now, over the last few days crimes will have been committed in the city that will obviously go unpunished, if we have no police, if the criminals aren't arrested, if there's no investigation and no trial, if the judges go home

and the courts don't work, criminality will inevitably increase, it's as if everyone were expecting the council to take over the policing of the city, they're asking for it, demanding it, protesting that without some form of security, there can be no peace of mind, and I keep wondering how, by issuing a call for volunteers, for example, by creating urban militias, surely we're not going to go out into the street dressed like gendarmes straight out of a comic opera, with uniforms rented from the theater's costume department, and what about guns, where are we going to get those, and what about using them, not just knowing how to use them, but being capable of using them, taking out a gun and firing it, can anyone imagine me, the councillors, the town hall civil servants, engaged in a rooftop pursuit of the midnight murderer, the Tuesday rapist or the white-gloved cat burglar of high-society salons. The phone rang, it was his secretary, Sir, your car is here, Thank you, he said, I'm going out now and I'm not sure yet whether I'll be back today or not, but if there are any problems, just call me on my mobile, Take care, sir, Why do you say that, Given the way things are, sir, that's the least we can wish each other, May I ask you a question, Of course, as long as I have an answer for it, If you don't want to, don't answer, What's the question, Who did you vote for, No one, sir, Do you mean you abstained, No, I mean that I cast a blank vote, Blank, Yes, sir, blank, And you're telling me just like that, You asked me the question just like that, And that gave you the confidence to reply, Just about, sir, but only just, If I understand you rightly, you also thought it could be a risk, Well, I hoped that it wouldn't be, As you see, your confidence was rewarded, Does that mean that I won't be asked to hand in my notice, No, you can sleep easy on that score, It would be far better if we didn't need to sleep in order to feel at ease, sir, Well put, Anyone could have said the same, sir, it certainly wouldn't win any literary prizes, You will have to be satisfied with my applause, then, That's reward enough, sir, So let's leave it that if you need me, you can call me on my mobile, Yes, sir, Right, then, I'll see you tomorrow, if not later on today, Yes, see you later, or tomorrow, replied the secretary.

The council leader quickly tidied up the papers scattered about his desk, most of them might have been written about another country and another century, not about this capital now, under a state of siege, abandoned by its own government, surrounded by its own army. If he tore them up, if he burned them, if he threw them in the wastepaper basket, no one would come to him demanding an explanation for what he had done, people had far more important things to think about now, the city, after all, is no longer part of the known world, it's a pot full of putrefying food and maggots, an island set adrift in a sea not its own, a dangerous source of infection, a place which, as a precautionary measure, has been quarantined until the plague becomes less virulent or until it runs out of people to kill and ends up devouring itself. He asked his secretary to bring him his raincoat, picked up his briefcase containing papers to be studied at home and went downstairs. The driver, who was waiting for him, opened the car door, They said you won't be needing me, sir, No, I won't, you can go home, See you tomorrow, then, sir, See you tomorrow. It's odd how we spend every day of our life saying goodbye, saying and hearing others say see you tomorrow when, inevitably, on one of those days, which will be someone's last, either the person we said it to will no longer be here, or we who said

it will not. We will see if on today's tomorrow, what we normally refer to as the following day, when the council leader and his chauffeur meet again, they will be capable of grasping what an extraordinary, near-miraculous thing it is to have said see you tomorrow and to find that what had been no more than a problematic possibility has come to pass as if it had been a certainty. The council leader got into his car. He was going for a drive around the city, to have a look at the people on the way, not in any hurry, but stopping now and then to get out and walk for a while, listening to what was being said, in short, taking the pulse of the city, assessing the strength of the incubating fever. From his childhood reading he remembered a king in some far eastern country, he wasn't sure now whether he had been a king or an emperor, he was, more than likely, the caliph of the time, who was in the habit of disguising himself and leaving his palace to go and mingle with the ordinary people, the lower orders, and to eavesdrop on what was said about him during frank exchanges in the squares and streets. The truth is that such exchanges would not have been as frank as all that, because in those days, as ever, there would have been no shortage of spies to take note of opinions, complaints and criticisms and of any embryonic conspiracies. It is an unvarying rule for those in power that, when it comes to heads, it is best to cut them off before they start to think, afterward, it might be too late. The council leader is not the king of this besieged city, and as for the vizier of the interior, he has exiled himself to the other side of the frontier and he will, at this moment, doubtless be in some meeting with his collaborators, we will find out who and why in a while. For this reason the council leader does not need to disguise himself with a false beard and moustache, the face he is wearing is the one he usually wears, except that it looks a little more preoccupied than normal, as we have noticed before from the lines on his forehead. A few people recognize him, but few say hello. Do not assume, however, that the indifferent or the hostile are to be found only amongst those who originally cast blank votes, and who would, therefore, see him as an adversary, quite a few voters from his own party and from the party in the middle also look at him with ill-disguised suspicion, not to say with clear antipathy, What's he doing around here, they will think, what's he doing mixing with this rabble of blankers, he should be at work earning his salary, perhaps now that the majority has changed hands, he's come looking for votes, well, if he has, he hasn't got a hope in hell, there won't be any elections round here for a while, if I was the government, I know what I would do, I'd get rid of this whole council and instead appoint a decent administrative committee, who could be trusted politically. Before continuing this story, it would be as well to explain that the use of the word blanker a few lines earlier was neither accidental nor fortuitous, nor was it a slip of the fingers on the computer keyboard, and it certainly isn't a neologism that the narrator has hastily invented in order to fill a gap. The term exists, it really does, you can find it in any up-to-date dictionary, the problem, if it is a problem, lies in the fact that people are convinced that they know the meaning of the word blank and of all its derivatives, and therefore won't waste their time going back to the source to check, or else they suffer from chronic intellectuallazyitis and stay right where they are, refusing to take even one step toward making a possibly beautiful discovery. No one knows who in the city first came up with it, which inquisitive researcher or chance

discoverer, but one thing is certain, the word spread rapidly and immediately took on the pejorative meaning that its very appearance seems to provoke. Although we may not previously have mentioned the fact, which is in every way deplorable, even the media, especially the state television channels, are already using the word as if it were one of the very worst of obscenities. When you see it written down, you don't notice it so much, but as soon as you hear it spoken with that angry curl of the lips and in that snide tone of voice, you would have to have the moral armor of a knight of the round table not to put a noose around your neck, don a penitent's tunic and walk along beating your chest and renouncing all your old principles and precepts, A blanker I was, a blanker no more, forgive me, my country, forgive me, my lord. The council leader, who will have nothing to forgive, since he is no one's lord and never will be, who will not even be a candidate at the next elections, has stopped watching the passers-by, he is looking now for signs of shabbiness, neglect, decline, and, at least at a first glance, he can find none. The shops and department stores are all open, although they don't appear to be doing much business, the traffic is flowing, impeded only by the occasional minor jam, there are no queues of anxious customers at the doors of the banks, the kind of queue that always forms in time of crisis, everything seems to be normal, there are no violent muggings, no shoot-outs or knife-fights, there is nothing but this luminous afternoon, neither too cold nor too hot, an afternoon that seems to have come into the world to satisfy all desires and to calm all anxieties. But not the council leader's unease or, to be more literary, his inner disquiet. What he feels, and he may be the only person amongst those passing by to feel this, is a kind of menace floating in the air, the kind that sensitive temperaments feel when the thick clouds covering the sky grow tense with waiting for the thunderbolt to fall, or as we might feel when a door creaked open in the darkness and a current of icy air brushed our cheek, when an awful feeling of foreboding opened the gates of despair to us, when a diabolical laugh sundered the delicate veil of the soul. Nothing concrete, nothing we could describe with any authority or objectivity, but the fact is that the council leader has to make a real effort not to stop the first person who passes and say to him, Be careful, don't ask me why or about what, just be careful, I've got a feeling that something bad is going to happen, If you, the council leader, with all your responsibilities, don't know, how do you expect me to, they would ask him, It doesn't matter, what matters is that you should be very careful, Is it some epidemic, No, I don't think so, An earthquake, This isn't an area prone to earthquakes, there's never been one here, A flood, then, a deluge, It's been years since the river broke its banks, What then, Look, I don't know, Forgive me for asking, You're forgiven before you've even asked, No offence, sir, but have you perhaps had one drink too many, you know what they say, the last one is always the worst, No, I only drink at mealtimes, and then only in moderation, I'm certainly not an alcoholic, Well, in that case, I don't understand, When it's happened, you will, When what has happened, The thing that is going to happen. Bewildered, his interlocutor glanced around him, If you're looking for a policeman to arrest me, said the council leader, don't bother, they've all gone, No, I wasn't looking for a policeman, lied the other man, I'd arranged to meet a friend here, oh, there he is, see you again, then, sir, and take care, you know, to be perfectly frank, if I were you, I'd go straight home to

bed, when you sleep you forget everything, But I never go to sleep at this hour, As my cat would say, all hours are good for sleeping, May I ask you a question too, Of course, sir, feel free, Did you cast a blank vote, Are you doing a survey, No, I'm just curious, but if you'd rather not answer, don't. The man hesitated for a second, then, very gravely, he replied, Yes, I did, it's not, as far as I know, forbidden to do so, No, it's not forbidden, but look at the result. The man seemed to have forgotten about his imaginary friend, Look, sir, I have nothing against you personally, I'm even prepared to acknowledge that you've done a good job on the city council, but I'm not to blame for what you call the result, I voted as I wanted to vote, within the law, now it's up to you, the council, to respond, if the potato's too hot, blow on it, Don't get upset, I just wanted to warn you, You still haven't told me about what, Even if I wanted to, I couldn't, Then I've been wasting my time here, Forgive me, your friend's waiting for you, There isn't any friend waiting, I was just using that as an excuse to get away, Then thank you for having stayed a little longer, Sir, Please don't stand on ceremony, From what I know about what goes on in people's minds, I would say that it's your conscience that's troubling you, For something I didn't do, Some people say that's the worst kind of remorse, for something you allowed to happen, Maybe you're right, I'll think about that, but, anyway, be careful, I will, sir, and thank you for the warning, Even though you still don't know what I'm warning you against, Some people deserve our trust, You're the second person who's said that to me today, Then you can safely say that you've had a very good day indeed, Thank you, See you again, sir, Yes, see you again.

The council leader walked back to where he had parked his car, he was pleased, at least he had managed to warn one person, if the man passed the word on, then in a matter of hours, the whole city would be on the alert, ready for whatever might happen, I'm clearly not in my right mind, he thought, the man won't say anything to anyone, he's not a fool like me, well, it's not foolishness exactly, the fact that I felt a threat I'm incapable of defining is my problem, not his, I should just take his advice and go home, any day during which we've been offered a piece of good advice can never be considered to have been wasted. He got into his car and phoned his office to say that he wouldn't be going back to the town hall. He lived in a street in the center, not far from the overground metro station that served a large part of the eastern sector of the city. His wife, who is a surgeon, will not be at home, she's on night duty at the hospital, and as for their two children, the boy is in the army, he might even be one of the men defending the frontier with a heavy machine-gun at the ready and a gas mask hanging round his neck, and the girl works abroad as a secretary-cum-interpreter for an international organization, of the sort that always build their vast, luxurious headquarters in the most important cities, important politically speaking, of course. She, at least, will have benefited from having a father well placed in the official system of favors received and paid back, made and returned. Since even the very best advice is, at best, only ever half-obeyed, the council leader did not go to bed. He looked through the papers he'd brought home with him, made decisions about some of them and put others aside for further examination. When supper time approached, he went into the kitchen, opened the fridge,

but found nothing that he fancied eating. His wife had prepared something for him, she wouldn't let him go hungry, but the effort of setting the table, heating up the food and then washing the dishes seemed to him tonight a superhuman one. He left the house and went to a restaurant. When he had sat down at a table and while he was waiting for his food to come, he phoned his wife. How's work, he asked her, Oh, not too bad, how about you, Oh, I'm fine, just a bit anxious, Well, in the current situation, I hardly need ask you why, No, it's more than that, a kind of inner shudder, a shadow, a bad omen, Hm, I had no idea you were superstitious, There's a time for everything, Where are you, I can hear voices, In a restaurant, I'll go home afterward, or perhaps I'll drop in and see you first, being council leader opens many doors, But I might be in the operating theater and I'm not sure how long I'll be, All right, I'll think about it, lots of love, And to you too, Loads, Tons. The waiter brought him his first course, Here you are, sir, enjoy your meal. He was just raising his fork to his mouth when an explosion shook the whole building, the glass in the windows inside and out shattered, tables and chairs were overturned, people were screaming and groaning, some were injured, others were stunned by the blast, others were trembling with fright. The council leader was bleeding from a cut to his face caused by a piece of glass. The restaurant had obviously been hit by the shock wave from an explosion. It must have been in the metro station, sobbed a woman struggling to get to her feet. Pressing a napkin to his wound, the council leader ran out into the street. Broken glass crunched beneath his feet, up ahead rose a thick column of black smoke, he thought he could even see the glow of flames, It happened, it's at the station, he thought. He had discarded the napkin when he realized that holding his hand to his head was slowing him down, now the blood was running freely down his face and neck and soaking into his shirt collar. Wondering if the service would still be working, he stopped for a moment to dial the emergency number on his mobile phone, but the nervous-sounding voice that answered told him that the incident had already been reported, It's the council leader here, a bomb has exploded in the main overground station in the eastern part of the city, send all the help you can, firemen, civil defense people, scouts, if there are any, nurses, ambulances, first-aid equipment, whatever you have to hand, oh, and another thing, if there is some way of finding out where any retired police officers live, call them too and ask them to come and help, The firemen are already on their way, sir, we're doing everything we can do. He rang off and started running again. Other people were running alongside him, some overtook him, his legs felt like lead and it was as if his lungs were refusing to breathe the thick, malodorous air, and a pain, a pain that rapidly fixed itself in his trachea, kept getting worse and worse. The station was about fifty meters away now, the gray, grubby smoke, illuminated by the fire, rose up in furious tangled skeins. How many dead will there be inside, who planted the bomb, the council leader was asking himself. The sirens of the fire engines could be heard getting closer now, the mournful wailing, more like someone asking for help than bringing it, grew shriller and shriller, at any moment now they will come hurtling round one of these corners. The first vehicle appeared as the council leader was pushing his way through the crowd of people who had rushed to see the disaster, I'm the council leader, he said, I'm the leader of the city council, let me through, please, and he felt painfully foolish having

to repeat this over and over, aware that the fact of being council leader would not open all doors to him, indeed, inside, there were people for whom the doors of life had closed once and for all. Within minutes, great jets of water were being projected through openings that had once been doorways and windows, or were aimed up into the air to soak the upper part of the buildings in order to reduce the risk of the fire spreading. The council leader went over to the chief fire officer, What do you make of it, he asked, It's the worst fire I've ever seen, in fact, it has a distinct whiff of arson about it, Don't say that, it's not possible, It may just be an impression, let's hope I'm wrong. At that moment, a television recording van arrived, followed by others from the press and the radio, now, surrounded by lights and microphones, the council leader is answering questions, How many lives do you think will have been lost, What information do you have so far, How many people have been injured, How many people have suffered burns, When do you think the station will be back to normal, Have you any idea who might have been behind the attack, Was any warning received before the explosion, If so, who received it and what measures were taken to evacuate the station in time, Do you think it was a terrorist attack carried out by a group with links to the subversive movement active in the city, Do you think there will be more such attacks, As council leader and sole authority left in the city, what means do you have to carry out the necessary investigations. When the rain of questions had stopped, the council leader gave the only possible reply in the circumstances, Some of these questions are outside my competence, and so I can't really answer them, I assume, however, that the government will be making an official statement soon, as for the other questions, all I can say is that we are doing everything humanly possible to help the victims, let's just hope we get there in time, at least for some of them, But how many dead are there, insisted a journalist, We'll only know that when we go into that inferno, so, until then, please, spare me any more stupid questions. The journalists protested that this was no way to treat the media, who were, after all, only fulfilling their duty to inform and therefore deserved to be treated with respect, but the council leader cut short this corporate speech, One of the newspapers today went so far as to call for a bloodbath, that didn't happen this time, the burned don't bleed, they just get fried to a crisp, now, please, let me through, I have nothing more to add, we'll let you know when we have any concrete information. There was a general murmur of disapproval, and further back a sneering voice said, Who does he think he is, but the council leader made no attempt to find out who the dissenter was, during the last few hours, he, too, had done nothing but ask, Who do I think I am.

Two hours later, the fire was declared to be under control, the intense heat from the charred ruins took another two hours to abate, but it was still impossible to know how many people had died. About thirty or forty people were taken to hospital, suffering from injuries of varying degrees of severity, having escaped the worst of the blast because they had been in a part of the ticket hall farthest from the place where the bomb had exploded. The council leader remained there until the fire had died down completely, and he only left when the fire chief told him, Go and rest, sir, leave us to deal with things, and do something about that cut on your face, I can't understand why no one here noticed it,

It's all right, they had more serious things on their minds. Then he asked, And now, Now we have to locate and remove the bodies, some will have been blown to pieces, most will have been burned, Yes, I don't know if I could bear that, In your present state, I don't think you could either, I'm a coward, It's not cowardice, sir, even I passed out the first time, Thank you, do what you can, All I can do is put out the last burning ember, which is nothing, At least you'll be here. Covered in soot, his cheek black with dried blood, he started walking grimly back home. His whole body ached, from running, from nervous tension, from being on his feet for hours. There was no point trying to phone his wife, the person who answered would doubtless tell him, I'm sorry, sir, your wife is in the operating theater, she can't come to the phone. On either side of the road, people were looking out of their windows, but no one recognized him. A real council leader travels in his official car, has a secretary with him to carry his briefcase, three bodyguards to clear a path for him, but the man walking along the street is a filthy, stinking tramp, a sad man on the verge of tears, a ghost to whom no one would even lend a bucket of water in which to wash his sheet. The mirror in the lift revealed to him the blackened face he would have had now if he had been in the ticket hall when the bomb exploded, Horror, horror, he murmured. He opened the door with tremulous hands and went straight to the bathroom. He took the first-aid box out of the cabinet, the packet of cotton wool, the hydrogen peroxide, some liquid disinfectant containing iodine, some large sticking plasters. He said to himself, It probably needs a few stitches. His shirt was stained with blood all the way down to the waistband of his trousers, I bled more than I thought. He took off his jacket, painfully undid the sticky knot of his tie and took off his shirt. His vest was stained with blood too, I should have a wash, get in the shower, no, don't be ridiculous, that would just wash away the dried blood covering the wound and start it bleeding again, he said softly, I should, yes, I should, I should what. The word was like a dead body he had stumbled upon, he had to find out what the word wanted, he had to remove the body. The firemen and the civil defense people are going into the station. They are carrying stretchers and wearing protective gloves, most of them have never before touched a burned body, now they will know what it is like. I should. He went out of the bathroom and into his study, where he sat down at his desk. He picked up the phone and dialed a confidential number. It is almost three o'clock in the morning. A voice answers, The interior minister's office, who's calling, It's the leader of the city council in the capital, I'd like to speak to the minister, it's extremely urgent, if he's in, can you please put me straight through to him, One moment, please. The moment lasted two minutes, Hello, A few hours ago, minister, a bomb exploded in the overground train station in the eastern sector of the city, we don't yet know how many people have died, but everything indicates that the death toll will be high, there are already about forty or fifty wounded, Yes, I know, The reason I'm phoning you now is that I've been at the scene of the explosion all this time, Very commendable. The council leader took a deep breath, then asked, Haven't you anything to say to me, minister, What do you mean, About who could have planted the bomb, Well, it seems fairly obvious, your friends who cast the blank votes have clearly decided to go in for a bit of direct action, Sorry, but I don't believe that, Whether you believe it or not, that is the truth, Is or will be, You can make up your

own mind about that, What happened here, minister, was a heinous crime, Yes, I suppose you're right, that's what people usually call it, Who planted the bomb, minister, You seem upset, why don't you get some rest and call me when it gets light, but not before ten o'clock, Who planted the bomb, minister, What are you trying to insinuate, A question is not an insinuation, it would be an insinuation if I were to tell you what we are both thinking at this moment, There's no reason on earth why my thoughts should coincide with those of the leader of a municipal council. Well, they do this time, Careful now, you're going too far, Oh, I'm not just going too far, I've arrived, What do you mean, That I am speaking to the person directly responsible for the blast, You're mad, If only I was, How dare you cast aspersions on a member of the government, it's unheard of, From now on, minister, I am no longer the council leader of this besieged city, We'll talk tomorrow, but bear in mind that I have no intention of accepting your resignation, You'll have to accept it, just pretend that I died, In that case, I warn you, in the name of the government, that you will bitterly regret doing so, in fact, you won't even have time to regret it if you don't keep quiet about this whole affair, but that shouldn't prove too difficult, given that you say you're dead, Yes, I never imagined anyone could be so dead. The communication was cut at the other end. The man who had been the council leader got up and went into the bathroom. He took off his clothes and stood under the shower. The hot water quickly washed away the dried blood that had formed over the wound and the blood began to flow again. The firemen have just found the first charred body.

TWENTY-THREE DEATHS SO FAR, AND WE'VE NO IDEA HOW MANY MORE they'll find under the rubble, that's at least twenty-three deaths, interior minister, said the prime minister, bringing the flat of his hand down on the newspapers that lay open on his desk, The media are almost unanimous in attributing the attack to some terrorist group with links to the insurrection by the blankers, sir, Firstly, purely as a matter of good taste, please do me the great favor of not using the word blanker in my presence, secondly, please explain what you mean by the expression almost unanimous, It means that there are only two exceptions, two newspapers who do not accept the version that is doing the rounds and who are demanding a proper investigation, Interesting, Read what this one says, sir. The prime minister read out loud, We Demand To Know Who Gave The Order, And this one, sir, less direct, but along the same lines, We Want The Truth Whoever It May Hurt. The interior minister went on, It's nothing to get alarmed about, I don't think we need worry, in fact, it's rather a good thing that there should be a few doubts, that way people can't say they're all speaking with their master's voice, Do you mean that twenty-three or more deaths don't worry you, It was a calculated risk, sir, In the light of what happened, a very badly calculated one, Yes, I suppose you could see it like that, We assumed it would be a less powerful bomb, just something to give people a bit of a fright, There was clearly an unfortunate failure in the chain of command, If only I could be sure that was the only reason, The order was, I can assure you, correctly given, you have my word, sir, Your word, interior minister, For what it's worth, sir, Yes, for what it's worth, In either case, we knew there would be deaths, But not twenty-three, Even if there had been only three, they would have been no less dead than these twenty-three, it isn't a question of numbers, No, but it is also a question of numbers, May I remind you that he who wills the ends, wills the means, Oh, I've heard that refrain many times before, And this won't be the last time, even if, next time, you hear it from someone else's lips, Appoint a commission of inquiry at once, minister, To reach what conclusions, prime minister, Just set it to work, we'll sort that out later, Very good, sir, Give all necessary help to the families of the victims, both those who died and those who are currently in hospital, tell the council to take charge of the funerals, In the midst of all this confusion, I forgot to inform you that the council leader has resigned, Resigned, why, Well, to be more precise, he walked out, At this precise moment, I don't really care whether he resigned or walked out, my question is why, He arrived at the station immediately after the explosion took place and his nerve went, he couldn't cope with what he saw, No one could, I know I couldn't, indeed, I imagine even you couldn't, minister, so there must be some other reason for his abrupt departure, He thinks the government is responsible, and he didn't just hint at his suspicions either, he was quite explicit about it, Do you think he was the one who passed the idea on to those two newspapers, Frankly, prime minister, I don't, and, believe you me, I would love to be able to lay the blame at his door, What will the man do now, His wife is a doctor, Yes, I know her, They'll have to get by until he finds a new job, And meanwhile, Meanwhile, prime minister, I will keep him under the strictest possible surveillance, if that's what you mean, Whatever was the man thinking of, he seemed so trustworthy, a loyal party member, with an excellent political career, a future, The minds of human beings are not always entirely at one with the world in which they

live, some people have trouble adjusting to reality, basically they're just weak, confused spirits who use words, sometimes very skilfully, to justify their cowardice, You're obviously something of an expert on the subject, did you glean all this from your own experiences, If I had, would I be in the post of interior minister, No, I suppose not, but everything is possible in this world, no doubt our finest torture specialists kiss their children when they get home, and some may even cry at the cinema, And I sir, am no exception, in fact, I'm just an old sentimentalist really, Glad to hear it. The prime minister leafed slowly through the newspapers, he looked at the photographs one by one with a mixture of repugnance and apprehension, and said, You probably want to know why I don't sack you, Yes, sir, I'm curious to know your reasons, Because if I did, people would think one of two things, either that, independent of the nature and degree of guilt, I considered you directly responsible for what had happened, or that I was quite simply punishing you for your supposed incompetence for not having foreseen the possibility of such an act of violence in abandoning the capital to its fate, Yes, knowing as I do the rules of the game, I thought those would be your reasons, Obviously, there's a third reason, possible, as all things are, but improbable, and therefore out of the question, What's that, That you might make public the truth behind the attack, You know better than anyone that no interior minister, in any age or in any country in the world, has ever opened his mouth to speak of the mean, dishonorable, treacherous, criminal deeds committed in the course of his work, so you can rest easy on that score because I will prove no exception, If it becomes known that we ordered the bomb to be planted, we will give the people who cast the blank votes the final reason they needed, If you'll forgive me, prime minister, that way of thinking offends against logic, Why, And, if you'll allow me to say so, it does an injustice to the usual rigor of your thinking, Get to the point, Whether they find out or not, if they are then shown to be right, it's because they were right already. The prime minister pushed the newspapers away and said, This whole business reminds me of the story of the sorcerer's apprentice, the one who couldn't control the magical forces he had unleashed, Who, in your view, prime minister, is the sorcerer's apprentice in this case, them or us, Well, I very much fear that both of us are, they set off down a dead-end road with no thought for the consequences, And we followed them, Exactly, and now it's just a matter of waiting to see what the next step will be, As far as the government is concerned, we simply have to keep up the pressure, although after what has just happened, we obviously don't want to take any further action right now, And what about them, If the information I received before coming here is true, then they are preparing to hold a demonstration, What on earth do they hope to achieve by that, demonstrations never achieve anything, if they did, we wouldn't allow them, Presumably they want to protest against the attack, and as for getting authorization from the ministry of the interior, on this occasion, they won't even have to waste their time asking for it, Will we ever get out of this mess, That is not a matter for sorcerers, prime minister, the fully qualified or the apprentices, but, in the end, as always, the strongest side will win, The one who is strongest at the last moment will win, and we haven't yet reached that moment, the strength we have now may not be sufficient by then, Oh, I have every confidence, prime minister, an organized state cannot

possibly lose a battle like this, it would be the end of the world, Or the beginning of another, Now I'm not quite sure what I should make of those words, prime minister, Well, don't go spreading it around that the prime minister is entertaining defeatist ideas, Such a thought would never even enter my head, Just as well, You were clearly speaking hypothetically, Of course, If you don't need me for anything else, I'll get back to work, The president tells me he's had a brilliant idea, What's that, He didn't want to go into detail, he is awaiting events, To some purpose one hopes, He is the president, That's what I meant, Keep me informed, Yes, prime minister, Goodbye, Goodbye, prime minister.

The information received by the ministry of the interior was correct, the city was preparing for a demonstration. The final death toll had risen to thirty-four. No one knows where or how the idea came about, but it was immediately taken up by everyone, the bodies were not to be buried in cemeteries like the ordinary dead, their graves were to remain *per omnia sæ sæculorum* in the landscaped area opposite the station. However, a few families known for their right-wing allegiances and who were utterly convinced that the attack had been the work of a terrorist group with, as all the media affirmed, direct links to the conspiracy against the present government, refused to hand over their innocent dead to the community. Yes, they clamored, they truly were innocent of all guilt, because they had all their lives respected their own rights and those of others, because they had voted as their parents and their grandparents had, because they were orderly people and had now become the victims and martyrs of this murderous act of violence. They also alleged, in another tone entirely, perhaps so as not to scandalize anyone with such a lack of civic solidarity, that they had their own historical family vaults and it was a deep-rooted family tradition that those who had always been united in life should remain so after death, again *per omnia sæcula sæculorum*. The collective burial would not, therefore, be of thirty-four bodies, but twenty-seven. This was still a large number of people. Sent by who knows who, but certainly not by the council, which, as we know, will be without a leader until the interior minister approves the necessary appointment of a replacement, anyway, as we were saying, sent by who knows who, there appeared in the garden a vast machine with many arms, one of those so-called multipurpose machines, like a gigantic quick-change artist, which can uproot a tree in the time it takes to utter a sigh and which would have been capable of digging twenty-seven graves in less time that it takes to say amen, if the gravediggers from the cemeteries, who were equally attached to tradition, had not turned up to carry out the work by hand, that is, using spade and shovel. What the machine had, in fact, come to do was to uproot half a dozen trees that were in the way, so that the area, once trodden down and leveled, looked as if it had been born to be a cemetery and a place of eternal rest, and then it, the machine that is, went off and planted the trees and the shade that they cast elsewhere.

Three days after the attack, in the early morning, people started to flood out into the streets. They were silent and grave-faced, many carried white flags, and all wore a white armband on their left arm, and don't let any experts in the etiquette of funeral rites go

telling you that white cannot be a sign of mourning, when we are reliably informed that it used to be so in this very country, and we know that it has always been so for the Chinese, not to mention the Japanese, who, if it was left up to them, would all be wearing blue. By eleven o'clock, the square was already full, but all that could be heard was the great breathing of the crowd, the dull whisper of air entering and leaving lungs, in and out, feeding with oxygen the blood of these living beings, in, out, in, out, until suddenly, we will not finish the phrase, that moment, for those who have come here, the survivors, has not yet come. There were innumerable white flowers, quantities of chrysanthemums, roses, lilies, especially arum lilies, the occasional translucent white cactus flower, and thousands of marguerites which were forgiven their black hearts. Lined up twenty paces apart, the coffins were lifted onto the shoulders of the relatives and friends of the deceased, those who had them, and carried in procession to the graves, where, under the skilled guidance of the professional gravediggers, they were slowly lowered down on ropes until, with a hollow thud, they touched bottom. The ruins of the station still seemed to give off a smell of burned flesh. It will seem incomprehensible to some that such a moving ceremony, such a poignant display of collective grief, was not graced by the consolatory influence that would doubtless have come from the ritual practices of the country's sundry religious institutions, thus depriving the souls of the dead of their most certain viaticum and depriving the community of the living of a practical demonstration of ecumenicalism that might have contributed to leading the straying population back to the fold. The reason for this deplorable absence can only be explained by the various churches' fear that they might become the focus of suspicions, possibly tactical, or at worst strategic, of conniving with the blank-voting insurgency. This absence might also have to do with a number of phone calls, with minimal variations on the same theme, made by the prime minister himself, The nation's government would find it deeply regrettable if the chance presence of your church at the funeral service, while, of course, spiritually justified, should come to be considered, and subsequently exploited, as evidence of your political, and even ideological, support for the stubborn and systematic disrespect with which a large part of the capital's population continues to treat the legitimate and constitutional democratic authority. The burials were, therefore, purely secular, which is not to say that, here and there, a few private, silent prayers did not rise up to the various heavens to be welcomed there with benevolent sympathy. The graves were still open, when someone, doubtless with the best of intentions, stepped forward to give a speech, but this was immediately repudiated by the other people present, No speeches, we each have our own grief and we all feel the same sorrow. And the person who came up with this clear formulation of feelings was quite right. Besides, if that were the intention of the frustrated orator, it would be impossible to make a funeral oration for twenty-seven people, both male and female, not to mention some small child with no history at all. Unknown soldiers do not need the names that they used in life in order to be showered with the right and proper honors, and that's fine, if that's what we agree to do, but if these dead, most of them unrecognizable, and two or three of them still unidentified, want anything, it is to be left in peace. To those punctilious readers, showing a praiseworthy concern for the good ordering of the story, who want to know

why the usual, indispensable DNA tests were not carried out, the only honest answer we can give is our own total ignorance, allow us, however, to imagine that the famous and much-abused expression, Our dead, so commonplace, so much part of the routine patter of patriotic harangues, were to be taken literally in these circumstances, that is, if these dead, all of them, belong to us, we should not consider any of them exclusively ours, which would mean that any DNA analysis which took into account all the factors, including, in particular, the non-biological ones, and however hard it rummaged around inside the double helix, would only succeed in confirming a collective ownership which required no proof anyway. That man, or perhaps woman, had more than enough reason to say, as we noted above, Here, we each have our own grief and we all feel the same sorrow. Meanwhile, the earth was shoveled back into the graves, the flowers were shared out equally, those who had reasons to weep were embraced and consoled by the others, if such a thing is possible with such a recent grief. The loved one of each person, of each family, is here, although one does not know quite where, perhaps in this grave, perhaps in that, it would be best if we wept over all of them, as a shepherd once so rightly said, although heaven knows where he learned it, One can show no greater respect than to weep for a stranger.

The trouble with these narrative digressions, taken up as we have been with bothersome detours, is that one can find, too late, of course, almost without noticing, that events have moved on, have gone on ahead, and instead of us announcing what is about to happen, which is, after all, the elementary duty of any teller of tales worth his salt, all we can do is to confess contritely that it already has. Contrary to what we had supposed, the crowd has not dispersed, the demonstration continues and is now advancing en masse, filling the streets, in the direction, as the shouts are telling us, of the presidential palace. And on the way lies neither more nor less than the prime minister's official residence. The journalists from press, radio and television, who are at the head of the demonstration, take nervous notes, describe the events over the phone to the offices where they work, and excitedly unburden themselves of their professional and citizenly disquiets, No one seems to know quite what is going to happen, but we have reason to fear that the crowd is preparing to storm the presidential palace, which does not exclude, indeed we would say it remains highly likely, the possibility that they will also sack the prime minister's official residence and any ministerial buildings they pass on the way, this is not some apocalyptic vision, the mere fruit of our own fears, you have only to see the people's distraught faces, it would be no exaggeration to say that each of those faces is calling for blood and destruction, and thus, although it pains us to have to say this out loud and to the whole country, we reach the dreadful conclusion that the government, which has shown itself to be so efficient in other ways and was, for that very reason, applauded by all honest citizens, acted with a reprehensible lack of caution when it decided to abandon the city to the instincts of the angry mob, without the fatherly, dissuasive presence of the police on the streets, with no riot squads, with no tear-gas, no water-cannon, no dogs, in a word, unchecked. This speech warning of certain disaster reached a peak of media hysteria when they came in sight of the prime

minister's residence, a bourgeois mansion, late-eighteenth-century in style, where the journalists' shouts became screams, Now, now, anything could happen, may the holy virgin protect us all, may the glorious and revered spirits of our nation, up there in the empyrean into which they ascended, quell the wrathful hearts of these people. Anything could have happened, it's true, but, in the end, nothing did, apart from the demonstration, the small section of it that we can see, coming to a halt at the crossroads where the mansion, with its small surrounding park, occupies one corner, the rest of the crowd spilled over onto the pavements, into the adjoining squares and streets, if the police arithmeticians were here, they would say that, all in all, there were only about fifty thousand people, when the exact number, the real number, because we counted them all, one by one, was ten times higher.

It was here, where the demonstration had come to a halt and was standing in absolute silence, that a sharp-eyed television reporter discovered amidst that sea of heads a man whose face, despite half of it being covered by a dressing, he nonetheless recognized, especially since he had been lucky enough to catch a fleeting glimpse of his normal, healthy face, which, as is perfectly understandable, both confirms and is confirmed by the wounded half. Dragging his cameraman along behind him, the reporter began pushing his way through the crowd, saying to the people on either side of him, Excuse me, excuse me, may I come through, out of the way, please, this is very important, and then, when he was getting close, Sir, sir, excuse me, although what he was thinking was less polite, What the hell is this guy doing here. Reporters usually have good memories and this particular reporter had not forgotten the public attack delivered by the council leader on the night of the bomb blast and of which the news networks had been the entirely undeserving targets. Now the council leader would find out just how wounded they had been. The reporter stuck the microphone in his face and made a kind of secret sign to the cameraman which could as easily have meant Start recording as Beat him to a pulp, and which, in the present situation, probably meant both, Sir, may I say how astonished I am to see you here, Astonished, why, For the reason I've just given, to see you taking part in this demonstration, Well, I'm a citizen like any other, I can demonstrate when and how I want to, especially now that there's no need to ask for authorization, But you're not just any citizen, you're the council leader, No, I'm not, I stopped being council leader three days ago, I'd have thought that was common knowledge by now, It's the first I've heard of it, we haven't received any official statement about it as yet, from the council or from the government, You're surely not expecting me to call a press conference, You resigned, No, I walked out, Why, The only answer I have is a closed mouth, mine, The city's population will want to know why their council leader, As I said, I'm no longer council leader, Why their council leader has joined an anti-government demonstration, This is not an anti-government demonstration, it's a demonstration of grief, the people here came to bury their dead, The dead have been buried and yet the demonstration is continuing, how do you explain that, Ask these other people, At the moment, it's your opinion I'm interested in, Well, I'm just going where they're going, Do you sympathize with the electors who cast blank votes, with the

blankers, They voted as they wanted to vote, and whether I sympathize or not is irrelevant, And what about your party, what will they say when they find out you joined the demonstration, Ask them, You're not afraid they'll impose sanctions on you, No, What makes you so sure, For the simple reason that I no longer belong to the party, Did they expel you, No, I left, just as I left the post of council leader, What was the interior minister's reaction, Ask him, Who has taken over from you or will take over, Find out for yourself, Will we see you on more demonstrations, Turn up and you'll find out, So you've left the party on the right, in which you've spent your entire political career, and have gone over to the left, One day, I hope to understand just where it is I have gone, Sir, Don't call me that, Sorry, force of habit, and I have to confess to feeling confused, Careful, now, moral confusion, because I'm assuming your confusion is moral, is the first step along the path to disquiet and after that, as you yourselves are so fond of saying, anything can happen, No, I really am baffled, sir, I don't know what to think, Turn off the recording equipment, your bosses might not like what you just said, and, please, don't call me sir, The camera is already off, Just as well, that way you won't get yourself into any trouble, They say that the demonstration is heading for the presidential palace, Ask the organizers, Where are they, who are they, Everyone and no one, I suppose, There must be a leader, movements like this don't organize themselves, spontaneous generation doesn't exist, still less in the case of mass actions on this scale, Not until now, no, Do you mean that you don't believe the blank vote movement was spontaneous, It's outrageous of you to make such an inference, My impression is that you know much more about this business than you're letting on, The time always comes when we discover that we knew much more than we thought we did, now, leave me alone and get on with your job, find someone else to question, look, the sea of heads has started to move, What amazes me is that there isn't a single shout, a single long live or down with, not a single slogan saying what it is the people want, just this threatening silence that sends shivers down your spine, Forget the horror movie language, perhaps people are just tired of words, If people get tired of words, then I'll be out of a job, You won't say a truer word all day, Goodbye, sir, Once and for all, I'm not sir any more. The leading front quarter of the demonstration had turned back on itself, now it was going up a steep slope toward a long, broad avenue at the end of which it would turn to the right and receive on its face the cool caress of the breeze from the river. The presidential palace was about two kilometers away, on the flat. The reporters had received orders to leave the demonstration and to run on to take up positions outside the palace, but the general idea, amongst both the professionals working on the ground and those back at the editorial desks, was that, from the point of view of news interest, the coverage had been a pure waste of time and money, or to put it more crudely, a real kick in the balls for the media, or, in more delicate and refined terms, an undeserved slight. These guys aren't even any good at demonstrations, they said, they might at least throw the odd stone, burn the president in effigy, break a few windows, sing one of the old revolutionary songs, anything to show the world that they're not as dead as the people they've just buried. The demonstration did not live up to their expectations. The people arrived and filled the square, they stood for half an hour staring in silence at the closed-up palace,

then they dispersed, and, some walking, others in buses, still others cadging lifts from supportive strangers, they all went home.

This peaceful demonstration did what the bomb had failed to do. Troubled and frightened, the loyal voters of the party on the right and the party in the middle, or the p.o.t.r. and the p.i.t.m., gathered together in their respective family councils and decided, each according to their own lights, but unanimous as regards their final decision, to leave the city. They felt that the current situation, another bomb that might tomorrow be aimed at them, the rabble taking over the streets with absolute impunity, should convince the government of the need to revise the rigorous parameters they had established when imposing the state of siege, especially the scandalous injustice of having the same harsh punishment fall, without distinction, on the steadfast defenders of peace and on the declared fomenters of disorder. So as not to embark on this venture blindly, some of them, with friends in high places, set about sounding out by telephone the government's likely position on giving authorization, explicitly or tacitly, that would allow those who, quite rightly, were already beginning to describe themselves as prisoners in their own country, to enter free territory. The answers received, generally vague and in some cases contradictory, while not allowing them to draw hard and fast conclusions regarding the government's thinking on the matter, were, nevertheless, sufficient for them to admit as a valid hypothesis that, if certain conditions were observed and certain material compensations stipulated, the success of the escape, even though it was relative, even though not all their requests could be met, was, at least, conceivable, which meant that they could at least hold out some hope. For a week, in absolute secrecy, the committee responsible for organizing future convoys of cars, made up in equal numbers of militants of different categories from both parties and with the presence of consultants drawn from the capital's various moral and religious institutions, debated and finally approved an audacious plan of action which, in memory of the famous retreat of the ten thousand, received, on the suggestion of a learned hellenist from the party in the middle, the name of xenophon. The families who were candidates for emigration were given three days and no more to decide, with pencil in hand and a tear in the eye, what they could take with them and what they would have to leave behind. Human nature being what we know it to be, there were, inevitably, examples of selfish fancies, feigned distractions, treacherous appeals to an all-too-easy sentimentality, deceptively seductive maneuverings, but there were also cases of admirable selflessness, of the kind that still allow us to believe that if we persevere in these and other such gestures of worthy abnegation, we will, in the end, more than fulfil our small part in the monumental project of creation. The withdrawal was set for the early hours of the fourth day, which would, as it turned out, be a night of wild rain, but that would not be a problem, on the contrary, it would give this collective migration a touch of heroism to be remembered and inscribed in the family annals as a clear demonstration that not all the virtues of the race had been lost. Now, having to transport one person in a car quietly and with the weather in repose is not the same as having to keep the windscreen wipers flailing back and forth like mad things just to keep at bay the sheets of water falling from the sky. One grave problem,

which would be minutely debated by the committee, was the question placed on the table as to how the casters of blank votes, commonly known as blankers, would react to this mass flight. It is important to bear in mind that many of these anxious families live in buildings that are also inhabited by tenants who come from the other political shore and who might take a deplorably vengeful attitude and, to put it mildly, obstruct their departure or, more brutally, stop it altogether. They'll puncture our tyres, said one, They'll erect barricades on the landings, said another, They'll jam the lifts, offered a third, They'll put silicon in the locks of the cars, added the first, They'll smash the windscreens, suggested the second, They'll attack us as soon as we step out of the front door, They'll hold grandpa hostage, sighed another in such a way that made one think that this was, unconsciously, precisely what he wanted. The discussion went on, becoming more and more impassioned, until someone reminded them that the behavior of all those thousands of people during the demonstration had, however you looked at it, been impeccable, I'd even say exemplary, and consequently there seemed little reason to fear that things would now be any different, In fact, I think they'll be relieved to be rid of us, That's all very well, intervened a sceptic, they may be lovely people, wonderfully gentle and responsible, but there is something we have, alas, forgotten, What's that, The bomb. As we said on a previous page, this committee, of public salvation, as it occurred to someone to call it, a name that was immediately rejected for more than justified ideological reasons, was broadly representative, which means that on this occasion there were over two dozen people sitting round the table. You should have seen the reaction. Everyone else present bowed their head, then an admonitory look reduced to silence, for the rest of the meeting, the rash person who appeared to be ignorant of a basic tenet of social behavior which teaches that in the house of the hanged man, one should never mention the word rope. The embarrassing incident had one virtue, it brought everyone together in agreement on the optimistic thesis they had formulated. What happened next would prove them right. At precisely three o'clock on the morning of the appointed day, just as the government had done, the families started leaving home with their suitcases large and small, their bags and their bundles, their cats and their dogs, the occasional tortoise roused from its sleep, the occasional Japanese fish in a bowl, the occasional cage of parakeets, the occasional macaw on a perch. But the doors of the other tenants did not open, no one came out onto the landing to make fun of the spectacle, no one made jokes, no one insulted them, and it was not just because it was raining that no one went and leaned out of the windows to watch the convoys driving off in their different directions. Naturally, with all the noise, just imagine, going down the stairs dragging all that junk, the lifts buzzing up and down, the suggestions, the sudden alarms, Careful with the piano, careful with the tea service, careful with the silver platter, careful with the painting, careful with grandpa, naturally, we were saying, the tenants in the other apartments woke up, but none of them got out of bed to go and peer through the spyhole in the front door, they merely said to each other as they snuggled down beneath the blankets, They're leaving.

THEY ALMOST ALL CAME BACK. TO ECHO THE WORDS USED BY THE interior minister some days before when obliged by the prime minister to explain the discrepancy between the size of the bomb he had been ordered to plant and the bomb that had actually exploded, there was, in the case of this exodus, another grave failure in the chain of command. As experience has never tired of showing us, after long examination of many cases and their respective circumstances, victims not infrequently bear some responsibility for the misfortunes that befall them. Preoccupied as they were with political negotiations, none of which, as will soon become apparent, had been carried out at a high enough level to ensure the perfect execution of operation xenophon, the busy leaders of the committee had forgotten, or perhaps such a thing had simply never entered their heads, to check that the military would also be informed of their escape and, equally important, of the agreements they had reached. Some families, a half dozen at most, did manage to cross the line at one of the frontier posts, but this was because the young officer in charge had allowed himself to be convinced not just by the fugitives' repeated protestations of ideological purity and loyalty to the regime, but by their insistent declarations that the government knew about their retreat and had approved it. Meanwhile, in order to free himself from the doubts that soon assailed him, he phoned two other posts nearby, and his colleagues there were kind enough to remind him that their orders, since the beginning of the blockade, had been not to let through a living soul, not even someone on their way to save their father from the gallows or to give birth to a new baby in their house in the country. Terrified that he had made the wrong decision, which would doubtless be perceived as flagrant and possibly premeditated disobedience of orders received, with the consequent court-martial and more than likely loss of rank, the officer gave orders for the barrier to be lowered at once, thus blocking the kilometer-long caravan of cars and vans, all packed to the gills, that stretched back along the road. The rain continued to fall. Needless to say, brought face to face with their responsibilities, the committee members did not stand by waiting for the red sea to part. Mobile phone in hand, they started waking up all the influential people whom they felt they could safely be wrenched from sleep without provoking too angry a reaction, and it is quite possible that the whole complicated affair could have been resolved in the best possible way for the anxious fugitives had it not been for the fierce intransigence of the minister of defense, who decided to dig his heels in, No one gets through without my say-so, he said. As you will no doubt have guessed, the committee had forgotten to consult him. You might say that a minister of defense is not that important, that above a minister of defense there is a prime minister to whom the former owes obedience and respect, that higher still, is a president who is owed the same, if not greater, obedience and respect, although, if truth be told, as far as this particular president is concerned, this is mostly a matter of show. And indeed, after a hard dialectical battle between the prime minister and the minister of defense, in which the reasons put up by both sides flashed and flickered like an exchange of tracer bullets, the minister finally surrendered. He was greatly put out, it's true, and in the blackest of moods, but he nevertheless gave in. You will naturally want to know what decisive, unanswerable argument the prime minister used to force his recalcitrant interlocutor into submission. It was simple and direct, My dear minister, he said, put that brain of yours to

work and imagine the consequences tomorrow were we to shut the doors today on the very people who voted for us, As I recall, the order from the cabinet was to let no one pass, May I congratulate you on your excellent memory, but when it comes to orders, one has, from time to time, to be prepared to bend them, especially when it suits one to do so, which is precisely the case now, Sorry, I don't understand, Allow me to explain, tomorrow, once this problem has been resolved, with subversion crushed and spirits calmed, we will call new elections, isn't that right, It is, Do you think we could expect those we had turned away to vote for us again, No, they probably wouldn't, And we need those votes, remember, the party in the middle is hot on our heels, Yes, I understand, In that case, please give the order to allow the people to pass, Yes, sir. The prime minister put down the phone, looked at his watch and said to his wife, At this rate, I might be able to get another hour and a half or two hours' sleep, and added, I have a feeling that fellow will be sent packing at the next cabinet reshuffle, You shouldn't let people be so rude to you, said his other half, No one is ever rude to me, my love, they merely take advantage of my good nature, that's all, It comes to the same thing, she retorted, turning out the light. Before five minutes had passed, the telephone rang once more. It was the minister of defense again, Forgive me, prime minister, I'm sorry to interrupt your well-deserved rest, but unfortunately I have no option, What is it now, A detail we failed to notice, What detail, asked the prime minister, not bothering to disguise the touch of irritation he felt at the other man's use of we, It's quite simple, but very important, Get on with it and don't waste my time, Well, I was just wondering how we can be sure that all the people trying to leave the capital belong to our party, should we just take their word for it that they voted in the elections, couldn't some of the hundreds of vehicles queuing up along the roads be carrying subversive agents ready to infect with the blank plague the parts of the country that are as yet uncontaminated. The prime minister felt his heart contract when he realized he had been caught out, It's certainly a possibility to bear in mind, he murmured, That's precisely why I phoned you again, said the minister of defense, giving the screw another turn. The silence that followed these words demonstrated once more that time has nothing to do with the time told by clocks, those small machines made of wheels that do not think and springs that do not feel, devoid of a spirit that would allow them to imagine that five insignificant seconds counted off, one, two, three, four, five, could be an agonizing torment for the person at one end of the phone and a pool of sublime pleasure for the other. The prime minister drew one striped pajama sleeve across his forehead, which was now beaded with sweat, then, choosing his words carefully, he said, The matter clearly requires a different approach, a careful evaluation that looks at the problem in the round, cutting corners is always a mistake, My view precisely, How is the situation at the moment, asked the prime minister, Very tense on both sides, at some posts, they've even had to fire shots in the air, Do you have any suggestion to make as minister of defense, In more maneuverable conditions, I would order them to charge, but with all those cars blocking the roads, it's impossible, What do you mean charge, Well, I would get the tanks out, And when the snouts of the tanks came into contact with the first car, and I know tanks don't have snouts, it's just a manner of speaking, what, in your opinion, would happen then, People normally take

fright when they see a tank advancing on them, But, as I have just heard from your own lips, the roads are blocked, Yes, sir, So it wouldn't be easy for the car at the front to turn round, No, sir, it would be very difficult indeed, but then, one way or another, if we don't let them in, they're going to have to do that, But not in the state of panic that would inevitably be provoked by the sight of a phalanx of tanks with their guns pointing straight at them, No, sir, In short, you have no idea how to resolve the problem, said the prime minister, ramming the point home, sure now that he had taken back both control and the initiative, I'm afraid not, prime minister, Nevertheless, I am grateful to you for having drawn my attention to an aspect of the matter that had escaped me, It could have happened to anyone, Yes, to anyone, but it shouldn't have happened to me, You have so many things to think about, And now I have another, solving a problem for which the minister of defense has failed to find a solution, If that is how you feel, then I offer my resignation, Now I don't think I heard that and I don't think I want to, Yes, prime minister. There was another silence, shorter this time, barely three seconds, during which it was clear that the sublime pleasure and the agonizing torment had changed places. Another phone rang in the room. His wife answered it, she asked who was calling, then whispered to her husband, at the same time covering the mouthpiece of the phone, It's the interior minister. The prime minister gestured to her to wait, then issued his orders to the minister of defense, I want no more shots fired in the air and I want the situation stabilized until we can take the necessary measures, make it known to the people in the first few cars that the government is currently studying the situation and hopes to come up with proposals and directives shortly, and emphasize that everything will be resolved for the good of the country and of national security, May I remind you, prime minister, that there are hundreds of cars, So, We can't get the message to all of them, Don't worry, as long as the first cars at each post know, they'll make sure the information passes, like a powder trail, to the back of the queue, Yes, sir, Keep me informed, Yes, sir. The following conversation, with the interior minister, would be different, Don't waste any time telling me what's happened, I know already, They may not have told you that shots have been fired, It won't happen again, Ah, Now what we need to do is to get those people to turn round and go back, But if the army hasn't managed to do so, They haven't and they couldn't, you surely don't want the minister of defense to send in the tanks, Of course not, prime minister, From now on, the responsibility is yours, The police are no use in these situations and I have no authority over the army, Ah, but I wasn't thinking of the police, neither was I considering appointing you army chief of staff, Forgive me, prime minister, but I don't understand, Get your best speechwriter out of bed and put him straight to work, and meanwhile tell the media that the interior minister will speak on the radio at six o'clock, the television and the press can wait, it's the radio that matters now, It's almost five o'clock, prime minister, You don't have to tell me that, I have a watch, Sorry, I merely wanted to point out that there isn't much time, If your speechwriter can't come up with thirty lines in fifteen minutes, with or without syntax, then you'd better put him out in the street, And what should he write, Oh, any old line of argument that will convince these people to go home, that will inflame their patriotic feelings, tell them they're committing the crime of lèse-patrie by abandoning the capital to the subversive

hordes, tell them that all those who voted for the parties who built the current political system, including, inevitably, the party in the middle, our direct competitor, constitute the first line of defense of all democratic institutions, tell them that the homes they have left behind them unprotected will be burgled and looted by insurrectionist gangs, but don't tell them that we will, if necessary, burgle them ourselves, We could add that any citizen who decides to return home, regardless of age or social class, will be considered by the government to be a loyal promoter of legality, Promoter doesn't seem to me quite the right word, it's too vulgar, too commercial, besides, legality is getting more than enough promotion, we spend all our time talking about it, All right, then, defenders, heralds or legionnaires, Legionnaires is better, it sounds strong, martial, defenders is a term that lacks pride, it would give a negative impression of passivity, and heralds has a whiff of the middle ages about it, whereas the word legionnaire immediately suggests combative action, an aggressive mindset, and is also, as we know, a word with solid traditions, Let's just hope that the people on the road hear the message, It would seem, my dear fellow, that waking up too early clouds your perceptive faculties, I would bet my post as prime minister that at this very moment every one of those car radios is turned on, what matters is that news of the broadcast to the nation is announced at once and the announcement repeated every minute, What I fear, prime minister, is that these people may not be in a frame of mind to be convinced, if we tell them there's going to be a statement from the government, they will more than likely think that we're going to authorize them to cross the frontier, and their subsequent disappointment could have very grave consequences, It's very simple, your speechwriter is going to have to justify both the bread that he eats and his salary, he's got the lexical and rhetorical skills, let him sort it out, If I may just give voice to an idea that has only this minute occurred to me, Feel free to give voice to anything you like, but may I just point out that we are wasting time, it's already five past five, The statement would carry much more force if you, as prime minister, were to make it, Oh, I don't doubt it for a moment, In that case, why don't you, Because I am reserving myself for another occasion, one more suited to my station, Ah, I think I understand, It is, after all, merely a matter of common sense or, shall we say, hierarchical gradation, just as it would offend against the dignity of the nation's supreme court for the president to go on the radio to ask a few drivers to get off the roads, so must this prime minister be protected from everything that might trivialize his status as leader of the government, Hm, I see the idea, Good, it's a sign that you've finally managed to wake up, Yes, prime minister, And now to work, by eight o'clock at the latest, I want those roads cleared, and make sure the television companies get out there with all the terrestrial and aerial means at their disposal, I want the whole country to see the reports, Yes, sir, I'll do what I can, You won't do what you can, you will do what is necessary to obtain the results I have just demanded of you. The interior minister did not have time to respond, the prime minister had put the phone down. That's how I like to hear you talk, said his wife, Well, when someone gets my dander up, And what will he do if he can't solve the problem, He'll be given his marching orders and sent packing, Like the minister of defense, Exactly, You can't just dismiss ministers as if they were servants, They are servants, Yes, but you'll only have to find new ones, That is a subject that

requires calm consideration, What do you mean, consideration, Look, I'd rather not talk about it at the moment, But I'm your wife, no one can hear us, your secrets are my secrets, All I mean is that, bearing in mind the gravity of the situation, it would come as no surprise to anyone if I myself were to take on the portfolios of defense and the interior, that way the state of national emergency would be reflected in the structures and workings of the government, that is, total co-ordination and total centralization, that could be our watchword, It would be a huge risk, you could win everything or lose everything, Yes, but if I could triumph over a subversive action unparalleled anywhere, at any time, an action that attacked the system's most sensitive organ, that of parliamentary representation, then I would be assured of a lasting place in history, a unique place, as the savior of democracy, And I would be the proudest of wives, whispered his wife, slithering closer to him, as if touched by the magic wand of a rare brand of lust, a mixture of carnal desire and political enthusiasm, but her husband, conscious of the gravity of the hour and making his the harsh words of the poet, Why do you grovel before my rough boots? / Why do you loosen your perfumed hair / and treacherously open your soft arms? / I am nothing but a man with coarse hands / and a cold heart / and if, in order to pass, / I had to trample you underfoot / then, as you well know, I would trample you underfoot, abruptly threw off the bedclothes and said, I'm going to my study to keep an eye on developments, you go back to sleep, rest. The thought flashed through his wife's mind that, in a critical situation like this, when moral support would be worth its weight in gold, always supposing moral support had a weight, the widely accepted code of basic marital obligations, in the chapter on mutual help, determined that she should, without summoning the maid, immediately get up and prepare with her own hands a comforting cup of tea with the appropriate alimentary accompaniment of a few plain biscuits, instead, annoyed, frustrated, with her nascent lust quite evaporated, she turned over in bed and firmly closed her eyes, in the faint hope that sleep might still be able to make use of the remnants of that lust to put on a brief, private, erotic fantasy for her. Oblivious to the disappointments he had left behind him, and wearing over his striped pajamas one of those silk dressing-gowns adorned with exotic motifs, with Chinese pavilions and golden elephants, the prime minister went into his study, turned on all the lights, and switched on first the radio and then the television. The television screen still showed only the test card, it was too early for broadcasting to begin, but all the radio stations were already talking animatedly about the monstrous traffic jams on the roads, and opinions were bandied about on what was clearly an attempt at a mass escape from the unhappy prison into which the capital, through its own stupid fault, had been transformed, although there were also comments to the effect that such an unusually large circulatory blockage would mean that the vast trucks that brought food into the city every day would be unable to get through. These commentators did not yet know that these same trucks were being held, on strict orders from the army, three kilometers from the frontier. Radio reporters, traveling on motorbikes, questioned people all along the lines of cars and vans and were able to confirm that this was, indeed, a properly organized collective action, bringing together whole families, in order to escape the tyranny and the suffocating atmosphere which the

forces of subversion had imposed on the city. Some household heads complained about the delay, 'We've been here for nearly three hours and the queue hasn't moved a millimeter,' while others protested that they had been betrayed, 'They promised us we'd be able to get through with no problem, and here you have the brilliant result, the government bolted, went on holiday and threw us to the lions, and now, when we had our chance to get out too, they have the nerve to slam the door in our face. There were hysterical outbursts, children crying, old people white-faced with fatigue, angry men who had run out of cigarettes, exhausted women trying to impose some order on the desperate family chaos. The occupants of one car tried to turn round and drive back into the city, but were forced to give up under the hail of insults and abuse that fell on them, 'Cowards, black sheep, blankers, bastards, spies, traitors, sons-of-bitches, now we know why you came, to demoralize us decent folk, but if you think we're going to let you go, you've got another think coming, if necessary, we'll let your tyres down and see if that teaches you some respect for other people's sufferings. The phone rang in the prime minister's study, it could be the minister of defense, or the interior minister, or the president. It was the president, 'What's going on, why wasn't I informed immediately about the general pandemonium along all the routes out of the capital,' he asked, 'Sir, the government has the situation under control, the problem will soon be resolved,' 'Yes, but I should have been informed, you owe me that courtesy at least,' 'Well, I felt, and I take personal responsibility for the decision, that there was no reason to interrupt your sleep, but I was going to phone you in about twenty minutes or half an hour, but, as I say, I take full responsibility, president,' 'Good, good, that was kind of you, but if my wife were not in the healthy habit of getting up early, I, the president, would still be sleeping while the country burns,' 'It's not burning, president, all the appropriate measures have been taken,' 'Don't tell me you're going to bomb the lines of vehicles,' 'As you should know by now, president, that is not my style,' 'It was, of course, just a manner of speaking, obviously I never thought you would commit such a barbaric act,' 'The radio should soon announce that the interior minister will address the nation at six o'clock, there it is, they're giving the first announcement now, and there will, of course, be others, it's all organized, president,' 'Well, at least, that's something,' 'It's the beginning of success, president, I have complete confidence that we will be able to persuade these people to return to their homes in peace and good order, And if they don't, If they don't, the government will resign,' 'Oh, don't play that old trick on me, you know as well as I do that, in the situation in which the country finds itself, I couldn't accept your resignation even if I wanted to,' 'Yes, I know, but I had to say it,' 'Fine, anyway, now that I'm awake, be sure to keep me up to date on what's happening. The radios kept insisting, 'We interrupt the programme once again to inform our listeners that the interior minister will, at six o'clock, be making a statement to the nation, we repeat, at six o'clock the interior minister will make a statement to the nation, we repeat, a statement will be made to the nation by the interior minister at six o'clock, we repeat, at six o'clock the nation will be made a statement by the interior minister, the ambiguity of this last reformulation did not go unnoticed by the prime minister, who remained for a few seconds smiling at his own thoughts, amusing himself by wondering how the devil an interior minister could make

the nation into a statement. He might have reached some conclusion that could have proved of future use had the test card on the television screen not vanished to give way to the usual image of the flag flapping lazily on the flagpole, as if it, too, had just woken up, while the national anthem blasted out with its trombones and drums, with the odd clarinet trill in the middle and a few persuasive belches from the bass tuba. The presenter who then appeared had the knot in his tie all awry and a sour look on his face, as if he had just been the victim of some insult that he would not readily forgive or forget, Considering the gravity of the political and social situation, he said, and in accordance with the population's sacred right to have access to a free and diverse news media, we are starting our broadcast early today. Like many of those listening, we have just learned that the interior minister will be speaking on the radio at six o'clock, presumably to express the government's attitude to the attempted exodus from the city by many of its inhabitants. This television company does not believe that it has been the object of any deliberate and intentional discrimination, but, rather, that through some inexplicable misunderstanding, unexpected in highly experienced politicians such as those who form the present national government, this particular company was somehow forgotten. At least, apparently. There will be those who will point out the relatively early hour at which the statement is to be made, but the employees of this network, throughout its long history, have given more than sufficient proof of their self-sacrifice, their dedication to the public cause and their unalloyed patriotism, not to be relegated now to the humiliating condition of bearers of second-hand news. We are confident that, before the hour fixed for the promised statement, it may still be possible to reach a basis for agreement which, without wishing to take away what has been given to our colleagues in public radio, will restore to us that which, by merit, belongs to us, that is, our position and our responsibility as the country's prime news medium. While we await this agreement, and we hope to receive news of it at any moment, we wish to report that a television helicopter is lifting off even as I speak, in order to offer our viewers the first images of the vast queues of vehicles, whose planned withdrawal was, we have learned, given the evocative and historic name of xenophon, and which now stand immobilized all along the city's exit routes. Fortunately, the rain that has been beating down on the selfless convoys all night stopped over an hour ago. The sun will soon rise above the horizon and break through the dark clouds. Let us hope that its appearance will also remove the barriers which, for reasons we fail to understand, still prevent these our courageous compatriots from reaching freedom. May they, for the good of the nation, prove successful. The following images showed the helicopter in the air, then, looking down, the tiny heliport from which it had taken off, and, afterward, the first view of the nearby roofs and streets. The prime minister put his right hand on the phone. He did not have to wait long, Prime minister, began the interior minister, Yes, I know, no need to say anything, we made a mistake, We made a mistake, you say, Yes, we did, because if one of us was wrong and the other failed to correct him, then the mistake belongs to both, But I don't have your authority or your responsibility, prime minister, Ah, but you had my trust, So what do you want me to do then, You will speak live on television and there will be a simultaneous radio broadcast, problem solved, And we don't bother to reply to the

impertinent terms and tone in which the gentlemen of the television station chose to refer to the government, In time, we will, but not now, I'll deal with them later, Good, You've got the statement with you, Yes, of course, do you want me to read it to you, No, don't bother, I'll wait to hear it live, It's nearly time, I must go, Are they expecting you, then, asked the prime minister, puzzled, Yes, I told my secretary of state to negotiate with them, Without my knowledge, You know as well as I do that we had no alternative, Without my approval, insisted the prime minister, Let me remind you that I had your trust, those are your words, besides, if one makes a mistake and the other corrects it, then both are right, If this whole business isn't sorted out by eight o'clock, I'll expect your immediate resignation, Yes, prime minister. The helicopter was flying low over one of the lines of cars, people were waving at it from the road, they must have been saying to each other, It's the television people, it's the television people, and the fact that the great gyratory bird had, indeed, been sent by the television people seemed to everyone a clear guarantee that the impasse was about to be resolved. If the television cameras are here, they said, that's a good sign. It wasn't. At six o'clock prompt, when the horizon was already becoming tinged with pink, the interior minister's voice boomed out from all the car radios, Dear fellow countrymen and women, in the last few weeks, our nation has been through what is, without doubt, the most serious crisis recorded in the history of our people since the very dawn of nationhood, never before has there been a more urgent need to defend national cohesion to the hilt, the behavior of certain people, a tiny, ill-advised minority of the country's population as a whole, under the influence of ideas entirely at odds with the correct functioning of our current democratic institutions and with the respect that is due to them, has made them the mortal enemies of that cohesion, which is why, today, a terrible threat hovers over our normally peaceable society, the threat of a civil conflict with unforeseeable consequences for the future of the nation, the government was, needless to say, the first to understand the thirst for freedom that lay behind the attempted exodus from the capital carried out by those whom we have always known to be patriots of the first water, people who, in the most adverse of circumstances, have shown themselves, either by voting or by the simple example of their day-to-day lives, to be genuinely incorruptible defenders of legality, restoring and renewing the very best of the old legionnaire spirit and honoring its traditions by placing themselves at the service of the public good, the government was also the first to see that, by firmly turning their backs on the capital, the sodom and gomorrah of our day, these patriots were demonstrating a most praiseworthy combative spirit which the government does, of course, recognize, however, taking into consideration the national interest as a whole, it is the government's belief, and, to this end, we appeal to the minds of those men and women who have spent so many anxious hours waiting for a clear message from those responsible for the country's fate, it is, I repeat, the government's belief, that the most appropriate militant action to be taken in the present circumstances is for those thousands of people to reintegrate themselves back into the life of the capital city, to return to their homes, those bastions of legality, those centers of resistance, those bulwarks where the unsullied memory of their ancestors watches over the works of their descendants, it is, I say again, the

government's belief that these sincere and objective reasons, brought to you heart in hands, should be weighed by those people in their cars listening to this official statement, and although the material aspects of the situation should, of course, count for little in a calculation in which spiritual values are paramount, the government would like to take this opportunity to reveal that it has received information concerning the existence of a plan to burgle and plunder your abandoned homes, a plan which, according to our latest information, has already been set in motion, as I must conclude from the note I have just been handed, for, according to our sources, a total of seventeen apartments have so far been burgled and plundered, as you see, dear countrymen and women, your enemies are wasting no time, only a few hours have passed since your departure, and yet already the vandals are breaking down the doors of your homes, already the barbarians and savages are stealing your possessions, it lies, therefore, in your hands to avoid a still greater disaster, consult your consciences, know that the nation's government is on your side, it is up to you now to decide whether you are for us or against us. Before disappearing from the screen, the interior minister just had time to shoot a look at the camera, and in his face there was self-confidence, but also something that looked very like a challenge, although you would have to be privy to the secrets of the gods to interpret that rapid glance with total accuracy, the prime minister, however, was not fooled, for him it was just as if the interior minister had thrown in his face the words, You who pride yourself on your tactics and your strategies, could not have done better. And he had to agree that he could not, although they would have to wait and see just what the results would be. The helicopter reappeared, and there, once again, was the city, there again were the endless lines of cars. For a good ten minutes, nothing moved. The reporter was struggling to fill in time, he imagined the family councils that would be taking place inside the cars, he praised the minister's statement, he railed against the burglars, demanded that they be treated with all the rigor of the law, but it was obvious that unease was gradually seeping into him, it was plain as plain that the government's words had fallen on stony ground, not that he, still waiting for some last-minute miracle, dared to say so, but any viewer with a reasonable degree of experience in deciphering audiovisuals would have noticed the poor journalist's distress. Then the much-desired, much-longed-for marvel occurred, just when the helicopter was flying over the tail-end of one of the queues, the last car in the line turned round, followed by the car ahead, and then by another and another and another. The reporter gave an excited yelp, We are, dear viewers, witnessing a truly historic moment, for, responding with exemplary discipline to the government's appeal, in a display of civic duty that will be inscribed in letters of gold in the annals of the capital, the people are beginning their return home, thus bringing to a peaceful close what could have been a catastrophe with, as the interior minister so rightly said, unforeseeable consequences for the future of our nation. From this point on, for some minutes more, the report took on a decidedly epic tone, transforming the retreat of these ten thousand defeated people into a victorious ride of the valkyries, replacing xenophon with wagner, transmuting into odoriferous sacrifices wafting up to the gods of olympus and valhalla the foul-smelling fumes belching forth from the car exhausts. There were now brigades of reporters on the streets, from the radio and the press, and all were trying to hold the cars

back for a moment so as to glean from the passengers, live and from the source itself, some description of the emotions filling them as they set off on their forced return home. As was to be expected, they encountered all sorts, frustration, disappointment, anger, a desire for revenge, we may not have got out this time, but we will the next, edifying affirmations of patriotism, exalted declarations of party loyalty, long live the party of the center, long live the party in the middle, unpleasant odors, annoyance at not having slept a wink all night, take that camera away, will you, we don't want any photographs, agreement or disagreement as to the reasons given by the government, some scepticism about what would happen tomorrow, fear of reprisals, criticism of the authorities' shameful apathy, But there are no authorities, the reporter remarked, That's precisely the problem, there are no authorities, but mainly there was a great concern for the fate of the possessions left behind in the homes to which the occupants of the cars had only expected to return once the revolt of the blankers had been finally crushed, the number of burgled houses will doubtless now be more than seventeen, who knows how many will have been stripped of even their last rug, their last vase. The helicopter was now showing an aerial shot of how the lines of cars and vans, in which those who had been last were now first, branched off as they entered the areas near the center and how, from a certain point onward, it was no longer possible to distinguish amongst the confusion of traffic those who were returning from those who were already there. The prime minister phoned the president, a very brief conversation, an exchange of congratulations, These people must have lukewarm water running in their veins, the president said scornfully, if it had been me in one of those cars, I promise you I would have driven through however many barriers they put in front of me, It's lucky you're the president then, it's lucky you weren't there, said the prime minister, smiling, Yes, but if things start to get difficult again, that will be the moment to implement my idea, About which I still know nothing, One of these days, I'll tell you about it, And you will have my undivided attention, by the way, I'm calling a cabinet meeting for today in order to discuss the situation, it would be very useful if you could be there too, if, that is, you have no more pressing duties to perform, Don't worry, it's just a matter of re-arranging things, all I have to do today is go and cut a ribbon somewhere or other, Very good, sir, I will inform the cabinet. The prime minister decided that it was high time he said a kind word to the interior minister and congratulated him on the effectiveness of his statement, why not, after all, just because he didn't like the man didn't mean he couldn't recognize that this time he had coped very well with the problem to be resolved. His hand was just reaching for the phone when a sudden change in the voice of the television reporter made him look at the screen. The helicopter was flying so low now that it was almost touching the rooftops, you could see quite clearly various people coming out of the buildings, men and women standing on the pavement, as if they were waiting for someone, We have just been informed, said the reporter in great alarm, that the images our viewers are seeing of people leaving the buildings and waiting on the pavement are being repeated at this moment all over the city, we don't want to think the worst, but everything indicates that the inhabitants of these buildings, who are clearly insurrectionists, are preparing to prevent the people, who yesterday were their neighbors and whose homes they have doubtless just plundered,

from entering the building, if that is so, then, much as it pains us to say so, the government who ordered the withdrawal of the police force from the capital must be brought to book, it is with a heavy heart that we ask ourselves how, or indeed if, the bloody physical confrontation which is clearly about to take place can possibly be avoided, president, prime minister, where are the police who should be defending innocent people from the barbarous treatment these others are preparing to mete out to them, oh, dear god, dear god, whatever is going to happen next, said the reporter, almost sobbing now. The helicopter hung motionless in the air, and there was a clear view of everything that was happening in the street. Two cars stopped outside the building. The doors opened and the occupants got out. Then the people on the pavement went over to them, This is it, this is it, we must prepare ourselves for the worst, screamed the reporter, hoarse with excitement, then the people exchanged a few inaudible words and, without more ado, began unloading the cars and carrying into the buildings in broad daylight what had been carried out under cover of a dark and rainy night. Shit, exclaimed the prime minister, and thumped the table.

THIS BRIEF SCATOLOGICAL INTERJECTION, WITH THE EXPRESSIVE POTENTIAL of an entire speech on the state of the nation, summed up and distilled the depth of disappointment that had gradually been gnawing away at the government's mental energies, in particular the energies of those ministers who, given the nature of their respective posts, had been most closely linked to the different phases of the political and repressive processes brought into play against the forces of sedition, in short, the ministers responsible for defense and the interior, who, from one moment to the next, each in his own field, had lost all the prestige gained from the good services they had rendered to the country during the crisis. Throughout the day, until it was time for the cabinet meeting to start, and, indeed, during it too, that grubby word was frequently muttered in the silence of thought, and, if there were no witnesses close by, even uttered out loud or murmured like some irrepressible unburdening of the soul, shit, shit, shit. It had occurred to neither of those ministers, of defense or the interior, or, which is truly unforgivable, to the prime minister either, to ponder briefly, even in a strict, disinterested academic sense, what might happen to the frustrated fugitives when they returned to their homes, however, if they had bothered to do so, they would probably have got no further than the horrific prophecy of the reporter in the helicopter which we failed to record earlier, Poor things, he was saying, almost in tears, they're going to be massacred, I'm sure of it. In the end, and it was not in that street alone that the marvel occurred, rivaling the most noble historical examples, both religious and profane, of love for one's neighbor, the slandered and insulted blankers went to the aid of the vanquished members of the opposing faction, and each person made this decision entirely on his or her own and in consultation with his or her own conscience, there was no evidence of any order issued from above or of a password to be learned by heart, the fact is that they all came to offer whatever help their strength permitted, and then they were the ones to say, careful with the piano, careful with the tea service, careful with the silver platter, careful with grandpa. It is understandable, therefore, that there should be so many frowning faces around the great cabinet table, so many beetling brows, so many eyes red with anger or from lack of sleep, probably nearly all of these men would have preferred some blood to have been spilt, they would not have wanted the massacre announced by the television reporter, but some incident that would have shocked the sensibilities of the population outside the capital, something that would set the whole country talking for the next few weeks, an argument, a pretext, another reason to demonize these wretched rebels. Which is why one can also understand why the minister of defense has just whispered, out of the corner of his mouth, to his colleague the interior minister, What the hell are we going to do now. If anyone else overheard the question, they were intelligent enough to pretend otherwise, because that was precisely why they were gathered there, to find out what the hell they were going to do now, and they would doubtless not leave the room empty-handed.

The first person to speak was the president of the republic, Gentlemen, he said, in my opinion, and as I think we would all agree, we are living through the most difficult and complex moment since the first election revealed the existence of a vast subversive

movement hitherto undetected by the security services, not that we were the ones to make the discovery, for it chose, instead, to reveal itself, the interior minister, whose actions have otherwise always had my personal and institutional support, will, I am sure, agree with me when I say that the worst thing is that we have not, up until now, taken a single effective step toward solving the problem, and, perhaps graver still, we have been forced to watch, powerless, the rebels' brilliant tactic of helping our voters to move all their useless junk back into their apartments, that, gentlemen, could only be the brainchild of some machiavellian mastermind, someone who remains hidden behind the curtain and makes the puppets do exactly as he wants, we all know that we sent those people back out of sheer painful necessity, but now we must prepare ourselves for a more than likely chain reaction that will lead to new escape attempts, not this time of whole families, nor of spectacular convoys of cars, but of isolated individuals or small groups, and not by road, but across country, the minister of defense will assure me that these areas are regularly patrolled, that there are electronic sensors installed all along the frontier, and I could not bring myself to doubt the efficacy of such measures, however, in my view, complete containment can only be achieved by the construction of a wall around the capital, an impassable wall made out of concrete slabs, and, I would say, about eight meters high, using, of course, the system of electronic sensors already in existence and backed up by as many barbed-wire fences as are judged to be necessary, I am firmly convinced that no one would manage to get past that, not even, I would say, a fly, if you'll allow me my little joke, but not so much because flies couldn't get through it, as because, as far as one can judge from their normal behavior, they have no reason to fly that high. The president of the republic paused to clear his throat and ended by saying, The prime minister already knows about this proposal of mine and, shortly, he will doubtless submit it for discussion by the government, who will then, as is their duty, decide upon the appropriateness and practicability of carrying it out, as for me, I am content in the knowledge that you will bring all your experience to bear on the matter. A diplomatic murmur went round the table, which the president of the republic interpreted as one of tacit approval, an idea he would have had to correct had he heard the minister of finance's muttered remark, And where would we find the money for a crazy scheme like that.

Having shuffled the documents in front of him from one side to the other, as was his custom, the prime minister was the next to speak, The president of the republic, with the brilliance and rigor we have come to expect, has just given us a clear picture of the difficult and complex situation in which we find ourselves, and there is, therefore, no point in my adding to his exposition any details of my own, which would, after all, serve only to lend further shading to his original sketch, however, having said that, and in view of recent events, I believe that what we need is a radical change of strategy, which would pay special attention, along with all the other factors, to the possibility of the birth and growth in the capital of an atmosphere of social harmony purely as a consequence of this gesture of unequivocal solidarity, doubtless machiavellian, doubtless politically motivated, to which the whole country has borne witness in the last few hours, you have only to read

the unanimously complimentary comments in the special editions brought out by the newspapers, consequently, we have no option but to recognize that all our attempts to make the rebels listen to reason have, each and every one, been a resounding failure, and that the cause of that failure, at least in my opinion, could well have been the severity of the repressive measures we chose to use, and secondly, if we continue with the strategy we have followed up until now, if we continue with the escalation of coercive methods, and if the response of the rebels also continues to be what it has been up until now, which is to say no response at all, we will be forced to resort to drastic measures of a dictatorial nature, such as the indefinite withdrawal of civil rights from the city's population, which, to avoid ideological favoritism, would have to include our own voters too, or, with the aim of preventing the spread of the epidemic, the passing of an emergency electoral law that would apply to the whole country and would make blank votes void, and so on. The prime minister paused to take a sip of water, then went on, I spoke of the need for a change of strategy, however, I did not say that I had such a strategy drawn up and prepared for immediate implementation, we need to bide our time, to allow the fruit to ripen and for brave resolutions to rot, I must confess that I myself would actually prefer a period of slight relaxation during which we could work to gain as much advantage as possible from the few signs of concord that seem to be emerging. He paused again and seemed to be about to continue speaking, but then said only, Now let me hear your opinions.

The interior minister raised his hand, I notice that you are confident of the persuasive influence our voters may have on the minds of those to whom I must confess I was somewhat astonished to hear you refer merely as rebels, but you did not, I believe, speak of the contrary possibility, that the subversives might use their harmful theories to confuse those citizens who are still respecters of the law, You're quite right, I don't think I did mention that possibility, said the prime minister in response, because I imagined that were that to happen, it would not bring about any fundamental change, the worst possible consequence would be that the current eighty percent of people who cast blank votes would become one hundred percent, and the quantitative change introduced into the problem would have no qualitative impact, apart, obviously, from creating unanimity. What shall we do then, asked the minister of defense, That is precisely why we are here, to analyze, consider and decide, Including, I assume, the proposal made by the president of the republic, which, of course, has my wholehearted support, The president's proposal, given the scale of the work involved and its many implications, requires an in-depth study to be undertaken by an ad hoc commission that will have to be set up for that purpose, on the other hand, it is, I think, fairly obvious that the building of a wall of partition would not immediately resolve any of our difficulties and would inevitably create others, the president knows my views on the subject, and the personal and institutional loyalty I owe him would not allow me to remain silent about it here at this cabinet meeting, but this does not, I repeat, mean that the commission's work should not begin as early as possible, as soon as it has been appointed, within the next few days. The president of the republic was visibly put out, I am the president, of course, and not the pope, and I do

not, therefore, presume to any kind of infallibility, but I would like my proposal to be discussed with some urgency, As I said before, sir, came the prime minister's prompt reply, I give you my word that you will receive news of the commission's findings sooner than you might imagine, Meanwhile, I suppose we'll just have to continue groping our way blindly forward, said the president. The silence that fell was thick enough to blunt the blade of even the sharpest of knives. Yes, blindly, he repeated, unaware of the general embarrassment. From the back of the room came the minister of culture's calm voice, Just as we did four years ago. The minister of defense rose, red-faced, to his feet, as if he had been the object of a brutal, unforgivable obscenity, and, pointing an accusing finger, he said, You have just shamefully broken a national pact of silence to which we all agreed, As far as I know, there was no pact, far less a national one, I was a grown man four years ago, and I have no recollection of the population being summoned to sign a piece of parchment promising never to utter one word about the fact that for several weeks we were all of us blind, You're right, there was no formal pact, said the prime minister, intervening, but we all thought, without any need for any agreement on paper, that the dreadful test we had been through would, for the sake of our mental health, be best thought of as a terrible nightmare, something that existed as a dream rather than as a reality, In public maybe, but you are surely not telling me that you have never spoken about what happened in the privacy of your own home, Whether we have or not is of no importance, a lot of things happen in the privacy of one's home that never go beyond its four walls, and, if I may say so, your allusion to the as yet unexplained tragedy that occurred amongst us four years ago shows a degree of bad taste that I would not have expected in a minister of culture, The study of bad taste, prime minister, must be one of the longest and juiciest chapters in the history of culture, Oh, I didn't mean that kind of bad taste, but the other sort, otherwise known as a lack of tact, It would seem, prime minister, that you share the belief that death exists only because it has a name, that things have no real existence if we have no name to give them, There are endless things for which I don't know the name, animals, vegetables, tools and machines of every shape and size and for all conceivable purposes, But you know that they have names, and that puts your mind at rest, We're getting off the subject, Yes, prime minister, we are getting off the subject, all I said was that four years ago we were blind and what I'm saying now is that we probably still are. The indignation was general, or almost so, cries of protest leapt up and jostled for position, everyone wanted to speak, even the transport minister, who, being possessed of a strident voice, usually spoke very little, but was now setting his vocal cords to work, May I speak, may I speak. The prime minister looked at the president of the republic as if asking his advice, but this was pure theater, the president's diffident attempt at a gesture, whatever it was intended to mean, was quashed by the raised hand of his prime minister, Bearing in mind the emotive and passionate tone of the interpolations, it is clear that a debate would get us nowhere, which is why I will let none of you speak, especially since, possibly without realizing it, the minister of culture was spot on when he compared the plague currently afflicting us to a new form of blindness, That is not a comparison of my making, prime minister, I merely remarked that we were blind and that we very probably continue to be blind, any extrapolation not logically

contained in my initial proposition is not allowable, Changing the position of words often changes their meaning, but they, the words, when weighed one by one, continue physically, if I may put it like that, to be exactly what they were and, therefore, In that case, allow me to interrupt you, prime minister, I want to make it quite clear that responsibility for any changes in the position or meaning of my words lies entirely with you and that I had nothing whatsoever to do with it, Let's say that you provided the nothing and I contributed the whatsoever and that the nothing and the whatsoever together authorize me to state that the blank vote is as destructive a form of blindness as the first one, Either that or a form of clear-sightedness, said the minister of justice, What, asked the interior minister, who thought he must have misheard, I said that the blank vote could be seen as a sign of clear-sightedness on the part of those who used it, How dare you, in the middle of a cabinet meeting, utter such antidemocratic garbage, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, no one would think you were the minister of justice, cried the minister of defense, Actually, I wonder if I've ever been more of a minister of justice or for justice than I am at this moment, Soon you'll have me believing that you, too, cast a blank vote, said the interior minister drily, No, I didn't cast a blank vote, but I'll certainly consider doing so next time. When the scandalized clamor of voices resulting from this last statement had begun to die away, a question from the prime minister brought it to a complete halt, Do you realize what you have just said, Yes, so much so that I place in your hands the post with which you entrusted me, I am tendering my resignation, replied the man who was now no longer either minister for or minister of justice. The president of the republic turned pale, he looked like an old rag that someone had distractedly left behind on the back of the chair, I never thought I would live to see the face of treachery, he said, and felt that history was sure to record the phrase, and should there be any risk of history forgetting, he would make a point of reminding it. The man who had up until now been the minister of justice got to his feet, bowed in the direction of the president and the prime minister and left the room. The silence was interrupted by the sudden scraping of a chair, the minister of culture had got up and, from the bottom of the table, in a strong, clear voice, was announcing, I wish to resign too, Oh, come on, don't tell me that, as your friend promised us just now in a moment of commendable frankness, you're considering casting a blank vote next time as well, the prime minister said, trying to be ironic, I doubt that will be necessary, I did so last time, Meaning, Exactly what you heard, nothing more, Kindly leave the room, Yes, prime minister, I was about to, the only reason I turned back was to say goodbye. The door opened, then closed, leaving two empty chairs at the table. Well, exclaimed the president of the republic, we hardly had time to get over the first shock when we got another slap in the face, That was no slap in the face, president, ministers come and ministers go, it's the most common thing in the world, said the prime minister, anyway, the government entered this room with a full complement of ministers and will leave with a full complement, I'll take over the post of justice minister and the minister for public works will take care of cultural affairs, But I don't have the necessary qualifications, remarked the latter, Yes, you do, culture, as certain people in the know are always telling me, is also a public work, it will, therefore, be perfectly safe in your hands. He rang the bell and

ordered the clerk who appeared at the door, Take those chairs away, then, addressing the meeting, Let's have a short break of fifteen or twenty minutes, the president and I will be in the next room.

Half an hour later, the ministers resumed their places round the table. The absences went unnoticed. The president of the republic came in looking utterly perplexed, as if he had just been given a piece of news whose meaning was completely beyond his comprehension. The prime minister, on the other hand, seemed very pleased with himself. The reason would soon become clear. When, earlier on, I brought to your attention the urgent need for a change of strategy, given the failure of all the actions drawn up and executed since the beginning of this crisis, he began, I never for one moment expected that an idea capable of carrying us forward to victory would come precisely from a minister who is no longer with us, I refer, as you will doubtless have surmised, to the ex-minister of culture, who has shown once again how important it is to examine the ideas of your adversary in order to discover which aspects of those ideas can be used to your advantage. The ministers of defense and of the interior exchanged indignant glances, that was all they needed, to hear the intelligence of a despised traitor being praised to the skies. The interior minister scribbled a few rapid words on a piece of paper and passed it to his colleague, My instinct was right, I distrusted those guys right from the start, to which the minister of defense replied by the same means and with the same emotion, There we were trying to infiltrate them, and it turns out they had infiltrated us. The prime minister was continuing to discuss the conclusions he had reached based on the ex-minister of culture's sibylline statement about how we had all been blind yesterday and continued to be blind today, Our mistake, our great mistake, for which we are paying right now, lay in that attempt at obliteration, not of our memories, since we would all of us be capable of recalling what happened four years ago, but of the word, the name, as if, as our ex-colleague remarked, in order for death to cease to exist, we would simply have to stop saying the word we use to describe it, Aren't we getting away from the main problem, asked the president of the republic, we need concrete proposals, objectives, the cabinet is going to have to take some important decisions, On the contrary, president, this is the main problem, and if I'm right, this is the idea that will give us, on a plate, the possibility of resolving once and for all a problem which we have, at most, managed only to patch up here and there, but those patches quickly come unstitched and leave everything exactly as it was, What are you getting at, explain yourself, please, President, gentlemen, let us dare to take a step forward, let us replace silence with words, let us put an end to this stupid, pointless pretence that nothing happened four years ago, let us talk openly about what life, if it can be called a life, was like during the time that we were blind, let the newspapers report it, let writers write about it, let the television show us images of the city taken immediately after we recovered our sight, let's encourage people to talk about the many and various evils we had to endure, let them talk about the dead, the disappeared, the ruins, the fires, the rubbish, the putrefaction, and then, when we have torn off the rags of false normality with which we have tried to bind up the wound, we will say that the blindness of those

days has returned in a new guise, we will draw people's attention to the parallel between the blankness of that blindness of four years ago and the blind casting of blank ballot papers now, the comparison is crude and fallacious, as I would be the first to recognize, and there will be those who will reject it at once as an offence to intelligence, to logic and to common sense, but it is just possible that many people, and I hope they will soon become the overwhelming majority, will be convinced, will stand before the mirror and ask themselves if they are, again, blind, if this blindness, more shameful than the other blindness, is not leading them from the straight and narrow, propelling them toward the ultimate disaster which would be the possibly definitive collapse of a political system which, without our even noticing the threat, carried within it, right from the start, in its vital nucleus, in the voting process itself, the seeds of its own destruction or, a no less disquieting hypothesis, of a transition to something entirely new and unknown, so different that we would probably have no place in it, raised as we were in the shelter of an electoral routine which, for generations and generations, managed to conceal what we now realize was one of its great trump cards. I firmly believe, the prime minister continued, that the strategic change we needed is in sight, yes, the restoration of the system to the status quo ante is within our grasp, however, I am the prime minister of this country and not some vulgar snake-oil salesman promising miracles, but I will say that, while we may not get results in twenty-four hours, I am sure we will begin to see them within twenty-four days, the struggle, though, will be long and hard, because sapping the energy of this new blank plague will take time and much effort, not forgetting, ah, not forgetting the dreaded head of the tapeworm, which can hide itself away anywhere, for until we can locate it in the foul innards of the conspiracy, until we can drag it out into the light of day to be given the punishment it deserves, that fatal parasite will continue to produce its rings and to undermine the strength of the nation, but we will win the final battle, my word and your word, now and until the final victory, will be the guarantee of that promise. Pushing back their chairs, the ministers rose as one man and stood applauding enthusiastically. Purged of its troublesome members, the cabinet was, at last, a cohesive whole, one leader, one will, one plan, one path. Seated in his armchair, as befitted the dignity of his office, the president of the republic was clapping too, but only with the tips of his fingers, thus letting it be known, as well as by the stern look on his face, how piqued he was not to have been the object of some reference, however minimal, in the prime minister's speech. He should have known better who he was dealing with. When the clamorous crackle of applause was beginning to subside, the prime minister raised his right hand to call for silence and said, Every voyage needs a captain, and during the dangerous voyage on which the country is now embarked, that captain is and must be your prime minister, but woe betide the ship that does not carry a compass to guide it over the vast ocean and through the storms, well, gentlemen, the compass that guides me and the ship, the compass, in short, that guides us all, is here, by our side, always keeping us on course with his vast experience, always encouraging us with his wise advice, always instructing us with his peerless example, a thousand rounds of applause, then, and a thousand thanks to his excellency the president of the republic. The ovation was even warmer than the first and seemed as if it would

never end, nor would it end as long as the prime minister continued to clap his hands or until the clock in his head said, Enough, stop there, he's won. Just two minutes more to confirm that victory and, at the end of those two minutes, the president of the republic, with tears in his eyes, was embracing the prime minister. Perfect, nay, even sublime moments can occur in the life of a politician, he said afterward, his voice choked with emotion, but whatever tomorrow may hold for me, I assure you that this moment will never be erased from my memory, it will be my crowning glory in happy times, my consolation in sad ones, I thank you with all my heart, with all my heart, I embrace you. More applause.

Perfect moments, especially when they verge on the sublime, have the grave disadvantage of being very short-lived, which fact, being obvious, we would not need to mention were it not that they have a still greater disadvantage, which is that we do not know what to do once they are over. This awkward pause, however, reduces down to almost nothing when there is an interior minister present. As soon as the cabinet had resumed their usual places, with the minister of public works and culture still wiping away a furtive tear, the interior minister raised his hand to ask permission to speak, Carry on, said the prime minister, As the president of the republic so touchingly pointed out, there are perfect, truly sublime moments in life, and we have had the great privilege of experiencing two such moments here, with the president's speech of thanks and the prime minister's new strategy, which has, of course, received our unanimous approval and to which I will refer in this intervention, not in order to withdraw my applause, nothing could be further from my mind, but, if I may be so immodest, to amplify and facilitate the effects of that strategy, I am referring to what the prime minister said about not being able to guarantee results in twenty-four hours, but being sure of getting them before twenty-four days were up, now, with respect, I do not believe that we can afford to wait twenty-four days, or twenty or fifteen or even ten, cracks are beginning to appear in the social edifice, the walls are shaking, the foundations are trembling, it could all come crashing down at any moment, Do you have you any real proposal to make, asked the prime minister, apart from describing the imminent collapse of a building, Oh, yes, replied the interior minister, unperturbed, as if he had not noticed the prime minister's sarcastic tone, Be so kind as to enlighten us, then, First of all, prime minister, I must make it clear that my proposal is merely intended to complement the proposal you presented to us and which we approved, it does not seek to amend, correct or perfect, it is simply another suggestion which is, I hope, deserving of everyone's attention, Oh, get on with it and stop beating about the bush, get to the point, What I propose, prime minister, is a rapid action, a shock offensive, with helicopters, You're surely not thinking of bombarding the city, Yes, sir, I am, but with paper, With paper, Exactly, prime minister, with paper, first, in order of importance, we would have a proclamation signed by the president of the republic and addressed to the population of the capital, second, a series of brief, punchy messages intended to pave the way and prepare people's minds for the doubtless slower actions advocated by the prime minister, that is, newspaper articles, television programmes, memories of the time when we were blind, stories by

writers, etc., by the way, I would just mention that my ministry has its own team of writers, people highly trained in the art of persuasion, which, as I understand it, writers normally achieve only briefly and after much effort, It seems an excellent idea to me, said the president of the republic, but obviously the text would have to be submitted to me for my approval so that I could make any changes I deem appropriate, but, on the whole, I like it, it's a splendid idea, which, above all, has the enormous political advantage of placing the figure of the president of the republic in the front line of battle, oh, yes, a fine idea. The murmur of approval in the room indicated to the prime minister that this last move had been won by the interior minister, So be it, then, take all the necessary steps, he said, and on the appropriate page in the government's school progress report he mentally added another black mark against the minister's name.

THE REASSURING IDEA THAT, LATER OR SOONER, AND, MORE LIKELY, sooner than later, fate will always strike down pride, was roundly confirmed by the humiliating opprobrium suffered by the interior minister, who, believing that he had, in extremis, won the latest round in the pugilistic battle in which he and the prime minister had been engaged, saw his plans fizzle out after an unexpected intervention from the skies, which, at the last moment, decided to change sides and join the enemy. However, in the final analysis and, indeed, in the first, the blame for this, in the view of the most attentive and competent of observers, lay entirely with the president of the republic for having delayed his approval of the manifesto which, bearing his signature and intended for the moral edification of the city's inhabitants, should have been distributed by the helicopters. During the three days that followed the cabinet meeting the celestial vault revealed itself to the world in its magnificent suit of seamless blue, perfect weather, smooth and faultless, and above all with no wind, ideal for hurling papers out into the air and watching them float down, dancing the dance of the elves, to be picked up by anyone who happened to be passing or who had come out into the street curious to learn what news or orders were drifting down from above. During those three days, the much-thumbed text traipsed back and forth between the presidential palace and the ministry of the interior, sometimes more profuse in arguments, sometimes more concise in ideas, with words crossed out and replaced by others that would immediately suffer the same fate, with phrases which, shorn of what went before, no longer fitted what came after, so much wasted ink, so much torn-up paper, this, we will have you know, is what is meant by the torment of writing, the torture of creation. On the fourth day, the sky, grown tired of waiting, and seeing that things down below still kept chopping and changing, decided to start off the morning covered by a layer of low, dark clouds, of the sort that usually bring the rain they promise. By late morning, a few sparse droplets had begun to fall, stopping now and then and starting up again, an irritating drizzle which, despite threatening more, seemed unlikely to get much worse. This on-off state of affairs continued until mid-afternoon, and then, suddenly, without warning, like someone who has grown weary of hiding his true feelings, the heavens opened to give way to a continuous, steady, monotonous rain, intense but not violent, the kind of rain that can continue falling for a whole week and for which farmers are generally grateful. Not so the ministry of the interior. Even assuming that the air force's supreme command would authorize the helicopters to take off, which, would, in itself, be highly problematic, hurling papers down from above in weather like this would be utterly ridiculous, and not just because there would be hardly any people in the streets, and the main concern of the few who were would be to remain as dry as possible, even worse was the thought that the presidential manifesto might land in the mud, be swallowed up by the devouring drains, might crumble and dissolve in the puddles that the wheels of cars splash rudely through, throwing up fountains of grubby water as they go, in truth, in truth I say to you, only a fanatical believer in legality and the respect one owes to one's superiors would bother to stoop down and rescue from the ignominious slime an explanation about the relationship between the general blindness of four years ago and this majority blindness now. To the interior minister's vexation, he had to stand by and watch, powerless, as, on the pretext of the on-going and unpostponable

national emergency, the prime minister, with, moreover, the reluctant agreement of the president of the republic, set in motion the media machinery, encompassing press, radio, television and all the other written, aural and visual submedia available, both current and concurrent, whose task it would be to persuade the capital's population that it was, alas, once more blind. When, days later, the rain stopped and the upper air had once more clothed itself in azure, only the stubborn and ultimately angry insistence of the president of the republic managed to get the postponed first part of the plan put into action, My dear prime minister, said the president, do not think for a moment that I have reneged on or am even considering reneging on the decision taken by the cabinet, I continue to believe that it is my duty to address the nation personally, But, sir, it really isn't worth it, the clarification process is already underway and I'm sure we'll soon be getting results, Those results could be about to appear around the corner the day after tomorrow, but I want my manifesto to be launched first, The day after tomorrow is, of course, just a manner of speaking, All the better, get that manifesto distributed now, Believe me, sir, A word of warning, if you don't do it, I'll blame you for the inevitable loss of personal and political trust between us, Allow me to remind you, sir, that I still have an absolute majority in parliament, any threatened loss of trust would be merely personal in nature and would have no political repercussions, It would if I made a statement to parliament declaring that the word of the president of the republic had been hijacked by the prime minister, Please, sir, that isn't true, It's true enough for me to say so, in parliament or out of it, Distributing the manifesto now, The manifesto and the other papers, Distributing the manifesto now would be pointless, That's your opinion, not mine, But president, The fact that you call me president means that you recognize me as such, so do as I say, Well, if you put it like that, Oh, I do, and another thing, I'm tired of watching your battles with the interior minister, if you think he's no good, then sack him, but if you don't want to sack him or can't, then put up with it, if you yourself had come up with the idea of a manifesto signed by the president, you would probably have issued orders for it to be delivered door to door, Now that's unfair, sir, Maybe it is, I don't deny it, but people get upset and lose their temper and end up saying things they didn't intend to or hadn't even thought, Let's consider the matter closed, All right, the matter is closed, but tomorrow morning I want those helicopters in the air, Yes, president.

If this acerbic exchange had not taken place, if the presidential manifesto and the other leaflets had, because unnecessary, ended their brief life in the rubbish, the story we are telling would have developed quite differently from this point on. We can't imagine exactly how or in what way, we just know it would have been different. Obviously, any reader who has been paying close attention to the meanderings of the plot, one of those analytical readers who expects a proper explanation for everything, would be sure to ask whether the conversation between the prime minister and the president of the republic was simply added at the last moment to justify such a change of direction, or if it simply had to happen because that was its destiny, from which would spring soon-to-be-revealed consequences, forcing the narrator to set aside the story he was intending to write and to follow the new course that had suddenly appeared on his navigation chart. It is difficult to

give such an either-or question an answer likely to satisfy such a reader totally. Unless, of course, the narrator were to be unusually frank and confess that he had never been quite sure how to bring to a successful conclusion this extraordinary tale of a city which, en masse, decided to return blank ballot papers, in which case this violent exchange of words between the prime minister and the president of the republic, which ended so happily, would have been as welcome to him as flowers in May. What other explanation is there for his abrupt abandonment of the complex narrative thread he had been developing merely in order to set off on gratuitous digressions not about what-did-not-happen-but-might-have, but about what-did-happen-but-might-not-have. We are referring, to put it plainly, to the letter which the president of the republic received three days after the helicopters had showered the capital's streets, squares, parks and avenues with the colored leaflets in which the ministry of the interior's writers set out their conclusions about the likely connection between the tragic collective blindness of four years ago and the present-day electoral madness. The signatory was fortunate in that his letter fell into the hands of a particularly scrupulous clerk, the sort who looks at the small print before he starts reading the large, the sort who is capable of discerning amongst the untidy scrawl of words the tiny seed that requires immediate watering, if only to find out what it might grow into. This is what the letter said, Your excellency, Having read, with due and deserved attention, the manifesto addressed by you to the people and, in particular, to the inhabitants of the capital, and being keenly aware both of my duty as a citizen of this country and of the need, during the crisis into which the nation is currently plunged, for every one of us to maintain a close, constant, zealous watch for anything strange that we might see now or might have seen in the past, I wish to bring to the attention of your excellency's renowned powers of judgement a few unknown facts which may help toward a better understanding of the nature of the plague that befell us. I say this because, although I am just an ordinary man, I believe, as you do, that there must be some link between the recent blindness of casting blank ballot papers and that other blindness which, for weeks that none of us will ever forget, made us all outcasts from the world. What I am suggesting, your excellency, is that the first blindness might perhaps help to explain this blindness now, and that both might be explained by the existence, and possibly by the actions, of one person. Before going on, however, impelled as I am by a sense of civic duty upon which I would challenge anyone to cast doubt, I wish to make it clear that I am not an informer or a sneak or a grass, I am simply trying to be of service to my country in the distressing situation in which it currently finds itself, without so much as a lantern with which to illumine the path to salvation. I do not know, how could I, if the letter I am writing will be enough to light that lantern, but I repeat, duty is duty, and at this moment, I see myself as a soldier taking a step forward and presenting myself as a volunteer for a mission, and this mission, your excellency, consists in revealing, and I use the word reveal because this is the first time I have spoken of this matter to anyone, that four years ago, together with my wife, I fell in with a group of people who, like so many others, were struggling desperately to survive. It will seem that I am not telling you anything that you, through your own experiences, do not know already, but what no one knows is that one of the people in our group, the wife of an

ophthalmologist, did not go blind, her husband went blind like the rest of us, but she did not. At the time, we made a solemn vow never to speak about the matter, she said that she did not want to be seen afterward as a rare phenomenon, to be subjected to questions and submitted to examinations once we had all recovered our sight, that it would be best just to forget and pretend it had never happened. I have respected that vow until today, but can no longer remain silent. Your excellency, allow me to say that I would feel deeply offended if this letter were seen as a denunciation, although, on the other hand, perhaps it should be seen as such, because, and this is something else you do not know, during that time, a murder was committed by the person I am telling you about, but that is a matter for the courts, I content myself with the thought that I have done my duty as a patriot by drawing your lofty attention to a fact which has, until now, remained a secret and which, once examined, might perhaps produce an explanation for the merciless attack of which the present political system has been the target, this new blindness which, if I may humbly reproduce your excellency's own words, strikes at the very foundations of democracy in a way in which no totalitarian system ever succeeded in doing. Needless to say, sir, I am at your disposal, or at the disposal of whichever institution is charged with carrying out what is clearly a necessary investigation, to amplify, develop and elaborate on the information contained in this letter. I assure you that I feel no animosity toward the person in question, however, what counts above all else is this our nation, which has found in you the most worthy of representatives, that is my one law, the only one I hold to with the serenity of a man who has done his duty. Yours faithfully. There followed the signature and below that, on the left, the signatory's full name, address and telephone number, as well as his identity card number and e-mail address.

The president of the republic slowly placed the piece of paper on his desk and, after a brief silence, asked his cabinet secretary, How many people know about this, No one apart from the clerk who opened it and recorded the letter in the register, Can he be trusted, Yes, I suppose so, president, he's a party member, but it might be a good idea to let him know that the slightest hint of disloyalty on his part could cost him very dear, and, if I may make a suggestion, that warning should be delivered directly, By me, No, sir, by the police, it's more effective that way, the man is summoned to the main police station where the toughest policeman they have takes him into an interrogation room and puts the fear of god into him, Oh, I don't doubt the results would be excellent, but I see one grave difficulty, What's that, sir, It will be a few days before the case reaches the police and, meanwhile, the fellow's tongue will start to wag, he'll tell his wife, his friends, he might even talk to a journalist, in short, he'll drop us in the soup, You're quite right, sir, the solution would be to have an urgent word with the chief of police, if you like, sir, I'll happily do that myself, Short-circuit the hierarchical chain of government, go over the prime minister's head, is that your idea, Obviously I wouldn't dare to do so if the case were not so serious, sir, My friend, in this world, and, as far as we know, there is no other, everything gets out in the end, now while I believe you when you say that the clerk is to be trusted, I couldn't say the same of the chief of police, what if, as is more

than likely, he's in cahoots with the interior minister, imagine the fuss there would be, the interior minister demanding an explanation from the prime minister because he can't demand one from me, the prime minister wanting to know if I'm trying to by-pass his authority and his responsibilities, in a matter of hours, the thing we are trying so hard to keep secret will be out in the open, Once again, sir, you are right, Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say, as a certain fellow politician once did, that I'm always right and rarely have any doubts, but I'm not far off, So what shall we do, sir, Send the man in, The clerk, Yes, the one who read the letter, Now, In another hour it might be too late. The cabinet secretary used the internal phone to summon the clerk, Come to the president's office immediately and be quick about it. Walking down the various corridors and through the various rooms usually took at least five minutes, but the clerk appeared at the door after only three. He was breathing hard and his legs were shaking. There was no need to run, said the president, smiling kindly, The cabinet secretary said I should be quick, sir, said the clerk, panting, Good, now the reason I wanted to see you was this letter, Yes, sir, You read it, of course, Yes, sir, Do you remember what was in it, More or less, sir, Don't use such expressions with me, answer my question, Yes, sir, I remember it as if I had read it this minute, Do you think you could try to forget its contents, Yes, sir, Think carefully now, you know, of course, that trying to forget and actually forgetting are not the same thing, No, sir, they're not, So mere effort won't be enough, you'll need to do something more, You have my word of honor, sir, You know, I was almost tempted to tell you again not to use such expressions, but I'd prefer you to explain precisely what you so romantically call your word of honor means to you in the present situation, It means, sir, a solemn declaration that, whatever happens, I will in no way divulge the contents of the letter, Are you married, Yes, sir, Right, I'm going to ask you a question, And I will answer it, sir, Supposing you were to reveal the nature of the letter to your wife and only to your wife, do you think you would, in the strict sense of the term, be divulging anything, I refer, of course, to the letter, not to your wife, No, sir, because divulge, strictly speaking, means to broadcast, to make public, Correct, I am pleased to see that you know your etymologies, But I wouldn't even tell my wife, Do you mean that you will tell her nothing, Nor anyone else, sir, Give me your word of honor, Forgive me, sir, but I already have, Imagine that, I had forgotten already, if the fact escapes me again, the cabinet secretary here will remind me, Yes, sir, said the two voices in unison. The president fell silent for a few seconds, then asked, What if I were to look in the letter register and see what you had written, can you save me the bother of getting out of my chair and tell me what I would find there, Just one word, sir, You must have a remarkable capacity for synthesis if you can sum up such a long letter in one word, Petition, sir, What, Petition, that's the word in the register, Nothing more, Nothing more, But that way no one will know what the letter is about, That was exactly my thinking, sir, that it would be best if no one knew, the word petition covers everything. The president leaned contentedly back and gave the prudent clerk a broad, toothy smile, then he said, Well, if you had said that in the first place you wouldn't have had to give away something as serious as your word of honor, One precaution guarantees the other, sir, Not bad, not bad at all, but have a look at the register from time to time, just in case someone should think to add something

else to the word petition, I've already blocked the line, sir, so that nothing can be added, You can go now, As you wish, sir. When the door had closed, the cabinet secretary said, I must confess I hadn't thought him capable of showing such initiative, I believe we have just satisfactorily proved to ourselves that he deserves our trust, He might deserve yours, said the president, but not mine, But I thought, You thought rightly, my friend, but, at the same time, wrongly, the safest way of categorizing people is not by dividing them up into the stupid and the clever, but into the clever and the too clever, with the stupid, we can do what we like, with the clever, the trick is to get them on our side, whereas the too clever, even when they're on our side, are still intrinsically dangerous, they can't help it, the oddest thing is that in everything they do, they are constantly warning us to be wary of them, but, generally speaking, we pay no attention to the warnings and then have to face the consequences, Do you mean to say, sir, Yes, I mean that our prudent clerk, that prestidigitator of the letter register, capable of transforming a troubling letter like that into a mere petition, will soon be getting a call from the police so that they can give him the fright that you and I, between ourselves, had promised him, he himself said as much, though without quite realizing it, one precaution guarantees the other, You're right as usual, sir, you're always so far-sighted, Yes, but the biggest mistake I made in my political life was letting them sit me down in this chair, I didn't realize at the time that the arms of this chair had handcuffs on them, That's because it's not a presidentialist regime, Exactly, and that's why all they allow me to do is cut ribbons and kiss babies, Now, though, you're holding a trump card, As soon as I hand it to the prime minister, it will be his trump card, and I will simply have acted as postman, And the moment he hands it to the interior minister, it will belong to the police, since the police are at the end of the assembly line, You've learned a lot, I'm at a good school, sir, Do you know something, I'm all ears, sir, Let's leave the poor devil alone, who knows, tonight, when I get home, or later on, in bed, I might tell my own wife what the letter said, and you, my dear cabinet secretary, will probably do the same, your wife will look at you as if you were a hero, her own sweet husband privy to all the secrets and webs that the state weaves, who's in the know, who inhales, without benefit of a mask, the putrid stench of the gutters of power, Please, sir, Oh, take no notice, I don't think I'm as bad as the worst, but sometimes I'm suddenly very conscious that that isn't enough, and my soul aches more than I can say, Sir, my mouth is and will remain closed, As will mine, as will mine, but there are times when I imagine what the world would be like if we all opened our mouths and didn't stop talking until, Until what, sir, Oh, nothing, nothing, leave me alone now.

Less than an hour had passed when the prime minister, summoned urgently to the palace, entered the office. The president gestured to him to sit down and, as he handed him the letter, said, Read this and tell me what you think. The prime minister sat down in the chair and started to read. He must have been about halfway through the letter when he looked up with an interrogative expression on his face, like someone who has not quite grasped what someone has just said to him, then he went on and, without further interruptions or other gestural manifestations, read to the end. A patriot full of good intentions, he said, and, at the same time, a complete swine, Why a swine, asked the

president, If what he says here is true, if this woman, always assuming she did exist, really didn't go blind and helped these six other people to survive that terrible time, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the writer of this letter owes her the good fortune of being alive today, my parents might be alive too if they had had the good fortune to meet her, He says that she murdered someone, No one knows for certain how many people were killed during that period, president, it was decided that all the bodies found had died accidentally or from natural causes and the matter was laid to rest, Even things laid to rest can be woken, That's true, president, but, in this case, I don't feel it would be for the best, it's highly unlikely there were any witnesses to the crime and, even if there were, they were just the blind amongst the blind, it would be absurd, a complete nonsense, to bring that woman to trial for a murder no one saw her commit and where the corpus delicti does not exist, The writer of the letter states that she killed someone, Yes, but he doesn't say that he was a witness to the murder, besides, sir, as I said before, the person who wrote this letter is a complete swine, Moral judgements are beside the point, As I well know, sir, but it does one good sometimes to say what one feels. The president took the letter back, looked at it as if it wasn't there and asked, What do you think you'll do, Me, nothing, replied the prime minister, there isn't a thread of evidence to go on, You noticed, of course, that the writer of the letter suggests the possibility of a link between the fact that this woman didn't go blind and the massive casting of blank votes that got us into this mess in the first place, Sir, we haven't always agreed with each other, That's only natural, Yes it is, as natural as it is for me not to have the slightest doubt that your intelligence and your common sense, which I greatly respect, will reject out of hand the idea that a woman, simply because she did not go blind four years ago, should today be deemed responsible for the fact that a few hundred thousand people, who had never even heard of her, chose to cast blank ballot papers when summoned to vote in an election, Well, put like that, There is no other way to put it, sir, my advice is to file the letter under correspondence from crazies and let the matter drop, while we continue the search for a solution to our problems, real solutions, not the fantasies or grudges of an imbecile, You're quite right, I was taking a lot of inconsequential twaddle far too seriously and I've wasted your time by asking you to come over here to see me, Oh, that doesn't matter, sir, my wasted time, if you want to call it that, has been more than made up for by our having reached agreement, Thank you, I'm glad you see it like that, Right, then, I'll leave you to get on with your work and I'll return to mine. The president of the republic was about to hold out his hand to say goodbye when the phone rang. He picked up the receiver and heard his secretary say, The interior minister would like to speak to you, sir, Put him through. The conversation was a long one, the president listened and, as the seconds passed, the expression on his face altered, sometimes he murmured Yes, on one occasion he said It's certainly worth looking into, and he ended with the words Speak to the prime minister about it. He put the receiver down, That was the interior minister, And what did that delightful man want, He's received a letter along the same lines and he's decided to begin an investigation, Bad news, But I told him to talk to you first, So I heard, but it's still bad news, Why, If I know the interior minister, and I'm sure few can know him as well as I do, he will have

already spoken to the chief of police by now, Stop him, Oh, I'll try, but I'm afraid it might be useless, Use your authority, What, and be accused of blocking an investigation into facts that affect the nation's security, at a moment when everyone knows that the nation is in grave danger, asked the prime minister, adding, You would be the first to withdraw your support from me, the agreement we've just reached would be a mere illusion, it already is, since it serves no purpose. The president nodded, then said, A little while ago, in connection with this letter, my cabinet secretary came out with a very illuminating phrase, What was that, He said that the police were at the end of the assembly line, Let me congratulate you, sir, on having such an excellent cabinet secretary, meanwhile, you had better warn him that there are some truths that should not be spoken out loud, This room is soundproof, That doesn't mean there aren't a few microphones hidden about the place, Perhaps I'd better have the room searched, Please believe me when I say that, if you do find any microphones, I was not the one who ordered them to be placed here, Very funny, Very sad, May I say how sorry I am, my friend, that circumstances have left you in this blind alley, Oh, there'll be some way out, although, I confess, I can't see one at the moment, and going back is impossible. The president accompanied the prime minister to the door, It's odd, he said, that the man who wrote the letter didn't write to you as well, He probably did, but your secretariat and that of the interior minister are clearly more diligent than mine, Very funny, No, sir, very sad.

THE LETTER ADDRESSED TO THE PRIME MINISTER, BECAUSE THERE WAS a letter, took two days to reach his hands. He realized at once that the clerk in charge of recording the letter had been less discreet than the president's clerk, how else explain the rumors that had been flying around for the last two days, rumors which, in turn, were either the result of a leak by mid-level civil servants eager to demonstrate that they were au courant or in the know, or else had been deliberately started by the ministry of the interior as a way of stopping in its tracks any attempt by the prime minister to oppose the police investigation or, however symbolically, obstruct it. There remained the possibility, which we will describe as the conspiracy theory, that the supposedly secret conversation between the prime minister and his interior minister that took place after the former had been summoned to the presidential palace, had been far less private than one might have thought, given the padded walls, which, who knows, may have concealed a few latest-generation microphones, of the kind that only an electronic gun-dog with the finest pedigree could sniff out and find. Whatever the truth of the matter, there was nothing to be done about it, it is a sad moment for state secrets, which have no one to defend them. The prime minister is so conscious of this deplorable certainty, so convinced of the pointlessness of secrets, especially when they have ceased to be so, that, with the look of someone observing the world from a very high vantage point, as if he were saying Don't say a word, I know everything, he slowly folded the letter up and put it in one of his inside jacket pockets. It came straight from the blindness of four years ago, I'll keep it with me, he said. The air of shocked surprise on his cabinet secretary's face made him smile, Don't worry, my friend, there are at least two other letters identical to this, not to mention the many photocopies that are doubtless already doing the rounds. His cabinet secretary's face suddenly assumed a look of feigned innocence or abstraction, as if he had not quite understood what he had heard, or as if his conscience had suddenly leapt out at him along the road, accusing him of some ancient, or else very recent, misdeed. You can go now, I'll call you if I need you, said the prime minister, getting up from his chair and going over to one of the windows. The noise he made in opening it concealed the sound of the door closing. From there, he could see little more than a succession of low roofs. He felt a nostalgia for the capital city, for the happy times when votes did as they were told, for the monotonous passing of the hours and days spent either at his petit-bourgeois official residence or at the national parliament, for the agitated and not infrequently jolly and amusing political crises, which were like sudden eruptions of foreseeable duration and controlled intensity, almost always put on, and through which one learned not only not to tell the truth, but, when necessary, to make it correspond, point by point, with the lie, just as the wrong side and the right side of things are, quite naturally, always found together. He wondered if the investigation would already have begun, he paused to speculate upon whether the agents taking part in the police action would be those who had fruitlessly remained behind in the capital charged with obtaining information and submitting reports, or if the interior minister would have preferred, for this new mission, people whom he knew and trusted, who were to hand and within easy reach, and, who knows, were seduced by the glamorous movie adventure element of a clandestine breaking of the blockade, crawling, with a knife tucked in their belt, underneath barbed-

wire fences, outwitting the dreaded electronic sensors with magnetic desensitizers, and emerging on the other side in enemy territory, heading for their objective, like moles endowed with the agility of a cat and with night-vision glasses. Knowing the interior minister as he did, only slightly less bloodthirsty than dracula, and even more theatrical than rambo, this was sure to be the mode of action he would order them to adopt. He was absolutely right. Hidden in the small area of forest that almost borders the perimeter of the besieged city, three men are waiting for night to become early dawn. However, not everything that the prime minister imagined from his office window corresponds to the reality we see before us. For example, these men are dressed in plain clothes, there are no knives tucked into belts, and the weapon they have in their holster is the gun which is always so reassuringly described as regulation. As for the dreaded magnetic desensitizers, there is, amongst the various bits of apparatus the men are carrying, nothing that looks as if it fulfilled that function, which, when one thinks about it, could mean merely that magnetic desensitizers are quite simply and deliberately made not to look like magnetic desensitizers. We will soon learn, however, that, at a pre-arranged time, the electronic sensors in this section of the border will be turned off for five minutes, which was considered more than enough time for three men, one by one, without undue haste or hurry, to cross the barbed-wire barrier, part of which was cut today precisely for the purpose of avoiding torn trousers and lacerated skin. The army's sappers will be back to repair it before the rosy fingers of dawn return to reveal the threatening barbs rendered harmless only very briefly, as well as the enormous rolls of wire stretching out along both sides of the frontier. The three men are already through, in front goes the leader, who is the tallest, and they cross, in indian file, a field whose wet grass oozes and squeaks beneath their shoes. On a minor road on the outskirts of the city, about five hundred meters from there, a car is waiting to carry them through the silence of the night to their destination in the capital, a bogus insurance and reinsurance company which a complete dearth of clients, whether local or foreign, had not as yet managed to bankrupt. The orders that these men received directly from the lips of the interior minister are clear and categorical, Bring me results and I won't ask by what means you obtained them. They have no written instructions with them, no safe-conduct pass to cover them or which they could show as a defense or as a justification if things should turn out worse than they expect, and there is, of course, always the possibility that the ministry would simply abandon them to their fate if they committed some action that might prejudice the state's reputation and the immaculate purity of its objectives and processes. These three men are like a commando group entering enemy territory, there seems no reason to think that they will risk their lives there, but they are all aware of the delicate nature of a mission that demands a talent for interrogation, flexibility in drawing up strategy and swiftness in carrying it out. All to the maximum degree. I don't think you'll need to kill anyone, the interior minister had said, but if, in an extreme situation, you consider that there's no other option, then don't hesitate, I'll sort things out with the minister for justice, Whose post has just been taken over by the prime minister, remarked the leader of the group. The interior minister pretended not to hear, he merely glared at the importunate speaker, who had no alternative but to look away. The car

drove into the city, stopped in a square so that they could change drivers, and finally, after going round various blocks thirty or so times in order to throw off any unlikely pursuer, deposited them at the door of the building where the insurance and reinsurance office has its base. The porter did not come out to see who was arriving at what was a most unusual hour for an office building, one assumes he had received a visit from someone the previous afternoon who had persuaded him gently to go to bed early and advised him not to slip out from between the sheets, even if insomnia kept him from closing his eyes. The three men took the lift up to the fourteenth floor, went down a corridor to the left, another to the right, a third to the left, and finally reached the office of providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, as anyone can read on the notice on the door, in black letters on a tarnished, rectangular brass plate, affixed with nails that have brass heads in the shape of truncated pyramids. They went in, one of the subordinates turned on the light, the other closed the door and put the security chain on. Meanwhile the leader of the group walked through the various rooms, checked phone lines, plugged in machines, went into the kitchen, into the bedrooms and bathrooms, opened the door to what was intended to be the filing room and had a quick look at the various armaments stored in there, at the same time breathing in the familiar smell of metal and lubricant, he will inspect it all properly tomorrow, piece by piece, weapon by weapon. He summoned his assistants, sat down and told them to sit down too, Later this morning, at seven o'clock, he said, we will begin the work of following the suspect, notice that I call him the suspect, even though, as far as we know he has committed no crime, I do so not only to simplify communication between ourselves, but also because, for security reasons, it is best that his name is not mentioned, at least not during these first few days, I would add that with this operation, which I hope will last no longer than a week, our first objective is to get an idea of the suspect's movements around the city, where he works, where he goes, who he meets, the usual routine for a basic investigation, reconnoitring the terrain before making a direct approach, Should he be aware that he's being followed, asked the first assistant, Not for the first four days, but after that, yes, I want him to feel worried, uneasy, Having written that letter, he must surely be expecting someone to come looking for him, We'll do that when the moment comes, what I want, and it's up to you to achieve this effect, is to frighten him into thinking that he's being followed by the people he denounced, By the doctor's wife, No, not by her, but by her accomplices, the people who cast the blank votes, Aren't we taking things a bit fast, asked the second assistant, we haven't even started work yet, and here we are talking about accomplices, All we're doing is making a preliminary sketch, a simple sketch, that's all, I want to put myself in the shoes of the guy who wrote that letter and, from there, try to see what he sees, Well, a week spent tailing the guy seems far too long to me, said the first assistant, it should take us three days at most to bring him to boiling point. The leader frowned, he was going to say, Look, I said one week and it will be one week, but then he remembered the interior minister, he didn't recall him having expressly asked for rapid results, but since that is the demand most often heard from the lips of those in charge, and since there was no reason to think that the present case would be any exception, quite the contrary, he showed no more reluctance in agreeing to the period of three days

than that considered normal between a superior and a subordinate, on the rare occasions when the person issuing the orders is forced to give in to the reasoning of the person receiving them. We have photographs of all the adults who live in the building, I mean, of course, those of the male sex, said the leader, adding unnecessarily, One of them is that of the man we are looking for, We can't start following him until we've identified him, said the first assistant, True, replied the leader, but nevertheless, at seven o'clock, I want you to be strategically positioned in the street where he lives and to follow the two men you think most closely resemble the kind of person who would have written that letter, that's where we'll start, intuition and a good police nose must have their uses, Can I say something, asked the second assistant, Of course, To judge by the tone of the letter, the guy must be a total bastard, Does that mean, asked the first assistant, that we should only follow the ones who look like bastards, then he added, Although in my experience, the worst bastards are precisely the ones who don't look like they're bastards, It would have made much more sense to have gone straight to the identity card people and asked for a copy of the guy's photograph, it would have saved time and work. Their leader decided to cut this discussion short, I presume you're not intending to teach the priest to say the our father or the mother superior the hail mary, if they didn't tell us to do that it must be because they didn't want to arouse any curiosity that could have caused the operation to be aborted, With respect, sir, I disagree, said the first assistant, everything indicates that the guy is dying to spill the beans, in fact, I think if he knew we were here, he'd be banging on our door right now, You may be right, said the group leader, struggling to control the irritation he felt at what had every appearance of being a devastating critique of his plan of action, but we want to know as much as we can about him before we make direct contact, How's this for an idea, piped up the second assistant, Not another one, said his chief sourly, This is a good one, I guarantee it, one of us disguises himself as an encyclopedia salesman, that way we'll be able to see who opens the door, That encyclopedia salesman trick went out with the ark, said the first assistant, besides, it's usually the wives who come to open the door, I mean, it would be a great idea if our man lived on his own, but, as I recall from what he says in the letter, he's married, Oh, rats, exclaimed the second assistant. They sat in silence, looking at each other, the two assistants knowing that the best thing now would be to wait for their superior to have an idea of his own. They would, in principle, be prepared to applaud it even if it was as leaky as an old boat. The leader of the group was weighing up everything that had been said, trying to fit the various suggestions together in the hope that two pieces of the puzzle might just slot into place and that something would emerge, something so holmesian, so poirot-esque, that it would make these two men under orders from him open their mouths wide in amazement. And suddenly, as if the scales had fallen from his eyes, he saw the way forward, Most people, he said, unless, of course, they're physically incapacitated, don't spend all their time stuck at home, they go out to work, go shopping or for a walk, so my idea is that we should wait until there's no one in the apartment and then break in, the guy's address is on the letter, we've got plenty of skeleton keys, and there are bound to be photos around, it wouldn't be hard to identify him from the various photographs and that way we'd have no problem following him, and

if we want to find out when the place is empty, we'll use the phone, we'll get his number tomorrow from directory inquiries, or we could look it up in the telephone book, one or the other, it doesn't really matter. As he uttered this rather lame conclusion, he realized that the pieces of the puzzle really didn't fit. Although, as explained before, the two assistants' attitude toward the results of their leader's cogitations was one of total benevolence, the first assistant, trying to find a tone of voice that would not wound his chief's susceptibilities, felt obliged to observe, Correct me if I'm wrong, but wouldn't it be best, since we know the guy's address, just to go and knock on his door and ask whoever answers Does So-and-so live here, if it's him, he'll say Yes, that's me, if it's his wife, she'll probably say I'll just go and call my husband, that way we would have the bird in our hand without having to beat about the bush. The leader raised his clenched fist like someone about to give the desk an almighty thump, but, at the last moment, he checked the violence of that gesture, slowly lowered his arm and said in a voice that seemed to fade with every syllable, We'll examine that possibility tomorrow, I'm going to bed now, good night. He was just going over to the door of the bedroom he would occupy during the time the investigation lasted when he heard the second assistant ask, So do we still start the operation at seven o'clock as planned. Without turning round, the group leader replied, That plan of action is suspended until further orders, you will receive your instructions tomorrow, once I have read through any messages from the ministry, and, if necessary, so as to speed up the work, I will make any changes I see fit. He said good night again, Good night, sir, replied his two subordinates, and then he went into his room. As soon as the door had closed, the second assistant prepared to continue the conversation, but the other man quickly put a forefinger to his lips and shook his head, indicating to him not to speak. He was the first one to push back his chair and say, Right, I'm off to bed, if you're staying up, be careful not to wake me when you come in. Unlike their leader, these two men, as the subordinates they are, do not have the right to a room of their own, they are both going to sleep in a large room with three beds, a kind of small dormitory which is rarely fully occupied. The bed in the middle is always the one least used. When, as in this case, there were two agents, they invariably used the beds on either side, and if only one policeman was sleeping there, he was also sure to prefer to sleep in one of those, never in the middle bed, perhaps because sleeping there would make him feel as if he were under siege or a prisoner under arrest. Even the hardest, most thick-skinned of policemen, and these two have not yet had the opportunity to prove that they are, need to feel protected by the proximity of a wall. The second assistant, who had understood the message, got to his feet and said, No, no, I'm not sitting up, I'm going to bed too. According to rank, first one, then the other, made use of the bathroom which was, as it should be, equipped with everything necessary for their ablutions, for we have not at any point in this report mentioned that the three policemen each brought with them only a small suitcase or a simple rucksack with a change of clothing, a toothbrush and a razor. It would be surprising if an enterprise christened with the fortunate name of providential did not take care to provide those to whom it gave temporary shelter with the various articles and products essential for their comfort and for the successful fulfilment of the mission with which they had been charged. Half an

hour later, the two assistants were in their respective beds, wearing their official pajamas, with the police emblem over their heart. So the plan from the ministry of the interior's planning department was useless, said the second assistant, It's always the same when they don't take the elementary precaution of consulting the people who've got the experience, replied the first assistant, Our leader's got plenty of experience, said the second assistant, if he hadn't, he wouldn't be where he is today, Sometimes, being too close to the centers of decision-making brings on myopia, makes you shortsighted, replied the first assistant sagely, Do you mean to say that if we ever get to a position of real power, like the chief, the same thing will happen to us, asked the second assistant, There's no reason why, in this particular case, the future should be any different from the present, replied the first assistant wisely. Fifteen minutes later, both were asleep. One was snoring, the other wasn't.

It was not yet eight o'clock in the morning, when the group leader, already washed, shaved and dressed, came into the room where the ministry's plan of action, or, to be more precise, the interior minister's plan of action that had been so rudely loaded onto the patient shoulders of the police authorities, had been torn to shreds by his two assistants, albeit with praiseworthy discretion and considerable respect, and even a slight touch of dialectical elegance. He had no problem in acknowledging this and bore them no rancor, on the contrary, he was clearly very relieved. With the same energetic strength of will with which he had overcome the incipient insomnia that had caused him to toss and turn for a while in bed, he took total control of operations, generously rendering unto caesar what could not be denied to caesar, but making it quite clear that, in the end, all benefits will sooner or later revert to god and to authority, god's other name. It was, therefore, a serene, confident man whom the two sleepy assistants found when, minutes later, they, in turn, shuffled into the living-room, still in their dressing-gowns, which were also adorned with the police emblem, and in their pajamas and bedroom slippers. Their chief had calculated as much, he had foreseen that the first point of the day would go to him, and he had already noted it on the blackboard. Good morning, boys, he said in a cordial tone, I hope you slept well. Yes, sir, said one. Yes, sir, said the other, Let's have breakfast, then get yourselves washed and dressed, who knows, we might catch him still in his bed, that would be fun, by the way, what day is it today, Saturday, today is Saturday, no one gets up early on Saturday, you wait, he'll open the door looking just the way you do now, in dressing-gown and pajamas, shuffling down the corridor in his slippers, and consequently with his defenses down, psychologically at a low ebb, come on, come on, who's the brave man who's going to volunteer to make breakfast, Me, said the second assistant, knowing full well that there was no third assistant to do the job. In a different situation, that is, if, instead of being thrown out, the ministry's plan had been accepted without further discussion, the first assistant would have stayed behind with his chief to agree and fine-tune, however unnecessarily, some detail of the investigation they were about to embark upon, but, in the circumstances, especially now that he, too, had been reduced to the inferiority of bedroom slippers, he decided to make a great gesture of camaraderie and say, I'll help you. Their leader agreed, it seemed a good idea, and he

sat down to go over some notes he had made before going to sleep. Barely fifteen minutes had passed when the two assistants reappeared carrying a tray each, bearing the coffee pot, the milk jug, a packet of plain biscuits, orange juice, yoghurt and jam, no doubt about it, the catering corps of the political police had once again done honor to their hard-won reputation. Resigned to drinking their coffee with cold milk or having to reheat it, the assistants said that they were going to get washed and dressed and would be back in a moment, We'll be as quick as we can. In fact, it seemed to them a grave lack of respect, with their superior there in suit and tie, to join him in their disheveled state, unshaven, eyes blinking, and emanating the thick, nocturnal smell of unwashed bodies. There was no need for them to explain, what was left unspoken was, for once, more than eloquent. Naturally, given this new atmosphere of peace, and with his assistants put firmly back in their places, it cost their chief nothing to urge them to sit down and share bread and salt with him, We're colleagues, we're in the same boat, a fine boss I'd be if I had to keep flaunting my stripes in order to get people to obey me, anyone who knows me knows I'm not like that, sit down, sit down. Slightly embarrassed, the assistants sat down, conscious that, whatever anyone said, there was something improper about the situation, two down-and-outs having breakfast with a person who, in comparison, looked like a dandy, they were the ones who should have got their asses out of bed early, more than that, they should have had the table set and ready for when their chief came out of his room, in dressing-gown and pajamas if he so wished, but us, no, we should have been properly dressed and with our hair combed, it is these small cracks in the varnish of behavior, rather than noisy revolutions, which, slowly, through repetition and persistence, finally bring down the most solid of social edifices. It is a wise dictum that says, If you want to be respected, don't encourage familiarity, let us hope, for the good of the job, that this particular chief does not have reason to regret this moment. In the meantime, he seems confident of his authority, we have only to hear him, This operation has two objectives, a main one and a secondary one, the secondary objective, which I'll deal with now so as not to waste time, is to find out as much as possible, but without, in theory, too much outlay of energy, about the supposed murder committed by the woman who led the group of six blind people mentioned in the letter, the main objective, to which we will apply all our efforts and abilities and for which we will use all reasonable means, whatever they may be, is to establish whether or not there is any connection between this woman, who is said to have retained her sight while the rest of us were all staggering around blind, and this new epidemic of blank ballot papers, It won't be easy to find her, said the first assistant, That's why we're here, all attempts to unearth the roots of the boycott have failed up until now and it might well be that this guy's letter won't get us very far either, but it at least opens a new line of inquiry, It seems pretty unbelievable to me that this woman could be behind a movement that involves some hundreds of thousands of people and that, tomorrow, if we don't stamp the whole business out now, she might gather together millions and millions more, said the second assistant, Both things are equally impossible, but if one of them happened, so could the other one, replied the chief, and concluded, with the look of someone who knows more than he is authorized to say, never imagining how true his words will prove to be, Impossibilities

never come singly. With this happy concluding phrase, the perfect close to a sonnet, breakfast also came to an end. The assistants cleared the table and carried the crockery and what remained of the food into the kitchen, We'll go and get washed and dressed now, we won't be a moment, they said, Wait, said the chief, then, addressing himself to the first assistant, You'd better use my bathroom, otherwise we'll never get out of here. The lucky assistant blushed with contentment, his career had just taken a great leap forward, he was going to pee in his chief's toilet.

In the underground garage a car was waiting for them, the keys of which had been deposited the day before on the chief's bedside table, along with a brief explanatory note indicating its make, color, registration number and the parking place where the vehicle had been left. Avoiding the foyer, they took the lift straight down to the garage and had no difficulty in finding the car. It was nearly ten o'clock. The chief said to the second assistant as the latter was opening the back door for him, You drive. The first assistant sat in the front, next to the driver. It was a pleasant, very sunny morning, which shows yet again that the punishments of which the sky was such a prodigal source in the past, have, with the passing of the centuries, lost their force, those were good and just times, when any failure to obey the divine diktat was enough for several biblical cities to be annihilated and razed to the ground with all their inhabitants inside. Yet here is a city that cast blank votes against the lord and not a single bolt of lightning has fallen upon it, reducing it to ashes, as happened, in response to far less exemplary vices, to sodom and gomorrah, as well as to admah and to zeboyim, burned down to their very foundations, although the last two cities are mentioned less often than the first, whose names, perhaps because of their irresistible musicality, have remained forever in people's ears. Nowadays, having abandoned their blind obedience to the lord's orders, lightning bolts fall only where they want to, and, as has become manifest, one can clearly not count on them to lead this sinful city and caster of blank votes back to the path of righteousness. In their place, the ministry of the interior has sent three of its archangels, these three policemen, chief and subalterns, who, from now on, we will designate by their corresponding ranks, which are, following the hierarchical scale, superintendent, inspector and sergeant. The first two sit watching the people walking along, none of them innocent, all of them guilty of something, and they wonder if that venerable-looking old gentleman, for example, is not perhaps the grand master of outer darkness, if that girl with her arms about her boyfriend is not the incarnation of the undying serpent of evil, if that man walking along, head down, is not going to some unknown cave where the potions that poisoned the spirit of the city are distilled. The sergeant, whose lowly condition means that he is under no obligation to think elevated thoughts or to harbor suspicions about what lies beneath the surface of things, has rather homelier concerns, like this one with which he is about to dare to interrupt his superiors' meditations, With weather like this, the man might have gone to spend the day in the country, What country, asked the inspector in an ironic tone, What do you mean what country, The real country is on the other side of the frontier, on this side, it's all city. It was true. The sergeant had missed a golden opportunity to remain silent, but he had learned a lesson,

asking such questions would get him nowhere. He concentrated on his driving and swore to himself that he would only open his mouth if asked to. That was when the superintendent spoke, We will be hard and implacable, we won't resort to any of the classic tricks, like that old, outmoded hard cop, soft cop routine, we are a commando of operatives, feelings don't count here, we will imagine that we are machines made to perform a specific task and we will simply carry out that task without so much as a backward glance, Yes, sir, said the inspector, Yes, sir, said the sergeant, breaking his own oath. The car turned into the street where the man who wrote the letter lives, over in that building, on the third floor. They parked the car a little further on, the sergeant opened the door for the superintendent, the inspector got out the other side, the commando is complete, on the firing line, fists clenched, action.

Now we see them on the landing. The superintendent gestures to the sergeant, who rings the doorbell. Total silence inside. The sergeant thinks, You see, I was right, he has gone to spend the day in the country. Another gesture, another ring on the doorbell. A few seconds later, they hear someone, a man, ask from behind the door, Who is it. The superintendent looks at his immediate subordinate, who says in a loud voice, Police, One moment, please, said the man, I have to get dressed. Four minutes passed. The superintendent made the same gesture, the sergeant again rang the doorbell, this time keeping his finger pressed down. One moment, one moment, please, I'm coming, I've only just got up, these last words were spoken with the door open by a man wearing shirt and trousers and still in his slippers, Today is the day of the slipper, thought the sergeant. The man did not seem alarmed, he wore the look of someone finally seeing the arrival of the visitors he has been waiting for, any hint of surprise was probably due only to the fact that there were so many of them. The inspector asked him his name and he told them, adding, Do come in, and I apologize for the state the place is in, I never imagined you would come so early, besides, I thought you would call me in to make a statement, but you've come to me instead, it's about the letter, I assume, Yes, it's about the letter, said the inspector bluntly, Come in, come in. The sergeant went in first, sometimes the hierarchy works in reverse, followed by the inspector, with the superintendent bringing up the rear. The man shuffled down the corridor, Follow me, this way, he opened a door that gave onto a small sitting-room and said, Sit down, please, and if you don't mind, I'll just go and put some shoes on, this is no way to receive visitors, We're not exactly what you would call visitors, remarked the inspector, No, of course not, it was just a manner of speaking, Go and put some shoes on, then, and be quick about it, we're in a hurry, No, we're not, we're not in any hurry at all, said the superintendent, who had not until then said a word. The man looked at him, and this time he did so with an air of slight alarm, as if the tone in which the superintendent had spoken was not what had been agreed, and all he could think of to say was, You can, I assure you, count on my entire cooperation, sir, Superintendent, said the sergeant, Superintendent, repeated the man, and you, sir, Don't worry, I'm just a sergeant. The man turned to the third member of the group, replacing his question with an interrogative lift of the eyebrows, but the answer came from the superintendent, This gentleman is an inspector and my chief officer, then

he added, Now go and put some shoes on, we'll wait for you. The man left the room. I can't hear anyone else in the apartment, it looks as if he lives alone, whispered the sergeant, His wife's probably gone to spend the day in the country, said the inspector with a smile. The superintendent signaled to them to be quiet, I'll ask the first questions, he said, lowering his voice. The man came back in and, as he sat down, said May I, as if he were not in his own house, and then, Here I am, now how can I help you. The superintendent nodded kindly, then began, Your letter, or, rather, your three letters, because there were three of them, Yes, I thought it was safer that way, because you never know, one of them might have got lost, the man began, Don't interrupt, just answer any questions I ask you, Yes, superintendent, Your letters, I repeat, were read with great interest by their recipients, especially as regards what you say about a certain unidentified woman who committed a murder four years ago. There was no question in these words, it was a simple reiteration of facts, and so the man said nothing. There was an expression of confusion and perplexity on his face, he could not understand why the superintendent did not get straight to the heart of the matter instead of wasting time on an episode which he had only mentioned in order to cast a still darker light on an already disquieting portrait. The superintendent pretended not to notice, Tell us what you know about that murder, he asked. The man suppressed an urge to remind the superintendent that this had not been the most important part of the letter, that, compared with the country's current situation, the murder was the least of it, but no, he wouldn't do that, prudence told him to follow the music they were asking him to dance to, later on, they were sure to change the record, I know that she killed a man, Did you see her do it, were you there, asked the superintendent, No, superintendent, but she herself confessed, To you, To me and to other people, You do know, I assume, the technical meaning of the word confession, More or less, superintendent, More or less isn't enough, either you do or you don't, In the sense that you mean, no, I don't, Confession means a declaration of one's own mistakes or faults, it can also mean an acknowledgement of guilt or of the truth of an accusation by the accused to someone in authority or in a court of law, now, can these definitions be applied rigorously to this case, No, not rigorously, superintendent, Fine, continue, My wife was there, my wife witnessed the man's death, What do you mean by there, There, in the old insane asylum where we were quarantined, Your wife, I assume, was also blind, As I said the only person who didn't go blind was her, Who's her, The woman who committed the murder, Ah, We were in a dormitory, And the murder was committed there, No, superintendent, in another dormitory, So none of the people from your dormitory were present when the murder was committed, Only the women, Why only the women, It's difficult to explain, superintendent, Don't worry, we've got plenty of time, There were some blind men who took over and started terrorizing us, Terrorizing, Yes, superintendent, terrorizing, How, They got hold of all the food and if we wanted to eat, we had to pay, And they demanded women as payment, Yes, superintendent, And that woman killed a man, Yes, superintendent, Killed him how, With a pair of scissors, Who was this man, The one who was in charge of the other blind men, She's obviously a brave woman, Yes, superintendent, Now tell us why you reported her, But I didn't, I only mentioned it

because it seemed relevant, Sorry, I don't understand, What I meant to say in the letter was that someone who was capable of doing that was capable of doing the other thing. The superintendent did not ask what other thing this was, he merely looked at the person whom he had, using navy language, called his chief officer, inviting him to continue the interrogation. The inspector paused for a few seconds, Would you mind asking your wife to join us, he asked, we'd like to talk to her, My wife isn't here, When will she be back, She won't, we're divorced, When did that happen, Three years ago, Would you object to telling us why you got divorced, For personal reasons, Naturally they would be personal, For private reasons then, As with all divorces. The man looked at the inscrutable faces before him and realized that they would not leave him in peace until he had told them what they wanted to know. He cleared his throat, crossed and uncrossed his legs, I'm a man of principle, he began, Oh, we know that, said the sergeant, unable to contain himself, I mean, I know that, I had the privilege of reading your letter. The superintendent and the inspector smiled, it was a justifiable blow. The man looked at the sergeant, bewildered, as if he had not expected an attack from that quarter, and, lowering his eyes, he went on, It was to do with those blind men, I couldn't bear the fact that my wife had done it with those vile men, for a whole year I put up with the shame of it, but, in the end, it became unbearable, and so I left her, got a divorce, How odd, I thought you said that these other blind men gave you food in exchange for your women, said the inspector, That's right, And your principles, I assume, did not allow you to touch the food that your wife brought to you after she had, to use your expression, done it with those vile men. The man hung his head and did not reply. I understand your discretion, said the inspector, it really is too private a matter to be bandied about amongst strangers, oh, sorry, I didn't mean to wound your sensibilities. The man looked at the superintendent as if pleading for help, or at least asking him to replace the pincers with a spell on the rack. The superintendent obliged and applied the garrotte, In your letter, you referred to a group of seven people, Yes, superintendent, Who were they, Apart from the woman and her husband, Which woman, The one who didn't go blind, The one who acted as your guide, Yes, superintendent, The one who, in order to avenge her fellow women, stabbed the leader of the bandits with a pair of scissors, Yes, superintendent, Go on, Her husband was an ophthalmologist, We know that, There was a prostitute too, Did she tell you she was a prostitute, Not that I remember, no, superintendent, So how did you know she was a prostitute, By her manner, it was clear from her manner, And, of course, manners never deceive, go on, And there was an old man who was blind in one eye and wore a black eye-patch, and he and she lived together afterward, Who's she, The prostitute, Were they happy, I've no idea, You must have some idea, During the year that we still saw each other, yes, they seemed happy. The superintendent counted on his fingers, There's still one missing, he said, Yes, there was a boy with a squint who had lost his parents in all the confusion, Do you mean that you all met in the dormitory, No, superintendent, we had all met before, Where, At the ophthalmologist's where my then wife took me when I went blind, in fact, I think I was the first person to go blind, And you infected the others, the whole city, including your visitors today, It wasn't my fault, superintendent, Do you know the names of these people, Yes, superintendent, Of all of

them, Apart from the boy, if I knew his name then, I've forgotten it now, But you remember the others, Yes, superintendent, And their addresses, Yes, unless they've moved in the last three years, Of course, unless they've moved in the last three years. The superintendent glanced round the small room, and his gaze lingered on the television as if he were hoping for some inspiration from it, then he said, Sergeant, pass your notebook to this gentleman and lend him your pen so that he can write down the names and the addresses of the people of whom he has spoken so warmly, apart from the boy with the squint, who wouldn't be of any use to us anyway. The man's hands trembled when he took the pen and the notebook, they continued to tremble as he wrote, he was telling himself that there was no reason to feel afraid, that the police were there because he had, in some way, summoned them himself, what he didn't understand was why they didn't talk about the blank ballot papers, the insurrection, the conspiracy against the state, about the only real reason he had written his letter. His hands were trembling so much that his writing was almost illegible, May I use another sheet, he asked, Use as many as you like, replied the sergeant. His writing began to grow steadier, it was no longer a motive for embarrassment. While the sergeant retrieved the pen and handed the notebook to the superintendent, the man was wondering what gesture, what word could win him, even if only belatedly, the sympathy of these policemen, their benevolence, their complicity. Suddenly, he remembered, I've got a photograph, he exclaimed, yes, I think I've still got it, What photograph, asked the inspector, Of the group, it was taken shortly after we had recovered our sight, my wife didn't want it, she said she'd get a copy, she said I should keep it so that I wouldn't forget, Were those her words, asked the inspector, but the man did not reply, he had stood up and was about to leave the room, when the superintendent ordered, Sergeant, go with this gentleman, if he has any trouble finding the photograph, help him, don't come back without it. They were absent for only a few minutes. Here it is, said the man. The superintendent went over to the window to be able to see better. In a line, side by side, the six adults stood in pairs, couple by couple. On the right, alongside his wife, stood the man himself, plainly recognizable, to the left there stood, without a shadow of a doubt, the old man with the black eye-patch and the prostitute, and in the middle, by a process of elimination, two people who could only be the doctor's wife and her husband. In front, kneeling down like a football player, was the boy with the squint. Next to the doctor's wife was a large dog looking straight at the camera. The superintendent beckoned to the man to join him, Is that her, he asked, pointing, Yes, superintendent, that's her, And the dog, If you like, I can tell you the story, superintendent, No, don't bother, she'll tell me. The superintendent left first, followed by the inspector and then the sergeant. The man who had written the letter watched them go down the stairs. The building has no lift and there is little hope that it ever will.

THE THREE POLICEMEN DROVE AROUND THE CITY FOR A WHILE, FILLING in time until lunch, although they would not eat together. The plan was to park the car near an area where there were plenty of restaurants and then to go their separate ways, each to a different place, and meet exactly ninety minutes later in a square some way off, where the superintendent, this time at the wheel, would pick his subordinates up. Obviously, no one here knows who they are, besides, none of them has a capital P branded on his forehead, but common sense and prudence tell them not to wander around as a group through the center of a city which is, for many reasons, hostile to them. True, there are three men over there, and another three ahead of them, but a quick glance is enough to see that they are normal people, belonging to the common species of passer-by, ordinary folk, free of all suspicion of being representatives of the law or pursued by it. During the drive, the superintendent wanted to hear his two subordinates' impressions of the man who had written the letter, making it clear, however, that he was not interested in any moral judgements, We know he's a bastard of the first order, so there's no point wasting time coming up with other descriptions. The inspector was the first to speak, saying that he had particularly admired the way in which the superintendent had directed the interrogation, skilfully omitting any reference to the malicious suggestion contained in the letter, that the doctor's wife, given her exceptional personal circumstances during the plague of blindness four years ago, could be the cause of or in some way implicated in the conspiracy that led to the capital's population casting blank votes. The guy was obviously completely thrown, he said, he was expecting that to be the main and possibly the only subject the police would be interested in, but how wrong he was. I almost felt sorry for him, he added. The sergeant agreed with what the inspector had said, noting, too, how, by alternating the role of interrogator between himself and the inspector, he had succeeded brilliantly in breaking down the interrogatee's defenses. He paused and, in a low voice, said, Superintendent, it is my duty to inform you that when you told me to leave the room with him I used my pistol on him, Used it, how, asked the superintendent, I stuck it in his ribs, he's probably still got the mark, But why, Well, I thought it would take a while to find the photo and that the guy would take advantage of the interruption to come up with some trick to hinder the investigation, something that would force you, sir, to change the line of inquiry in the direction that best suited him, And now what do you want me to do, pin a medal on your chest, said the superintendent mockingly, We gained time, sir, the photo appeared in an instant, And I'm sorely tempted to make you disappear, Forgive me, sir, Oh, don't worry, I'll tell you when you're forgiven, always assuming I remember, Yes, sir, One question, Yes, sir, Was the safety catch on, Yes, sir, Why, because you'd forgotten to take it off, No, sir, I really just wanted to frighten the guy, And you managed to do that, Yes, sir, Well, it looks like I'll have to give you that medal after all, but, please, don't get too excited, and mind you don't run over that old lady or jump a red light, the last thing I want is to have to explain myself to a policeman, But there are no police in the city, sir, they were withdrawn when the state of siege was declared, said the inspector, Ah, now I understand, I was wondering why it was so quiet. They drove past a park where children were playing. The superintendent looked at them with an air that seemed distracted, absent, but the sigh that suddenly emerged from his

breast showed that he must have been thinking about other times and other places. After we've had lunch, he said, I'll be going back to base, Yes, sir, said the sergeant, Do you have any orders for us, sir, asked the inspector, Go for a walk, stroll around the city, go into the cafés and shops, keep your eyes and ears open, and come back in time for supper, we won't be going out tonight, there's bound to be some canned stuff in the kitchen, Yes, sir, said the sergeant, And tomorrow we'll be working on our own, our bold driver, the policeman with the gun, will go and talk to the ex-wife of the man who wrote the letter, the inspector here, sitting in the dead man's seat, will visit the old man with the black eye-patch and his prostitute, and I'll reserve the doctor's wife and the doctor for myself, as for tactics, we'll stick strictly to those we used today, no mention of blank votes, no getting involved in political debates, restrict your questions to the circumstances surrounding the murder, to the personality of the presumed murderer, get them to talk about the group, how it was formed, if they had met before, what their relationship is like today, they're probably friends and will want to protect each other, but they're bound to make mistakes if they haven't reached some prior agreement about what they should say and what it would be best to stay quiet about, our job is to help them make those mistakes, and, to cut this rather long speech short, remember the most important fact of all, tomorrow morning, we must arrive at the houses of these people at exactly half past ten, I'm not telling you to synchronize watches, because that only happens in action movies, but we mustn't give any of the suspects the chance to pass on the message, to warn the others, but now let's go and have lunch, ah, yes, and when you come back, come in through the garage, on Monday, I'll have to find out whether or not the porter can be trusted. Rather more than the stipulated ninety minutes later, the superintendent picked up his assistants, who were waiting for him in the square, then dropped them off in turn, first the sergeant, then the inspector, in different parts of the city, where they would carry out the orders they had been given, to walk about, go into cafés and shops, keep their eyes and ears open, in short, to sniff out any crime. They will return to base for the promised canned supper and to sleep, and when the superintendent asks them if they have anything to report, they will confess that they have absolutely nothing to tell him, that while the inhabitants of this city aren't any less talkative than those in any other, they certainly don't talk about the subject of most interest. That's a good sign, he will say, the proof that there is a conspiracy lies precisely in the fact that no one talks about it, silence, in this case, does not contradict, it confirms. The phrase was not his, it had been spoken by the interior minister, with whom, when he got back to providential ltd, he'd had a brief phone conversation, which, even though the line was extremely safe, complied with all the precepts of the law of basic official secrecy. Here is a summary of their conversation, Hello, puffin speaking, Hello, puffin, replied albatross, First contact made with local bird life, friendly reception, useful interrogation with the participation of hawk and gull, good results, Substantial, puffin, Very substantial, albatross, we got an excellent photograph of the whole flock, tomorrow we'll start identifying the different species, Well done, puffin, Thank you, albatross, Listen, puffin, I'm listening, albatross, Don't be fooled by occasional silences, puffin, when birds are quiet, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're on their nests, it's the calm that conceals

the storm, not the other way round, the same thing happens with human conspiracies, the fact that no one mentions them doesn't mean they don't exist, do you understand, puffin, Yes, albatross, I understand perfectly, What are you going to do tomorrow, puffin, I'm going to go for the osprey, Who is the osprey, puffin, explain yourself, It's the only one on the whole coast, albatross, indeed, as far as we know, there has never been another, Ah, now I understand, Do you have any orders for me, albatross, Just carry out rigorously those I gave you before you left, puffin, They will be rigorously carried out, albatross, Keep me posted, puffin, I will, albatross. Once he had checked that all microphones were switched off, the superintendent gave vent to his feelings, Ye gods of the police and of espionage, what a farce, I'm puffin and he's albatross, the next thing you know we'll be communicating by squawks and screeches, there'd be a storm then, no fear. When his subordinates finally arrived back, tired from pounding the city streets, he asked them if they had any news, and they said no, they had strained eyes and ears watching and listening, but, alas, with no result. These people talk as if they had nothing to hide, they said. It was then that the superintendent, without giving his source, uttered the interior minister's words about conspiracies and the ways in which they disguise themselves.

The following day, after breakfast, they looked at the map and in the city guide for the streets they were interested in. The nearest one to the building where providential Ltd is based is the street where the ex-wife of the man who wrote the letter, formerly known as the first blind man, has her apartment, the doctor's wife and her husband are a little further off, and furthest away are the old man with the black eye-patch and the prostitute. Let's just hope they're in. As on the previous day, they took the lift down to the garage, in fact, for those leading clandestine lives, this is not the best way of proceeding, because while it is true that, up until now, they have escaped the porter's busyboding, I wonder who those spooks are, I've never seen them around here before, he would think to himself, but they will not escape the curiosity of the garage attendant, and we will soon find out with what consequences. This time, the inspector will drive, since he has the longest journey. The sergeant asked the superintendent if he had any special instructions to give him and was told that he had no special instructions, only general ones, I just hope you don't do anything stupid and that you keep your gun firmly in its holster, But I would never threaten a woman with a gun, sir, Oh, yeah, anyway, don't forget, you are forbidden to knock on her door before half past ten, Yes, sir, Go for a walk, have a coffee if you can find somewhere, buy a newspaper, look in the shop windows, you can't have forgotten everything you were taught at police college, No, sir, Good, this is your street, out you get, Where will we meet when we've finished, asked the sergeant, we need to arrange a meeting place, that's the trouble with only having one key to the office, I mean, if I, for example, was to finish my interrogation first, I wouldn't be able to go back to base, Nor would I, said the inspector, That's what comes of them not providing us with mobile phones, insisted the sergeant, sure of his reasoning and trusting that the beauty of the morning would dispose his superior to be kind. The superintendent agreed, Meanwhile, we'll have to make do with what we've got, but if the

investigation calls for it, then I'll requisition more equipment, as for keys, if the ministry authorizes the expense, tomorrow, you'll each have a key of your own, And what if they refuse, Then I'll sort something out, But what are we going to do about fixing a meeting place, asked the inspector, From what we know of this story already, everything indicates that my investigation is going to take the longest, so why don't you meet me there, make a note of the address, we'll see then how the people being interrogated react to the arrival of two more police officers, An excellent idea, sir, said the inspector. The sergeant merely nodded, since he could not say out loud what he was thinking, that any praise for the idea belonged to him, even if only indirectly and by a very tortuous route. He made a note of the address in his investigator's notebook and got out of the car. The inspector drove off and, as he did so, said, To be fair, he really tries, poor boy, I can remember being just like him when I was starting out, so eager to do something right that I made nothing but blunders, in fact, I sometimes ask myself how I ever came to be promoted to inspector, Or how I came to be what I am today, You too, sir, Me too, me too, my friend, all policemen start out much the same, everything else is just a question of luck, Luck and knowledge, Knowledge on its own isn't always enough, whereas with luck and time you can achieve almost anything, but don't ask me what luck is because I wouldn't be able to tell you, all I can say is that often you can get what you want just by having friends in the right places or some favor to call in, Not everyone was born to be a superintendent, True, Besides, a police force made up entirely of superintendents wouldn't work, Nor would an army made up entirely of generals. They turned into the street where the ophthalmologist lives. Drop me here, said the superintendent, I'll walk the rest of the way, Good luck, sir, And to you, Let's hope we can resolve this matter quickly, to be perfectly honest I feel as if I was lost in the middle of a minefield, Calm down, man, there's no reason to be worried, look at these streets, see how peaceful and quiet the city is, That's exactly what worries me, sir, a city like this, with no one in charge, with no government, no security, no police, and no one seems to care, there's something very mysterious going on here which I can't quite understand, That's what we were sent here to do, to understand, we have the knowledge and I just hope the rest comes with it, Luck, you mean, Yes, luck, Well, good luck, then, sir, Good luck, inspector, and if the woman who's supposed to be a prostitute shoots you a seductive look or gives you a glimpse of thigh, just pretend you haven't noticed, concentrate on the interests of the investigation, think of the eminent dignity of the organization that we serve, The old man with the black eye-patch is sure to be there too, and old men, I'm reliably informed, are real terrors, said the inspector. The superintendent smiled, Old age is catching up with me as well, I wonder if I'll live long enough to turn into a real terror. Then he glanced at his watch, It's a quarter past ten already, I hope you manage to get there on time, As long as you and the sergeant keep to the timetable, it doesn't really matter if I'm a bit late, said the inspector. The superintendent said goodbye, See you later, and got out of the car and, as soon as he set foot on the pavement, as if he had made an appointment to meet his own flawed reasoning right there, he realized that it made no sense to have been so rigorous about the time when they should knock on the suspects' respective doors, since, with a policeman in their home, they would have neither the

sangfroid nor the opportunity to phone their friends to warn them of the imagined danger, always assuming they were that astute, astute enough for them to work out that if they were the object of police attention, then their friends would be too, Besides, thought the superintendent, irritated with himself, they obviously won't be their only friends, and in that case, how many of their friends would each of them have to ring, how many. He was not just thinking these thoughts to himself now, he was muttering accusations, abuse, insults, How did such an imbecile ever manage to become superintendent, how could the government have given an imbecile like me full responsibility for an investigation on which the fate of the whole country might hang, and how did this imbecile come up with that stupid order to his subordinates, I just hope they're not both laughing at me at this very moment, I shouldn't think the sergeant is, but the inspector is bright, too bright really, even though, at first sight, he doesn't seem to be, or perhaps he's just good at hiding it, which, of course, makes him doubly dangerous, no, I'd better be very careful with him, treat him with caution, I wouldn't want this to get out, others have found themselves in similar situations and with catastrophic results, someone once said, I can't remember who, that a moment's folly can ruin a whole career. This implacable bout of self-flagellation did the superintendent good. Seeing him crushed and ground into the mud, it was the turn of cool reflection to speak and to show him that the order had not been foolish at all, Imagine what would have happened if you hadn't given those instructions and the inspector and the sergeant had turned up at whatever time they fancied, one of them in the morning, the other in the afternoon, then you really would have been an imbecile, an out-and-out imbecile, not to see what would inevitably happen, the people who had been interrogated in the morning would rush to warn those who were to be interrogated in the afternoon, and when, that afternoon, the investigator knocked on the door of the suspects he'd been allocated he would find himself confronted by a line of defense he might not be able to break down, that's why you're a superintendent and will continue to be, not just because you know your job, but also because you're lucky enough to have me here, cool reflection, to put things in perspective, starting with the inspector, whom you won't now have to start treating with kid gloves, as was your intention, a rather cowardly one if you don't mind my saying. The superintendent didn't mind. With all this coming and going, thinking and rethinking, he was late in carrying out his own order, and it was already a quarter to eleven when he raised his hand to press the doorbell. The lift had carried him up to the fourth floor, this is the door.

The superintendent was waiting for someone inside to ask Who is it, but the door simply opened and a woman appeared and said, Yes. The superintendent put his hand in his pocket and produced his identification, Police, he said, And what do the police want with the people who live in this apartment, asked the woman, The answers to a few questions, About what, Look, I hardly think the landing is the best place to begin an interrogation, Oh, so it's an interrogation, is it, asked the woman, Madam, even if I only had two questions to ask you, it would still be an interrogation, You appreciate precision in language I see, Especially in the answers I am given, Now that's a good answer, It

wasn't difficult, you served it up to me on a plate, And I'll serve you up some others if what you're after is the truth, Looking for the truth is the fundamental aim of any policeman, Well, I'm very glad to hear you say that so emphatically, you'd better come in, my husband has just popped out to buy the newspapers, he won't be long, If you prefer, if you think it would be more proper, I can wait outside, Nonsense, come in, in what safer hands could anyone be than in those of the police, said the woman. The superintendent went in, the woman walked ahead of him and opened the door to a welcoming living-room in which one sensed a friendly, lived-in atmosphere, Please, superintendent, sit down, she said, and asked, Would you like a cup of coffee, No, thank you, we don't accept anything when we're on duty, Naturally, that's how all the great corruptions begin, a cup of coffee today, a cup of coffee tomorrow, and by the third cup, it's too late, It's one of our rules, madam, May I ask you to satisfy one little curiosity of mine, What's that, You told me that you were from the police, you showed me an identity card that says you're a superintendent, but, as far as I know, the police withdrew from the capital some weeks ago, leaving us to fall into the clutches of the violence and crime that is rife everywhere, am I to understand from your presence here today that our policemen have come home, No, madam, we have not, to use your expression, come home, we are still on the other side of the dividing line, You must have strong reasons, then, to cross the frontier, Yes, very strong, And the questions you have come to ask are, naturally, to do with those reasons, Naturally, So I'd better wait until you ask them, Exactly. Three minutes later, they heard the front door open. The woman left the room and said to the person who had come in, Guess what, we've got a visitor, a police superintendent no less, And since when have police superintendents been interested in innocent people. These last words were spoken in the room itself, the doctor preceding his wife and addressing the superintendent, who answered, getting up out of the chair in which he had been sitting, There are no innocent people, even when not guilty of an actual crime, we are all unfailingly guilty of some fault, And what crime or fault are we being blamed for or accused of, There's no rush, doctor, let's make ourselves comfortable first, that way we can talk more easily. The doctor and his wife sat down on a sofa and waited. The superintendent remained silent for a few seconds, he was suddenly unsure which was the best tactic to adopt. It was one thing for the inspector and the sergeant, in order not to start the hare too early, to limit themselves, in accordance with the instructions they had been given, to asking questions about the murder of the blind man, but he, the superintendent, had his eyes fixed on a more ambitious goal, to find out if the woman before him, sitting beside her husband as calmly as if, owing nothing, she had nothing to fear, was, as well as being a murderer, also part of the diabolical plot that had caused the government's current state of humiliation, having forced it to bow its head and kneel. It is not known who in the official department of cryptography decided to bestow on the superintendent the grotesque code-name of puffin, doubtless some personal enemy, for a more fitting and justifiable nickname would be alekhine, the grand master of chess, who has, sadly, now left the ranks of the living. The doubt that had arisen dissipated like smoke and a solid certainty took its place. Observe with what sublime, combinatorial art he is about to develop the moves that will lead him, or so he thinks, to the final

checkmate. With a sly smile, he said, Actually I wouldn't mind that cup of coffee you were kind enough to offer me, It's my duty to remind you that the police accept nothing while on duty, the doctor's wife replied, enjoying the game, Superintendents are authorized to infringe the rules whenever they think it appropriate, You mean when useful to the interests of the investigation, You could put it like that, And you're not afraid that the coffee I'm about to bring you will be a step along the road to corruption, Ah, I seem to remember you saying that that only happens with the third cup of coffee, No, what I said was that the third cup of coffee completed the corrupting process, the first opened the door, the second held it open so that the aspirant to corruption could enter without stumbling, the third slammed the door shut, Thank you for the warning, which I take as a piece of advice, and so I'll stop at the first cup, Which will be served at once, said the woman, and with that she left the room. The superintendent glanced at his watch. Are you in a hurry, asked the doctor pointedly, No, doctor, I'm not in a hurry, I was just wondering if I'm keeping you from your lunch, It's too early yet for lunch, And I was also wondering how long it will take before I can leave here with the answers I want, Does that mean that you know the answers you want or that you want answers to your questions, asked the doctor, adding, they are not the same thing, You're quite right, they're not, during the brief conversation I had alone with your wife, she had occasion to remark that I admire precision in language, and I see that is also the case with you, In my profession, it's not unusual for diagnostic errors to occur simply because of some linguistic imprecision, You know, I've been calling you doctor and you haven't yet asked me how I know you're a doctor, Because it seems to me a waste of time asking a policeman how he knows what he knows or claims to know, A good answer, just as one would not ask god how he became omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent, You're not saying that the police are god, are you, We are merely his modest representatives on earth, doctor, Oh, I thought they were the churches and the priests, The churches and the priests are only second in the ranks.

The woman came back with the coffee, three cups on a tray and a few plain biscuits. It seems that everything in this world is doomed to repeat itself, thought the superintendent, while his palate relived the tastes of breakfast at providential ltd, Thank you very much, but I'll just have the coffee, he said. When he replaced the cup on the tray, he thanked her again and added with a knowing smile, Excellent coffee, madam, I might even reconsider my decision not to have a second cup. The doctor and his wife had already finished theirs. None of them had touched the biscuits. The superintendent produced a notebook from his jacket pocket, prepared his pen, and allowed his voice to emerge in a neutral, expressionless tone, as if he were not really interested in the answer, What explanation would you give, madam, for the fact that during the epidemic four years ago you did not go blind. The doctor and his wife looked at each other, surprised, and she asked, How do you know that I didn't go blind four years ago, Just now, said the superintendent, your husband, with great perspicacity, remarked that he considered it a waste of time asking a policeman how he knows what he knows or claims to know, Yes, but I'm not my husband, And I do not have to reveal, either to you or to

him, the secrets of my profession, it's enough that I know you did not go blind. The doctor made as if to intervene, but his wife placed her hand on his arm, All right, then, tell me, and I assume that this is not a secret, of what possible interest can it be to the police that I did or did not go blind four years ago, If you had gone blind like everyone else, if you had gone blind as I myself did, you can be quite sure that I would not be here now, Was it a crime not to go blind, she asked, No, not going blind wasn't and never could be a crime, although, now that you mention it, you were able to commit a crime precisely because you weren't blind, A crime, A murder. The woman glanced at her husband as if asking his advice, then turned rapidly back to the superintendent and said, Yes, it's true, I did kill a man. She did not go on, she kept her eyes fixed on him, waiting. The superintendent pretended to be writing something down in his notebook, but all he was doing was playing for time, trying to think what his next move would be. The woman's response had surprised him less because she had confessed to a murder than because of the way she had immediately fallen silent again afterward, as if there were nothing more to be said on the subject. And the truth is, he thought, it isn't the crime that interests me. I assume you had a good reason, he ventured, For what, asked the woman, For committing the crime, It wasn't a crime, What was it then, .An act of justice, That's what the courts are for, to administer justice, But I could hardly have gone and complained to the police, for as you yourself said, at the time, you were blind, like everyone else, Apart from you, Yes, apart from me, Who did you kill, A rapist, a vile creature, Are you telling me that you killed someone who was raping you, No, not me, a friend, Was she blind, Yes, she was, And the man was blind too, Yes, How did you kill him, With a pair of scissors, Did you stab him in the heart, No, in the throat, You don't have the face of a murderer, I'm not a murderer, You killed a man, He wasn't a man, superintendent, he was a bedbug. The superintendent wrote something else down and turned to the doctor, And where were you, sir, while your wife was busy killing this bedbug, In the dormitory of the former lunatic asylum where they had put us when they still thought that by isolating the first people to go blind they could stop the spread of the blindness, You are, I believe, an ophthalmologist, Yes, I had the privilege, if I can call it that, of dealing with the first person to go blind, A man or a woman, A man, Did he end up in the same dormitory, Yes, along with a few other people who were in my surgery at the time, Did it seem to you a good thing that your wife had murdered the rapist, It seemed necessary, Why, You wouldn't ask that question if you had been there, Possibly, but I wasn't, and so I'll ask you again why it seemed necessary to you that your wife should have killed the bedbug, that is, the man raping her friend, Someone had to do it, and she was the only one who could see, Just because the bedbug was a rapist, It wasn't just him, all the others in the same dormitory were demanding women in exchange for food, he was the ringleader, Your wife was also raped, Yes, Before or after her friend, Before. The superintendent made another note in his book, then asked, In your view, as an ophthalmologist, what explanation could there be for the fact that your wife did not go blind, In my view as an ophthalmologist, there is no explanation, You have a remarkable wife, sir, Yes, I do, but not just because of that, What happened afterward to the people who had been interned in that old lunatic asylum, There was a fire, most of them must

have been burned alive or crushed by falling masonry, How do you know there was falling masonry, Very simple, because we could hear it once we were outside, And how did you and your wife escape, We got out in time, You were lucky, Yes, she guided us, Who do you mean by us, Myself and a few other people, the ones who had been in my surgery, Who were they, The first blind man, to whom I referred earlier, and his wife, a young woman with conjunctivitis, an older man with a cataract, and a young boy with a squint who was with his mother, And your wife helped them all escape from the fire, Yes, all of them, apart from the boy's mother, she wasn't in the asylum, she had got separated from her son, and they only found each other again weeks after we had recovered our sight, Who took care of the boy during that time, We did, Your wife and yourself, Yes, well, she did, because she could see, and the rest of us helped as best we could, Do you mean to say that you lived together as a group, with your wife as guide, As guide and provider, You were very lucky, said the superintendent again, You could call it that, Did you stay in touch with the people in the group once things had got back to normal, Yes, of course, And you still do, Apart from the first blind man, yes, Why that one exception, He wasn't a very nice person, In what sense, In all senses, That's too vague, Yes, I know, And you don't want to be more specific, Speak to him yourself and make up your own mind, Do you know where they live, Who, The first blind man and his wife, They split up, they're divorced, Do you still see her, Yes, we do, But not him, No, not him, Why, As I said, he's not a nice person. The superintendent went back to his notebook and wrote down his own name so that it would not look as if he had learned nothing from such a long interrogation. He was about to make his next move, the most problematic and risky of the whole game. He raised his head, looked at the doctor's wife, opened his mouth to speak, but she anticipated him, You're a police superintendent, you came and identified yourself as such and have been asking us all kinds of questions, but aside from the matter of the premeditated murder which I committed and to which I have confessed, but for which there were no witnesses, some because they died, and all of them because they were blind, not to mention the fact that no one wants to know now what happened four years ago when everything was in chaos and the law was a mere dead letter, we are still waiting for you to tell us what brought you here, I think it's time you put your cards on the table, stopped beating about the bush and got straight down to what really interests the person who sent you here. Up until that moment, the superintendent had had a very clear idea of the aim of the mission with which he had been charged by the interior minister, neither more nor less than finding out if there was some relationship between the phenomenon of the blank votes and the woman sitting there before him, but her interpolation, blunt and to the point, had disarmed him, and, worse than that, had made him suddenly aware of how ridiculous it would seem if he were to ask her, with his eyes cast down because he would not have the courage to look at her, You wouldn't by any chance be the organizer, the leader, the head of the subversive movement that came into being in order to place democracy in a situation which it would be no exaggeration to describe as perilous, if not fatal, What subversive movement, she would ask, The one behind the blank votes, Are you telling me that casting a blank vote is a subversive act, she would ask again, If it happens in large numbers, yes, And where does it say that, in

the constitution, in the electoral law, in the ten commandments, in the highway code, on the cough medicine bottle, she would insist, Well, it's not written down exactly, but anyone can see that it's a simple matter of a hierarchy of values and of common sense, first there are the valid votes, then the blank votes, then the void votes, and, finally, the abstentions, I mean, obviously, democracy will be imperiled if one of those secondary categories overtakes the primary one, the votes are there so that we can make prudent use of them, And I'm the person to blame for what happened, That's what I'm trying to find out, And just how did I manage to get the majority of the population to cast blank votes, by slipping pamphlets under their doors, offering up midnight prayers and conjurations, adding a special chemical to the water supply, promising first prize in the lottery to everyone, or buying votes with the money my husband earns at his surgery, You kept your sight when everyone else was blind and you have been unable or unwilling to explain why, And that makes me guilty of a plot against world democracy, That's what I'm trying to find out, Well, go and find out, and when you've completed your investigation, come and tell me about it, until then you won't get another word out of me. And that, above all else, was what the superintendent did not want. He was just preparing to say that he had no further questions, but would return the following day, when the doorbell rang. The doctor got up and went to see who it was. He returned to the living-room accompanied by the inspector. This gentleman says he's a police inspector and that you gave him orders to come here, Yes, I did, said the superintendent, but I've finished my work for the day, we'll continue tomorrow at the same hour, Sir, you told me and the sergeant, the inspector broke in, but the superintendent cut him off, What I did or did not tell you is of no interest now, So, tomorrow, will all three of us come, Inspector, that question is impertinent, any decisions I make are made in the proper place and at the proper time, and you will find out what they are in due course, replied the superintendent angrily. He turned to the doctor's wife and said, Tomorrow, as you requested, I won't waste time with circumlocutions, I'll come straight to the point, and you'll find what I have to ask you no less extraordinary than I find the fact that you kept your sight during the general epidemic of blindness four years ago, I went blind, the inspector went blind, your husband went blind, but you did not, we'll find out if, in this case, the old dictum holds true, she that made the saucepan made the lid, So it's to do with saucepans, then, superintendent, asked the doctor's wife in a wry tone, No, it's to do with lids, madam, lids, replied the superintendent as he withdrew, relieved that his adversary had supplied him with a reasonably nimble exit line. He had a faint headache.

THEY DID NOT HAVE LUNCH TOGETHER. STICKING TO HIS TACTIC OF controlled dispersal, the superintendent reminded the inspector and the sergeant, when they went their separate ways, that they should not go to the same restaurants they had gone to yesterday, and, just as he would have done had he been his own subordinate, he himself scrupulously carried out the orders he had given. He did so in a spirit of self-sacrifice too, for he ended up choosing a restaurant which, despite the three stars promised on the menu, only put one on his plate. This time, there was not one meeting-point, but two, the sergeant was waiting at the first, and the inspector at the second. They both saw at once that their superior was not in the mood for conversation, the encounter with the ophthalmologist and his wife had clearly not gone well. And since they, in turn, had gleaned no useful results from their investigations, the planned exchange and study of information back at Providential Ltd, insurance and reinsurance, did not promise to be the smoothest of rides. This professional tension was only heightened by the unexpected and troubling question put to them by the garage attendant when they arrived in their car, Where are you gentlemen from. It is true that the superintendent, all honor to him and to his experience in the job, did not lose his cool, We're from Providential Ltd, he replied sharply, and then, even more sharply, We're going to park where we always park, in the company's designated space, so your question is not just impertinent, it's rude, It may well be impertinent and rude, but I really don't remember seeing you here before, That, said the superintendent, is because not only are you rude, you also have a very poor memory, my colleagues here are new to the company and this is their first visit, but I've certainly been here before, now get out of our way will you, the driver's a little nervous and he might accidentally run you over. They parked the car and got into the lift. Not even considering that it might be a rash thing to say, the sergeant was eager to explain that he wasn't in the least nervous, that in the aptitude tests he'd done before joining the police, he had been described as very calm, but the superintendent silenced him with a brusque gesture. And now, protected by the reinforced walls and soundproof floor and ceiling of Providential Ltd, he launched a pitiless attack, Did it not even occur to you, you idiot, that there might be microphones installed in the lift, I'm sorry, sir, really I am, I wasn't thinking, spluttered the poor man, Tomorrow, you can stay here and keep watch over the place and use the time to write out five hundred times I am an idiot, Sir, please, Oh, leave it, take no notice, I know I'm exaggerating, but that man annoyed me, we've been carefully avoiding using the front door so as not to draw attention to ourselves and then that creep shows up, Perhaps we should get our people to write him a note, the way they did with the porter before we arrived, suggested the inspector, That would be counter-productive, we don't want anyone to notice us at all, It may be too late for that, sir, perhaps if the service has another place in the city, it would be best if we moved in there, Oh, they have, they have, but as far as I know, none of them is currently in operation, We could try, No, there's no time, and, besides, the ministry wouldn't like the idea, this business has got to be sorted out quickly, urgently, May I speak frankly, sir, asked the inspector, Go ahead, Well, it seems to me we're up a blind alley or, worse still, trapped inside a poisoned wasps' nest, What makes you think that, It's hard to explain really, but the fact is that I feel as if we were sitting on a barrel of gunpowder with the fuse lit, and

that it's going to blow up at any moment. The superintendent could have been listening to his own thoughts, but his position and the responsibility he bore to the mission he had been charged with allowed for no swerving from the straight road of duty, I disagree, he said, and with those two words brought the matter to a close.

Now they were sitting round the table where they had eaten breakfast that morning, with their notebooks open, ready for a brainstorming session. You start, the superintendent told the sergeant, As soon as I went into the apartment, he said, I could tell no one had tipped the woman off, Of course they hadn't, we had agreed that we would all arrive at half past ten, Yes, but I was a bit late, it was actually ten thirty-seven when I knocked on the door, confessed the sergeant, That doesn't matter now, carry on, let's not waste any more time, She told me to come in and asked if I would like a coffee, and I said I would, well, I didn't see why not, I felt almost like a visitor, then I told her that I was investigating what happened four years ago in the insane asylum, but then I thought it would be best not to broach the subject of the blind murder victim immediately, which is why I decided to ask instead about the cause of the fire, she found it odd that after four years we should want to revisit the very thing that everyone had been trying to forget, and I said that the idea now was to record as many facts as possible because the weeks when those events took place could no longer remain a blank in the nation's history, but she was no fool, she immediately pointed out the incongruity, that was the word she used, of us being in the situation in which we now find ourselves, with the city isolated and under a state of siege because of the blank votes, and someone having the idea of investigating what had happened during the plague of blindness, I have to admit, sir, that, at first, I was completely thrown and didn't know what to say in response, but I managed to come up with an explanation, which was that the investigation had been decided upon before the blank votes business, but that it had got delayed by bureaucratic red tape and that it had only been possible to implement it now, then she said that she had no idea what had caused the fire, it must have been mere coincidence, something that could easily have happened at any time, then I asked her how she had managed to get out, and she started telling me about the doctor's wife and praising her to the skies, saying what a remarkable person she was, completely unlike anyone she had met in her entire life, utterly remarkable, I'm sure, she said, that if it hadn't been for her, I wouldn't be here talking to you today, she saved us all, and it isn't just that she saved us, she did more than that, she protected us, fed us, looked after us, then I asked her who she meant when she used the personal pronoun us, and she listed, one by one, the people we already know about, and finally, she said that her then husband had also been part of the group, but that she didn't want to talk about him because they'd been divorced for three years, and that was all I learned from the conversation, sir, the impression I came away with was that the doctor's wife must be some kind of heroine, a truly noble soul. The superintendent pretended not to have heard those last few words. By doing so, he would not have to reprehend the sergeant for describing as a heroine and a truly noble soul a woman who was currently under suspicion of being involved in the worst crime that could, in the present circumstances, be

committed against the nation. He felt tired. And in a quiet, flat voice, he asked the inspector to report on what he had learned at the house of the prostitute and the old man with the black eye-patch, Well, if she was a prostitute, I don't think she is any more, Why, asked the superintendent, Because she doesn't have the manners or gestures or words or style of a prostitute, You seem to know a lot about prostitutes, Not really sir, only the usual things, plus a bit of personal experience, but mainly preconceived ideas, Go on, They received me politely enough, but they didn't offer me any coffee, Are they married, Well, they were both wearing wedding rings, And what did you make of the old man, He's old, and that's about all there is to be said about him, There you're wrong, there is everything to be said about the old, it's just that no one asks them anything, and so they keep quiet, Well, he didn't, Good for him, carry on, Anyway, I started talking about the fire, as my colleague here did, but then realized that I wouldn't get anywhere doing that, and so I decided to make a head-on attack, I mentioned a letter that the police had received and which described certain criminal acts committed in the asylum before the fire, amongst them a murder, and I asked them if they knew anything about it, and she said that she did, that no one could possibly know more, since she herself was the murderer, And did she say what the murder weapon was, asked the superintendent, Yes, a pair of scissors, And did she stab the man in the heart, No, sir, in the throat, And what else, To be honest, I was completely taken aback, Yes, I can imagine, Suddenly we had two perpetrators for the same crime, Go on, What comes next is pure horror, The fire, you mean, No, sir, she started describing in shocking, almost brutal detail what happened to the women who were raped in the dormitory occupied by the blind men, And what did he do while his wife was describing all this, He just looked straight at me, with his one eye, as if he could see inside me, That's just your imagination, No, sir, I learned then that one eye can see better than two, because, not having the other eye to help it, it has to do all the work itself, Perhaps that's why they say that in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king, Perhaps it is, sir, Go on, continue, When she had stopped talking, he began by saying that he didn't believe that the motive for my visit, that was the expression he used, had anything to do with ascertaining the causes of a fire of which nothing now remained or of clearing up the circumstances surrounding a murder that could never be proved, and that, if I had nothing more of any value to add, would I please leave, And what did you say, I invoked my authority as a policeman, said that I'd gone there with a mission to carry out and that I'd take whatever steps were necessary to do so, And what did he say, He replied that, in that case, I must be the only policeman on duty in the entire capital, since the police force had disappeared weeks ago, and that he therefore thanked me for my concern for their safety and, he hoped, my concern for the safety of a few other people too, since he couldn't quite believe that a policeman had been sent solely for the benefit of the two people in that room, And then, The situation had become difficult and I couldn't really do much more, the only way I could find of covering my retreat was by saying that they should prepare themselves for a confrontation in court because, according to the information we had, which was absolutely reliable, it was not she who had killed the leader of the blind criminals, but another person, a woman who had already been identified, And how did they react, At

first, I thought I had frightened them, but the old man recovered at once and said that, there in their home, or wherever it might be, they would be accompanied by a lawyer who knew more about the law than the police, Do you think you really did frighten them, asked the superintendent, Yes, I think so, but obviously I can't be sure, They might have been afraid, but certainly not for themselves, Who for, then, sir, For the real murderer, the doctor's wife, But the prostitute, Look, I don't know that we have the right to continue calling her that, inspector, All right, the wife of the man with the black eye-patch said that she was the killer, even though it's true that the man doesn't accuse her in his letter, but the doctor's wife, Who was, in fact, the real perpetrator of the crime, she herself confessed and confirmed as much to me. At this point, it was logical for the inspector and the sergeant to assume that their superior, now that he had touched on the subject of his own investigations, would give them a more or less complete report of what he had found out from his visit, but the superintendent merely said that he would be going back to the suspects' apartment the next day to interrogate them further and only then would he decide what to do next, And what about us, what should we do tomorrow, asked the inspector, Surveillance operations, nothing more, you take care of the ex-wife of the man who wrote the letter, she doesn't know you, so you shouldn't have any problem, Which means, automatically and by a process of elimination, said the sergeant, that I'll be taking care of the old man and the prostitute, Unless you can prove that she really is a prostitute, or continues to be one if she ever was, the use of the word prostitute is henceforth banned from our conversations, Yes, sir, And even if she is, find some other way of referring to her, Yes, sir, I'll use her name, The names were all transcribed into my notebook, they are no longer in yours, If you'd just tell me what her name is, sir, then there'd be no more of this prostitute business, Sorry, I can't, I consider that information to be, for the moment, confidential, Her name, or all the names, asked the sergeant, All of them, Well, then, I don't know what to call her, You can call her, for example, the girl with the dark glasses, But she wasn't wearing dark glasses, I can swear to that, Everyone has worn dark glasses at least once in their life, replied the superintendent, getting up. Shoulders hunched, he made his way over to the part of the office where he had his bedroom and closed the door behind him. I bet you he's going to get in touch with the ministry, said the inspector, What's up with him, asked the sergeant, He feels as bewildered as we do, It's as if he doesn't believe in what he's doing, Do you, No, but I'm just following orders, he's in charge, he shouldn't be giving off these confusing signals, because we'll be the ones to suffer the consequences, when the wave hits the rock, it's always the mussels that pay, Hm, I'm not sure how accurate a comparison that is, Why, Because it's always seems to me that the mussels are really glad when the water rushes over them, Search me, but I've certainly never heard mussels laugh, Oh, they not only laugh, they positively chuckle, it's just that the sound of the waves drowns them out, and you have to put your ear really close, That's not true, you're having fun now at the expense of a lowly sergeant, Don't get annoyed with me, it's simply a harmless way of passing the time, There's a better way than that, What, Sleep, I'm tired, I'm going to bed, The superintendent might need you, What, to go and bang my head against a brick wall again, I don't think so, You're probably right, said the inspector, I'll follow your example

and go and have a lie-down too, but I'll leave a note here to tell him to call us if he needs us, Good idea.

The superintendent had taken off his shoes and lain down on the bed. He was lying on his back, with his hands clasped behind his head, looking up at the ceiling, as if hoping for some advice from there or, if not that, at least what we usually call a disinterested opinion. Perhaps because it was soundproof, and therefore deaf, the ceiling had nothing to say to him, and, since it spent most of its time alone, it had practically lost the power of speech. The superintendent was going over in his mind the conversation he'd had with the doctor's wife and her husband, her face and his face, the dog that had got to its feet, growling, when he came in, only to lie down again at a word from his mistress, the old brass oil lamp which reminded him of an identical one that had been in his parents' house, but which had disappeared no one knew how, he was mixing these memories with what he had just heard from the mouths of the inspector and the sergeant and he was wondering what the hell he was doing there. He had crossed the frontier in pure movie detective style, he had convinced himself that he had come to rescue his country from mortal danger, and, in the name of that conviction, had given his subordinates ridiculous orders for which they had been kind enough to forgive him, he had tried to hold together a precarious framework of suspicions that was gradually falling apart with each minute that passed, and now he was wondering, surprised by a vague anxiety that made his diaphragm tighten, what reasonably credible information could he, the puffin, invent to transmit to an albatross who would, at this moment, be asking impatiently why he was so late in sending him news. What am I going to say to him, he wondered, that our suspicions about the osprey have been confirmed, that the husband and the others are part of the conspiracy, then he'll ask who these others are, and I'll say there's an old man with a black eye-patch who would really suit the code-name wolf-fish, and a girl with dark glasses whom we could call catfish, and the ex-wife of the guy who wrote the letter, and she could be called needle-fish, always assuming you agree with these designations, albatross. The superintendent had already got up from the bed and was talking now on the red phone, he was saying, Yes, albatross, the people I've just mentioned are not really big fish, they were just lucky enough to meet the osprey, who protected them, And what did you make of the osprey, puffin, She seemed a decent woman, normal, intelligent, and, if everything the others said about her is true, albatross, and I'm inclined to think it is, then she is clearly a quite extraordinary person, So out of the ordinary, puffin, that she was capable of killing a man with a pair of scissors, According to the witnesses, albatross, the man was a vile rapist, a totally repellent creature, Let's not delude ourselves, puffin, it's clear to me that these people have cooked up a single version of events just in case anyone should ever come and interrogate them, they've had four years to do so, and the way I see it, from the information you've given me and from my own deductions and intuitions, I would bet anything you like that these five people constitute an organized cell, probably, even, the head of that tapeworm we talked about a while ago, Neither I nor my colleagues had that impression, albatross, Well, puffin, you're going to have no option but to change your mind, We would need proof,

without proof, we can do nothing, albatross, Find it, then, puffin, make a rigorous search of all their homes, But we can't make house searches without the authorization of a judge, albatross, I would remind you, puffin, that the city is under a state of siege and that all the inhabitants' rights and guarantees have been suspended, And what if we can't find any proof, albatross, I refuse to admit that possibility, puffin, you strike me as rather too ingenuous for a superintendent, as long as I've been interior minister, any proofs that weren't there always turned up in the end, What you're asking me to do is neither easy nor pleasant, albatross, I'm not asking, puffin, I'm ordering you, Yes, albatross, but I would just like to point out that we have found no evidence of any crime, there's no proof that the person whom it was decided to consider as a suspect is, in fact, a suspect, indeed, all the contacts we have made, all the interrogations we have carried out, point to the innocence of that person, The photograph taken of a detainee, puffin, is always that of someone presumed to be innocent, only afterward does one learn that the criminal was there all the time, May I ask a question, albatross, Ask and I will answer, puffin, I've always been good at giving answers, What will happen if no proof of guilt is found, The same as would happen if no proof of innocence were found, How should I understand that, albatross, That there are cases when the sentence has been handed down before the crime has even been committed, In that case, if I understand you rightly, albatross, I ask to be withdrawn from this mission, You will be withdrawn, puffin, I promise you, but not now, nor at your request, you will be withdrawn when this case is closed, and this case will only be closed thanks to the praiseworthy efforts of you and your assistants, now listen carefully, I'll give you five days, is that clear, five days, not a day longer, to hand over the whole cell to me, bound hand and foot, your osprey and her husband, to whom, poor thing, we didn't ever get round to giving a name, and the three little fishes who have just surfaced, the wolf, the cat and the needle, I want them crushed beneath a weight of evidence impossible to deny, slide out of, contradict or refute, that is what I want, puffin, All right, albatross, I'll do what I can, You will do exactly what I have just said, meanwhile, so that you don't think badly of me, and being, as I am, a reasonable person, I realize that you will need some help to bring your work to a successful conclusion, Are you going to send me another inspector, albatross, No, puffin, my help will be of a different nature, but just as effective, or possibly more so, than if I were to despatch all the police at my command, I don't understand, albatross, You will be the first to understand when the bell sounds, The bell, The bell for the last round, puffin. The line went dead.

The superintendent left the room when it was twenty minutes past six by the clock. He read the message that the inspector had left on the table and wrote underneath it, I have something to sort out, wait for me. He went down to the garage, got into the car, started it and headed for the exit ramp. There he stopped and beckoned to the attendant. Still smarting from the angry exchange of words and the ill-treatment he had received from the tenant of providential ltd, the man came reluctantly over to the car window and uttered the customary phrase, Can I help you, A while ago, I was rather rough with you, Oh, that's all right, we're used to it here, Yes, but I didn't mean to offend

you, No, I'm sure you didn't, sir, Superintendent, I'm a police superintendent, here's my identification, Forgive me, superintendent, I would never have imagined, and the other gentlemen, The youngest is a sergeant and the other one is an inspector, I understand, superintendent, and I promise I won't bother you again, but I had the very best of intentions, We've been carrying out an investigation here, but that's finished now, and so we're just like anyone else, it's as if we were on holiday, although, for your own sake, I nevertheless recommend great discretion, remember that, even when he's on holiday, a policeman is still a policeman, it is, if you like, in his blood, Oh, I understand perfectly, superintendent, but, in that case, if you don't mind me speaking frankly, it would have been better not to have told me anything, what the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over, he that knows nothing sees nothing, Yes, but I needed to tell someone, and you were the person nearest to hand. The car was already going up the ramp, but the superintendent had one further piece of advice, Keep your mouth shut, I wouldn't want to have to regret what I told you. He certainly would have regretted it if he had turned round, for he would have found the man muttering secretly into the phone, perhaps telling his wife that he had just met a police superintendent, perhaps informing the porter of the identity of the three men in dark suits who always go straight up from the garage to providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, perhaps this, perhaps that, we will probably never know the truth about this phone call. A few meters further on, the superintendent drew up by the kerb, took his notebook out of his jacket pocket, leafed through it until he reached the page where he had transcribed the names and addresses of the treacherous letter-writer's former companions, then consulted the map and the city guide to check again where the traitor's ex-wife lived, since she was closest. He also made a note of the route he would have to follow to the house of the man with the black eye-patch and the girl with the dark glasses. He smiled to remember the sergeant's confusion when he told him that this would be the perfect name for the wife of the old man with the black eye-patch, But she wasn't wearing dark glasses, the poor sergeant had replied, bewildered. That was unfair of me, thought the superintendent, I should have shown him the group photo, in which the girl is standing with her arms by her side and in her right hand is holding a pair of dark glasses, elementary, my dear watson, but one had to have a superintendent's eyes to notice such things. He started the car. An impulse had made him leave providential ltd, an impulse had made him tell the garage attendant who he was, an impulse is taking him now to the home of the divorcee, an impulse will take him to the home of the old man with the black eye-patch, and the same impulse would have driven him afterward to the home of the doctor's wife had he not told them, both wife and husband, that he would be back tomorrow, at the same time, to continue the interrogation. What interrogation, he thought, would he say to her, for example, you are suspected of being the organizer, the leader, the king-pin of the subversive movement that has placed democracy in such grave danger, I am referring to the blank vote movement, and don't play the innocent with me, don't waste my time asking me if I have proof of what I'm saying, you, madam, are the one who will have to prove her innocence, because you can be quite sure, madam, that the proof will appear when it's needed, it's just a matter of inventing one or two irrefutable ones, and even if

they're not completely irrefutable, the circumstantial evidence, however remote in time, will be enough for us, as will the incomprehensible fact that you did not go blind four years ago when everyone else in the city was stumbling around and bumping into lampposts, and before you say that one thing has nothing to do with the other, let me just say, she that made the saucepan made the lid, that, at least, albeit expressed in different words, is the opinion of my minister, whom I have to obey even if it makes my heart ache, now you will say, a superintendent's heart can't ache, well, that's what you think, you may know a lot about superintendents, but I can guarantee you know nothing about this one, it's true I didn't come here with the honest aim of finding out the truth, it's true that you will have been condemned before even being judged, but the heart of this puffin, which is what my minister calls me, is aching and I don't know how to make it stop, take my advice, confess, confess even if you're not guilty, the government will tell the people that they have been the victims of an unparalleled case of mass hypnosis, that you are a genius in the art, people might even be amused and life will get back on track, you'll spend a few years in prison, your friends will end up there too if we so choose, and meanwhile, of course, there'll be a reform of the electoral law and an end to blank votes, or else they'll be distributed equally amongst all the parties as valid votes, so that the percentages will not be affected, after all, dear lady, it's the percentages that count, as for the voters who abstain and fail to produce a medical certificate, why not publish their names in the newspapers just as, in the olden days, criminals were pilloried in the public square, the reason I'm speaking to you in this way is because I like you, and just so that you can see how much I like you, I will tell you that the greatest happiness life could have given me four years ago, apart from not having lost part of my family in that tragedy, which, alas, I did, would have been to be a member of the group that you protected, I wasn't a superintendent then, I was a blind inspector, just a blind inspector who, after recovering his sight, would be there in the photo along with the others whom you saved from the fire, and your dog would not have growled when he saw me, and if all that and more had happened, I would be able to declare on my word of honor to the interior minister that he is wrong, that an experience like that and four years of friendship are enough for anyone to say that they know a person well, and to think that I entered your house as an enemy and now don't know how to leave it, whether alone, in order to confess to the minister that I have failed in my mission, or accompanied by you, taking you to prison. These last thoughts did not come from the superintendent, he was now more concerned with finding somewhere to park than with anticipating decisions on the fate of a suspect and on his own fate. He once more consulted his notebook and rang the bell of the apartment block where the ex-wife of the man who wrote the letter lives. He rang again and again, but the door did not open. He was reaching out his hand to make a fresh attempt, when he saw a ground-floor window open and an elderly woman in rollers and a housecoat poke her head out, Who are you looking for, she asked, The lady who lives in the first-floor apartment on the right, replied the superintendent, She's not in, in fact, I saw her go out, Do you know when she'll be back, No idea, but I'll be glad to give her a message, said the woman, Thank you, but it doesn't really matter, I'll come back another day. It didn't even occur to him that the woman with the rollers might be thinking

that the divorcee on the first floor on the right had apparently taken to receiving male visitors, the one who came this morning and this one now, who was old enough to be her father. The superintendent glanced at the map open on the seat beside him, started the car and set off for his second objective. This time, no neighbors appeared at the windows. The street door was open and so he could go straight up to the second floor, this is where the old man with the black eye-patch and the girl with the dark glasses live, what a strange couple, it's understandable that their helplessness when blind would have brought them together, but four years had passed, and while, for a young woman, four years are nothing, for an old man, it's more like eight. And yet they're still together, thought the superintendent. He rang the bell and waited. No one answered. He pressed his ear to the door and listened. Silence from the other side. He rang again out of habit, not because he expected anyone to come. He went down the stairs, got into the car and murmured, I know where they are. If he had had a direct line in his car and could have phoned the minister to tell him where he was going, he was sure the minister would reply in more or less these words, Bravo, puffin, that's the way to do it, catch those guys red-handed, but be careful, you should take reinforcements with you really, a man alone against five desperate villains, that's the kind of thing you only see in movies, besides, you don't know karate, that's after your time, Don't worry, albatross, I may not know karate, but I know what I'm doing, Go in there with your gun in your hand, terrify them, scare the shit out of them, Yes, albatross, Good, I'll start sorting out your medal now, There's no hurry, albatross, we don't yet know if I'll get out of this enterprise alive, It's a dead cert, puffin, I have every confidence in you, oh, I certainly knew what I was doing when I appointed you to this mission, Yes, albatross.

The streetlights come on, the evening is creeping up the ramp of the sky, soon night will begin. The superintendent rang the bell, no reason for surprise, policemen mostly do ring the bell, they don't always kick the door down. The doctor's wife appeared, I was expecting you tomorrow, superintendent, I'm afraid I can't talk to you right now, she said, we have visitors, Yes, I know them, that is, I don't know them personally, but I know who they are, That doesn't seem reason enough for me to let you in, Please, My friends have nothing to do with what brought you here, Not even you know what brought me here, and it's high time you did, Come in.

THERE IS AN IDEA ABROAD THAT, GENERALLY SPEAKING, THE CONSCIENCE of a police superintendent tends, on professional grounds and on principle, to be fairly accommodating, not to say resigned to the incontrovertible fact, theoretically and practically proven, that what must be must be and that there's nothing to be done about it. The truth is, however, that, although it may not be the most common of spectacles, it has been known for one of these valuable public servants, by chance and when least expected, to find himself caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, that is, between what he should be and what he would prefer not to be. For the superintendent of providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, that day has come. He had spent at most half an hour at the home of the doctor's wife, but that short time was enough to reveal to the astonished group gathered there the murky depths of his mission. He said he would do everything possible to divert from that place and those people the more than disquieting attentions of his superiors, but that he could not guarantee success, he told them he had been given the extremely tight deadline of five days to conclude the investigation and knew that the only acceptable verdict would be one of guilty, and, addressing the doctor's wife, he said The person they want to make the scapegoat, if you'll forgive the obvious impropriety of the expression, is you, madam, and, possibly indirectly, your husband, as for the others, I don't think you're in any real danger, your crime, madam, wasn't murdering that man, your great crime was not going blind when the rest of us did, the incomprehensible can be merely an object of scorn, but not if there is always a way of using it as a pretext. It is three o'clock in the morning, and the superintendent is tossing and turning in bed, unable to get to sleep. He is mentally making plans for the next day, he repeats them obsessively and then starts all over again, telling the inspector and the sergeant that, as arranged, he will go to the doctor's house to continue the interrogation of the wife, reminding them of the task he had charged them with, following the other members of the group, but, given the present situation, none of this makes sense any more, now what he needs to do is to impede, to hinder events, to invent for the investigation advances and delays that will, without making it too obvious, simultaneously feed and hamper the minister's plans, in short, he needs to wait and see what the minister's promised help involves. It was nearly half past three when the red telephone rang. The superintendent leapt out of bed, put on the slippers bearing the police insignia and, half-ran, half-stumbled over to the desk on which the phone stood. Even before he had sat down, he was putting the receiver to his ear and saying, Hello, It's albatross here, said the voice at the other end, Hello, albatross, puffin here, Now pay attention, puffin, I have some instructions for you, Yes, albatross, Today, at nine o'clock, this morning, not tonight, a person will be waiting for you at post six-north on the frontier, the army has been warned, so there'll be no problem, Am I to understand that this person is coming to replace me, albatross, There's no reason for you to think that, puffin, you have done well so far and will, I hope, continue to do so until this affair is closed, Thank you, albatross, and what are your orders, As I said, a person will be waiting for you at nine o'clock this morning at post six-north on the frontier, Yes, albatross, I've already made a note of that, You will give this person the photograph you mentioned, the one of the group in which the main suspect appears, you will also give him the list of names and addresses you

obtained and which you have in your possession. The superintendent felt a shiver run down his spine, But that photograph is necessary for my on-going investigations, he said, Well, I don't think it's as necessary as you say it is, puffin, indeed, I would go so far as to say that you don't need it at all, given that, either personally or through your subordinates, you have already made contact with all the members of the gang, You mean group, don't you, albatross, A gang is a group, Yes, albatross, but not all groups are gangs, Why, puffin, I had no idea you were so concerned about correct definitions, you obviously make good use of dictionaries, Forgive me for correcting you, albatross, my mind's still a bit fuzzy, Were you asleep, No, albatross, I was thinking about what I have to do tomorrow, Well, now you know, the person who will be waiting for you at post six-north is a man about your age and he will be wearing a blue tie with white spots, I shouldn't think there will be many other ties like that at military posts on the frontier, Do I know him, albatross, No, you don't, he's not from our department, Ah, He will respond to your password with the phrase No, there's never enough, And what's mine, There's always plenty of time, Very good, albatross, your orders will be carried out, I'll be there on the frontier at nine o'clock to meet him, Now go back to bed and sleep well for the rest of the night, puffin, I myself have been working up until now, so I'm going to do the same, May I ask you a question, albatross, Of course, but keep it short, Does the photograph have anything to do with the help you promised me, Very sharp of you, puffin, nothing gets past you, does it, So it does have something to do with it, Yes, it has everything to do with it, but don't expect me to tell you how, if I told you that, it would ruin the element of surprise, Even though I'm the person directly responsible for the investigations, Exactly, Does that mean you don't trust me, albatross, Draw a square on the ground, puffin, and put yourself inside it, within the space delineated by the lines of that square I trust you, but outside of it, I trust only myself, your investigation is that square, be content with the square and with your investigation, Yes, albatross, Sleep well, puffin, you'll hear from me before the week is out, I'll be here waiting, albatross, Good night, puffin, Good night, albatross. Despite the minister's conventional wishes for a good night's sleep, what little remained of the night did not prove of much use to the superintendent. Sleep refused to come, the doors and passageways of the brain were all closed, and inside ruled insomnia, queen and absolute mistress. Why does he want the photo, he asked himself over and over again, what did he mean by that threat that I would hear from him before the week was out, there was no threat contained in the individual words, but the tone, yes, the tone was threatening, if the superintendent, after a lifetime of interrogating all kinds of people, has learned to distinguish in amongst the tangled labyrinth of syllables the path he must follow to get out, he is also perfectly capable of noticing the shadowy zones that each word produces and trails behind it whenever it is pronounced. Say out loud the words You'll hear from me before the week is out, and you will see how easy it is to introduce into them a drop of insidious dread, the putrid stench of fear, the authoritarian timbre of a paternal ghost. The superintendent would prefer to think such soothing thoughts as these, But I have no reason to feel afraid, I do my work, I carry out the orders I'm given, and yet, in the depths of his conscience, he knew this was not true, he wasn't carrying out those orders for the simple reason that

he did not believe that because the doctor's wife had not gone blind four years she was therefore to blame for eighty-three percent of the capital's voting population having cast blank votes, as if the first odd fact were automatically responsible for the second. Even he doesn't believe it, he thought, he just wants a target to aim at, if this one fails, he'll find another, and another, and another, as many as it takes until he finally gets it right, or until, by dint of sheer repetition, the people he is trying to persuade of his merits grow indifferent to the methods and processes he adopts. In either case, the party will have won. Thanks to the skeleton key of digression, sleep had managed to open a door, escape down one of the corridors and immediately set the superintendent dreaming that the interior minister had asked him for the photograph so that he could stick a pin through the eyes of the doctor's wife, all the while singing a wizard's spell, Blind you were not, blind you will be, white you wore, black you will see, with this pin I prick you, from behind and before. Terrified, drenched in sweat, his heart pounding, the superintendent woke to the screams of the doctor's wife and the loud laughter of the minister, What an awful dream, he muttered as he turned on the light, what monstrous things the brain can generate. According to the clock, it was half past seven. He calculated how much time he would need to reach post six-north and was almost tempted to thank the nightmare for having been so kind as to wake him. He dragged himself out of bed, his head weighed heavy as lead, his legs weighed even more than his head, and he staggered uncertainly to the bathroom. He emerged twenty minutes later, slightly reinvigorated by the shower, newly shaved and ready for work. He put on a clean shirt and finished dressing, He'll be wearing a blue tie with white spots, he thought, and went into the kitchen to heat up a cup of coffee left over from the previous evening. The inspector and the sergeant must still have been sleeping, at least, they gave no sign of life. He munched his way unenthusiastically through a biscuit, and even bit into another one, then returned to the bathroom to clean his teeth. He went into the bedroom, placed in a medium-sized envelope the photograph and the list of names and addresses, having first copied the latter onto another piece of paper, and when he went back into the sitting-room, he heard noises coming from the room in the apartment where his subordinates were sleeping. He didn't wait for them, nor did he knock on their door. He scribbled a note, I had to go out early, I'm taking the car, do as I told you yesterday and concentrate on following the women, the wife of the man with the black eye-patch and the ex-wife of the man who wrote the letter, have lunch out if you can manage it, I'll be back here later this afternoon, I expect results. Clear orders, precise instructions, if only everything could be like that in this superintendent's difficult life. He left providential Ltd and took the lift down to the garage. The attendant was already there, the superintendent said good morning, received a greeting in return, and wondered, in passing, if the man actually slept in the garage too, There don't seem to be any specific hours of work in this place. It was nearly half past eight, I've got time, he thought, I'll be there in less than half an hour, besides, I shouldn't be the first to arrive, albatross was quite explicit, quite clear about that, the man will be waiting for me at nine o'clock, so I can arrive a minute later, or two or three, at midday if I want. He knew this wasn't true, that he must simply not arrive before the man he was going to meet, Perhaps it's because the soldiers on guard

at post six-north would get nervous seeing someone parked on this side of the dividing line, he thought, as he put his foot down on the accelerator to go up the ramp. Monday morning, but there wasn't much traffic, the superintendent would take twenty minutes at most to reach post six-north. But where the devil is post six-north, he suddenly asked out loud. In the north, of course, but six, where the hell was that. The minister had said six-north as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if it were one of the capital's most famous monuments or else the metro station that had been destroyed by a bomb, the kind of place that everyone was sure to know, and, foolishly, it had not occurred to him to ask, Just where exactly is that, albatross. In a matter of a moment the amount of sand in the upper part of the hour-glass had dwindled dramatically, the tiny grains were rushing through the opening, each grain more eager to leave than the last, time is just like people, sometimes it's all it can do to drag itself along, but at others, it runs like a deer and leaps like a young goat, which, when you think about it, is not saying much, since the cheetah is the fastest of all the animals, and yet it has never occurred to anyone to say of another person He runs and jumps like a cheetah, perhaps because that first comparison comes from the magical late middle ages, when gentlemen went deer-hunting and no one had ever seen a cheetah running or even heard of its existence. Languages are conservative, they always carry their archives with them and hate having to be updated. The superintendent, having managed to park the car somewhere, had unfolded the map of the city and was now resting it on the steering-wheel, anxiously searching for post six-north on the northern periphery of the capital. It would be relatively easy to locate if the city were shaped like a rhombus or a lozenge or formed a parallelogram, a space whose four lines circumscribed, as albatross had so coolly put it, the amount of trust he deserved, but the city's outline is irregular and, on the fringes, on either side, it is impossible to tell where the north ends and where the east or the west begins. The superintendent looks at his watch and feels as afraid as a sergeant expecting a reprimand from his superior. He won't arrive on time, it's simply impossible. He tries to reason calmly, Logic would say, but since when has logic ruled human decisions, that the various military posts would have been numbered in a clockwise direction from the westernmost point of the northern sector, hour-glasses are clearly of no use in this instance. Perhaps this reasoning is wrong, but then since when has reason ruled human decisions, not an easy question to answer, but it's always better to have one oar than none, and, besides, it is written that a moored boat goes nowhere, and so the superintendent put a cross where it seemed to him post number six should be and set off. Since the traffic was light and there wasn't so much as the shadow of a policeman on the streets, he was sorely tempted to jump every red light he came to, a temptation he did not resist. He was not speeding, he was flying, he barely took his foot off the accelerator, and when he had to brake, he performed a controlled skid, as those acrobats of the steering-wheel do in car chases in the movies, making the more nervous spectators jump in their seats. The superintendent had never driven like this in his life and he never would again. It was already gone nine o'clock when he finally reached post six-north, and the soldier who came to find out what this agitated driver wanted told him that this was, in fact, five-north. The superintendent swore out loud and was about to turn round, but

stopped this precipitate gesture just in time and asked in which direction he would find six-north. The soldier pointed east and, just in case there was any doubt, uttered two brief words, That way. Fortunately, there was a road running more or less parallel to the frontier, it was only a matter of three kilometers, the way is clear, there aren't even any traffic lights, the car started, accelerated, braked, took a bend at breathtaking speed and screeched to a halt, almost touching the yellow line painted across the street, there it is, post six-north. Next to the barrier, about thirty meters away, a middle-aged man was waiting, So he's quite a bit younger than me, thought the superintendent. He picked up the envelope and got out of the car. He couldn't see a single soldier, they must have had orders to keep out of sight or to look the other way while this ceremony of meeting and handing-over took place. The superintendent walked toward the man. He was holding the envelope in his hand and thinking, I mustn't make any excuses about being late, if I were to say Hello, good morning, sorry about the delay, I had a bit of trouble finding the place, and, do you know what, albatross forgot to tell me where post six-north was, you didn't have to be a genius to realize that this long, rambling sentence could be understood by the other man as a false password, and then one of two things would happen, the man would either summon the soldiers to arrest this liar and provocateur, or he would take out his gun and with a cry of Down with blank ballot papers, down with sedition, death to all traitors, would carry out a summary execution. The superintendent had reached the barrier. The man did not move, he just looked at him. He had his left thumb hooked in his belt, his right hand in his raincoat pocket, all far too natural to be real. He's armed, he's carrying a gun, thought the superintendent, and said, There's always plenty of time. The man did not smile or even blink, he said, No, there's never enough, and then the superintendent gave him the envelope, perhaps now they could say good morning to each other, perhaps chat for a few moments about what a pleasant Monday morning it was, but the other man merely said, Fine, you can leave now, I'll make sure this finds its way to the right person. The superintendent got into his car, reversed and drove back to the city. Feeling embittered and utterly frustrated, he tried to console himself by imagining what a good joke it would have been to hand the man an empty envelope and then wait to see what happened. The minister, ablaze with anger and incandescent with rage, would immediately phone him to demand an explanation and he, the superintendent, would then swear by all the saints in the court of heaven, including those on earth still awaiting canonization, that the envelope had contained the photograph and the list of names and addresses, just as he had ordered, My responsibility, albatross, ended the moment that your messenger, having put down the gun he was holding, yes, I could see he was carrying a gun, took his right hand out of his raincoat pocket to receive the envelope, But the envelope was empty, I opened it myself, the minister would scream, That's nothing to do with me, albatross, he would reply with the serenity of someone at perfect peace with his conscience, Oh, I know what you're up to, the minister would bawl, you don't want me to touch so much as a hair on the head of your fancy woman, She's not my fancy woman, she's a person who is entirely innocent of the crime she's been accused of, albatross, Don't call me albatross, your father was an albatross, your mother was an albatross, but I'm the interior minister, If the interior minister has

ceased to be an albatross, then the police superintendent will cease to be a puffin, At this precise moment, the puffin is very likely to cease being a superintendent, Well, anything's possible, Anyway, send me another copy of the photo today, do you hear, But I haven't got one, Oh, but you will have, more than one if necessary, How, Very easy, by going to where you'll find one, in your fancy woman's apartment or in the other two apartments, you don't expect me to believe that the photo that disappeared was the only copy, do you. The superintendent shook his head, The minister's no fool, there would be no point handing him an empty envelope. He was almost in the center of the city now, where things were, of course, livelier, although not in any exaggerated or noisy way. He could see that the people he passed had their worries, but, at the same time, they seemed quite calm. The superintendent ignored the obvious contradiction, the fact that he could not explain in words what he saw did not mean that he couldn't feel it, that he could not sense it with his feelings. The man and woman over there, for example, you can see that they like each other, that they're fond of each other, that they love each other, you can see that they're happy, look, they just smiled, and yet, not only are they worried, they are, if I may put it like this, calmly and clearly aware of that. You can see that the superintendent is worried too, perhaps, well, what does one more contradiction matter, perhaps that is why he has gone into this café to have a proper breakfast that will distract him and make him forget the warmed-up coffee and the stale biscuits of providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, he has just ordered some freshly squeezed orange juice, some toast and a cup of real coffee with milk. God bless whoever invented you, he murmured piously to the toast when the waiter set it down before him, wrapped in a napkin in the old-fashioned way, so that it would not get cold. He asked for a newspaper, the front page carried only foreign news, there was nothing of local interest, apart from a statement from the minister of foreign affairs announcing that the government was preparing to consult various international bodies about the former capital's anomalous situation, starting with the united nations and ending with the court in the hague, passing through the european union, the organization for economic cooperation and development, the organization of petroleum-exporting countries, the north atlantic treaty organization, the world bank, the international monetary fund, the world trade organization, the world organization for atomic energy, the world organization for labor, the world meteorological organization, and a few other bodies, which were only secondary or still under discussion, and therefore not mentioned. Albatross will be most put out, it seems they're trying to steal his sweets, thought the superintendent. He looked up from the newspaper like someone who feels a sudden need to gaze into the distance and said to himself that perhaps this news was the reason behind that unexpected and urgent demand for the photograph, He never was one to allow people to get one over on him, he's obviously preparing his next trick, and it'll probably be a dirty trick, the dirtiest of the dirty, he murmured. Then it occurred to him that he had the whole day to himself, that he could do whatever he wanted. He had set the inspector and the sergeant their task, and a useless task it was, they would, at this moment, be lurking in some doorway or behind a tree, they would already be waiting to see who left the house first, the inspector doubtless hoping it would be the girl with dark

glasses, while the sergeant, because there was no one else, would have to content himself with the ex-wife of the man who wrote the letter. The worst thing that could happen to the inspector would be for the old man with the black eye-patch to appear, not so much for the reason you are thinking, that following a pretty, young woman is obviously a more attractive prospect than trailing after an old man, but because people with only one eye see twice as much, they don't have their other eye to distract them or to insist on looking at something else, we've said as much before, but truths need to be repeated many times so that they don't, poor things, lapse into oblivion. And what shall I do, wondered the superintendent. He summoned the waiter, returned the newspaper, paid the bill and left. As he was sitting down behind the wheel again, he glanced at his watch, Half past ten, he thought, a good time, precisely the hour I set for the second interrogation. A good time, he had thought, but he would not have been able to say why or for what. He could, if he chose, go back to providential Ltd and rest until lunchtime, perhaps even sleep a little and make up for the sleep he had lost during the wretched night he had had to endure, the painful conversation with the minister, the nightmare, the screams of the doctor's wife when the albatross stuck the pin through her eyes, but the idea of shutting himself up between those gloomy walls seemed repulsive to him, he had nothing to do there, he certainly didn't want to spend his time reviewing the store of arms and munitions, as he had thought he would do when he first arrived, and as was his duty as superintendent, as surely as if it had been set down in writing. The morning still retained some of the luminous quality of dawn, the air was cool, the ideal weather for a walk. He got out of the car and started walking. He went to the end of the street, turned left and found himself in a square, he crossed it, set off down another street and reached another square, he had a memory of having been here four years ago, one blind man amongst other blind men, listening to speakers who were also blind, the last echoes, if one could but hear them, would be from the most recent political meetings to have been held in those places, the p.o.t.r. in the first square, the p.i.t.m. in the second, and as for the p.o.t.l., as if this were its historical fate, it had had to make do with a bit of waste ground right on the edge of the city. The superintendent walked and walked, and suddenly, how he didn't know, found himself in the street where the doctor and his wife lived, he did not, however, think, This is the street where the doctor lives. He slackened his pace, continuing along on the other side, and he was perhaps twenty meters away when the door of the building opened and the doctor's wife appeared with the dog. The superintendent immediately swung round, went over to a shop window and stood there looking in and waiting, if she crossed over, she would see him reflected in the glass. She didn't. The superintendent stared studiously in the opposite direction, the doctor's wife was moving away from him, the dog, with no lead, was walking along beside her. Then it occurred to the superintendent that he should follow her, that it wouldn't go amiss if he were to do what the sergeant and the inspector were doing at that very moment, if they were trudging the streets behind the other suspects, then he had a duty to do the same even if he was a superintendent, now where's that woman going, the dog is probably just a cover, or perhaps she uses the dog's collar for transporting secret messages, ah, what happy times they were when St Bernard dogs used to carry little barrels of brandy around

their neck and with that small amount how many lives feared lost in the snowy alps were saved. His pursuit of the suspect, if we want to continue calling her that, did not last long. In a secluded spot, rather like a village forgotten in the middle of the city, there was a slightly neglected park, with large shady trees, sandy walks and flower beds, rustic, green-painted benches, and, in the middle, a lake in which a statue, representing a female figure, bent over the water with her empty water jar. The doctor's wife sat down, opened the bag she had brought with her and took out a book. Until she had opened the book and started reading, the dog would not move from there. She looked up from the page and said, Off you go, and he ran off to do, as people used to say in more euphemistic days, what no one else could do for him. The superintendent watched from a distance and remembered his question to himself after breakfast, And what shall I do. For about five minutes he lurked behind the bushes, it was lucky the dog hadn't come this way, he might have recognized him and this time done more than just growl at him. The doctor's wife wasn't waiting for anyone, she had, as so many other people do, simply taken her dog for a walk. The superintendent went straight over to her, making the sand crunch underfoot, and stopped a few feet away. Slowly, as if she found it hard to tear herself away from her reading, the doctor's wife raised her head and looked at him. She did not appear to recognize him at first, probably because she wasn't expecting to see him there, then she said, We were waiting for you, but when you didn't come and the dog was getting impatient for his walk, I decided to bring him here, but my husband's at home, he'll look after you until I get back, unless, of course, you're in a hurry, No, I'm not in a hurry, You go ahead, then, I'll be right there, once the dog has had a bit of a run, after all, it's not his fault people decided to cast blank ballot papers, If you don't mind, and since chance seems to have arranged it this way, I'd prefer to talk to you here, without witnesses, And I assumed that this interrogation, to continue calling it by that name, would take place with my husband present, like the first one, It wouldn't be an interrogation, my notebook won't leave my pocket, and I haven't got a tape-recorder concealed about my person either, besides, I have to say that my memory isn't what it was, it forgets easily, especially when I don't tell it to record what it hears, Oh, I had no idea the memory could hear, It's our second set of ears, those on the outside only serve to carry the sound inside, What do you want then, Like I said, I want to talk to you, About what, About what's happening in this city, Superintendent, I'm very grateful to you for coming to my house yesterday evening and for telling us, and my friends too, that there are people in the government interested in the strange phenomenon of the doctor's wife who failed to go blind four years ago and who now, it seems, is the organizer of a conspiracy against the state, but, to be perfectly frank, unless you have something more to say to me on the subject, I really don't think there's much point in our talking about anything else, The interior minister made me hand over the group photograph of you, your husband and your friends, this very morning I went to a military post on the frontier to do so, So you did have something to tell me, but there really wasn't any need for you to follow me, you could have gone straight to my house, you know the way, But I didn't follow you, I wasn't hiding behind a tree or pretending to read a newspaper while I waited for you to leave your house so that I could follow you, as the inspector and the

sergeant engaged with me on this investigation will be doing with your friends right now, although the only reason I ordered them to do so was to keep them occupied, that's all, Do you mean to tell me you're here by chance, Yes, I happened to be walking down the street and I saw you leaving your house, It's hard to believe that it was pure chance that brought you to the street where I live, Call it what you like, But it was, at any rate, a happy coincidence, if you prefer to call it that, without it I wouldn't have found out that the photograph is now in the hands of your minister, Oh, that I would have told you on another occasion, And what, may I ask, does he want with it, I've no idea, he didn't tell me, but I'm sure it won't be for any good purpose, So you didn't come to submit me to a second interrogation, said the doctor's wife, No, not today, not tomorrow, never, as far as I'm concerned, I know all I need to know about this story, You'll have to explain yourself better, sit down, don't just stand there like that woman with the empty water jar. The dog suddenly appeared and came bounding out from behind some bushes heading straight for the superintendent, who instinctively drew back, Don't be frightened, said the doctor's wife, grabbing the dog by the collar, he won't bite you, How did you know I was afraid of dogs, Oh, I'm no witch, I just observed you when you were in our apartment, Is it that obvious, It is rather, steady, this last word was addressed to the dog, who had stopped barking and was instead producing a low, continuous noise in its throat, far more intimidating than a growl, the sound of an organ the bass notes of which have been badly tuned. You'd better sit down, that way he'll know you mean me no harm. The superintendent gingerly sat down, keeping his distance, Is his name Steady, No, it's Constant, but for us and for my friends he's the dog of tears, we called him Constant for short, Why the dog of tears, Because four years ago I was crying and this creature came and licked my face, During the time of the white blindness, Yes, during the time of the white blindness, this dog is the second marvel from those wretched days, first the woman who did not go blind when it seems it was her duty to do so, then this compassionate dog who came and drank her tears, Did that really happen, or was I dreaming, What we dream also happens, superintendent, Hopefully not everything, Do you have some reason for saying that, No, not really, I was just talking for the sake of it. The superintendent was lying, the sentence he had refused to allow his mouth to utter would have been quite different, Hopefully the albatross will not come and poke out your eyes. The dog had come closer and was almost touching the superintendent's knees with its nose. It was looking at him and its eyes were saying, I won't hurt you, don't be afraid, she wasn't when I found her on that other day. Then the superintendent slowly reached out his hand and touched the dog's head. He felt like crying and letting the tears course down his face, perhaps the marvel would be repeated. The doctor's wife put her book away in her bag and said, Let's go, Where, asked the superintendent, You'll have lunch with us, won't you, if you've nothing more important to do, Are you sure, About what, That you want to have me sitting at your table, Yes, I'm sure, And you're not afraid I might be tricking you, Not with those tears in your eyes, no.

WHEN THE SUPERINTENDENT ARRIVED BACK AT PROVIDENTIAL LTD, IT WAS after seven o'clock in the evening, and he found his subordinates waiting for him. They were clearly not happy. How was your day, any news to report, he asked them in a bright, almost jovial tone, pretending an interest which, as we know better than anyone, he did not feel, As for the day, awful, as for news to report, even worse, replied the inspector, We would have been better off staying in bed and sleeping, said the sergeant, What do you mean, In my entire life, I cannot remember ever having been involved in such a stupid, pointless investigation, began the inspector. The superintendent would gladly have chimed in with You don't know the half of it, but he chose to remain silent. The inspector went on, It was ten o'clock by the time I reached the street where the guy who wrote the letter's ex lives, Sorry, said the sergeant, but you can't say ex, Why not, Because that could mean she was just his ex-girlfriend, Does it matter, asked the inspector, Yes, she wasn't his girlfriend, she was his spouse, All right, what I should have said was that at ten o'clock I reached the street where the guy who wrote the letter's ex-spouse lives, That's better, But spouse sounds ridiculous and pretentious, when you introduce your wife to someone, I bet you don't say and this is my spouse. The superintendent cut short the discussion, Keep that for another time, let's get to what's important, What's important, went on the inspector, is that I was there until nearly midday, and she still hadn't left her apartment, not that this really surprised me, the city's all topsy-turvy, some companies have closed and others are only working half-time, people don't necessarily have to get up early, Lucky them, said the sergeant, So did she go out or didn't she, asked the superintendent, who was beginning to get impatient, She went out at precisely a quarter past twelve, Is there some reason why you say precisely, No, sir, I naturally looked at my watch and there it was, a quarter past twelve, Go on, Well, keeping an eye on any taxis that passed, in case she should get into one of them and leave me stranded in the middle of the street looking like a complete fool, I followed her, but it didn't take me long to realize that wherever it was she was going, she would be going there on foot, And where did she go, You're going to laugh, sir, I doubt it, She walked for more than half an hour, so fast I could hardly keep up, just as if she was doing it for the exercise, and suddenly, unexpectedly, I found myself in the street where the old man with the black eye-patch and the girl with the dark glasses, you know, the prostitute, live, She's not a prostitute, inspector, She may not be one now, but she was once, it's all the same, It's all the same in your mind, but not in mine, and since it's me you're talking to and I'm your superior, kindly use words in a way that I can understand, In that case, I'll say ex-prostitute, Say the man with the black eye-patch's spouse just as, a few minutes ago, you said the guy who wrote the letter's ex-spouse, as you see, I'm using your terms, Hm, Anyway, you found yourself in their street and then what happened, She went into the building where they live and stayed there, And what did you do, the superintendent asked the sergeant, I was hiding, but when she went inside, I joined the inspector to work out a strategy, And then, We decided to work together while we could, said the inspector, and agreed on how we would proceed if we had to split up again, And then, Since it was lunchtime, we took advantage of the break, So you went and had lunch, No, sir, he'd bought two sandwiches and he gave me one, and that was our lunch. The superintendent finally smiled, You

deserve a medal, he said to the sergeant, who, emboldened, responded, People have won one for less, sir, You don't know how right you are, Put my name down on the list, then. The three of them smiled, but only briefly, the superintendent's face soon darkened again, What happened next, he asked, It was half past two when they all came out, they must have had lunch together there, said the inspector, we were immediately on the alert because we didn't know if the old man had a car or not, but he didn't use it, perhaps he's saving petrol, anyway, we followed them and if it was an easy job for one, imagine what it was like for two, And where did all this end, In a cinema, they went to the cinema, Did you check to see if there was another door they could have left by without you realizing, There was one, but it was closed, just in case, though, I told him to keep an eye on it for half an hour, No one left, the sergeant confirmed. The superintendent felt weary of this comedy, What else, just summarize the rest, he said in a tense voice. The inspector looked at him in surprise, The rest, sir, well, there isn't much else, they left together when the film ended, they took a taxi, and we took another, we gave the driver the classic order We're the police, follow that car, it was just another straightforward trip, the wife of the guy who wrote the letter was the first to get out, Where, In the street where she lives, as we said, sir, we don't have any news to report, then the taxi took the others to their house, And what did you do, Well, I stayed behind in the first street, said the sergeant, And I stayed in the second, said the inspector, And then, Then, nothing, none of them went out again, and I was there for nearly another hour, in the end, I caught a taxi, passed by the other street to pick up my colleague and we came back together, in fact, we've just got in, A pointless task then, said the superintendent, It certainly seems like it, said the inspector, the most interesting thing about this whole business is that it started out fairly well, the interrogation of the guy who wrote the letter, for example, was worthwhile, even amusing, the poor devil didn't know what to do with himself and ended up with his tail between his legs, but after that, I don't know how, we got stuck, I mean, we got ourselves stuck, you must know a bit more, sir, since you got to interrogate the real suspects twice, Who are the real suspects, asked the superintendent, Well, first, the doctor's wife and then the husband, it seems quite clear to me that if they share a bed, they must share the blame too, What blame, You know as well as I do, sir, Imagine that I don't, explain it to me, The blame for the situation we're in, What situation, The blank ballot papers, the city under a state of siege, the bomb in the metro station, Do you really believe what you're saying, asked the superintendent, That's why we came here, to investigate and capture the guilty party, You mean the doctor's wife, Yes, sir, as far as I'm concerned the interior minister's orders were pretty clear on that front, The interior minister didn't say the doctor's wife was to blame, Sir, I may only be a police inspector who may never make it as far as superintendent, but I've learned from my experience in this job that things half-spoken exist in order to say what can't be fully expressed, When the next post for superintendent comes up, I'll support your promotion, but until then, the truth requires me to inform you that, as regards the doctor's wife, the word, not half-spoken, but fully expressed, is innocence. The inspector shot the sergeant a sideways glance, a plea for help, but the sergeant had the absorbed look of someone who has just been hypnotized, so he could expect no help from him.

Cautiously, the inspector asked, Are you saying that we're going to leave here empty-handed, Or we could, if you prefer, leave here with our hands in our pockets, And that's how we should present ourselves to the minister, If there's no guilty party, we can't invent one, Are those your words or the minister's, Oh, I doubt they're the minister's words, at least, I don't remember having heard him say them, Well, sir, I've never heard them all the time I've been in the police, but I'll say no more, I won't open my mouth again. The superintendent got up, looked at his watch and said, Go and have supper in a restaurant somewhere, you hardly had any lunch at all, you must be hungry, but don't forget to bring me the bill so that I can stamp it, And what about you, sir, asked the sergeant, No, I had a good lunch, and if I do feel peckish, there's always tea and biscuits to keep hunger at bay. The inspector said, The respect I feel for you, sir, obliges me to say how concerned I am about you, Why, We're just subordinates, the worst thing that can happen to us is a reprimand, but you're responsible for the success of this mission and you seem determined to declare it a failure, Does declaring an accused person innocent mean that a mission has failed, It does if the mission was designed to put the blame on an innocent party, A short while ago, you stated categorically that the doctor's wife was to blame, now you're almost on the point of swearing on the holy gospel that she's innocent, Sir, I might well swear it on the gospel, but not in the presence of the interior minister, Of course, I understand, you have your family, your career, your life, That's right, sir, you might also add, my lack of courage, We're both human beings, and I would never go that far, my only advice to you is that, from now on, you take our sergeant here under your wing, I've a feeling you're going to need each other. The inspector and the sergeant said, See you later, sir, and the superintendent replied, Have a nice meal, and don't rush. The door closed.

The superintendent went into the kitchen for a drink of water, then he went into his room. The bed was still unmade, a pair of dirty socks lay on the floor, one here, one over there, a dirty shirt was draped untidily over a chair, not to mention the state the bathroom was in, this is a matter which providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance will have to resolve sooner or later, i.e. whether or not it is compatible with the natural discretion surrounding the work of the secret service to place at the disposal of the agents who stay here a woman who would act as housekeeper, cook and chambermaid. The superintendent gave the sheet and bedspread a quick tug, punched the pillow a couple of times, rolled up the shirt and the socks and stuffed them in a drawer, and the desolate appearance of the room improved a little, although, naturally, any female hand would have done it better. He looked at the clock, it was a good time, although he would soon find out whether the result would be equally good. He sat down, switched on the desk lamp and dialed the number. On the fourth ring, a voice answered, Hello, It's puffin here, Albatross speaking, Just calling in to report on the day's operations, albatross, Well, I hope you have some satisfactory results to give me, puffin, That depends on what you call satisfactory, albatross, Look, I have neither the time nor the patience for the finer shades of meaning, puffin, get to the point, May I ask you first, albatross, if the package reached its destination, What package, The nine o'clock package, at post six-north, Oh,

yes, it arrived perfectly, it's going to be very useful, you'll find out just how useful in due course, puffin, but now tell me what you and your men have been up to today, There's really not much to tell, albatross, a couple of surveillance operations and an interrogation, Let's take things one at a time, puffin, what was the result of the surveillance operations, Practically nil, albatross, Why, Throughout the time they were being followed, the people we would term the number two suspects behaved absolutely normally, albatross, And what about the interrogation of the number one suspects, which, I seem to recall, was your responsibility, puffin, To be perfectly honest, What did you say, To be perfectly honest, albatross, What's all this about honesty, puffin, It's just a way of beginning a sentence, albatross, Then will you please stop being perfectly honest and tell me, simply, whether or not you are in a position to confirm, without beating about the bush and without any further circumlocutions, that the doctor's wife, whose photo I have before me, is guilty, She admitted she was guilty of a murder, albatross, You know that for many reasons, amongst them the lack of a corpus delicti, this is not what interests us, Yes, albatross, So get straight to the point and tell me whether or not you can confirm that the doctor's wife is part of the movement behind the blank votes and that she may even be the head of the whole organization, No, albatross, I can't confirm that, Why, puffin, Because no policeman in the world, albatross, and I consider myself to be the last of them, would find a scrap of evidence to support such an accusation, You appear to have forgotten, puffin, that we had agreed that you would provide the necessary proof, And what proof would that be in a case like this, albatross, if you don't mind my asking, That neither was nor is my affair, I left that to your judgement, puffin, when I was still confident that you would be capable of bringing your mission to a successful conclusion, With respect, albatross, deciding that a suspect is innocent of the crime he or she is accused of seems to me the most successful of conclusions, Let's drop this code-name comedy, you're a police superintendent and I'm the interior minister, Yes, minister, Now, in order to see if we can finally come to some understanding, I'm going to put the question I asked you just now in a different way, Yes, minister, Setting aside your personal beliefs, are you prepared to confirm that the doctor's wife is guilty, yes or no, No, minister, And you have weighed the consequences of what you have just said, Yes, minister, Very well, then, take a note of the decisions I have just taken, I'm listening, minister, You will tell the inspector and the sergeant that they have orders to return tomorrow morning, that at nine o'clock they must be at post six-north on the frontier where they will be met by the person who will bring them here, a man more or less your age and wearing a blue tie with white spots, tell them to bring the car you've been using and which will, of course, no longer be necessary, Yes, minister, And as for you, As for me, minister, You will remain in the capital until you receive further orders, which will doubtless not be long in coming, And the investigation, You yourself said that there is nothing to investigate, that the suspect is innocent, That is my sincere belief, minister, Then you certainly can't complain, your case is solved, But what shall I do while I'm here, Nothing, do nothing, go for walks, enjoy yourself, go to the cinema, the theater, visit the museums, and, if you like, invite your new friends out to supper, charge it to the ministry, Minister, I don't understand, The five days I gave you for the investigation are still not yet

up, perhaps in the time that remains a different light will go on in your head, I doubt it, minister, Nevertheless, five days are five days, and I'm a man of my word, Yes, minister, Good night, sleep well, superintendent, Good night, minister.

The superintendent put down the phone. He got up from the chair and went to the bathroom. He needed to see the face of the man who had just been summarily dismissed. The actual words had not been spoken, but could be clearly seen, letter by letter, in all the other words, even those wishing him a good night's sleep. He wasn't surprised, he knew exactly what his interior minister was like and knew that he would be made to pay for not having obeyed the instructions he had received, the explicit and, above all, the implied instructions, the latter had, after all, been as clear as the former, but he was surprised by the serenity of the face he saw in the mirror, a face from which the lines seemed to have vanished, a face in which the eyes had become limpid and luminous, the face of a man of fifty-seven, a police superintendent by profession, who had just been through the fire and had emerged from it as if from a purifying bath. Yes, a bath would be a good idea. He got undressed and stepped into the shower. He allowed the water to flow freely, after all, what did he care, the ministry would foot the bill, he slowly soaped himself and again the water washed away any remaining dirt from his body, then his memory carried him on its back to a time four years ago, when they were all blind and wandering, filthy and starving, about the city, ready to do anything for a crust of stale, mouldy bread, for anything that could be eaten, or at least chewed, as a way of staving off hunger with their own juices, he imagined the doctor's wife guiding through the streets, beneath the rain, her little flock of unfortunates, her six lost sheep, her six fledglings fallen from the nest, her six newborn blind kittens, perhaps one day, in some street or other, he had bumped into them, perhaps they, out of fear, had repelled him, perhaps, out of fear, he had repelled them, it was every man for himself at the time, steal before they steal from you, hit out before they hit you, your worst enemy, according to the law of the blind, is always the person nearest you, But it's not only when we have no eyes that we don't know where we're going, he thought. The hot water fell clamorously upon his head and shoulders, it coursed over his body and disappeared, clean and gurgling, down the drain. He got out of the shower, dried himself on the bath towel bearing the police emblem, picked up the clothes he had left hanging on the hook and went into the bedroom. He put on clean underwear, his last, and it would have to be his last, for he hadn't thought of packing any more for a mission lasting only five days. He looked at his watch, it was nearly nine o'clock. He went into the kitchen, boiled some water for tea, dunked one sad teabag in the water and waited for the recommended number of minutes. The biscuits were like sugary granite. He bit into them hard, reduced them to smaller pieces that were easier to chew, then slowly crumbled them up. He sipped his tea, he preferred the green variety, but had to content himself with this black stuff, so old it hardly tasted of anything, providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, really should stop lavishing such luxuries on its temporary guests. The minister's words echoed sarcastically in his ears, The five days I gave you for the investigation are still not yet up, until they are, go for walks, enjoy yourself, go to the cinema, charge it to the ministry,

and he wondered what would happen then, would they send him back to headquarters, alleging that he was incapable of active service, would they sit him down at a desk to shuffle papers, a superintendent demoted to the lowly condition of pen-pusher, that would be his future, unless they made him take early retirement and forgot about him and only mentioned his name again when he died and they could strike him from the staff records. He finished eating, he threw the cold, damp teabag into the rubbish bin, washed the cup and scooped the crumbs off the table with the edge of his hand. He did all this with great concentration in order to keep his thoughts at bay, in order to let them in only one at a time, having first asked them what they contained, because you can't be too careful with thoughts, some present themselves to us with a cloying air of false innocence and then, when it's too late, reveal their true wicked selves. He again looked at his watch, a quarter to ten, how time passes. He left the kitchen and went into the living-room, sat down on a sofa and waited. He woke to the sound of the key in the door. The inspector and the sergeant came in, they had clearly had plenty to eat and drink, not, however, to any reprehensible extent. They said their good evenings, then the inspector, on behalf of them both, apologized for coming in a little late. The superintendent looked at his watch, it was past eleven, It's not that late, he said, but I'm afraid you're going to have to get up rather earlier than you perhaps expected, Another mission, asked the inspector, placing a package on the table, Yes, if you can call it that. The superintendent paused, glanced again at his watch and went on, At nine o'clock tomorrow morning you are to be at military post six-north with all your belongings, Why, asked the sergeant, You've been taken off the investigation that brought you here, Was that your decision, sir, asked the inspector, grave-faced, No, it was the minister's decision, But why, He didn't tell me, but don't worry, I'm sure he's got nothing against you personally, he'll ask you a lot of questions, but you'll know what to say, Does that mean you're not coming with us, sir, asked the sergeant, No, I'm staying here, Are you going to continue the investigation on your own, The investigation is over, With no concrete results, Neither concrete nor abstract, Then I don't understand why you're not coming with us, said the inspector, Orders from the minister, I'll stay here until the end of the five-day period he originally set, which means until Thursday, And what then, Perhaps he'll tell you when he questions you, Questions us about what, About how the investigation went, about how I ran it, But you just said that the investigation was over, Yes, but it's possible he may want to continue it in other ways, although not with me, Well, I can't make head nor tail of it, said the sergeant. The superintendent got up, went into the study and returned with a map, which he spread out on the table, pushing the package a little to one side to make room. Post six-north is here, he said, placing his finger on it, don't go to the wrong one, waiting for you will be a man whom the minister describes as more or less my age, but he's actually quite a lot younger, you'll recognize him by the tie he'll be wearing, blue with white spots, when I met him, we had to exchange passwords, but I don't think that will be necessary this time, at least the minister didn't say anything to me about it, I don't understand, said the inspector, It's seems pretty clear, said the sergeant, we just go to post six-north, No, what I don't understand is why we're leaving and the superintendent is staying, The minister must have his reasons, Ministers always do, But

they never say what they are. The superintendent intervened, There's no point talking about it, your best bet is not to ask for any explanations and to distrust any explanations they offer you, in the unlikely event that they do, because they're nearly always lies. He carefully folded up the map and, as if the thought had just occurred to him, said, You take the car, You're not even keeping the car, asked the inspector, There are plenty of buses and taxis in the city, besides, walking is good for the health, This whole thing is just getting harder and harder to understand, There's nothing to understand, my friend, I was given my orders and I'm carrying them out, and you must do the same, you can analyse and ponder all you like, but it doesn't change the reality one millimeter. The inspector pushed the package toward him, We brought this, he said, What is it, Well, the stuff they left for our breakfast here is so awful, we decided to buy some different biscuits, a bit of cheese, some decent butter, ham and a sandwich loaf, Are you going to take it with you or leave it here, said the superintendent, smiling, Well, if you're in agreement, sir, tomorrow we'll have breakfast together and whatever's left stays, said the inspector, smiling too. They had all smiled, the sergeant keeping the others company, but now all three were serious again, not knowing what to say. In the end, the superintendent said, I'm off to bed, I slept badly last night and it's been a busy day, starting with that business at post six-north, What business, sir, asked the superintendent, we don't yet know why you went to post six-north, No, that's true, I didn't get a chance to tell you, well, on orders from the minister I went and handed over the group photograph to that man wearing the blue tie with white spots, the same man you're going to meet tomorrow, What would the minister want with that photo, To use his words, we'll find out in due course, It smells very fishy to me. The superintendent nodded and went on, Then, by pure coincidence, I bumped into the doctor's wife, joined them for lunch at their apartment, and then, to top it all, had the conversation with the minister I told you about, We have the greatest respect for you, sir, said the inspector, but there's one thing we'll never forgive you, and I know I'm speaking for both of us here because we've already talked about it, What's that, You never let us go to that woman's apartment, You went there, inspector, Only to be shooed straight out again, Yes, that's true, agreed the superintendent, Why, Because I was afraid, Afraid of what, we're not monsters, Afraid that the need to find a guilty party at all costs would stop you seeing the person who was there before you, Did you trust us so little, sir, It wasn't a question of trust, of whether I did or didn't trust you, it was more as if I had found a treasure and wanted to keep it all to myself, no, that's not it, it wasn't a question of feelings, that wasn't what I was thinking, I simply feared for that woman's safety, I thought that the fewer people who questioned her, the safer she would be, So put in plain and simple language, and forgive my boldness, sir, said the sergeant, you didn't trust us, No, you're right, I admit it, I didn't, Well, don't bother asking our forgiveness, said the inspector, you're forgiven already, especially since you may well have been right to be afraid, we could have ruined everything, we could have gone in there like a couple of bulls in a china shop. The superintendent opened the package, took out two slices of bread, put two slices of ham in between and gave an apologetic smile, I must confess I'm hungry, all I had was a cup of tea and I nearly broke my teeth on those bloody biscuits. The sergeant

went into the kitchen and brought him a can of beer and a glass, Here you are, sir, this will help the bread slide down more easily. The superintendent sat down and munched his way through the ham sandwich, savoring every mouthful, then drank down the beer as if he were washing clean his soul, and when he had finished, he said, Right, now I will go to bed, sleep well, you two, and thanks for supper. He went over to the door that led to his bedroom, stopped and turned round, I'm going to miss you, he said. He paused and added, Don't forget what I told you earlier, What do you mean, sir, asked the inspector, That I have the feeling you're really going to need each other, don't be taken in by any sweet talk or promises of rapid promotion, I'm responsible for the conclusions reached by this investigation and no one else, you won't be betraying me as long as you tell the truth, but refuse to accept any lies in the name of a truth that is not your own, Yes, sir, promised the inspector, Help each other, said the superintendent, and then, That's all I wish for you, all I ask of you.

THE SUPERINTENDENT DID NOT WISH TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE interior minister's prodigal munificence. He did not seek distraction in theaters and cinemas, he did not visit the museums, he only left providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, to have lunch and supper, and when he paid the bill at the restaurant, instead of taking the bill with him, he left it on the table along with the tip. He did not go back to the doctor's house and had no reason to return to the garden where he had made his peace with the dog of tears or, as he was officially known, Constant, and where, eye to eye, spirit with spirit, he had spoken with the dog's mistress about guilt and innocence. Nor did he go and spy on what the girl with dark glasses and the old man with the black eye-patch might be doing, or the divorced wife of the man who had been the first to go blind. As for the latter, the author of the vile letter of denunciation and author, too, of many misfortunes, the superintendent had no doubt that, if he saw him, he would cross over to the other side of the road. The rest of the time, for hours on end, morning and evening, he spent sitting by the phone, waiting, and even when he was sleeping, his ears were listening. He was sure that the interior minister would phone in the end, he could not otherwise understand why the minister had wanted to drain to the very last minute, or more accurately, to the final dregs, the five days he had allocated for the investigation. The most natural thing would be for the minister to order him back to headquarters to settle all outstanding accounts, whether by enforced retirement or by resignation, but experience had shown him that anything natural was far too simple for the interior minister's tortuous mind. He remembered the inspector's words, banal but expressive, It smells very fishy to me, he had said when the superintendent had told him about handing over the photograph to the man wearing the blue tie with white spots at military post six-north, and it seemed to him that the heart of the matter must lie there, in the photograph, although he could not imagine how or why. It was in this slow waiting, which had an end in sight and which would not, as people say when they want to embellish a story, be interminable, and in thoughts such as these, which were often nothing but a continuous, irrepressible somnolence from which his half-watchful consciousness occasionally startled him awake, that he would spend the three remaining days, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, three leaves from the calendar which resisted being torn from midnight's stitching and which then remained stuck to his fingers, transformed into a shapeless, glutinous mass of time, into a soft wall that both resisted and sucked him in. Finally, on Wednesday, at half past eleven at night, the minister phoned. He did not say hello or good evening, he did not ask the superintendent if he was well or how he was coping with being alone, he did not mention whether he had questioned the inspector and the sergeant, together or separately, in friendly conversation or by issuing harsh threats, he merely said in passing, as if apropos of nothing, I think you'll find something in tomorrow's newspapers to interest you, I read the papers every day, minister, Congratulations, you're obviously very well-informed, nevertheless I urge you most strongly not to miss tomorrow's editions, you'll find them most interesting, I'll be sure to read them, minister, And watch the television news too, don't miss it whatever you do, We have no television set at providential ltd, minister, What a shame, although, on second thoughts, I rather approve, it's better like that, it might distract you from the arduous investigatory problems we set

you, besides, you could always go and visit one of your new friends and suggest you all get together and enjoy the show. The superintendent did not respond. He could have asked what his disciplinary situation would be after Thursday, but he preferred to say nothing, it was clear that his fate lay in the minister's hands, and so it was up to him to pronounce sentence, if he did ask, he was sure to receive some sharp riposte, along the lines of, Don't be in such a hurry, you'll find out tomorrow. Suddenly, the superintendent became aware that the silence had lasted longer than is considered normal in a telephone conversation, a mode of communication in which the pauses or rests between phrases are, generally speaking, either brief or even briefer. He had not reacted to the interior minister's spiteful suggestion and this had not appeared to trouble him, he had remained silent as if he were leaving time for his interlocutor to think of a response. The superintendent said cautiously, Minister. The electrical impulses carried the word down the line, but there was no sign of life at the other end. The albatross had hung up. The superintendent put the phone back on its rest and left the room. He went into the kitchen and drank a glass of water, it was not the first time he had noticed that talking to the interior minister created in him an almost desperate thirst, as if throughout the conversation he had been burning up inside and now had to hurry to put out his own fire. He went and sat down on the sofa in the sitting-room, but did not stay there long, the state of semi-lethargy in which he had lived for the past two days had disappeared, as if it had vanished at the minister's first word, for things, that vague agglomeration to which we usually give the generic and lazy label of things when it would take too much time and too much space to explain or merely define it, had begun to move very fast and they would not stop now until the end, but what end, and when, and how, and where. Of one thing he was sure, he did not need to be a maigret, a poirot or a sherlock holmes to know what the newspapers would publish the following day. The waiting was over, the interior minister would not phone him again, any order still to be issued would arrive through the intermediary of a secretary or directly from the police commissioner, a mere five days and five nights had been enough for him to go from being a superintendent in charge of a difficult investigation to a wind-up toy whose spring had gone and which was to be thrown out with the rubbish. It was then that it occurred to him that he still had one duty to perform. He looked up a name in the telephone book, mentally confirmed the address and dialed the number. The doctor's wife answered, Hello, Oh, good evening, it's me, the superintendent, forgive me for phoning you at this hour of the night, That's all right, we never go to bed early, Do you remember me telling you, when we were talking in the park, that the interior minister had ordered me to hand over that group photograph, Yes, I remember, Well, I have every reason to believe that the photograph will be published in tomorrow's newspapers and broadcast on television, Well, I won't ask you why, but I do remember you telling me that the minister wouldn't have wanted it for any good purpose, Exactly, but I never expected him to use it like this, What's he up to, We'll see tomorrow what the newspapers do apart from printing the photograph, but I imagine that they'll try to stigmatize you in the mind of the public, Because I didn't go blind four years ago, You know very well that the minister finds it highly suspicious that you didn't go blind when everyone else was losing their sight, and now that fact has become more than sufficient,

from his point of view, for him to find you responsible, either wholly or in part, for what is happening now, Do you mean the blank votes, Yes, the blank votes, But that's absurd, utterly absurd, As I've learned in this job, not only are the people in government never put off by what we judge to be absurd, they make use of absurdities to dull consciences and to destroy reason, What do you think we should do, Hide, disappear, but don't go to your friends' apartments, you wouldn't be safe there, they'll be putting them under surveillance soon as well, if they haven't already, You're right, but, in any case, we would never put at risk the safety of someone who had chosen to protect us, right now, for example, I'm wondering if you haven't been foolish in phoning us, Don't worry, the line is secure, in fact, there aren't many lines much securer than this, Superintendent, Yes, There's a question I'd like to ask, but I'm not sure I dare, Ask it, please, Why are you doing this for us, why are you helping us, Because of something I read in a book, years ago now, and which I had forgotten, but which has come back to me in the last few days, What was that, We are born, and at that moment, it is as if we had signed a pact for the rest of our life, but a day may come when we will ask ourselves Who signed this on my behalf, Fine, thought-provoking words, what's the book called, You know I'm ashamed to say it, but I can't remember, Never mind, even if you can't remember anything else, not even the title, Not even the name of the author, Those words, which probably no one else, at least not in that precise form, would ever have said before, had the good fortune not to have lost each other, they had someone to bring them together, and who knows, perhaps the world would be a slightly better place if we were able to gather up a few of the words that are out there wandering around alone, Oh, I doubt the poor despised creatures would ever find each other, No, probably not, but dreaming is cheap, it doesn't cost any money, Let's see what the papers say tomorrow, Yes, let's see, I'm prepared for the worst, Whatever the immediate results, think about what I said, hide, disappear, All right, I'll talk to my husband, Let's hope he manages to persuade you, Good night, and thank you for everything, There's nothing to thank me for, Take care. After he had hung up, the superintendent wondered if he hadn't been rather stupid to declare, as if it were his property, that the line was secure, that there wouldn't be many lines in the country much more secure. He shrugged and murmured, What does it matter, nothing is secure, no one is secure.

He did not sleep well, he dreamed of a cloud of words that fled and scattered as he chased after them with a butterfly net, pleading, Stop, please, don't move, wait for me. Then, suddenly, the words stopped and gathered together in a clump, one on top of the other, like a swarm of bees waiting for a hive they could swoop down on, and he, with a cry of joy, lunged forward with his net. What he had caught was a newspaper. It had been a bad dream, but it would have been worse if the albatross had returned to prick out the eyes of the doctor's wife. He woke early. He pulled on some clothes and went downstairs. He no longer went out via the garage, through the tradesmen's entrance, now he went out through the main door, what one might call the pedestrian entrance, he greeted the porter with a nod of his head if he happened to see him in his lodge or exchanged a word or two with him if he was outside, but it wasn't necessary, he - the

superintendent, not the porter - was, in a way, merely there on loan. The streetlights were still on, the shops wouldn't open for another two hours. He looked for and found a newspaper kiosk, one of the larger ones that receives all the papers, and he stood there waiting. Fortunately, it wasn't raining. The street lights went out, leaving the city plunged for a few moments in a last, brief darkness, which vanished as soon as his eyes grew accustomed to the change, and the bluish light of early morning descended upon the streets. The delivery van arrived, unloaded the bundles of papers and continued on its way. The newsagent started opening the bundles and arranging the newspapers according to the number of copies received, from left to right, from large to small. The superintendent went over to him, Good morning, he said, I'll have a copy of all of them. While the man was putting his purchases into a plastic bag, the superintendent looked at the rows of newspapers and saw that, with the exception of the last two, they all carried the photograph on the front page under banner headlines. The arrival of this keen customer with sufficient means to pay has got the newspaper kiosk off to good start this morning, indeed, we can safely say that the rest of the day will be no different, for every one of the newspapers will be snapped up, apart from those two piles on the right, of which only the usual number of copies will be sold. The superintendent was no longer there, he had run to catch a taxi he had spotted on the nearby corner, and having given the driver the address of providential ltd, and apologized for the shortness of the journey, he was now nervously taking the papers out of the bag and opening them. Alongside the group photo, with an arrow indicating the doctor's wife, was an enlargement of her face in a circle. And the headlines were, in red and in black, Revealed At Last - The Face Behind The Conspiracy, Four Years Ago This Woman Escaped Blindness, Mystery Of The Blank Ballot Papers Solved, Police Investigation Yields First Results. The still faint morning light and the swaying of the car as it bumped over the cobbled surface prevented him from reading the smaller print of the articles beneath. In less than five minutes the taxi had deposited him outside the door of the building. The superintendent paid, left the change in the driver's hand and rushed in. He raced past the porter without bothering to greet him and got into the lift, his state of excitement almost making him tap his toes with impatience, come on, come on, but the machinery, which had spent its whole life carrying people up and down, listening to conversations, unfinished monologues, tuneless fragments of songs, the occasional irrepressible sigh, the occasional troubled murmur, pretended that this was none of its business, it took a certain amount of time to go up and a certain amount of time to come down, like fate, if you're in that much of a hurry, take the stairs. The superintendent finally put the key in the door of providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, turned on the light and made straight for the table on which he had spread out the map of the city and where he had eaten a last breakfast with his now absent assistants. His hands were shaking. Forcing himself to slow down and not to skip any lines, he read, word by word, the articles in the four newspapers that had published the photograph. With a few small changes in style, with slight differences in vocabulary, the information was the same in all of them and one could sense a kind of arithmetic mean calculated by the editorial consultants at the ministry of the interior to fit the original font. The primitive prose read more or less like

this, Just when we were thinking that the government had decided to leave it to time, to that same time by which everything is worn away and transformed, the job of isolating and shrinking the malignant tumor that so unexpectedly grew in this nation's capital, taking the abstruse and aberrant form of the mass casting of blank ballot papers, which, as our readers know, vastly exceeded the number of votes cast for all the democratic political parties put together, our editorial desk has just received the most surprising and gratifying news. The investigatory genius and persistence of the police, in the persons of a superintendent, an inspector and a sergeant, whose names, for security reasons, we are not authorized to reveal, have managed to uncover the individual who is, in all probability, the head of the tapeworm whose coils have kept the civic conscience of the majority of the city's inhabitants of voting age entirely paralyzed and in a state of dangerous atrophy. A certain woman, married to an ophthalmologist, and who, wonder of wonders, was, according to reliable witnesses, the only person to escape the terrible epidemic four years ago that made of our homeland a country of the blind, this woman is now considered by the police to be the person responsible for the current blindness, limited this time, fortunately, to what used to be the capital city, and which has introduced into political life and into our democratic system the dangerous germ of perversion and corruption. Only a diabolical mind, like those of the greatest criminals in the history of humankind, could have conceived what, according to reliable sources, his excellency the president of the republic has so eloquently described as a torpedo fired below the water line of the majestic ship of democracy. For that is what it is. If it is proved, beyond a shadow of a doubt, as everything indicates it will be, that this doctor's wife is guilty, then all those citizens who still respect order and the law will demand that the full rigor of justice falls upon her head. How strange life is. Given the singularity of her case four years ago, this woman could have become an invaluable subject of study for our scientific community, and, as such, would have deserved a prominent place in the clinical history of ophthalmology, but she will now be singled out for public execration as an enemy of her country and of her people. One is tempted to say that it would have been better if she had gone blind.

That last sentence, clearly threatening in tone, sounded like a judicial sentence, just as if it had said It would have been better if you had never been born. The superintendent's first impulse was to phone the doctor's wife, to ask if she had read the newspapers, to comfort her as best as he could, but he was prevented by the thought that, overnight, the probability of her phone being tapped had become one hundred percent. As for the phones of providential ltd, the red and the gray ones, they, of course, were linked directly to the state's private network. He leafed through the other two newspapers, which had not printed a single word on the subject. What should I do now, he asked out loud. He went back to the article, re-read it, and found it strange that they had not identified the people in the photograph, in particular, the doctor's wife and the doctor. It was then that he noticed the caption, which read thus, The suspect is indicated by an arrow. It seems, although there is no solid confirmation of this fact, that the doctor's wife took this group under her wing during the epidemic of blindness. According

to official sources, identification of these people is at an advanced stage and will be made public tomorrow. The superintendent murmured, They're probably trying to find out where the boy lives, as if that would help them. Then, after some thought, At first sight, the publication of the photograph, unaccompanied by any other measures, appears to make no sense, since all the people in the photo, as I myself advised, could seize the opportunity and vanish, but then the minister loves a spectacle, a successful manhunt would give him greater political weight and more influence in both the government and the party, and as for other measures, the homes of these people are almost certainly already under round-the-clock surveillance, the ministry has had more than enough time to get agents into the city and to set up such a programme. While all of this was true, none of it answered his question What should I do now. He could phone the ministry of the interior on the pretext that, since it was now Thursday, he wanted to know what decision had been taken about his disciplinary situation, but there was no point, he was sure the minister would not speak to him, some secretary would merely come on the line, telling him to get in touch with the police commissioner, the days of conversations between albatross and puffin are over, superintendent. What shall I do now, he asked again, just sit here rotting away until someone finally remembers me and sends orders for the corpse to be removed, try to leave the city when it's more than likely that strict orders have been given at the frontier posts not to let me pass, what shall I do. He looked at the photograph again, the doctor and his wife in the middle, the girl with the dark glasses and the old man with the black eye-patch to the left, the guy who wrote the letter and his wife to the right, the boy with the squint kneeling down in front like a football player, the dog sitting at its mistress's feet. He re-read the caption, Full identification will be made public tomorrow, will be made public, tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. At that moment, he was suddenly gripped by an idea for a plan of action, but the following moment, caution was immediately protesting that it would be utter madness, The sensible thing, it said, would be not to wake the sleeping dragon, the stupid thing would be to approach while it's awake. The superintendent got out of his chair, paced twice around the room, returned to the table on which the newspapers lay, and looked again at the head of the doctor's wife surrounded by a white ring that looked already like a hangman's noose, at this hour, half the city is reading the newspapers and the other half is sitting in front of the television to hear what the newsreader on the first news bulletin is going to say or listening to the voice of the radio announcing that the woman's name will be made public tomorrow, and not only her name, but her address too, so that the whole population will know where evil has made its nest. The superintendent went to fetch the typewriter and brought it over to the table. He folded up the newspapers, pushed them to one side and sat down to work. The paper he was using bore the heading providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, and could, if not tomorrow, certainly the day after tomorrow, be used by the state prosecution as proof of a second crime, that of using civil service stationery for his own purposes, an aggravating factor being the confidential nature of that correspondence and the conspiratorial use to which it was put. What the superintendent was typing was neither more nor less than a detailed account of the events of the last five days, from early Saturday morning when he and his

two assistants had clandestinely breached the city blockade, until today, and this very moment of writing. Providential Ltd does, of course, have a photocopier, but it seems to the superintendent impolite to give the original letter to one person and a mere copy to the other, however convincingly the very latest reprographic techniques may assure us that not even the eyes of a hawk could tell them apart. The superintendent belongs to the second oldest generation of those who still eat bread in this world, which is why he retains a respect for form, which means that, having finished the first letter, he started carefully copying it out onto a clean sheet of paper. It is, to be sure, still a copy, but not in the same way. When he had completed this task, he folded up the letters and placed each one in an envelope bearing the company name, sealed the envelopes and wrote the respective addresses. While it is true that the letters will be delivered by hand, the addressees will understand, if only by the discreet elegance of the gesture, that these letters from providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, deal with important matters deserving of the news media's attention.

The superintendent is about to go out again. He placed the two letters in one of his inside jacket pockets and put on his raincoat, even though the weather is as mild as one could hope for at this time of year, as, indeed, he could ascertain for himself by opening the window and looking up at the slow, sparse, white clouds passing by overhead. It is possible that there may have been another strong reason, for the raincoat, especially of the belted trench-coat variety, is a kind of identifying feature of detectives from the classic era, at least ever since raymond chandler first created the character of marlowe, so much so that seeing a man walk by, a slouch hat on his head and his raincoat collar turned up, and immediately proclaiming there goes humphrey bogart with his piercing eyes gazing out between the edge of his collar and the brim of his hat, is the kind of knowledge that is within easy grasp of any reader of detective fiction, p.o. box death. This superintendent is not wearing a hat, his head is bare, as determined by the fashion of a modern world that loathes the picturesque and, as they say, shoots to kill without even asking if you're still alive. He has got out of the lift, walked past the porter's lodge, from where the porter waved to him, and now he is in the street ready to carry out his three objectives for that morning, namely, to eat a belated breakfast, to take a walk down the street where the doctor's wife lives, and to deliver the letters to their addressees. He achieves the first in this café, a cup of milky coffee, a couple of slices of buttered toast, not as tender and succulent as those he ate the other day, but there's no surprise there, life is like that, you win some, you lose some, and there are very few cultivators of buttered toast left, both amongst those who prepare it and those who eat it. Forgive these extremely banal gastronomic thoughts in a man who is carrying a bomb in his pocket. He has eaten and paid, now he is striding toward his second objective. It took him almost twenty minutes to get there. He slowed his pace when he reached the street and adopted the air of one just out for a stroll, he knows that if there are any surveillance police about they will probably recognize him, but he doesn't care. If one of them sees him and informs his immediate boss of what he saw, and if the boss passes on the information to his immediate superior, who then tells the police commissioner, who

then tells the interior minister, you can guarantee that the albatross will croak out in his harshest tones, Don't come bothering me with things I already know, tell me what I don't know, namely, what that wretched superintendent is up to. The street is more crowded than usual. There are small knots of people standing around outside the building where the doctor's wife lives, they are locals moved by a curiosity which is in some cases innocent and in other cases morbid, and who have come, newspaper in hand, to the place where the accused woman lives, a woman they know more or less by sight or from an occasional exchange of words, and there is the inevitable coincidence that the eyes of some have benefited from the expertise of her ophthalmologist husband. The superintendent has already spotted the surveillance policemen, the first has positioned himself next to one of the larger groups, the second, leaning with feigned idleness against a wall, is reading a sports magazine as if, in the world of letters, nothing more important could possibly exist. The fact that he is reading a magazine and not a newspaper can be easily explained, a magazine, while affording sufficient protection, takes up much less of the watcher's visual field and can be quickly stuffed into a pocket should it become necessary to follow someone. Policemen know these things, they learn them in kindergarten. It happens that the men here have no inkling of the stormy relations between the superintendent walking along and the ministry they all work for, which is why they assume he is just part of the operation and has come to make sure that everything is going to plan. Nothing odd about that. Although at certain levels in the organization, there are already mutterings that the minister is dissatisfied with the superintendent's work, the proof of which is that he has ordered his two assistants to come back, leaving the superintendent to lie fallow, or, as others say, on stand-by, these mutterings have not yet reached the lower levels to which these officers belong. We should point out, however, before we forget, that the said mutterers have no very clear idea what the superintendent came to do in the capital, which just goes to show that the inspector and the sergeant, wherever they are now, have kept their mouths shut. The interesting thing, although not in the least amusing, was to see how the policemen went over to the superintendent and whispered conspiratorially out of the corner of their mouth, Nothing to report. The superintendent nodded, looked up at the windows on the fourth floor and walked away, thinking, Tomorrow, when the names and addresses are published, there will be far more people here. Further on, he saw a taxi and hailed it. He got in, said good morning and, taking the envelopes out of his pocket, read the addresses and asked the driver, Which of these is closest, The second one, Take me there, then, please. On the seat next to the driver lay a folded newspaper, the one that bore the striking headline, in letters the color of blood, Revealed At Last - The Face Behind The Conspiracy. The superintendent was tempted to ask the driver his opinion of the sensational news published in today's newspapers, but abandoned the idea for fear that an overly inquisitive tone in his voice might betray his profession, One of the hazards of being a policeman, he thought. It was the driver who brought the subject up, I don't know about you, but I reckon this story about the woman they claim didn't go blind is just one of those whoppers they dream up to sell newspapers, I mean, I went blind, we all went blind, how was it that this one woman kept her sight, you'd have to be a fool to

believe that, And what about them saying that she was behind all those people casting blank votes, That's another load of old nonsense, a woman is a woman, she wouldn't get involved in things like that, I mean, if it was a man, possibly, he could be, but a woman, pfff, Yes, it'll be interesting to see how it all turns out, Once they've squeezed the juice out of this story, they'll invent another one, it's always the same, oh, you'd be surprised the things you learn behind the wheel, and I'll tell you something else too, Go on, Contrary to what everyone thinks, the rear-view mirror isn't just for checking on the cars behind, you can use it to look into the souls of your passengers too, I bet you'd never thought of that, No, I certainly hadn't, you astonish me, Like I say, this steering-wheel teaches you a lot. After such a revelation, the superintendent thought it best to allow the conversation to lapse. Only when the driver stopped the car and said, Here we are, did he dare to ask if that business about the rear-view mirror and the soul applied to all cars and all drivers, but the driver was quite clear about it, No, only taxis, sir, only taxis.

The superintendent entered the building, went over to the reception desk and said, Good morning, I represent providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, and I'd like to speak to the director, If you're here about insurance, perhaps it would be better to speak to the administrator, In principle, yes, you're quite right, but what brings me to your newspaper is not a mere technical matter, and it's vital, therefore, that I speak to the director himself, The director isn't here right now, and I don't imagine he'll be in until the afternoon, Who do you think I should speak to then, who would be the best person, Probably the editor-in-chief, In that case, I would be grateful if you could tell him I'm here, providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, Could you tell me your name, Providential will do fine, Oh, I see, the firm bears your name, Exactly. The receptionist made the phone call, explained the situation and, when she had hung up, said, Someone will be right down, mister providential. A few minutes later, a woman appeared, I'm the editor-in-chief's secretary, would you care to come with me. He followed her down a corridor, feeling quite calm and serene, then, suddenly, without warning, a realization of the bold step he was about to take took his breath away as if he had been punched in the solar plexus. There was still time to go back, to make some excuse, Oh, no, what a nuisance, I've forgotten a really important document which I really must have if I'm to talk to the editor-in-chief, but it wasn't true, the document was there, in his inside jacket pocket, the wine has been poured, superintendent, you have no option now but to drink it. The secretary showed him into a small, modestly furnished room, a couple of battered sofas that had fetched up here in order to live out the rest of their long lives in reasonable peace, a table in the middle with a few newspapers on it, a jumbled bookshelf. Sit down, please, the editor-in-chief asked if you wouldn't mind waiting for a moment, he's busy right now, That's fine, I'll wait, said the superintendent. This was his second chance. If he walked out of here and retraced the path that had led him into this trap, he would be safe, like someone who, having glimpsed his own soul in a rear-view mirror, had decided it was a fool, and that souls should not go around dragging people into the most terrible of disasters, but should, on the contrary, keep them safe from such things and behave themselves, because souls, if ever they do leave the body, almost

always get lost, they simply don't know where to go, and it is not just behind the wheel of a taxi that one learns such things. The superintendent did not leave, not now that the wine has been poured, etc. etc. The editor-in-chief came in, I do apologize for keeping you waiting for so long, but I was in the middle of doing something and I couldn't leave it half-finished, There's no need to apologize, it's very good of you to see me at all, So, mister providential, what can I do for you, although from what I've been told, this does seem to be more a matter for the administrative office. The superintendent raised his hand to his pocket and took out the first envelope, I'd be grateful if you would read the letter inside this envelope, Now, asked the editor-in-chief, Yes, if you wouldn't mind, but I must tell you first that my name is not Providential, So what is your name, You'll understand when you've read the letter. The editor-in-chief tore open the envelope, unfolded the piece of paper and started to read. He stopped after the first few lines and looked, perplexed, at the man before him, as if asking if it wouldn't be more prudent to stop right there. The superintendent made a gesture urging him to continue. The editor did not look up again until he had finished reading, on the contrary, it seemed as if, with each word, he were plunging deeper and deeper in, and as if he could not possibly return to the surface wearing his usual editor-in-chief's face once he had seen the fearful creatures inhabiting the lower depths. It was a deeply troubled man who finally looked up at the superintendent and said, Forgive the blunt question, but who are you, My name is there in the signature, Yes, I can see the name, but a name is just a word, it doesn't explain anything about who the person is, I'd prefer not to have to tell you, but I understand perfectly your need to know, In that case, tell me, Not unless you give me your word of honor that the letter will be published, In the absence of the director, I'm not authorized to make that commitment, They told me in reception that the director will only be in this afternoon, Yes, that's true, at around four o'clock, Right, I'll come back later then, but I just want you to know now that I have an identical letter with me and that if you're not interested in the matter, I'll deliver it to that other addressee, The letter is, I assume, addressed to another newspaper, Yes, but not to any of the papers that published the photograph, Of course, but you can't be sure that the other newspaper would be prepared to take the inevitable risks involved in publishing the facts you describe, No, I can't be sure, I'm betting on two horses and I risk losing on both, My feeling is that you risk much more if you win, Just as you do if you decide to publish. The superintendent got to his feet, I'll be here at a quarter past four, Here's your letter, since we haven't yet come to an agreement, I can't and shouldn't hold on to it, Thank you for not making me ask you for it. The editor-in-chief used the telephone in the room to call the secretary, Show this gentleman out, will you, he said, and make a note that he will be back at a quarter past four, and you'll be there to receive him and take him to the director's office, Yes, sir. The superintendent said, See you later, then, Yes, see you later, and they shook hands. The secretary opened the door for the superintendent, If you'd like to follow me, mister providential, she said, and once they were out in the corridor, If you don't mind my saying, this is the first time I've ever come across someone with that surname, it didn't even occur to me that it could exist, Well, now you know, It must be nice to be called Providential, Why, Well, because it's providential, That's the best

possible answer. They had reached reception, I'll be here at the time agreed, said the secretary, Thank you, Goodbye, mister providential, Goodbye.

The superintendent looked at his watch, it wasn't yet one o'clock, too early to have lunch, besides, he wasn't hungry, the buttered toast and coffee were still there in his stomach. He hailed a taxi and asked to be taken to the park where, on Monday, he had met the doctor's wife, there's no reason why one should always do the thing one first decided to do. He had not thought of going back to the park, but here he is. He will then continue on foot, like a police superintendent quietly carrying out his patrol, he will see how crowded the street is and may even exchange professional notes with the two guards. He walked through the garden and stopped for a moment to study the statue of the woman with the empty water jar, They left me here, she seemed to be saying, and now all I'm good for is staring into this grubby water, there was a time when the stone I'm made from was white, when a fountain flowed day and night from this jar, they never told me where all that water came from, I was just here to tip up the jar, but now not a drop falls from it, and no one has come to tell me why it stopped. The superintendent murmured, It's like life, my dear, we don't know why it starts or why it ends. He dipped the fingers of his right hand into the water and raised them to his lips. It did not occur to him that the gesture could have any meaning, however, anyone watching him from afar would have sworn that he had kissed that murky water, which was green with slime and came from a muddy pond, as impure as life itself. The clock had not advanced very much, he would have had time to sit down in the shade somewhere, but he did not. He repeated the route he had taken with the doctor's wife, he went into the street, where the scene had changed completely, now he could barely push his way through, there weren't just small knots of people, but a huge crowd that blocked the traffic, it was as if everyone from the neighboring area had left their houses to come and witness some promised apparition. The superintendent beckoned the two policemen over to the doorway of a building and asked them if anything had happened in his absence. They said that no one had left, that the windows had remained closed at all times, and they reported that two people unknown to them, a man and a woman, had gone up to the fourth floor to ask if the people in the apartment needed anything, but that the latter had replied in the negative and thanked them for their kindness. Is that all, asked the superintendent, As far as we know, replied one of the policeman, it's certainly going to be an easy report to write. He said this just in time, clipping the wings of the superintendent's imagination, which had unfurled and were already carrying him up the stairs, where he would ring the bell and announce, It's me, and then go in and tell them about the latest events, about the letters he had written, his conversation with the editor-in-chief, and then the doctor's wife would say Stay and have lunch with us, and he would, and the world would be at peace. Yes, at peace, and the policemen would write in their report, A superintendent who joined us went up to the fourth floor and only came down again an hour later, he did not say anything about what happened up there, but we both got the impression that he had had a good lunch. The superintendent went to have lunch somewhere else, but he did not eat much and showed no interest in the dish they

set before him, at three o'clock, he was sitting in the park again looking at the statue of the woman with her pitcher inclined like someone still expecting the miraculous restoration of the waters. At half past three, he got up from the bench where he had sat down and walked back to the newspaper offices. He had time, he didn't need to take a taxi in which, however reluctantly, he would have been unable to keep himself from looking in the rear-view mirror, he knew quite enough about his soul already and he might see something in the mirror that he didn't like. It was not quite a quarter past four when he arrived back at the newspaper offices. The secretary was already in reception, The director is expecting you, she said. She did not add the words mister providential, perhaps she had been told that it was not his real name and perhaps she felt offended by the trap into which she had, in all good faith, fallen. They walked down the same corridor, but this time they continued to the end, where they turned the corner, on the second door on the right there is a small notice which says Director. The secretary knocked discreetly, and someone inside answered, Come in. She went in first and held the door open for the superintendent. Thank you, we won't be needing you for the moment, said the editor-in-chief to the secretary, who left immediately. I'm most grateful to you for agreeing to talk to me, sir, began the superintendent, Let me be perfectly frank with you, I foresee enormous difficulties in our publishing the material that the editor-in-chief here has described to me, although I would, of course, be delighted to read the entire document, Here it is, sir, said the superintendent, handing him the envelope, Sit down, said the director, and just give me a couple of minutes, will you. The reading of the document did not make him bow his head as it had the editor-in-chief, but he was clearly a confused and worried man when he looked up, Who are you, he asked, unaware that the editor-in-chief had asked the same question, If your newspaper agrees to make public the contents of that document, then you will find out who I am, if you don't, then I will take back my letter and leave without another word, except to thank you for letting me take up so much of your time, The director knows that you have an identical letter which you intend to give to another newspaper, said the editor-in-chief, Exactly, said the superintendent, I have it here, and if we don't reach an agreement, I will deliver it today, because it's vital that this is published tomorrow, Why, Because tomorrow there may still be time to prevent an injustice being committed, You mean to the doctor's wife, Yes, sir, they are doing all they can to make her the scapegoat for the country's current political situation, But that's ridiculous, Don't tell me that, tell the government, tell the interior minister, tell your colleagues who write what they're told to. The director exchanged a look with the editor-in-chief and said, As you can imagine, it would be impossible for us to publish your statement as it stands, with all these details, Why, Don't forget, we are still living under a state of siege, the censors have their eyes trained on the press, especially on a newspaper like ours, Publishing this would get the newspaper shut down immediately, said the editor-in-chief, So is there nothing to be done, asked the superintendent, We can try, but we can't be sure it will succeed. How, said the superintendent. After another brief exchange of glances with the editor-in-chief, the director said, It's time you told us, once and for all, who you are, there's a name on the letter, it's true, but we have no way of knowing that it's not a false name, you could,

quite simply, be an agent provocateur sent here by the police to put us to the test and to compromise us, we're not saying that you are, of course, but I have to make it quite clear that we cannot take this conversation any further unless you identify yourself right now. The superintendent reached into a pocket and pulled out his wallet, Here you are, he said, and handed the director his police identification. The expression on the director's face changed at once from mistrust to stupefaction, What, you're a police superintendent, he said, A police superintendent, repeated the editor-in-chief dully when the director passed the document to him, Yes, came the calm response, and now I think we can continue the conversation, If you'll forgive my curiosity, said the director, what made you take a step like this, Personal reasons, Tell me one of those reasons, so that I can persuade myself that I'm not dreaming, When we are born, when we enter this world, it is as if we signed a pact for the rest of our life, but a day may come when we will ask ourselves Who signed this on my behalf, well, I asked myself that question and the answer is this bit of paper, You do know what might happen to you, don't you, Yes, I've had time enough to think about that. There was a silence, which the superintendent broke, You said you could try, We've thought of a little trick, said the director, and indicated to the editor-in-chief that he should continue, The idea, the editor said, would be to publish, albeit in very different terms and without the tasteless rhetoric, what was published elsewhere today, and then, in the final section, weave in some of the information you've given us today, it won't be easy, but it doesn't strike me as impossible, it's just a matter of skill and luck, We're relying on the boredom or even laziness of the civil servant in the censor's office, added the director, praying that he will think that since he knows this bit of news already, there's no point reading to the end, What's the probability that we'll succeed, asked the superintendent, To be perfectly frank, pretty low, admitted the editor-in-chief, we'll have to content ourselves with possibilities, And what if the ministry of the interior want to know where you got your information, To begin with we'll take refuge in insisting on the confidentiality of our sources, but that isn't going to be much use in a state of siege situation, And if they press you, if they threaten you, Then, much against our will, we will have no option but to reveal our source, we'll be punished, of course, but you will suffer the worst consequences, said the director, Fine, said the superintendent, now that we all know what to expect, let's do it, and if praying serves any purpose, I'll pray that the readers don't do as we're hoping the censor will do, that is, I'll pray that the readers do read the article through to the end, Amen, chorused the director and the editor-in-chief.

It was shortly after five o'clock when the superintendent left. He could have taken advantage of the taxi that someone else had just left at the door of the newspaper offices, but he preferred to walk. Oddly enough, he felt light and serene, as if someone had removed from some vital organ the foreign body that had been gradually gnawing away at him, a bone in the throat, a nail in the stomach, poison in the liver. Tomorrow all the cards in the deck would be on the table, the game of hide-and-seek would be over, and so he has not the slightest doubt that the minister, always assuming that the article does see the light of day, and, even if it doesn't, that news of it reaches his ears, will

know immediately at whom to point the accusing finger. Imagination seemed prepared to go further, it even took a first, troubling step, but the superintendent grabbed it by the throat, Today is today, madam, and tomorrow will come soon enough, he said. He had decided to go back to providential ltd, his legs felt suddenly heavy, his nerves as lax as if they were an elastic band that had been kept fully stretched for far too long, he experienced an urgent need to close his eyes and sleep. I'll hail the first taxi that appears, he thought. He still had to walk for quite a way, all the taxis that passed were occupied, one didn't even hear him call, and finally, when he could barely drag his feet along, a small lifeboat picked up the shipwrecked man just before he drowned. The lift hoisted him charitably up to the fourteenth floor, the door opened unresistingly, the sofa received him like a dear friend, and a few minutes later, the superintendent was lying, legs outstretched, fast asleep, or sleeping the sleep of the just, as people used to say in the days when they believed that the just existed. Snuggled up in the maternal lap of providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, whose peaceful atmosphere did full justice to the names and attributes conferred upon it, the superintendent slept for a good hour, at the end of which he awoke with renewed energy, or so at least it seemed to him. When he stretched, he felt the second envelope in his inside jacket pocket, the one he had not delivered, Perhaps I was wrong to bet everything on one horse, he thought, then quickly realized that he could not possibly have had the same conversation twice, that he could not have gone straight from one newspaper to the next and told the same story, and by repetition, worn away at its veracity, What's done is done, he thought, there's no point thinking about it any more. He went into his bedroom and saw the light on the answering machine flashing. Someone had phoned and left a message. He pressed the button, the telephonist's voice spoke first, then that of the police commissioner, Please note that tomorrow, at nine o'clock, I repeat, at nine o'clock, not at twenty-one hundred hours, your colleagues, the inspector and the sergeant, will be waiting for you at post six-north, I should tell you that, not only has your mission failed due to the technical and scientific incompetence of the person in charge, your presence in the capital has now also come to be considered inappropriate both by the interior minister and by myself, I need only add that the inspector and the sergeant are officially responsible for escorting you to my presence and have orders to arrest you if you resist. The superintendent stood staring at the answering machine, and then, slowly, like a person saying goodbye to someone setting off on a long trip, reached out his hand and pressed the erase button. Then he went into the kitchen, took the envelope out of his pocket, soaked it in alcohol and, folding it to form an inverted V in the sink, set fire to it. A gush of water carried the ashes down the drain. Having done that, he went back into the living-room, turned on all the lights, and devoted himself to a leisurely perusal of the newspapers, paying special attention to the paper to which or to whom, in some way, he had handed his fate. When it was time, he went and looked in the fridge to see if he could prepare something resembling supper from whatever was in there, but soon gave up, scarcity was not, in this case, a synonym for either freshness or quality. They should install a new fridge here, he thought, this one has given all it had to give. He went out, ate quickly in the first restaurant he came across and returned to providential ltd. He had to get up early the

following day.

THE SUPERINTENDENT WAS AWAKE WHEN THE TELEPHONE RANG. HE DID not get up to answer it, he was sure that it would be someone from the police commissioner's office reminding him of the order he had received to appear at nine o'clock, note, at nine o'clock, not at twenty-one hundred hours, at military post six-north. They probably won't phone again, and one can easily understand why, for in their professional lives and, who knows, possibly in their private lives too, policemen make great use of the mental process we call deduction, also known as logical inference. If he doesn't answer, they would say, it's because he's already on his way. How wrong they were. It's true that the superintendent has now got out of bed, it's true that he has entered the bathroom to perform the appropriate actions to relieve and cleanse his body, it is true that he has got dressed and is about to leave, but not in order to hail the first taxi that appears and say to the driver, who is looking at him expectantly in the rear-view mirror, Take me to pos: six-north, Post six-north, I'm sorry, but I've no idea where that is, it must be a new street, No, it's a military post, I can show you where it is if you have a map. No, this dialogue will never take place, not now or ever, the superintendent is going out to buy the newspapers, that was why he went to bed early yesterday, not in order to get enough rest and arrive promptly for the meeting at post six-north. The street lamps are still on, the man at the newspaper kiosk has just raised the shutters, he is starting to set out the week's magazines, and when he finishes this work, as if it were a sign, the street lamps go out and the distribution truck arrives. The superintendent approaches while the man is still sorting out the newspapers into the order with which we are already familiar, but, this time, there are almost as many copies of one of the less popular newspapers as there are of the papers with a larger circulation. The superintendent felt this was a good omen, but this pleasant feeling of hope was immediately succeeded by a violent shock, the headlines on the first newspapers in the row were sinister, troubling, and all in intense red ink, Murderess, This Woman Killed, Woman Suspect's Other Crime, A Murder Committed Four Years Ago. At the other end of the row, the newspaper whose offices the superintendent had visited yesterday asked, What Haven't We Been Told. The headline was ambiguous, it could mean this or that, or the opposite, but the superintendent preferred to see it as a small lantern placed there to guide his stumbling steps out of the valley of shadows. A copy of each, he said. The newsagent smiled, thinking that he seemed to have acquired a good customer for the future, and handed him the plastic bag containing the newspapers. The superintendent looked around for a taxi, he waited in vain for nearly five minutes, then decided to walk back to providential ltd, which is not, as we know, very far from here, but he is carrying a heavy load, a plastic bag bursting with words, it would be easier to carry the world on one's back. As luck would have it, though, he took a short-cut down a narrow street and came upon a modest, old-style café, the sort that opens early because the owner has nothing else to do and which the customers visit in order to make sure that everything is there in its usual place and where the taste of the breakfast muffin speaks of eternity. He sat down at a table, ordered a white coffee, asked if they served toast, with butter, of course, no margarine, please. The coffee, when it arrived, was merely passable, but the toast had come direct from the hands of an alchemist who had only failed to discover the philosopher's stone because he had never managed to get beyond the putrefaction stage.

The superintendent had opened the newspaper that most interested him today, he did so as soon as he sat down, and a quick glance was enough for him to see that the trick had worked, the censor had allowed himself to be taken in by the confirmation of what he already knew, and the thought had clearly never even crossed his mind that one must always take great care with what one thinks one knows, because behind it one finds concealed an endless chain of unknowns, the last of which will probably prove insoluble. Nevertheless, there was no point in harboring any great illusions, the newspaper would not be on sale at the kiosks all day, he could already imagine the enraged interior minister brandishing a copy and yelling, Get this garbage impounded at once and find out who leaked this information, the last part of the phrase had attached itself automatically, for the minister would know perfectly well that there was only one possible source for this act of treachery and betrayal. It was then that the superintendent decided that he would visit as many newspaper kiosks as his strength would allow in order to find out if the newspaper was selling in large or small numbers, to see the faces of the people who were buying it and to find out if they turned straight to the article or were distracted by frivolities. He glanced quickly at the four biggest-selling newspapers. Crudely elementary, but effective, the work of poisoning the public was continuing, two and two are four and always will be four, if that's what you did yesterday, then you must have done the same today, and anyone who has the temerity to doubt that one thing inevitably leads to another is an enemy of legality and order. Pleased, he paid the bill and left. He started with the kiosk where he himself had bought the newspapers and had the satisfaction of seeing that the relevant pile had gone down quite a bit. Interesting, isn't it, he said to the newsagent, it's selling really well, Apparently some radio station mentioned an article they published, One hand washes the other and both hands wash the face, said the superintendent mysteriously, Yes, you're right, replied the man, although he had no idea what the superintendent meant. So as not to waste time looking for other kiosks, the superintendent asked each newsagent where the next one was, and, perhaps because of his respectable appearance, they always gave him the information, but it was clear that every one of those newsagents would like to have asked him What have they got that I haven't. The hours passed, the inspector and the sergeant, over there at post six-north, had grown weary of waiting and had asked for instructions from the police commissioner's office, the commissioner had informed the minister, the minister had explained the situation to the prime minister, and the prime minister had replied, It's not my problem, it's yours, you sort it out. Then the expected happened, when he reached the tenth kiosk, the superintendent could not find the newspaper. He asked for it, pretending he was going to buy a copy, but the newsagent said, You're too late, they took them all away less than five minutes ago, They took them, why, They're collecting them from all the kiosks, Collecting them, That's another way of saying impounding them, But why, what was in the newspaper to make them do that, It was something about that woman and the conspiracy, you know, it's been in all the other papers, well, now it seems she killed a man, Couldn't you get me a copy, you'd be doing me a great favor, No, I haven't got one, and even if I had, I wouldn't sell it to you, Why not, How do I know you're not a police officer on the prowl to see if I take the bait, You're quite right, you can't be too careful,

said the superintendent and walked off. He didn't want to go back to providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, to listen to that morning's phone call and doubtless others demanding to know where he was, why he wasn't answering the phone, why he had disobeyed the order to be at post six-north at nine o'clock, but the fact is he has nowhere to go, by now, there must be a sea of people outside the house of the doctor's wife, all shouting, some in favor, some against, although they're probably all in favor, the others would be in the minority, they probably don't want to risk being insulted or worse. Nor can he go to the offices of the newspaper that published the article, if there aren't any plain-clothes policemen at the entrance, they'll be around somewhere, he can't even phone because all the lines will doubtless be tapped, and when he thought this, he understood, at last, that providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, would be under surveillance too, that all the hotels would have been forewarned, that there is not a single soul in the city who could take him in, even if he or she wanted to. He imagines that the newspaper will have received a visit from the police, he imagines that the director will have been forced, willingly or not, to reveal the identity of the person who provided him with the subversive information they had published, he might even have been reduced to showing them the letter bearing the name providential ltd, and signed in the fugitive superintendent's own hand. He felt tired, his feet dragged, his body was bathed in sweat, although it wasn't even particularly hot. He couldn't wander these streets all day just pointlessly killing time, then, suddenly, he felt a great desire to go to the park with the statue of the woman and the water jar, to sit down by the edge of the pool, to stroke the green water with the tips of his fingers and raise them to his mouth. But then what will I do, he asked. Nothing, except plunge back into the labyrinth of streets, to get disoriented and lost and then turn back, walking and walking, eating even if he isn't hungry, just to keep his body going, spending a couple of hours in a cinema, distracting himself by watching the adventures of an expedition to mars in the days when it was still inhabited by little green men, and coming out, blinking in the bright afternoon light, considering going to another cinema to waste another two hours traveling twenty thousand leagues under the sea in captain nemo's submarine, and then entirely giving up the idea because there is clearly something strange happening in the city, men and women are handing out small sheets of paper that people stop to read and then immediately stuff into a pocket, they've just handed one to the superintendent, it's a photocopy of the article from the impounded newspaper, the one bearing the headline What Haven't We Been Told, the one which, between the lines, tells the true story of the last five days, the superintendent can control himself no longer, and right there, like a child, he bursts into convulsive sobs, a woman of about his age comes and asks if he's all right, if he needs help, and he can only shake his head, no, thank you, he's fine, don't worry, and since chance does occasionally do the right thing, someone from one of the top storeys of this building hurls out a handful of papers, and another and another, and down below the people hold up their arms to catch them, and the papers float down, they glide like doves, and one of them rests for a moment on the superintendent's shoulder before sliding to the ground. So, in the end, nothing is lost, the city has taken the matter into its own hands and set hundreds of photocopiers working, and now there are

animated groups of boys and girls slipping the sheets of paper into mail boxes or delivering them to people's doors, someone asks if they're advertising something and they say, yes, sir, it's the very best of advertisements. These happy events gave the superintendent a new soul, and as if with a magic wave of the hand, white magic, not black, all his tiredness vanished, this is a different man walking these streets now, this is a different mind doing the thinking, seeing clearly what had been obscure before, amending conclusions that had seemed rock-solid and which now crumble between the fingers that touch them and decide, instead, that it is highly unlikely that providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance, since it is a secret base, would have been placed under surveillance, after all, posting police guards there could arouse suspicions as to its importance and significance, although that would not, on the other hand, be particularly grave, since they could simply take providential ltd somewhere else and the matter would be resolved. This new and negative conclusion cast stormy shadows over the superintendent's spirit, but his next conclusion, while not entirely reassuring, at least served to resolve the serious problem of accommodation or, in other words, not knowing where he would sleep that night. The matter can be explained in a few brief words. The fact that the ministry of the interior and the police commissioner's office viewed with more than justifiable displeasure the way that this public servant had unilaterally severed all contact with them did not mean that they had lost interest in where he was and where he could be found if needed urgently. If the superintendent had decided to lose himself in this city, if he had gone to ground in some gloomy backstreet, as outcasts and runaways usually do, they would have the devil's own job to find him, especially if he had established a network of contacts amongst other subversive elements, an operation which, on the other hand, given its complexity, is not something that can be set in motion in the space of six days or so, which is the time we have spent here. Therefore, far from guarding the two entrances to providential ltd, they would, on the contrary, leave the way free so that the homing instinct that is natural to all creatures would make the wolf return to its cave, the puffin to its hole in the cliffs. So the superintendent could still enjoy a familiar, welcoming bed, always assuming they don't come and wake him in the middle of the night, having opened the front door with delicate skeleton keys and forced him to surrender with the threat of three guns pointed straight at him. It is true, as we have said before, that there are times in life so grim that it's either raining on one side or blowing a gale on the other, and this is the situation in which the superintendent finds himself now, obliged to choose between spending an uncomfortable night under a tree in the park, like a tramp, within sight of the woman with the water jar, or comfortably ensconced between the stale blankets and crumpled sheets of providential ltd, insurance and reinsurance. This explanation did not prove to be quite as succinct as we promised, however, as we hope you will understand, we could not dismiss any of the possible variables without due consideration, detailing, impartially, the diverse and contradictory risk and safety factors, only to reach the conclusion we should have reached at the start, that there is no point running away to baghdad in order to avoid a meeting arranged for you in samarra. Having weighed and considered everything and decided to waste no further time on pondering the various weights down to the last milligram, the last possibility and the last

hypothesis, the superintendent took a taxi to providential ltd, this was at the end of the evening, when the shadows cool the path ahead and the sound of water falling into pools grows bolder and, to the surprise of those who pass, becomes suddenly perceptible. There is not a single piece of paper left in the streets. Despite all this, it is clear that the superintendent feels slightly apprehensive and he has reason enough to do so. His own reasoning and the knowledge he has acquired over time regarding the wiles of the police have led him to conclude that no danger awaits him at providential ltd or will assail him later tonight, but this does not mean that samarra is not where it has to be. This thought caused the superintendent to place his hand on his gun and to think, Just in case, I'll use the time it takes to go up in the lift to leave the gun cocked. The taxi stopped, We're here, said the driver, and it was at that moment that the superintendent saw, stuck to the windscreen, a photocopy of the article. Despite his fear, all the anxiety and trepidation had been worthwhile. The lobby was deserted, the porter absent, the scene was set for the perfect crime, a stab wound in the heart, the dull thud of the body as it drops to the tiled floor, the door closing, the car with false number plates that draws up and leaves, bearing away the murderer, nothing simpler than killing and being killed. The lift was there, he did not need to summon it. Now it is going up in order to leave its cargo on the fourteenth floor, inside it a sequence of unmistakable clicks says that a gun has been made ready to fire. There isn't a soul to be seen in the corridor, the offices are all closed at this hour. The key slipped easily into the lock, almost noiselessly the door allowed itself to be opened. The superintendent leaned against it to close it, turned on the light and will now go into every room, open all the wardrobes where a person might hide, peer under the beds, draw back the curtains. No one. He felt vaguely ridiculous, a swashbuckling hero wielding a gun with nothing to point at, but, as the saying goes, slow but sure ensures a ripe old age, as providential ltd must well know, since it deals not only with, insurance but with reinsurance. In the bedroom, the light on the answering machine is blinking, and the display indicates that there have been two calls, one might be from the inspector warning him to be careful, the other will be from one of albatross's under-secretaries, or they might both be from the police commissioner, in despair at the treachery of a man he had trusted and, at the same time, worried about his own future, even though he himself had not been responsible for appointing him. The superintendent took out the piece of paper with the names and addresses of the group, to which he had added the doctor's telephone number, which he dialed. No one answered. He dialed again. He dialed a third time, but this time, as if it were a signal, he let it ring three times and then hung up. He dialed a fourth time and, at last, someone answered, Yes, said the doctor's wife abruptly, It's me, the superintendent, Oh, hello, we've been expecting you to call, How have things been, Terrible, in a matter of twenty-four hours, they've managed to transform me into a kind of public enemy number one, Believe me, I'm really sorry for the part I've played in all this, You weren't the one who wrote what the newspapers published, No, I didn't go that far, Maybe the article that appeared in one of them today and the thousands of photocopies that were distributed will help to clear up this whole absurd situation, Maybe, You don't sound very hopeful, Oh, I have hopes, naturally, but it will take time, this business isn't going to resolve itself from one moment

to the next, We can't go on living like this, shut up in this apartment, it's like being in prison, All I can say is that I did everything I could, You won't be visiting us again, then, The mission they gave me is over, and I've received orders to go back, Well, I hope we see each other again some day, in happier times than these, if there ever are any, They seem to have got lost en route, Who, Those happier times, You're going to leave me feeling more discouraged than I was, Some people manage to stay standing even when they've been knocked down, and you're one of them, Well, right now, I'd be very grateful for some help getting back on my feet, And I'm only sorry I can't give you that help, Oh, I think you've helped much more than you let on, That's just your impression, you're talking to a policeman, remember, Oh, I haven't forgotten, but the truth is that I no longer think of you as one, Thank you for that, now all that remains is to say goodbye, until the next time, Until the next time, Take care, And you, Good night, Good night. The superintendent put the phone down. He had a long night ahead of him and no way of getting through it except by sleeping, unless insomnia got into bed with him. They would probably come for him tomorrow. He had not arrived at post six-north as he had been ordered to, and that is why they will come for him. Perhaps one of the messages he erased had said just that, perhaps they had called to warn him that the people sent to arrest him will be here at seven o'clock in the morning and that any attempt at resistance will only make matters worse. They will not, of course, need skeleton keys to get in, because they will bring a key of their own. The superintendent is fantasizing. He has an arsenal of weapons to hand, ready to be fired, he could fight to the last cartridge, or at least, let's say, to the first canister of tear-gas that they lob into the fortress. The superintendent is fantasizing. He sat down on the bed, then allowed himself to fall backward, he closed his eyes and pleaded for sleep to come soon, I know the night has barely begun, he was thinking, that there is still light in the sky, but I want to sleep the way a stone seems to sleep, without the traps set by dreams, but to be enclosed in a block of black stone, at least, please, at the very least, until morning, when they come to wake me at seven o'clock. Hearing his desolate cry, sleep came running and stayed there for a few moments, then withdrew while he undressed and got into bed, only to return at once, with hardly a second's delay, to remain by his side all night, chasing any dreams far away into the land of ghosts, the place where, mingling fire and water, they are born and multiply.

It was nine o'clock when the superintendent woke up. He wasn't crying, a sign that the invaders had not used, tear-gas, he did not have handcuffs round his wrists or guns leveled at his head, how often fears come to sour our life and prove, in the end, to have no foundation, no reason to exist. He got up, shaved, washed and dressed as usual, then went out intending to go to the café where he had eaten breakfast the previous day. On the way, he bought the newspapers, I thought you weren't coming today, said the man at the kiosk with all the familiarity of an old acquaintance, There's one missing, commented the superintendent, It didn't appear today, and the distributor doesn't know when it will be published again, possibly next week, apparently they've had a massive fine slapped on them, But why, Because of that article, the one they made all those photocopies of, Oh, I

see, Here's your bag, there are only five papers today, so you'll have less to read. The superintendent thanked him and went in search of the café. He could no longer remember where the street was and his appetite was growing with each step he took, the thought of toast made his mouth water, we must forgive this man for what may appear, at first sight, to be deplorable gluttony, inappropriate in a man of his age and standing, but we must remember that yesterday he went to bed on an empty stomach. He finally found the street and the café, now he is sitting at the table, and while he waits, he glances through the papers, here are the headlines, in black and red, so that we can get a rough idea of their respective contents, Another Subversive Act By The Enemies Of Our Country, Who Set the Photocopiers Working, The Dangers Of Disinformation, Who Paid For Those Photocopies. The superintendent ate slowly, savoring every mouthful down to the last crumb, even the coffee tastes better than yesterday, and when he had finished his meal, his body now refreshed, his spirit which, ever since yesterday, had felt itself under an obligation to the park and the pond, to the green water and the woman with the water jar, reminded him, You so wanted to go there, but you didn't, Well, I'll go now, replied the superintendent. He paid, put all the papers back in the bag and set off. He could have caught a taxi, but he preferred to go on foot. He had nothing else to do and it was a way of passing the time. When he reached the park, he went and sat on the bench where he had talked to the doctor's wife and become properly acquainted with the dog of tears. From there he could see the pond and the woman with the water jar poised for pouring. Underneath the tree, it was still slightly cool. He drew his raincoat over his knees and, with a sigh of satisfaction, made himself comfortable. The man wearing the blue tie with white spots came up behind him and shot him in the head.

Two hours later, the interior minister was giving a press conference. He was wearing a white shirt and a black tie and, on his face, an expression of deep regret, of profound grief. The table was crowded with microphones and the only other ornament was a glass of water. As always, the national flag hung meditatively behind him. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, said the minister, I have summoned you here today to give you the tragic news of the death of the superintendent who had been charged by me with investigating the conspiratorial web whose leader, as you know, has now been revealed. Unfortunately, his was not a natural death, but the result of a deliberate, premeditated murder, the work, no doubt, of a professional criminal of the worst kind if we bear in mind that a single bullet was enough to carry out the killing. Needless to say, all the indications are that this was a new criminal action by the subversive elements in our unhappy former capital, who continue to undermine the stability of the democratic system and its correct functioning, and to work cold-bloodedly against the political, social and moral integrity of our nation. I need hardly point out that the example of supreme dignity offered to us today by the murdered superintendent will, for ever after, be the object not just of our utter respect, but also of our most profound veneration, for his sacrifice has, from this day forth, and a most unhappy day it is, bestowed on him a place of honor in the pantheon of our nation's martyrs who, up there in the beyond, have their eyes always upon us. The national government, which I am here to represent, shares the mourning and grief of all

those who knew the extraordinary human being we have just lost, and, at the same time, assures all the citizens of this land that it will not be discouraged in this war we are waging against the evil of the conspirators and the irresponsibility of those who support them. Just two further points, the first to tell you that the inspector and the sergeant who were assisting the murdered superintendent in the investigation had been withdrawn from the mission at the latter's request so as to protect their lives, the second to inform you that, as regards this fine man, this exemplary servant of the nation, who, alas, we have just lost, the government will examine by what legal means he may, exceptionally and posthumously, and as quickly as possible, be awarded the highest honor with which the nation distinguishes those of its sons and daughters who bring honor upon it. Today, ladies and gentlemen, is a sad day for decent people, but duty requires us all to cry *sursum corda*, lift up your hearts. A journalist raised his hand to ask a question, but the interior minister was already leaving, on the table only the untouched glass of water remained, the microphones recorded the respectful silence due to the dead, and, behind them, the flag tirelessly continued its meditation. The following two hours were spent by the minister and his closest advisors in drawing up an immediate plan of action that would consist, basically, in arranging a surreptitious return to the capital city of a large number of policemen, who, for now, would work in plain clothes, with no outward sign that might indicate to which organization they belonged. This was an implicit admission that they had committed a very grave error indeed in leaving the former capital unsupervised. But it's not too late to correct that mistake, said the minister. At that precise moment, an under-secretary came in to tell the interior minister that the prime minister wished to speak to him immediately in his office. The minister made a muttered comment that the prime minister could have chosen a better time, but had no option but to obey the summons. He left his advisors to put the finishing logistical touches to the plan and set off. The car, with guards to front and rear, bore him to the building in which the cabinet offices had been installed, this took him ten minutes, and five minutes later, he was entering the prime minister's office, Good afternoon, prime minister, Good afternoon, do sit down, You phoned me just as I was working on a plan to rectify the decision we took to withdraw the police from the capital, I can probably bring it to you tomorrow, Don't bother, Why not, prime minister, Because you won't have time, The plan is almost finished, it just needs a few minor touches, You do not, I'm afraid, understand, when I say that you won't have time, I mean that by tomorrow you will no longer be interior minister, What, the question emerged just like that, explosive and somewhat disrespectful, You heard what I said, there's no need for me to repeat it, But, prime minister, Let's save ourselves a pointless conversation, your duties cease as of this moment, Such harshness is most unjust, prime minister, and is, if I may say so, a strange and arbitrary way of rewarding my services to the nation, there must be a reason, which I hope you will give me, for this brutal dismissal, yes, brutal, I won't withdraw the word, Your services during the crisis have been one long string of errors which I won't bother to enumerate, I can understand that necessity knows no law, that the ends justify the means, but always on condition that the ends are achieved and the law of necessity is obeyed, but you obeyed and achieved neither, and now there's the death of the

superintendent, He was murdered by our enemies, Please, don't come to me with any operatic arias, I've been in this game too long to believe in fairy tales, the enemies of whom you speak had, on the contrary, every reason to make him their hero and no reason at all to kill him, There was no other way out, prime minister, the man had become a subversive influence, We would have settled our accounts with him later, not now, his death was an unforgivable blunder, and now, as if that weren't enough, we've got demonstrations in the streets, Insignificant, prime minister, my information, Your information is worthless, half the population is out on the street already and the other half will soon be joining them, The future, prime minister, will, I am sure, judge that I was right, And a fat lot of good it will do you if the present judges you to be wrong, and now, that's an end to it, please leave, this conversation is over, But I need to hand on any matters pending to my successor, Don't worry, I'll send someone over to deal with all that, But what about my successor, I'm your successor, after all, why shouldn't the prime-minister-cum-justice-minister also be the interior minister, that way we can keep it all in the family, so don't you worry, I'll take care of everything.

AT TEN O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING ON THIS SAME DAY, TWO PLAIN-CLOTHES policemen went up to the fourth floor and rang the bell. The doctor's wife answered and asked, Who are you, what do you want, We're policemen and we have orders to take your husband away to be questioned, and there's no point telling us he's gone out, the building is being watched, which is why we know he's here, You have absolutely no reason to question him, up until now, I've been the one accused of all the crimes, That's not our business, we've received strict orders to take the doctor and not the doctor's wife, so, unless you want us to force our way in, go and call him, and keep that dog under control too, we wouldn't want anything to happen to it. The woman closed the door. She opened it again shortly afterward, and this time her husband was with her, What do you want, To take you in for questioning, we've told your wife already, we're not going to stand here all day repeating it, Do you have any credentials with you, a warrant, We don't need a warrant, the city's under a state of siege, and as for credentials, here's our identification, will that do, Can I change my clothes first, One of us will go with you, Are you afraid I'll run away or commit suicide, We're just following orders, that's all. One of the policemen went inside, they did not take long. Wherever my husband's going, I'm going with him, said the woman, Like I said, you're not going anywhere, you're staying here, don't make me have to get nasty with you, You couldn't be any nastier than you already are, Oh, believe me, I could, you can't imagine how nasty I can be, and then to the doctor, You've got to be handcuffed, hold out your hands, Please, don't put those things on me, please, I give you my word of honor that I won't try to escape, Come on, put your hands out, and forget about words of honor, right, that's better, you're safer like that. The woman embraced her husband and kissed him, weeping, They won't let me come with you, Don't worry, I'll be back home tonight, you'll see, Come home soon, I will, my love, I will. The lift started to go down.

At eleven o'clock, the man in the blue tie with white spots went up onto the flat roof of the building almost opposite the back of the building where the doctor's wife and her husband live. He is carrying a box of varnished wood, rectangular in shape. Inside is a dismantled weapon, an automatic rifle with a telescopic sight, which he will not use because at such a short distance no good marksman could possibly miss his target. He will not use the silencer either, but, in this case, it is for reasons of an ethical order, the man in the blue tie with white spots feels that the use of such apparatus shows a gross disrespect for the victim. The weapon has been assembled now and loaded, with each piece in its place, a perfect instrument for the job it is intended to do. The man in the blue tie with white spots chooses the place from which he will fire and prepares himself to wait. He is a patient man, he has been doing this for years and always does his work well. Sooner or later, the doctor's wife will come out onto the balcony. Meanwhile, just in case the waiting should go on for too long, the man in the blue tie with white spots has brought with him another weapon, an ordinary catapult, the sort that is used for hurling stones, especially for the purpose of breaking windows. No one hears the glass breaking and no one comes running to see who the childish vandal was. An hour has passed, and the doctor's wife has still not appeared, she has been crying, poor thing, but now she will go and get some fresh air, she doesn't open one of the windows that give onto the street

because there are always people watching, she prefers the back of the house, so much quieter since the advent of television. The woman goes over to the iron balustrade, places her hands on it and feels the coolness of the metal. We cannot ask her if she heard the two successive shots, she is lying dead on the ground and her blood is sliding and dripping onto the balcony below. The dog comes running out, he sniffs and licks his mistress's face, then he stretches out his neck and unleashes a terrifying howl which another shot silences. Then a blind man asked, Did you hear something, Three shots, replied another blind man, But there was a dog howling too, It's stopped now, that must have been the third shot, Good, I hate to hear dogs howl.

DEATH WITH INTERRUPTIONS

Translated from the Portuguese
by Margaret Jull Costa

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A C E G I K J H F D B

This book is printed on 100 percent postconsumer-waste recycled stock.

For Pilar, my home

We will know less and less what it means to be human.

—Book of Predictions

If, for example, you were to think more deeply about death, then it
would be truly strange if, in so doing, you did not encounter new
images, new linguistic fields.

—WITTGENSTEIN

THE FOLLOWING DAY, NO ONE DIED. THIS FACT, BEING absolutely contrary to life's rules, provoked enormous and, in the circumstances, perfectly justifiable anxiety in people's minds, for we have only to consider that in the entire forty volumes of universal history there is no mention, not even one exemplary case, of such a phenomenon ever having occurred, for a whole day to go by, with its generous allowance of twenty-four hours, diurnal and nocturnal, matutinal and vespertine, without one death from an illness, a fatal fall, or a successful suicide, not one, not a single one. Not even from a car accident, so frequent on festive occasions, when blithe irresponsibility and an excess of alcohol jockey for position on the roads to decide who will reach death first. New year's eve had failed to leave behind it the usual calamitous trail of fatalities, as if old atropos with her great bared teeth had decided to put aside her shears for a day. There was, however, no shortage of blood. Bewildered, confused, distraught, struggling to control their feelings of nausea, the firemen extracted from the mangled remains wretched human bodies that, according to the mathematical logic of the collisions, should have been well and truly dead, but which, despite the seriousness of the injuries and lesions suffered, remained alive and were carried off to hospital, accompanied by the shrill sound of the ambulance sirens. None of these people would die along the way and all would disprove the most pessimistic of medical prognoses. There's nothing to be done for the poor man, it's not even worth operating, a complete waste of time, said the surgeon to the nurse as she was adjusting his mask. And the day before, there would probably have been no salvation for this particular patient, but one thing was clear, today, the victim refused to die. And what was happening here was happening throughout the country. Up until the very dot of midnight on the last day of the year there were people who died in full compliance with the rules, both those relating to the nub of the matter, i.e. the termination of life, and those relating to the many ways in which the aforementioned nub, with varying degrees of pomp and solemnity, chooses to mark the fatal moment. One particularly interesting case, interesting because of the person involved, was that of the very ancient and venerable queen mother. At one minute to midnight on the thirty-first of december, no one would have been so ingenuous as to bet a spent match on the life of the royal lady. With all hope lost, with the doctors helpless in the face of the implacable medical evidence, the royal family, hierarchically arranged around the bed, waited with resignation for the matriarch's last breath, perhaps a few words, a final edifying comment regarding the moral education of the beloved princes, her grandsons, perhaps a beautiful, well-turned phrase addressed to the ever ungrateful memory of future subjects. And then, as if time had stopped, nothing happened. The queen mother neither improved nor deteriorated, she remained there in suspension, her frail body hovering on the very edge of life, threatening at any moment to tip over onto the other side, yet bound to this side by a tenuous thread to which, out of some strange caprice, death, because it could only have been death, continued to keep hold. We had passed over to the next day, and on that day, as we said at the beginning of this tale, no one would die.

It was already late afternoon when the rumor began to spread that, since the beginning of the new year, or more precisely since zero hour on this first day of January,

there was no record in the whole country of anyone dying. You might think, for example, that the rumor had its origins in the queen mother's surprising resistance to giving up the little life that was left to her, but the truth is that the usual medical bulletin issued to the media by the palace's press office not only stated that the general state of the royal patient had shown visible signs of improvement during the night, it even suggested, indeed implied, choosing its words very carefully, that there was a chance that her royal highness might be restored to full health. In its initial form, the rumor might also have sprung, naturally enough, from an undertaker's, No one seems to want to die on this first day of the new year, or from a hospital, That fellow in bed twenty-seven can't seem to make up his mind one way or the other, or from a spokesman for the traffic police, It's really odd, you know, despite all the accidents on the road, there hasn't been a single death we can hold up as a warning to others. The rumor, whose original source was never discovered, although, of course, this hardly mattered in the light of what came afterward, soon reached the newspapers, the radio and the television, and immediately caused the ears of directors, assistant directors and editors-in-chief to prick up, for these are people not only primed to sniff out from afar the major events of world history, they're also trained in the ability, when it suits, to make those events seem even more major than they really are. In a matter of minutes, dozens of investigative journalists were out on the street asking questions of any joe schmo who happened by, while the ranks of telephones in the throbbing editorial offices stirred and trembled in an identical investigatory frenzy. Calls were made to hospitals, to the red cross, to the morgue, to funeral directors, to the police, yes, all of them, with the understandable exception of the secret branch, but the replies given could be summed up in the same laconic words, There have been no deaths. A young female television reporter had more luck when she interviewed a passer-by, who kept glancing alternately at her and at the camera, and who described his personal experience, which was identical to what had happened to the queen mother, The church clock was striking midnight, he said, when, just before the last stroke, my grandfather, who seemed on the very point of expiring, suddenly opened his eyes as if he'd changed his mind about the step he was about to take, and didn't die. The reporter was so excited by what she'd heard that, ignoring all his pleas and protests, No, senhora, I can't, I have to go to the chemist's, my grandfather's waiting for his prescription, she bundled him into the news car, Come with me, your grandfather doesn't need prescriptions any more, she yelled, and ordered the driver to go straight to the television studio, where, at that precise moment, everything was being set up for a debate between three experts on paranormal phenomena, namely, two highly regarded wizards and a celebrated clairvoyant, hastily summoned to analyze and give their views on what certain wags, the kind who have no respect for anything, were already beginning to refer to as a death strike. The bold reporter was, however, laboring under the gravest of illusions, for she had interpreted the words of her interviewee as meaning that the dying man had, quite literally, changed his mind about the step he was about to take, namely, to die, cash in his chips, kick the bucket, and so had decided to turn back. Now, the words that the happy grandson had pronounced, As if he'd changed his mind, were radically different from a blunt, He changed his mind. An elementary knowledge of syntax

and a greater familiarity with the elastic subtleties of tenses would have avoided this blunder, as well as the subsequent dressing-down that the poor girl, scarlet with shame and humiliation, received from her immediate superior. Little could they, either he or she, have imagined that these words, repeated live by the interviewee and heard again in recorded form on that evening's news bulletin, would be interpreted in exactly the same mistaken way by millions of people, and that an immediate and disconcerting consequence of this would be the creation of a group firmly convinced that with the simple application of will-power they, too, could conquer death and that the undeserved disappearance of so many people in the past could be put down solely to a deplorable weakness of will on the part of previous generations. But things would not stop there. People, without having to make any perceptible effort, continued not to die, and so another popular mass movement, endowed with a more ambitious vision of the future, would declare that humanity's greatest dream since the beginning of time, the happy enjoyment of eternal life here on earth, had become a gift within the grasp of everyone, like the sun that rises every day and the air that we breathe. Although the two movements were both competing, so to speak, for the same electorate, there was one point on which they were able to agree, and that was on the nomination as honorary president, given his eminent status as pioneer, of the courageous veteran who, at the final moment, had defied and defeated death. As far as anyone knows, no particular importance would be given to the fact that grandpa remained in a state of profound coma, which everything seems to indicate is irreversible.

Although the word crisis is clearly not the most appropriate one to describe these extraordinary events, for it would be absurd, incongruous and an affront to the most basic logic to speak of a crisis in an existential situation that has been privileged by the absence of death, one can understand why some citizens, zealous of their right to know the truth, are asking themselves, and each other, what the hell is going on with the government, who have so far given not the slightest sign of life. When asked in passing during a brief interval between two meetings, the minister for health had, it is true, explained to journalists that, bearing in mind that they lacked sufficient information to form a judgment, any official statement would, inevitably, be premature. We are collating data being sent to us from all over the country, he added, and it's true to say that no deaths have been reported, but, as you can imagine, we have been as surprised as everyone else by this turn of events and are not as yet ready to formulate an initial theory about the origins of the phenomenon or about its immediate and future implications. He could have left the matter there, which, considering the difficulties of the situation, would have been a cause for gratitude, but the well-known impulse to urge people to keep calm about everything and nothing and to remain quietly in the fold whatever happens, this tropism which, among politicians, especially if they're in government, has become second nature, not to say automatic or mechanical, led him to conclude the conversation in the worst possible way. As minister responsible for health, I can assure everyone listening that there is absolutely no reason for alarm, If I understand you correctly, remarked the journalist in a tone that tried hard not to appear too ironic,

the fact that no one is dying is, in your view, not in the least alarming, Exactly, well, those may not have been my precise words, but, yes, that, essentially, is what I said, May I remind you, minister, that people were dying even yesterday and it would never have occurred to anyone to think that alarming, Of course not, it's normal to die, and dying only becomes alarming when deaths multiply, during a war or an epidemic, for example, When things depart from the norm, You could put it like that, yes, But in the current situation, when, apparently, no one is prepared to die, you call on us not to be alarmed, would you not agree with me, minister, that such an appeal is, at the very least, somewhat paradoxical, It was mere force of habit, and I recognize that I shouldn't have applied the word alarm to the current situation, So what word would you use, minister, I only ask because, as the conscientious journalist I hope I am, I always try, where possible, to use the exact term. Slightly irritated by the journalist's insistence, the minister replied abruptly, I would use not one word, but six, And what would those be, minister, Let us not foster false hopes. This would doubtless have provided a good, honest headline for the newspaper the following day, but the editor-in-chief, having consulted his managing editor, thought it inadvisable, from the business point of view as well, to throw this bucket of icy water over the prevailing mood of enthusiasm, Let's go for the usual headline, New Year, New Life, he said.

In the official communiqué, broadcast late that night, the prime minister confirmed that no deaths had been recorded anywhere in the country since the beginning of the new year, he called for moderation and a sense of responsibility in any evaluations and interpretations of this strange fact, he reminded people that one could not exclude the hypothesis that this was merely a fluke, a freak cosmic change that could not possibly last, an exceptional conjunction of coincidences impinging on the space-time equation, but that, just in case, the government had already begun exploratory talks with the relevant international organizations to enable the government, when necessary, to take efficient, coordinated action. Having uttered this pseudoscientific flim-flam, whose very incomprehensibility was intended to calm the commotion gripping the nation, the prime minister ended by stating that the government was prepared for all humanly imaginable eventualities, and determined to face with courage and with the vital support of the population the complex social, economic, political and moral problems that the definitive extinction of death would inevitably provoke, if, as everything seemed to indicate, this situation was confirmed. We will accept the challenge of the body's immortality, he exclaimed in exalted tones, if that is the will of god, to whom we will always offer our grateful prayers for having chosen the good people of this country as his instrument. Which means, thought the prime minister when he finished reading the statement, that the noose is well and truly round our necks. Little did he imagine how tightly that noose would be drawn. Not half an hour had passed when, sitting now in the official car taking him home, he received a call from the cardinal, Good evening, prime minister, Good evening, your eminence, Prime minister, I'm phoning to tell you that I feel profoundly shocked, Oh, so do I, your eminence, it's an extremely grave situation, the gravest situation the country has ever had to confront, That's not what I mean, What do you

mean, your eminence, It is utterly deplorable that when you wrote the statement I have just listened to, you failed to remember what constitutes the foundation, the main beam, the cornerstone, the keystone of our holy religion, Forgive me, your eminence, but I can't quite see what you're driving at, Without death, prime minister, without death there is no resurrection, and without resurrection there is no church, Hell's bells, Sorry, I didn't quite hear what you said, could you say that again, please, Me, no, I said nothing, your eminence, it was probably some interference on the line caused by atmospheric electricity, by static, or even a problem with reception, the satellite does sometimes cut out, but you were saying, your eminence, Yes, I was saying that any catholic, and you are no exception, must know that without resurrection there is no church, more than that, how could it even occur to you that god would ever will his own demise, such an idea is pure sacrilege, possibly the very worst of blasphemies, Your eminence, I didn't say that god had willed his own demise, Not in those exact words, no, but you admitted the possibility that the immortality of the body might be the will of god, and one doesn't need a doctorate in transcendental logic to realize that it comes down to the same thing, Your eminence, believe me, I only said it for effect, to make an impression, it was just a way of rounding off the speech, that's all, you know how important these things are in politics, Such things are just as important in the church, prime minister, but we think hard before we open our mouths, we don't just talk for talking's sake, we calculate the long-term effects, indeed, our specialty, if you'd like me to give you a useful image, is ballistics, Well, I'm very sorry, your eminence, If I was in your shoes, I'd be sorry too. As if estimating how long the grenade would take to fall, the cardinal paused, then, in a gentler, friendlier tone, went on, May I ask if you showed the statement to his majesty before reading it out for the media, Naturally, your eminence, dealing, as the statement did, with such a very ticklish subject, And what did the king say, assuming, of course, that it's not a state secret, He thought it was fine, Did he make any comment after he'd read it, Excellent, What do you mean excellent, That's what his majesty said, excellent, Do you mean that he, too, blasphemed, Your eminence, it is not up to me to make such judgments, living with my own mistakes is quite hard enough, Well, I will have to speak to the king and remind him that in a confusing and delicate situation like this, only faithful, unswerving observance of the proven doctrine of our holy mother church can save the country from the dreadful chaos about to overwhelm us, That is up to you, your eminence, that is your role, Yes, I will ask his majesty which he prefers, to see the queen mother forever dying, prostrate on a bed from which she will never again rise, with her earthly body shamefully clinging to her soul, or to see her, by dying, triumph over death, in the eternal, splendid glory of the heavens, Surely no one would hesitate over which answer to give, Probably not, but, contrary to what you may think, prime minister, I care less about the answers than I do about the questions, notice that our questions have both an obvious objective and a hidden intention, and when we ask them, it is not only so that the person being questioned gives the answers which, at that moment, we need him to hear himself saying, it is also in order to prepare the way for future answers, A bit like politics, your eminence, Exactly, except that unlikely though it may seem, the advantage the church has is that by managing what is on high, it governs what is down below. There

was another pause, which was interrupted by the prime minister, I'm nearly home, your eminence, but if I may, there is one question I would like to ask you, Ask away, What will the church do if no one ever dies again, Never is too long a time, even when one is dealing with death, prime minister, You have not, I feel, answered my question, your eminence, Let me turn the question back on you, what will the state do if no one ever dies again, The state will try to survive, although I very much doubt it will, but the church, The church, prime minister, has grown so accustomed to eternal answers that I can't imagine it giving any other kind, Even if reality contradicts them, We've done nothing but contradict reality from the outset, and yet we're still here, What will the pope say, If I were pope, and god forgive me the ridiculous vanity of imagining such a thing, I would immediately issue a new thesis, that of death postponed, With no further explanations, The church has never been asked to explain anything, our specialty, along with ballistics, has always been the neutralization of the overly curious mind through faith, Goodnight, your eminence, see you tomorrow, God willing, prime minister, god willing, Given the way things are at the moment, it doesn't look like he has much choice, Don't forget, prime minister, that beyond the frontiers of our country, people continue to die as normal, which is a good sign, That depends on your point of view, your eminence, perhaps they're viewing us as a kind of oasis, a garden, a new paradise, Or a new hell, if they've got any sense, Goodnight, your eminence, I wish you a peaceful, restoring night's sleep, Goodnight, prime minister, and if death does decide to return tonight, I hope she doesn't think to visit you, If justice is anything more than an empty word, the queen mother should go before I do, Well, I promise I won't denounce you to the king tomorrow, That's very good of you, your eminence, Goodnight, Goodnight.

It was three o'clock in the morning when the cardinal had to be rushed into hospital with an attack of acute appendicitis which required immediate surgery. Before he was sucked down the tunnel of anesthesia, in the fleeting moment that precedes a total loss of consciousness, he thought what so many others have thought, that he might die during the operation, then he remembered that this was no longer a possibility, and in one final flash of lucidity, he thought, too, that if, despite everything, he did die, that would mean, paradoxically, that he had vanquished death. Filled by an irresistible desire for sacrifice, he was about to beg god to kill him, but did not have time to formulate the words. Anesthesia saved him from the supreme sacrilege of wanting to transfer the powers of death to a god more generally known as a giver of life.

ALTHOUGH IT HAD IMMEDIATELY BEEN RIDICULED BY RIVAL newspapers, which had managed to draw on the inspiration of their principal writers for the most diverse and meaty of headlines, some dramatic, some lyrical and others almost philosophical or mystical, if not touchingly ingenuous, as was the case with the popular newspaper that contented itself with *And What Will Become Of Us Now*, ending the phrase with the graphical flourish of an enormous question mark, the aforementioned headline *New Year, New Life*, for all its grating banality, had struck a real chord with some people who, for reasons either of nature or nurture, preferred the solidity of a more or less pragmatic optimism, even if they had reasons to suspect that it might be merely a vain illusion. Having lived, until those days of confusion, in what they had imagined to be the best of all possible and probable worlds, they were discovering, with delight, that the best, the absolute best, was happening right now, right there, at the door of their house, a unique and marvelous life without the daily fear of *parca's* creaking scissors, immortality in the land that gave us our being, safe from any metaphysical awkwardnesses and free to everyone, with no sealed orders to open at the hour of our death, announcing at that crossroads where dear companions in this vale of tears known as earth were forced to part and set off for their different destinations in the next world, you to paradise, you to purgatory, you down to hell. Because of this, the more reticent or more thoughtful newspapers, along with like-minded radio and television stations, had no option but to join the high tide of collective joy that was sweeping the country from north to south and from east to west, refreshing fearful minds and driving far from view the long shadow of *thanatos*. With the passing days, and when they saw that still no one died, pessimists and skeptics, only a few at a time at first, then *en masse*, threw in their lot with the *mare magnum* of citizens who took every opportunity to go out into the street and proclaim loudly that now life truly is beautiful.

One day, a lady, recently widowed, finding no other way of showing the new joy flooding her being, although not without a slight pang of grief to think that, if she did not die, she would never again see her much-mourned husband, had the idea of hanging the national flag from the flower-bedecked balcony of her dining room. It was, as they say, no sooner said than done. In less than forty-eight hours the hanging out of flags had spread throughout the country, the colors and symbols of the flag took over the landscape, although more obviously so in the cities, of course, there being more balconies and windows in the city than in the country. Such patriotic fervor was impossible to resist, especially when certain worrying, not to say threatening statements, where they came from no one knew, began to be distributed, saying such things as, *Anyone who doesn't hang our nation's immortal flag from the window of their house doesn't deserve to live, Anyone not displaying the national flag has sold out to death, Join us, be a patriot, buy a flag, Buy another one, Buy another, Down with the enemies of life, it's lucky for them that there's no more death.* The streets were a veritable festival of fluttering insignia, flapping in the wind if it was blowing, and if it wasn't, then a carefully positioned electric fan did the job, and if the fan wasn't powerful enough to make the standard flap in virile fashion, making those whip-crack noises that so exalt the martially minded, it would at least

ensure that the patriotic colors undulated honorably. A small number of people murmured privately that it was completely over-the-top, nonsense, and that sooner or later there would be no alternative but to remove all those flags and pennants, and the sooner the better, because just as too much sugar spoils the palate and harms the digestive process, so our normal and proper respect for patriotic emblems will become a mockery if we allow it to be perverted into this serial affront to modesty, on a par with those unlamented flashers in raincoats. Besides, they said, if the flags are there to celebrate the fact that death no longer kills, then we should do one of two things, either take them down before we get so fed up with them that we start to loathe our own national symbols, or else spend the rest of our lives, that is, eternity, yes, eternity, having to change them every time they start to rot in the rain or get torn to shreds by the wind or faded by the sun. There were very few people who had the courage to put their finger on the problem publicly, and one poor man had to pay for his unpatriotic outburst with a beating which, had death not ceased her operations in this country at the beginning of the year, would have put an end to his miserable life right there and then.

Nothing is ever perfect, however, for alongside those who laugh, there will always be others who weep, and sometimes, as in the present case, for the self-same reasons. Various important professions, seriously concerned about the situation, had already started to inform those in power of their discontent. As one would expect, the first formal complaints came from the undertaking business. Rudely deprived of their raw material, the owners began by making the classic gesture of putting their hands to their heads and wailing in mournful chorus, Now what's going to become of us, but then, faced by the prospect of a catastrophic collapse from which no one in the funeral trade would escape, they called a general meeting, at the end of which, after heated discussions, all of them unproductive because all of them, without exception, ran up against the indestructible wall of death's refusal to collaborate, the same death to which they had become accustomed, from parents down to children, as something which was their natural due, they finally approved a document to be submitted to the government for their consideration, which document adopted the only constructive proposal, well, constructive, but also hilarious, that had been presented at the debate, They'll laugh at us, warned the chairman, but I recognize that we have no other way out, it's either this or the ruin of the undertaking business. The document stated that, at an extraordinary general meeting called to examine the grave crisis they were going through because of the lack of deaths in the country, the funeral directors' representatives, after an intense and open debate, during which a respect for the supreme interests of the nation had always been paramount, had reached the conclusion that it was still possible to avoid the disastrous consequences of what would doubtless go down in history as the worst collective calamity to befall us since the founding of the nation, namely, that the government should make obligatory the burial or cremation of all domestic animals that die a natural or accidental death, and that such burials or cremations, regulated and approved, should be carried out by the funerary industry, bearing in mind our admirable work in the past as the public service which, in the deepest sense of the term, we have always been, generation after

generation. The document went on, We would draw the government's attention to the fact that this vital change in the industry cannot be made without considerable financial investment, for it is not the same thing to bury a human being and to carry to its final resting place a cat or a canary, or indeed a circus elephant or a bathtub crocodile, for it will require a complete reformulation of our traditional techniques, and the experience already acquired since pet cemeteries were given the official go-ahead will prove extremely useful in this essential process of modernization, in other words, what has, up until now, been very much a sideline in our industry, although admittedly a very lucrative one, will now become our sole activity, thus avoiding, as far as possible, the dismissal of hundreds, if not thousands of selfless and courageous workers who have, every day of their working lives, bravely confronted the terrible face of death and upon whom death has now so unfairly turned her back, And so, prime minister, with a view to providing the protection merited by a profession which has, for millennia, been classified as a public utility, we ask you to consider not only the urgent need for a favorable decision, but also, in parallel, either the opening of a line of subsidized loans or else, and this would be the icing on the cake, or perhaps I should say the brass handles on the coffin, not to say elementary justice, the granting of nonrecoverable loans that would help toward the rapid revitalization of a sector whose survival is now threatened for the first time in history, and, indeed, long before history began, in all the ages of pre-history as well, for no human corpse has ever lacked for someone who would, sooner or later, come along and bury it, even if it was only the generous earth herself opening up to receive it. Respectfully hoping that our request may be granted, we remain.

The directors and administrators of hospitals, both staterun and private, were soon beating on the door of the minister in question, the minister for health, to express, along with the other relevant public services, their worries and anxieties, which, strange though it may seem, always highlighted logistical rather than health matters. They stated that the usual rotational process of patients coming in, getting better or dying had suffered, if we may put it like this, a short-circuit or, if you prefer a less technical term, a bottleneck, the reason being the indefinite stay of an ever larger number of patients who, given the seriousness of their illnesses or of the accidents of which they had been victims, would, in the normal course of events, have passed over into the next life. The situation is extremely grave, they argued, we have already started putting patients out in the corridors, even more frequently than we usually do, and everything indicates that in less than a week's time, it will not only be the lack of beds we have to deal with, for with every corridor and every ward full, and given the lack of space and the difficulties of maneuvering, we will have to face the fact that we have no idea where to put any beds that are available. There is a way of solving the problem, concluded the people in charge of the hospitals, however it does, very slightly, infringe on the hippocratic oath, and the decision, were it to be taken, would have to be neither medical nor administrative, but political. Since a word to the wise is always enough, the minister for health, having consulted the prime minister, sent the following dispatch, With regard to the unavoidable overcrowding which is already beginning to have a seriously prejudicial effect on the

hitherto excellent working of our hospital system and which is a direct consequence of the growing number of people being admitted in a state of suspended life and who will remain so indefinitely with no possibility of a cure or even of any improvement, at least not until medical research reaches the new goals it has set itself, the government advises and recommends hospital boards and administrations that, following a rigorous analysis, on a case-by-case basis, of the clinical situation of patients who find themselves in this position, and once the irreversibility of those morbid processes has been confirmed, the patients should be handed over to the care of their families, with hospitals taking full responsibility for ensuring that patients receive all the treatments and examinations their GPs deem to be either necessary or advisable. The government's decision is based on a hypothesis within the grasp of everyone, namely that a patient in such a state, that is, permanently on the brink of a death which is permanently being denied to him, must, even during any brief moments of lucidity, be pretty much indifferent to where he is, whether in the loving bosom of his family or in a crowded hospital ward, given that, in neither place, will he manage to die or be restored to health. The government would like to take this opportunity to inform the population that investigations are continuing apace and these will, as we hope and trust, lead to a satisfactory understanding of the still mysterious causes of the disappearance of death. We would also like to say that a large interdisciplinary commission, including representatives from the various religions and philosophers from a variety of different schools of thought, who always have something to say about such matters, has been charged with the delicate task of reflecting on what a future without death will be like, at the same time trying to make a reasonable forecast of the new problems society will have to face, the principle of which some might summarize with this cruel question, What are we going to do with all the old people if death is not there to cut short any ambitions they may have to live an excessively long life.

Homes for the third and fourth age, those charitable institutions created for the peace of mind of families who have neither the time nor the patience to wipe away snot, tend to weary sphincters and get up at night to bring the bedpan, were not long in coming and beating their heads against the wailing wall, as the hospitals and undertakers had done before them. To give justice where justice is due, we should recognize that the dilemma in which they found themselves, namely, whether or not to continue taking in residents, would challenge the forward-planning skills of any manager of human resources, as well as any desire to be evenhanded. Largely because the final results, and this is what characterizes genuine dilemmas, would always be the same. Accustomed until now, as were their querulous colleagues of the intravenous injection and the floral wreath with the purple ribbon, to the certainty resulting from the continuous and unstoppable rotation of lives and deaths, some coming in and others going out, the homes for the third and fourth ages did not even want to consider a working future in which the objects of their care never changed face or body, except to display them in a still more lamentable state with each day that passed, more decadent and more sadly disheveled, the face growing steadily more shriveled, line by line, like a raisin, limbs

tremulous and hesitant, like a ship searching vainly for a compass that had fallen overboard. A new guest had always been a motive for celebration at these eventide homes, it meant a new name that one would have to fix in one's memory, particular habits brought from the outside world, eccentricities peculiar to them alone, like the retired civil servant who had to scrub his toothbrush every day because he couldn't bear seeing bits of toothpaste stuck among the bristles, or the old lady who drew family trees but could never find the right names to hang on the branches. For a few weeks, until routine evened out the amount of attention given to all the inmates, he or she would be the newcomer, the youngster, for the last time in his or her life, even if that life lasted as long as the eternity which, as people say of the sun, had come to shine on all the people of this fortunate land, on all of us who will see the sun set every day and yet remain alive, though no one knows how or why. Now, however, the new guest, unless he or she came to fill some vacancy and round up the institution's income, is someone whose fate is known beforehand, we won't see him leave here to go and die at home or in the hospital as used to happen in the good old days, while the other residents hurriedly locked the door to their rooms so that death wouldn't enter and carry them off too, no, that, we know, is a thing of a past, a past that will never come back, but someone in the government will have to consider our fate, us, the owners, managers and employees of these eventide homes, the fate awaiting us is that when the moment comes to down tools, there will be no one to take us in, we are not even masters of the thing which was, in a way, also ours, at least as regards the years of work we put in, and here, it should be pointed out, it was the employees' turn to speak, what we mean is that there will be no room for people like us in the eventide homes, unless we can rid ourselves of some of the residents, an idea that had already occurred to the government following the debate about the plethora of patients in hospitals, the family, they said, should resume its obligations, but for that to happen there would have to be at least one member of the family with sufficient intelligence and enough physical energy, gifts whose sell-by dates, as we know from our own experience and from what the world shows us, last only as long as a sigh when compared with this recently inaugurated eternity, anyway, the remedy, unless someone can come up with a better idea, would be to create more eventide homes, not as has been the case until now, using houses and mansions that have known better days, but building from scratch vast new edifices, in the form of a pentagon, for example, or a tower of Babel or a labyrinth of Knossos, starting out with districts, then cities, then metropoli, or, to put it more crudely, cemeteries of the living where fatal and irrenunciable old age will be cared for as god would have wanted until, since their days will have no end, who knows when, for the crux of the matter, and we feel it our duty to call this to the attention of the relevant authority, is that, with the passing of time, not only will there be more elderly people living in these eventide homes, but more and more people will be needed to care for them, with the result that the rhomboid of the ages will be swiftly turned on its head, with a gigantic, ever-growing mass of old people at the top, swallowing up like a python the new generations, who, transformed for the most part into nursing or administrative staff to work at these eventide homes, after spending the better part of their lives caring for old crocks of all ages, both the normally old and the

methuselahs, multitudes of parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, great-great-great-grandparents, and so on, ad infinitum, will, in turn, pile up, one on top of the other, like the leaves that fall from the trees onto the leaves from previous autumns, mais où sont les neiges d'antan, the endless throngs of those who, little by little, spent their lives losing teeth and hair, the legions with bad sight and bad hearing, those with hernias, colds, those with hip fractures, the paraplegic, the now immortal geriatrics who can't even stop the drool running down their chin, you, gentlemen of the government, may not want to believe us, but such a future is perhaps the worst nightmare that could ever have assailed a human being, such a thing would never have been seen even in the dark caves, where all was fear and trembling, and it is we who have had experience of the first eventide home who are saying this, and in those days, obviously, everything was very small-scale indeed, but our imaginations must serve for something, and to be perfectly frank, prime minister, hand on heart, rather death than such a destiny.

A terrible threat is endangering the survival of our industry, declared the president of the federation of insurance companies to the media, referring to the many thousands of letters which, all couched in more or less identical terms, as if they had been copied from a single draft, had, in the last few days, been flooding their offices, all calling for the immediate cancellation of the life insurance policies of the undersigned. These letters stated that, given the well-known fact that death had put an end to itself, it would be absurd, not to say downright stupid, to continue paying exorbitant premiums which would only serve to make the companies still richer, with no kind of balancing recompense for them. I'm not pouring money down the drain, said one particularly disgruntled policy-holder in a postscript. Some went further, demanding the return of sums already paid, but in these cases, it was clear that they were just making a stab in the dark, trying their luck. In answer to the inevitable question from journalists about how the insurance companies intended to fend off this sudden salvo of heavy artillery, the president of the federation said that, while their legal advisors were, at that very moment, carefully studying the small print of policies for some kind of interpretative loophole that would allow them, always keeping strictly to the letter of the law, of course, to impose on these heretical policy-holders, even if it were against their wishes, the obligation to continue paying premiums for as long as they remained alive, that is, for all eternity, the more likely option would be to reach some form of consensus, a gentlemen's agreement, which would consist in the addition to policies of a brief addendum, with one eye on rectifying the current situation and with the other on the future, and which would set eighty as the age of obligatory death, in a purely figurative sense of course, the president was quick to add, smiling benevolently. In this way, the companies would receive the premiums, as normal, until the date when the happy policy-holder celebrated his eightieth birthday, at which time, now that he had become someone who was, virtually speaking, dead, he would promptly be paid the full sum stipulated in the policy. He should also add, and this would be of no small interest, that, if they so desired, customers could renew their contract for another eighty years, at the end of which, they would, to all intents and

purposes, register a second death, and the earlier procedure would then be repeated, and so on and so forth. Among the journalists who knew their actuarial calculus, there were some admiring murmurs and a brief flutter of applause which the president acknowledged with a brief nod. Strategically and tactically, the move had been perfect, so much so that the following day letters started pouring in again to the insurance companies declaring the previous letters null and void. All the policy-holders declared themselves ready to accept the proposed gentlemen's agreement, and indeed one might say, without exaggeration, that this was one of those very rare occasions when no one lost and everyone gained. Especially the insurance companies, which had been saved from catastrophe by the skin of their teeth. It is assumed that at the next election, the president of the federation will be re-elected to the post he fills so very brilliantly.

ONE CAN SAY ALMOST ANYTHING ABOUT THE FIRST MEETING of the interdisciplinary commission except that it went well. The blame, if such a weighty term can be applied here, rests on the dramatic memorandum sent to the government by the eventide homes, especially those final ominous words, Rather death, prime minister, than such a destiny. The philosophers, divided as always between frowning pessimists and smiling optimists, readied themselves to recommence for the thousandth time the ancient dispute over whether the glass was half full or half empty, a dispute which, when transferred to the matter they had been summoned there to discuss, would probably come down to a mere inventory of the advantages and disadvantages of being dead or of living forever, while the religious delegates, from the outset, presented a united front, hoping to set the debate on the only dialectical terrain that interested them, that is, the explicit acceptance that death was fundamental to the existence of the kingdom of god and that, therefore, any discussion about a future without death would be not only blasphemous but absurd, since it would, inevitably, presuppose an absent or, rather, vanished god. This was not a new attitude, the cardinal himself had already put his finger on the implications of this theological version of squaring the circle, when, in his phone conversation with the prime minister, he admitted, although not in so many words, that if there was no death, there could be no resurrection, and if there was no resurrection, then there would be no point in having a church. Now, since this was clearly the only agricultural implement god possessed with which to plough the roads that would lead to his kingdom, the obvious, irrefutable conclusion is that the entire holy story ends, inevitably, in a cul-de-sac. This bitter argument came from the mouth of the oldest of the pessimistic philosophers, who did not stop there, but went on, Whether we like it or not, the one justification for the existence of all religions is death, they need death as much as we need bread to eat. The religious delegates did not bother to protest. On the contrary, one of them, a highly regarded member of the catholic sector, said, You're absolutely right, my dear philosopher, that, of course, is why we exist, so that people will spend their entire life with fear hanging round their neck, and when their time comes, they will then welcome death as a liberation, You mean paradise, Paradise or hell, or nothing at all, what happens after death matters to us far less than is generally believed, religion, sir, is an earthly matter, and has nothing to do with heaven, That isn't what we're usually told, We had to say something to make the merchandise attractive, So does that mean you don't believe in eternal life, We pretend we do. For a minute no one spoke. The oldest of the pessimists allowed a wry smile to spread across his face and he adopted the air of someone who has just seen a particularly difficult laboratory experiment crowned with success. In that case, said a philosopher from the optimistic wing, why are you so alarmed by the fact that death has ended, We don't know that it has, we know only that it has ceased to kill, which is not the same thing, Agreed, but given that this doubt remains unresolved, I repeat my question, Because if human beings do not die then everything will be permissible, And would that be a bad thing, asked the old philosopher, As bad as nothing being permissible. There was another silence. The eight men seated round the table had been asked to reflect upon the consequences of a future without death and to construct from the present information a plausible forecast of what new

problems a society would have to confront, quite apart, of course, from an inevitable exacerbation of the old problems. The trouble is that the future is already here, said one of the pessimists, before us we have, among others, statements drawn up by the so-called eventide homes, by hospitals, by funeral directors, by insurance companies, and apart from the latter, who will always find a way of profiting from any situation, one must admit that the prospects are not just gloomy, they're terrible, catastrophic, more dangerous by far than anything even the wildest imagination could dream up, Without wishing to be ironic, which, in the current circumstances, would be in appalling taste, remarked an equally highly regarded member of the protestant sector, it seems to me that this commission is dead before it's been born, The eventide homes are right, rather death than such a destiny, said the catholic spokesman, What do you propose we do then, asked the oldest of the pessimists, apart from the immediate dissolution of this commission, which is what you appear to want, We, the catholic apostolic roman church, will organize a national campaign of prayer, asking god to bring about the return of death as quickly as possible so as to save poor humanity from the worst horrors, Does god have authority over death, asked one of the optimists, They're two sides of the same coin, on one side the king and on the other the crown, In that case perhaps it was god who ordered death to withdraw, One day we will know why he set us this test, meanwhile we will put our rosaries to work, We will do the same, by which I mean that we, too, will pray, no rosaries for us, of course, smiled the protestant, And we will arrange processions throughout the country calling on death to return, just as we used to do ad petendam pluviam, to ask for rain, translated the catholic, We won't go that far, such processions have never been part of our customs, said the protestant, smiling again, And what about us, asked one of the optimistic philosophers in a tone that seemed to announce his imminent enlistment in the ranks of the opposition, what are we going to do now, when it seems that all doors are closed to us, To start with, replied the oldest philosopher, let's adjourn this session, And then what, We will continue to philosophize since that is what we were born to do, even if all we have to philosophize about is the void, What for, I don't know what for, All right, then, why, Because philosophy needs death as much as religions do, if we philosophize it's in order to know that we will die, as monsieur de montaigne said, to philosophize is to learn how to die.

Even among those who were not philosophers, at least not in the usual meaning of the term, some had managed to learn that path. Paradoxically, they had not themselves learned how to die, because their time had not yet come, but to ease the deaths of others, by helping death. The method used, as you will soon see, was yet another manifestation of the human race's inexhaustible capacity for inventiveness. In a village, a few miles from the frontier with one of the neighboring countries, there was a family of poor country people who, for their sins, had not one relative, but two, in that state of suspended life or, as they preferred to call it, arrested death. One of them was a grandfather of the old sort, a sturdy patriarch reduced by illness to a mere shadow, although it had not entirely robbed him of the power of speech. The other was a child of only a few months to whom they had not even had time to teach the words for life or

death and to whom actual death had refused to show herself. They were neither dead nor alive, and the country doctor who visited them once a week said that there was nothing that could be done for or against them, not even by injecting each of them with a kindly lethal drug, which, not long ago, would have been the radical solution to such problems. At most, it might push them toward the place where death presumably was, but it would be pointless, futile, because at that precise moment, as unreachable as ever, she would take a step back and keep her distance. The family went to ask for help from the priest, who listened, raised his eyes to heaven and said that we are all in god's hands and that his divine mercy is infinite. Well, it might be infinite, but not infinite enough to help the poor little child who has done no wrong in this world. And that was how things stood, with no way forward, with no solution to the problem and no hope of finding one, when the old man spoke, Come over here someone, he said, Do you want a drink of water, asked one of his daughters, No, I don't want any water, I want to die, The doctor says that's not possible, papa, remember, no one dies anymore, The doctor doesn't know what he's talking about, ever since the world was the world, there has always been an hour and a place to die, Not anymore, That's not true, Calm down, papa, you'll make your fever worse, I haven't got a fever and even if I had, it wouldn't matter, now listen to me carefully, All right, I'm listening, Come closer, before my voice gives out, What is it. The old man whispered a few words into his daughter's ear. She shook her head, but he insisted and insisted. But that won't solve anything, papa, she stammered, astonished and pale with horror, It will, And if it doesn't, We lose nothing by trying, And if it doesn't work, That's simple enough, you just bring me back home, And the child, The child goes too, and if I stay there, he stays with me. The daughter tried to think, her warring emotions etched on her face, then she asked, Why can't we bring you back and bury you both here, You can imagine how that would look, two deaths in a country where no one, however hard they try, can die, how would you explain that, besides, given the way things stand now, I'm not sure death would allow us to return, It's madness, papa, Maybe, but I don't see any other way out of this situation, We want you alive, not dead, Yes, but not in my current state, alive but dead, dead but apparently alive, If that's what you want, we'll do as you ask, Give me a kiss. The daughter kissed him on the forehead and left the room, crying. With her face still bathed in tears, she went and told the rest of the family about her father's plan, that they should take him, that same night, across the border, where death was still functioning and where, or so he believed, death would have no alternative but to accept him. This announcement was received with a complicated mixture of pride and resignation, pride because it is not every day that one sees an old man, of his own volition, offering himself up to elusive death, and resignation because they had nothing to lose either way, what could they do, you can't fight fate. It is said that one cannot have everything in life, and the courageous old man will leave behind him only a poor, honest family who will certainly always honor his memory. The family wasn't just this daughter who had left the room in tears and the child who had done no wrong in this world, there was another daughter too and her husband, the parents of three children who were all, fortunately, in good health, plus a maiden aunt who was long past marrying age. The other son-in-law, the husband of the daughter who left the room

in tears, is living in a distant land, where he emigrated to earn a living, and tomorrow, he will discover that he has lost the only child he had and the father-in-law he loved. That's how life is, what it gives with one hand one day, it takes away with the other. We are more aware than anyone how unimportant it must seem this account of the relationships in a family of country folk whom we will probably never see again, but it seemed to us wrong, even from a purely technical, narratorial point of view, to dismiss in two lines the very people who will be the protagonists of one of the most dramatic episodes in this true, yet untrue story about death and her vagaries. So there they stay. We forgot to say that the maiden aunt expressed one doubt, What will the neighbors say, she asked, when they notice the absence of these two people who were at death's door, but couldn't die. The maiden aunt does not usually speak in such a precious, roundabout way, but if she did so now it was in order not to break down in tears, which is what she would have done had she spoken the name of the child who had done no wrong in this world and the words, my brother. The father of the three other children said, We'll simply tell them what happened and await the consequences, we'll probably be accused of making secret burials, outside the cemetery and without the knowledge of the authorities, and, worse still, in another country, Well, let's just hope they don't start a war over it, said the aunt.

It was almost midnight when they set off for the frontier. The other villagers had taken longer than usual to retire to bed, as if they suspected that something strange was afoot. At last, silence reigned in the streets, and the lights in the houses gradually went out one by one. First, the mule was harnessed to the cart, then, with great difficulty even though he weighed so little, the grandfather was carried downstairs by his son-in-law and his two daughters, who reassured him when he asked faintly if they had the spade and the hoe with them, We do, don't worry, and then the mother went upstairs, took the child in her arms and said, Goodbye, my child, I'll never see you again, although this wasn't true, because she, too, would go in the cart with her sister and her brother-in-law, because they would need at least three people for the task ahead. The maiden aunt chose not to say goodbye to the travelers who would never return and, instead, shut herself up in the bedroom with her nephews. Since the metal rims of the cartwheels would make a terrible noise on the uneven surface of the road, with the grave risk of bringing curious householders to their windows to find out where their neighbors were going at that hour, they made a diversion along dirt tracks that finally brought them out onto the road beyond the village. They weren't very far from the frontier, but the trouble was that the road would not take them there, at a certain point they would have to leave it and continue along paths where the cart would barely fit, and the very last section would have to be made on foot, through the undergrowth, somehow or other carrying the grandfather. Fortunately, the son-in-law has a thorough knowledge of the area because, as well as having tramped these paths as a hunter, he had also made occasional use of them in his role as amateur smuggler. It took them almost two hours to reach the point where they would have to abandon the cart, and it was then that the son-in-law had the idea of putting the grandfather on the mule's back, trusting to the animal's sturdy legs. They unhitched the beast, removed any superfluous bits of harness, and then struggled to

lift the old man up. The two women were crying, Oh, my poor father, Oh, my poor father, and their tears took from them what little strength they still had. The poor man was only semi-conscious, as if he were already crossing the first threshold of death. We can't do it, exclaimed the son-in-law in despair, then, suddenly, it occurred to him that the solution would be for him to get on the mule first and then pull the old man up afterward onto the withers of the mule, I'll have to ride with my arms around him, there's no other way, you can help from down there. The child's mother went over to the cart to make sure he was still covered by the blanket, she didn't want the poor little thing to catch cold, and then she went back to help her sister, One, two, three, they said, but nothing happened, the body seemed to weigh like lead now, they could barely lift him off the ground. Then something extraordinary happened, a kind of miracle, a prodigy, a marvel. As if for a moment the law of gravity had been suspended or had begun to work in reverse, pushing up not down, the grandfather glided gently from his daughters' hands and, of his own accord, levitated his way into his son-in-law's open arms. The sky, which, since the onset of night, had been covered by heavy, threatening clouds, cleared suddenly to reveal the moon. We can go on now, said the son-in-law, speaking to his wife, you lead the mule. The mother of the child drew back the blanket a little to look at her son. His closed eyelids were like two small, pale smudges, his face a blur. Then she let out a scream that pierced the air all around and made the beasts in their lairs tremble, I won't be the one to take my child to the other side, I didn't bring him into this world in order to hand him over to death, you take papa, I'll stay here. Her sister came over to her and asked, Would you rather watch him dying year by year, That's easy enough for you to say, you have three healthy children, But I care for your son as if he were my own, In that case, you take him, because I can't, And I shouldn't, because that would be like killing him, What's the difference, Taking someone to their death and killing them are two different things, you're the child's mother, not me, Would you be capable of taking one of your own children, or all of them, Yes, I think so, but I couldn't swear to it, Then I'm in the right, If that's what you want, then wait for us here, we're going to take papa. The sister went over to the mule, grasped the bridle and said, Shall we go, and her husband answered, Yes, but very slowly, I don't want him to slip off. The full moon was shining. Somewhere up ahead lay the frontier, that line which is visible only on maps. How will we know when we get there, asked the woman, Papa will know. She understood and asked no further questions. They continued on, another hundred yards, another ten steps, and suddenly the man said, We've arrived, Is it over, Yes. Behind them a voice repeated, It's over. The child's mother was for the last time clasping her dead son to her with her left arm, for resting on her right shoulder were the spade and hoe that the others had forgotten. Let's go a little further, as far as that ash tree, said the brother-in-law. Far off, on a hill, they could make out the lights of a village. From the way the mule was placing its feet, they could tell that the earth there was soft and would be easy to dig. This looks like a good place, said the man, the tree will serve as a marker when we come here to bring them flowers. The child's mother dropped the spade and hoe and tenderly laid her son on the ground. Then the two sisters, taking every care not to slip, received the body of their father and, without waiting for any help from the man who was now getting off the mule,

they took the body and placed it beside that of his grandson. The child's mother was sobbing and repeating over and over, My son, my father, and her sister came and embraced her, weeping and saying, It's better like this, it's better like this, the life these poor unfortunates were living was no life at all. They both knelt down on the ground to mourn the dead who had come there to deceive death. The man was already working with the hoe, then he shifted the loosened earth with the spade and started digging again. The earth underneath was harder, more compacted, rather stony, and it took half an hour of solid work before the grave was deep enough. There was no coffin and no shroud, the bodies would rest on the bare earth, just with the clothes they had on. The man and the two women joined forces, with him standing in the grave and them above, and they managed, by degrees, to lower the old man's body into the hole, the women holding him by his outstretched arms, the man taking the weight until the body touched bottom. The women wept constantly, and although the man's eyes were dry, he was trembling all over, as if in the grip of a fever. The worst was yet to come. Amid tears and sobs, the child was handed down and placed beside his grandfather, but he looked wrong there, a small, insignificant bundle, an unimportant life, left to one side as if he didn't belong to the family. Then the man bent over, picked up the child, lay him face down on his grandfather's chest, and arranged the grandfather's arms so that they were holding the tiny body, now they're comfortable, ready for their rest, we can start covering them with earth, careful now, just a little at a time, that way they can say their goodbyes to us, listen to what they're saying, goodbye my daughters, goodbye my son-in-law, goodbye my aunts and uncles, goodbye my mother. When the grave was filled, the man trod the earth down and smoothed it to make sure that no chance passer-by would notice that anyone was buried there. He placed a stone at the head and a smaller stone at the foot, then with the hoe he scattered over the grave the weeds he removed earlier, other living plants would soon take the place of those withered, dry, dead weeds, which would gradually enter the food cycle of the same earth from which they had sprung. The man paced out the distance between tree and grave, twelve paces, then he put the spade and hoe on his shoulder and said, Let's go. The moon had disappeared, the sky had once more clouded over. Just as they had finished hitching the mule to the cart, it started to rain.

THE PROTAGONISTS OF THESE DRAMATIC EVENTS, DESCRIBED in unusually detailed fashion in a story which has, so far, preferred to offer the curious reader, if we may put it so, a panoramic view of the facts, were, when they unexpectedly entered the scene, given the social classification of poor country folk. This mistake, the result of an overhasty judgment on the part of the narrator, based on an assessment which was, at best, superficial, should, out of respect for the truth, be rectified at once. A family of poor country folk, if they were truly poor, would not be the owners of a cart nor would they have money enough to feed an animal with the large appetite of a mule. They were, in fact, a family of smallholders, reasonably well-off in the modest world they lived in, well-brought-up people with sufficient schooling to be able to hold conversations which were not only grammatically correct, but which also had what some, for lack of a better word, call content, others substance, and others, perhaps more vulgarly, meat. Were that not the case, the maiden aunt would never have been able to come out with the lovely sentence we commented on before, What will the neighbors say when they notice the absence of these two people who were at death's door, but couldn't die. Hurriedly filling in that gap, and with truth restored to its rightful place, let us now hear what the neighbors did say. Despite all the family's precautions, someone had seen the cart and puzzled over why those three people would be going out at that late hour. This was precisely the question the vigilant neighbor asked himself, Where are those three off to at this hour, a question repeated the following morning, with only slight modification, to the old farmer's son-in-law, Where were you three off to at that hour of the night. The son-in-law replied that they'd had some business to attend to, but the neighbor was not convinced, Business to attend to at midnight, with the cart, and your wife and your sister-in-law, that's a bit odd, isn't it, he said, It might be odd, but that's how it was, And where were you coming from when the sky was just beginning to grow light, That's hardly your affair, You're right, I'm sorry, it really isn't my affair, but I assume you won't mind my asking after your father-in-law, Much the same, And your little nephew, He's much the same too, Well, I hope they both get better, Thank you, Goodbye, Goodbye. The neighbor walked away, stopped and turned back, It seemed to me that you were carrying something in the cart, it seemed to me that your sister had a child in her arms, and if so, the figure lying down covered by a blanket was probably your father-in-law, what's more, What's more, what, What's more, when you came back, the cart was empty and your sister had no child in her arms, You obviously don't sleep much at night, No, I sleep very lightly and wake easily, You woke up when we left and when we came back, that's what people call coincidence, That's right, And you want me to tell you what happened, Only if you'd like to, Come with me. They went into the house, the neighbor greeted the three women, I don't wish to intrude, he said, embarrassed, and waited. You'll be the first person to know, said the son-in-law and you won't have to keep it a secret because we won't ask you to, Please, only tell me what you want to, My father-in-law and my nephew died last night, we took them over the border, where death is still active, You killed them, exclaimed the neighbor, In a way, yes, given that they couldn't have gone there under their own steam, but in a way, no, because we did it at the request of my father-in-law, and as for the child, poor thing, he had no voice in the matter and no life worth living, they're buried at the foot of an ash

tree, in each other's arms you might say. The neighbor clutched his head, And now, Now you'll go and tell the whole village, we'll be arrested and taken to the police, and probably tried and sentenced for what we didn't do, But you did do it, A yard from the frontier they were still alive, a yard further on, they were dead, when exactly, according to you, did we kill them and how, If you hadn't taken them there, Yes, they would be here, waiting for a death that wouldn't come. Silent and serene, the three women were watching the neighbor. I'm off, he said, I thought something had happened, but I never imagined anything like this, Please, I have a favor to ask, said the son-in-law, What, Come with me to the police, that way you won't have to go from door to door telling people about the horrible crimes we've committed, I mean, imagine, patricide and infanticide, good grief, what monsters live in this house, That isn't how I would put it, Yes, I know, so come with me, When, Now, strike while the iron is hot, Let's go then.

They were neither tried nor sentenced. Like a lit fuse, the news spread rapidly through the nation, the media inveighed against the loathsome creatures, the murderous sisters, the son-in-law accomplice, they shed tears over the old man and the innocent child as if they were the grandfather and grandson everyone would have liked to have had, for the thousandth time, those right-thinking newspapers that acted as barometers of public morality pointed the finger at the unstoppable decline in traditional family values, which was, in their opinion, the fount, cause and origin of all ills, and then, only forty-eight hours later, news started coming in of identical incidents happening throughout the border regions. Other carts and other mules transported other defenseless bodies, fake ambulances wound along deserted country lanes to reach the place where they could unload the bodies, usually kept in their seats for the duration by seat belts, although there was the occasional disgraceful instance of bodies being stowed in the boot and covered with a blanket, cars of all makes, models and prices journeyed toward this new guillotine, whose blade, if you'll forgive the very free comparison, was the slender line of the frontier invisible to the naked eye, each vehicle carrying those poor unfortunates whom death, on this side of the line, had kept in a state of permanent dying. Not all the families who acted thus could allege in their defense the same motives, in some ways respectable, but nevertheless debatable, as our anguished farming family who, never imagining the consequences of their actions, had sparked this traffic. Some who made use of this expedient to get rid of their father or grandfather in a foreign land merely saw it as a clean, efficient way, although radical might be a better word, of freeing themselves from the genuine dead-weights that their dying relatives had become to them at home. The media who, earlier, had energetically denounced the daughters and son-in-law of the old man buried along with his grandson, including in their vituperations the maiden aunt, accusing her of complicity and connivance, now stigmatized the cruelty and lack of patriotism of apparently decent folk who, at this time of grave national crisis, had let slip the hypocritical mask that concealed their true natures. Under pressure from the governments of the three neighboring countries and from the opposition parties, the prime minister condemned these inhumane activities, citing the need to respect human life and announcing that the armed forces would

immediately take up positions along the frontier to prevent any citizen in a state of terminal physical decline from crossing over, whether on their own initiative or due to some arbitrary decision taken by relatives. Deep down, of course, although the prime minister dared not say this out loud, the government was not entirely opposed to an exodus which would, in the final analysis, serve the interests of the country by helping to lower the demographic pressure that had been building continuously over the last three months, although it was still far from reaching truly worrying levels. The prime minister also neglected to say that he'd had a discreet meeting with the interior minister that very day, the aim of which was to set up a nationwide network of vigilantes, or spies, in cities, towns and villages, whose mission would be to inform the authorities of any suspicious moves made by people with close relatives in a state of suspended death. The decision to intervene or not would be made on a case-by-case basis, since it was not the government's intention to put a complete stop to this new kind of migratory urge, but, rather, to satisfy, at least in part, the concerns of the governments of countries with whom they shared a border, enough, at least, to silence their complaints for a time. We're not here just to do what they want us to do, said the prime minister firmly, The plan will still exclude small hamlets, large estates and isolated houses, remarked the interior minister, We'll leave them to their own devices, they can do what they like, for as you know from experience, my friend, it's impossible to have one policeman per person.

For two weeks, the plan worked more or less perfectly, but, after that, some of the vigilantes started complaining that they were receiving threatening phone calls, warning them that, if they wanted to live a nice quiet life, they had better turn a blind eye to the clandestine traffic of the terminally ill, and even close their eyes completely if they didn't want to add their own corpse to the number of people with whose surveillance they had been charged. These were not empty threats, as became clear when the families of four vigilantes were told by anonymous callers that they should pick their loved ones up at such and such a place. And there they were, not dead, but not alive either. Given the gravity of the situation, the interior minister decided to show his power to the unknown enemy, on the one hand, by ordering his spies to intensify their investigations, and, on the other, by cancelling the drip-drip system of letting this one through, but not that one, which had been applied in accordance with the prime minister's tactics. The response was immediate, four more vigilantes suffered the same sad fate as the previous four, but, in this case, there was only one telephone call, intended for the interior minister himself, which could be interpreted as a provocation, but also as an action determined by pure logic, like someone saying, We exist. The message, however, did not stop there, it brought with it a constructive proposal, Let's come to a gentlemen's agreement, said the voice on the other end, you order your vigilantes to withdraw and we'll take charge of discreetly transporting the dying to the border, Who are you, asked the department head who answered the call, Just a group of people who care about order and discipline, all of us highly competent in our field, people who hate confusion and always keep our promises, in short, we're honest folk, And does this group have a name, asked the civil servant, Some call us the maphia, with a ph, Why the ph, To distinguish us from the

original mafia, The state doesn't make agreements with mafias, Not on documents signed by a notary, no, Nor on any others, What position do you hold, Department head, That is, someone who knows nothing about real life, But I know my responsibilities, All that interests us at the moment is that you present our proposal to the person in authority, to the minister, if you have access to him, No, I don't have access to the minister, but this conversation will be passed on immediately to my superiors, The government will have forty-eight hours to study the proposal, not a minute more, but warn your superiors that if we don't get the answer we want, there will be more vigilantes in a state of coma, Right, I'll do that, So I'll phone again the day after tomorrow at the same time to find out what their decision is, Fine, I'll make a note, It's been a pleasure talking to you, If only I could say the same, Oh, I'm sure you'll change your tune when you hear that the vigilantes have returned home safe and sound, and if you haven't yet forgotten your childhood prayers, start praying now that they do just that, I understand, I knew you would, Right then, Forty-eight hours and not a minute more, But I certainly won't be the person who speaks to you, Oh, I'm certain you will be, Why's that, Because the minister won't want to speak to me directly, besides, if things go wrong, you'll be the one to take the rap, after all, what we're proposing is a gentlemen's agreement, Yes, sir, Goodbye, Goodbye. The department head removed the tape from the tape recorder and went to speak to his immediate superior.

Half an hour later, the cassette was in the hands of the interior minister. He listened, listened again, listened a third time and then asked, Is this department head to be trusted, Well, replied the superior, up until now I've never had the slightest reason for complaint, Nor the greatest, I hope, Neither great nor small, said the superior, who had failed to catch the irony. The minister removed the cassette from the tape player and started unraveling the tape. When he had finished, he placed it in a large glass ashtray and held the flame of his lighter to it. The tape began to wrinkle and crumple, and in less than a minute was transformed into a shapeless, blackened, fragile tangle. They probably recorded the conversation with the department head too, said the superior, That doesn't matter, anyone can fake a phone conversation, all you need are two voices and a tape recorder, what matters is that we've destroyed our tape, and burning the original means burning any potential copies too, Needless to say the telephone operator keeps a record of all phone calls, We'll make sure that disappears too, shall we, Yes, sir, and now, if I may, I'll leave you to consider the matter, No need, I've already come up with a response, That hardly surprises me, minister, given that you are lucky enough to be a very quick thinker, That would be mere flattery if it didn't happen to be true, because I do think quickly, Are you going to accept the proposal, No, I'm going to make a counterproposal, They may, I'm afraid, reject it, the terms in which the emissary spoke were both peremptory and threatening, if we don't get the answer we want, there will be more vigilantes in a state of coma, those were his words, My dear fellow, the answer we're going to give them is precisely the answer they're expecting, Sorry, sir, I don't understand, That, my dear fellow, is your problem, and I don't wish to wound your feelings when I say this, but your problem is that you're not capable of thinking like a

minister, My fault entirely, Oh, please, don't blame yourself, if you're ever called upon to serve the country as a minister, you'll see how your brain leaps the moment you sit down in a chair like this, the difference is quite unimaginable, Yes, but I'm a mere civil servant and will gain nothing by nurturing fantasies like that, You know the old saying, never say from this water I will not drink, Right now, sir, you have some very bitter water indeed to drink, said the superior, indicating the burned remains of the tape, When you follow a clear-cut strategy and know all the facts of the matter, it's not so very hard to draw up a safe plan of action, I'm all ears, minister, The day after tomorrow, given that your department head will be the one to speak to the emissary, he and no one else will be the ministry's negotiator and he'll tell them that we agree to examine the proposal they made to us, but will warn them, too, that public opinion and the opposition party would never allow all those thousands of vigilantes to be withdrawn from service without some reasonable explanation, And, obviously, to say that the maphia have taken over the running of the business would hardly be thought a reasonable explanation, Precisely, although you could perhaps have put it a little more diplomatically, Forgive me, minister, it just came out like that, Anyway, at that point, the department head will present a counterproposal, or what we might also call an alternative suggestion, namely, that the vigilantes will not be withdrawn from service, they will remain where they are now, but deactivated, Deactivated, Yes, the word is clear enough, I think, Oh, indeed, minister, I was merely expressing my surprise, Surprise about what, after all, it's the only way we have of not appearing to be giving in to the rascals' blackmail, Even though we have, The important thing is that it doesn't look as if we have, that we preserve the facade, what happens behind that facade will no longer be our responsibility, Meaning, Let's just imagine that we intercept a vehicle and arrest the men in charge of it, needless to say those risks were included in the bill that the relatives had to pay, There won't be any bills or receipts, the maphia don't pay taxes, That's just a manner of speaking, what matters is the fact that it's a win-win situation for everyone, for us because it's a load off our minds, for the vigilantes because they will no longer run the risk of suffering any physical harm, for the families because they can rest easy knowing that their living-dead will finally be transformed into their dead, and for the maphia because they'll get paid for their work, A perfect arrangement, minister, One that comes with the cast-iron guarantee that it will be to no one's advantage to blab, No, you're probably right, Perhaps I seem a little too cynical, Not at all, minister, I only admire the way in which you came up with such a solid, logical, coherent plan, Experience, my friend, experience, Right, I'll go and talk to the department head and pass your instructions on to him, I'm sure he'll give a good account of himself, because as I said before, he's never given me the slightest reason for complaint, Nor the largest, I believe, Neither one nor the other, replied the superior, who had finally understood the little joke.

Everything or, to be more exact, almost everything went as the minister had foreseen. At precisely the hour agreed, not a minute before, not a minute afterward, the emissary from the criminal association, the self-styled maphia, phoned to hear what the ministry had to say. The department head deserved full marks for the way in which he

carried out his role, he was firm and clear and persuasive as regards the fundamental question, namely, that the vigilantes, albeit deactivated, would remain at their posts, and he had the satisfaction of receiving in return, and of being able to pass on to his superior, the best of all possible replies in the circumstances, that the government's alternative suggestion would be examined closely and that another phone call would ensue in twenty-four hours' time. And that is what happened. The close examination concluded that the government's proposal could be accepted, but with one condition, that the only vigilantes to be deactivated should be those who had remained loyal to the government, or, in other words, those whom the maphia had failed to persuade to collaborate with the new boss, that is, the maphia itself. Let us try to understand the criminals' point of view. Faced by a long, complex operation on a national scale, and having to employ many of their more experienced personnel in visiting those families who would, in principle at least, be prepared to rid themselves of their loved ones for the praiseworthy reason that they wished to spare them not only pointless, but eternal suffering, it would clearly be a great help to the maphia if they could make use of the government's vast network of informers, with the added convenience that it allowed them to continue using their preferred weapons of corruption, bribery and intimidation. It was against this stone, suddenly thrown into the middle of the road, that the interior minister's strategy stubbed its toe, causing serious damage to the dignity of state and government. Caught between a rock and a hard place, between scylla and charybdis, between the devil and the deep blue sea, he rushed to consult the prime minister about this unexpected gordian knot. The worst of it was that things had gone too far for them to be able to turn back now. The prime minister, despite being more experienced than the interior minister, could find no better way out of the difficulty than to propose further negotiations, establishing a kind of numerus clausus, with something like a maximum of twenty-five percent of the total number of current vigilantes going over to work for the other side. Once again it would fall to the department head to transmit to his now impatient interlocutor the conciliatory platform which the prime minister and the interior minister, ever-hopeful, believed would finally allow the agreement to be ratified. It would, however, be an agreement with no signatures, since it was a gentlemen's agreement, in which one's word was enough, thus, as the dictionary explains, avoiding any legal formalities. They clearly had no idea what twisted, evil minds the maphiosi have. Firstly, the maphia gave no deadline for a response, leaving the poor interior minister on tenterhooks and convinced now that he would be obliged to hand in his letter of resignation. Secondly, when, after several days, it occurred to them that they really should phone, it was only to say that they had still not reached a conclusion as to whether or not the platform would prove sufficiently conciliatory, and then, in passing, as if it were a matter of no importance, they took the opportunity to inform them that they were not in any way responsible for the fact that, the previous day, four more vigilantes had been found in a desperate state of health. Thirdly, because everything has an ending, be it happy or not, the answer that had just been given to the government by the national maphioso board, via the department head and his superior, was divided into two points, point a, the numerus clausus would be not twenty-five percent, but thirty-five, point b, whenever they

felt it suited their interests, and with no need for prior consultation with the authorities, far less their consent, the organization demanded that it be given the right to transfer the vigilantes working for them to posts occupied by deactivated vigilantes, whom they would, of course, replace. Take it or leave it. Do you see any way out of this dilemma, the prime minister asked the interior minister, Well, sir, I'm not even sure it exists, if we refuse, I estimate that every day we'll have four vigilantes rendered useless both for work and life, if we accept, we'll be in the hands of these people for who knows how long, Forever, or for at least as long as there are families who want to rid themselves at whatever price of the burdens they have at home, That's just given me an idea, I'm not sure whether to be pleased to hear that or not, Look, I've done the best I can, prime minister, but if I've become another kind of burden, then you just have to say the word, Oh, don't be so sensitive, come on, what's this idea of yours, Well, prime minister, I believe we're faced here by a clear case of supply and demand, What's that got to do with anything, we're talking here about people who have only one way to die, As with the classic question about which came first, the chicken or the egg, it's not always easy to tell whether the demand preceded the supply or if, on the contrary, it was the supply that created the demand, Perhaps I should consider moving you from the ministry of the interior to the finance department, They're not so very different, prime minister, the ministry of the interior has its finances, and the finance department has its interior, they're communicating vessels, so to speak, Stick to the point and tell me your idea, If it hadn't occurred to that first family that the solution to the problem might be waiting for them on the other side of the border, the situation in which we find ourselves today would perhaps be different, if a lot of families hadn't followed their example, the maphia wouldn't have turned up, wanting to exploit a business that simply didn't exist, In theory, yes, although, as we know, they're perfectly capable of squeezing water out of a stone and then selling it for a profit, so I'm afraid I still don't see what your idea is, It's simple, prime minister, If only it were, Put briefly, we have to turn off the supply, And how would we do that, By persuading families, in the name of the most sacred principles of humanity, love for one's neighbor and solidarity, to keep their terminally ill loved ones at home, And how exactly do you think such a miracle would happen, My idea is to run a massive publicity campaign in all the media, press, television and radio, including street parades, consciousness-raising groups, the distribution of pamphlets and stickers, street theater and straight theater, films, especially sentimental dramas and cartoons, a campaign capable of moving people to tears, a campaign that would cause relatives who have strayed from their duties and obligations to repent, one that would awaken in people feelings of solidarity, self-sacrifice and compassion, it would, I'm convinced, take only a short time for the guilty families to become aware of the unforgivable cruelty of their actions and to return to the transcendent values which not so very long ago formed their bedrock, My doubts are growing by the minute, now I'm wondering if I shouldn't move you to culture, or perhaps religion, for which you also seem to have a certain vocation, Or else, prime minister, place the three portfolios under one ministry, You mean as well as the finance department, Well, yes, if they really are communicating vessels, What you wouldn't be suited to at all, my friend, would be propaganda, your idea that a

publicity campaign would bring families back into the fold of sensitive souls is utter nonsense, Why, prime minister, Because campaigns like that only profit those who earn money making them, We've done plenty of such campaigns before, Yes, and you've seen the results, besides, to go back to the matter that should be concerning us, even if your campaign were to bear fruit, it wouldn't do so today or tomorrow, and I have to make a decision now, Indeed, prime minister. The prime minister gave a despairing smile, This whole thing is ridiculous, absurd, he said, we know very well that we have no choice and that any proposals we make will only serve to make the situation worse, In that case, In that case, and if we don't want to have on our conscience four vigilantes a day battered to within an inch of their lives and left at death's door, all we can do is to accept their conditions, We could order a lightning strike by the police, a surprise attack, and arrest dozens of maphiosi, that might make them take a step back, The only way to kill the dragon is by cutting off its head, clipping its nails will have no effect at all, It might help, Four vigilantes a day, minister, remember that, four vigilantes a day, it's best if we recognize that we're tied hand and foot, The opposition will have a field day, they'll accuse us of selling the country to the maphia, They won't say country, they'll say nation, Even worse, Let's just hope the church is willing to help, after all, I imagine they'll be receptive to the argument that, as well as providing them with a few useful deaths, the reason we made this decision was to save lives, You can't talk about saving lives any more, prime minister, that was before, You're right, we'll have to come up with some other expression. There was a silence. Then the prime minister said, Enough of this, give the necessary instructions to your department head and start work on the deactivation plan, we also need to know the maphia's thinking on how to distribute the twenty-five percent of vigilantes who will make up the numerus clausus, Thirty-five percent, prime minister, Please don't remind me that our defeat has been even worse than we at first thought, It's a sad day, If the families of the next four vigilantes knew what was going on here, they wouldn't say so, And to think that those four vigilantes might be working for the maphia tomorrow, That's life, my dear head of the ministry of communicating vessels, Ministry of the interior, prime minister, of the interior, Oh, that's just the tube that connects all the other tubes together.

YOU MIGHT THINK THAT AFTER ALL THE SHAMEFUL CAPITULATIONS made by the government during the ups and downs of their negotiations with the maphia, going so far as to allow humble, honest public servants to begin working full-time for that criminal organization, you might think that, morally speaking, they could sink no lower. Alas, when one advances blindly across the boggy ground of realpolitik, when pragmatism takes up the baton and conducts the orchestra, ignoring what is written in the score, you can be pretty sure that, as the imperative logic of dishonor will show, there are still, after all, a few more steps to descend. Through the relevant ministry, that of defense, known, in more honest times, as the ministry of war, orders were issued to the troops positioned along the frontier to limit themselves to guarding only the a-roads, especially those that led into the neighboring countries, leaving all b- and c-roads to wallow in bucolic peace, along with, and this for very good reasons, the complex network of local roads, lanes, footpaths, tracks and shortcuts. This, inevitably, meant a return to barracks for most of the troops, which, while it gladdened the hearts of the rank and file, including corporals and quartermasters, who were all thoroughly fed up with guard duty and patrols day and night, caused, on the other hand, great feelings of discontent among the sergeants, apparently more aware than the others of the importance of the values of military honor and service to the nation. Now if the capillary movement of that displeasure reached as far as the second lieutenants and lost some of its impetus when it got to the first lieutenants, the truth is that it redoubled in strength when it reached the level of the captains. Naturally, none of them would dare to pronounce out loud the dangerous word maphia, but, when they talked about it among themselves, they could not help but recall how in the days prior to their return to barracks they had intercepted a number of vans transporting terminally ill patients and that beside each driver there had sat an officially accredited vigilante who, without even being asked, had produced, with all the necessary stamps, signatures and seals, a piece of paper which, for reasons of national interest, gave express authorization for the transportation of the ailing mr. or mrs. so-and-so to some unspecified destination, and stated that the army should feel obliged to give all the assistance they could in order to ensure the occupants of each van a safe and successful journey. None of this would have provoked any doubts in the minds of the worthy sergeants had it not been for a strange coincidence, for on at least seven occasions, the vigilante had handed the soldier the document to be checked and given him a knowing wink. Considering the geographical distance between the places in which these episodes of country life had occurred, the sergeants immediately dismissed the hypothesis that it might have been, shall we say, an equivocal gesture, a rather primitive come-on in a game of seduction between persons of the same sex or, indeed, although in this case it hardly mattered, of different sexes. However, it was the vigilantes' evident nervousness, more pronounced in some than in others it's true, but all of whom behaved as if they were throwing a bottle into the sea with a message inside it calling for help, that led the sharp-eyed corps of sergeants to think that inside these vans skulked that most famous of cats which, when it wants to be discovered, always finds a way to leave the tip of its tail showing. Then came the inexplicable order to return to barracks, followed by a few whispered rumors, which arose who knows how or where, but which some purveyors of news hinted, in confidence,

might have come from the interior minister himself. The opposition newspapers spoke of the unhealthy atmosphere being breathed in the barracks, while newspapers close to the government vehemently denied that such miasmas were poisoning the esprit de corps of the armed forces, but the fact is that rumors of a possible military coup, although no one could explain the supposed reasons for such a coup, spread everywhere and, for the moment, forced onto the back burner of public interest the problem of the sick who were unable to die. Not that the problem had been forgotten, as was proved by a phrase in circulation at the time and much repeated by the denizens of cafés, Even if there is a military coup, at least we can be sure of one thing, however many shots they fire at each other, they won't succeed in killing anyone. Everyone expected, at any moment, a dramatic appeal from the king for national unity, a communiqué from the government announcing a package of urgent measures, a statement from the high commands of the army and the air force, but not the navy, unnecessary in a landlocked country, protesting their absolute loyalty to the legitimately constituted powers, a manifesto from writers, a stance taken by artists, a concert in solidarity, an exhibition of revolutionary posters, a general strike called by the two main trade unions, a pastoral letter from the bishops urging prayer and fasting, a procession of penitents, a mass distribution of pamphlets, yellow, blue, green, red, white, there was even talk of a mass demonstration whose participants would be the thousands of people of all ages and conditions who found themselves in a state of suspended death, parading down the main avenues of the capital on stretchers, in wheelbarrows, in ambulances, or on the backs of their more robust children, with, at the front of the cortège, a huge banner that said, sacrificing a few commas to make the couplet work, We here who cannot die await all of you who pass us by. In the end, none of this proved necessary. It's true that suspicions of the maphia's direct involvement in the transportation of the dying did not go away, it's true that these were even reinforced in the light of subsequent events, but a single hour was all it took for a sudden threat from the enemy-without to calm the fratricidal mood and prompt the three estates, church, nobility and people, for de spite the country's progressive ideas, the three estates still existed, to rally round their king and, with some justifiable reluctance, round the government too. The facts, as tends to be the case, can be told in few words.

Angered by the continual invasion of their territories by commandos of gravediggers, either employed by the maphia or there of their own volition, coming from that aberrant land where no one died, and after various futile diplomatic protests, the governments of the three neighboring countries decided, in a concerted action, to bring out their troops and protect their frontiers, with strict orders to shoot after the third warning. It's worth mentioning that the deaths of a few maphiosi shot down at almost point-blank range after crossing the line of separation, something we usually refer to as an occupational hazard, were immediately used as an excuse for the organization, in the name of personal safety and operational risks, to increase the prices on its list of services offered. Having mentioned this interesting little sidelight on the workings of the maphia's administration, let us move on to what really matters. Once again, using a tactically

impeccable maneuver to circumvent the ditherings of the government and the doubts of the armed forces' high commands, the sergeants seized the initiative and became, in everyone's eyes, the promoters, and consequently also the heroes, of the popular protest movement that marched forth to demand, en masse, in squares, avenues and streets, the immediate return of the troops to the battle front. Indifferent to and untouched by the terrible problems faced by the country on this side of the border, struggling, as it was, with its quadruple crisis, demographic, social, political and economic, the countries on the other side had finally dropped their mask and revealed to the light of day their true face, that of harsh conquistadors and implacable imperialists. In shops and homes, on the radio, on the television and in the newspapers, what one heard and read was, They're jealous of us, they're envious of the fact that no one here dies, that's why they want to invade and occupy our territory so that they won't have to die either. After two days, marching flat out and with flags flying, singing patriotic songs like the "Marseillaise," "Ça Ira," "Maria da Fonte," the "Hino da Carta," "Nao Verás País Nenhum," "The Red Flag," the "Portuguesa," "God Save the King," "The Internationale," "Deutschland über Alles," the "Chant des Marais," and the "Stars and Stripes," the soldiers returned to the posts they had left, and there, armed to the teeth, waited staunchly for imminent attack and for glory. There was neither. Neither glory nor attack. There were few conquests and even less empire-building, for the aforementioned neighboring countries simply wanted to stop this new species of forced migrant being buried there without due authorization, and it wouldn't be so bad if all they did was bury them, but they brought them there to be killed, murdered, eliminated, finished off, since it was at the precise, fateful moment when they crossed the frontier, feet first so that the head would be aware of what was happening to the rest of the body, that the poor unfortunates passed away, uttered their last sigh. The two valiant camps faced each other, but the rivers will not run red with blood this time either. This had nothing to do with the men on this side of the border, for they knew they wouldn't die even if a burst of machine-gun fire cut them in two. Although, out of perfectly legitimate scientific curiosity, we should ask ourselves how the two halves could survive in cases where the stomach was left on one side and the intestines on the other. Whatever the truth of the matter, only a complete madman would have considered firing the first shot. And, thank god, it never was fired. Indeed, the only consequence of a few soldiers from the other side deciding to desert to the el dorado where no one dies was that they were sent straight back where they came from and where a court martial awaited them. This fact is entirely irrelevant to the narrative of the complicated story we've been telling and we will not speak of it again, but neither did we want merely to relegate it to the darkness of the inkwell. The court martial will probably decide a priori not to take account in their deliberations of the ingenuous desire for eternal life that has always inhabited the human heart, What would happen if we all lived forever, where would it end, the prosecution will ask, resorting to the lowest of rhetorical blows, and the defense, needless to say, won't have wit enough to come up with a fitting answer, for they have no idea where it will end either. Let us only hope that they do not shoot the poor devils. Then it really could be said that they went out for wool and came home shorn.

Let's change the subject. When we mentioned the suspicions harbored by the sergeants, and by their allies among certain second lieutenants and captains, about the maphia's direct involvement in the transportation of the dying to the border, we said that these suspicions were strengthened by certain subsequent events. The moment has come to reveal what those were and how they came about. Taking as their example the family of smallholders who began the whole process, what the maphia has been doing is simply crossing the border, burying the dead, and charging a small fortune for the service. With the difference that they paid no attention to the beauty of the site and never bothered to note down in their log-book any orographic or topographic reference points that might, in future, help tearful family members, repenting of their evil deeds, to find the grave again and beg forgiveness of the dead. One doesn't require a strategically acute mind to understand that the armies ranged along the other side of the three frontiers had begun to constitute a serious obstacle to funerary practices which had, up until then, taken place unobstructed. The maphia would not be what it is had it failed to find a solution to the problem. It really is a shame, if you will allow us a brief aside, that the brilliant intellects leading these criminal organizations should have departed from the strait and narrow path of respect for the law and disobeyed the wise biblical precept that urges us to earn our daily bread by the sweat of our brow, but facts are facts, and while repeating adamastor's sad words, ah, but my heart is sick to tell the tale, we will set down here the distressing news of the trick deployed by the maphia to get round a difficulty which was, to all appearances, insoluble. Before doing so, however, it might be as well to explain that the word sick, placed by the epic poet in the mouth of the unhappy giant adamastor, meant, in that context, profoundly sad, sorrowful, grief stricken, but for some years now, ordinary people have thought, and quite rightly too, that they could make use of that excellent word to express feelings of disgust, repugnance, loathing, which, as anyone will recognize, have nothing to do with the feelings described above. One cannot be too careful with words, they change their minds just as people do. Obviously, the trick wasn't as simple as making sausages, stuff 'em, tie 'em up and stick 'em in the smoke-room, the matter took time, it required emissaries with false moustaches and hats with the brim low over their eyes, telegrams in code, conversations down secret phone lines, on red telephones, midnight meetings at crossroads, notes left under stones, all of which elements we had noted in the earlier negotiations, when, so to speak, they were playing at dice with the lives of the vigilantes. Nor must one think that these transactions were, as in the earlier case, purely bilateral. As well as the maphia in this country where no one dies, the maphias in the neighboring countries also took part in these talks, for that was the only way to protect both the independence of each criminal organization within the national framework in which it worked and the independence of their respective governments. It would be completely unacceptable, absolutely reprehensible for the maphia in one of those countries to negotiate directly with the administration of another. Things, however, did not reach that point, having been prevented from doing so up until now, as if by a last vestige of modesty, by the sacrosanct principle of national sovereignty, a principle as important to maphias as it is to governments, and while this is perfectly understandable in the latter, you might have your doubts when it came to

criminal associations, until you remembered with what jealous brutality they defended their territories from the hegemonic ambitions of their professional colleagues. Coordinating all this, bringing together the general and the particular, balancing the interests of some with the interests of others, was not an easy task, which explains why, for two long, boring weeks of waiting, the soldiers had passed the time insulting each other over the loudspeakers, although always taking care not to overstep the mark, not to be too rude, in case the offense should go to the head of some particularly prickly lieutenant-colonel and then all hell would break loose. The biggest contributing factor in complicating and delaying the negotiations was the fact that none of the maphias in the other countries had teams of biddable vigilantes, and they therefore lacked the irresistible means of putting pressure on the government that had produced such excellent results here. Although this darker side of the negotiations has never been revealed, except in the form of the inevitable rumors, there are good reasons for thinking that the middle-ranking commanders of the armies in the neighboring countries, with the indulgent approval of their superior officers, had allowed themselves to be persuaded, god alone knows at what price, by the arguments of the local maphia spokesmen, to close their eyes to the unavoidable comings and goings, advances and retreats, in which the solution to the problem consisted. A child could have come up with the idea, but to put it into practice, he would, having reached what we call the age of reason, have had to go and knock on the door of the maphia's recruiting section and say, My vocation has brought me here, do with me as you will.

Lovers of concision, laconicism and economy of language will doubtless be asking, if the idea is such a simple one, why did we need all this waffle to arrive, at last, at the critical point. The answer is equally simple, and we will give it using a current and very trendy term, that will, we hope, make up for the archaisms with which, in the likely opinion of some, we have spattered this account as if with mold, and that term is context. Now everyone knows what we mean by context, but there could have been doubts had we rather dully used that dreadful archaism background, which is, moreover, not entirely faithful to the truth, given that the context gives not only the background, but all the innumerable other grounds that exist between the subject observed and the line of the horizon. It would be better then if we called it a framework. Yes, a framework, and now that we finally have it well and truly framed, the moment has come to reveal the nature of the trick that the maphia thought up to avoid any chance of a conflict that might prejudice their interests. As we have said, a child could have come up with the idea. It was this, to take the sufferer across the frontier, and, once he or she had died, to bring him or her back to be buried in the maternal bosom of his country of origin. A perfect checkmate in the most rigorous, exact and precise meaning of the word. As we have seen, the problem was resolved without discredit to any of the parties, and the four armies, who now had no reason to remain at the frontier on a war footing, could withdraw peacefully, since the maphia proposed simply to enter and then leave again, for, as we have said before, the dying expired the moment they were transported to the other side, and now there will be no need for them to linger even for a minute, merely

the time it takes to die, and that, which has always been the briefest of moments, just a sigh, that's all, so you can imagine how it would be in this case, a candle that suddenly burns itself out without anyone even having to blow. Not even the gentlest of euthanasias could be as easy or as sweet. The most interesting aspect of the new situation is that the justice system of the country in which people do not die finds itself without any legal basis on which to take action against the buriers, always supposing they really wanted to, and not just because of the gentlemen's agreement that the government was forced to make with the maphia. It can't accuse them of homicide because, technically speaking, no homicide takes place, and also because the reprehensible act, and if anyone can find a better way of describing it, then please do, takes place abroad, and they can't even accuse them of burying the dead, since that is the natural fate of the dead, and they should be grateful that there is someone prepared to take on a task which, however you look at it, is a painful one, both from the physical and the psychological viewpoint. They could, at most, allege that no doctor was present to record the death, that the burial did not fulfill the regulations set down for a correct interment and that, as if such a thing were quite unheard of, the grave is not only unmarked, but will certainly be lost from view once the first heavy rains come and the plants push up, tender and joyful, through the fertile soil. Having considered all the difficulties, and concerned that it might be plunged into the swamp of appeals in which, the maphia's clever lawyers, inveterate intriguers, would mercilessly drown them, the law decided to wait patiently to see how things turned out. This was, without a shadow of a doubt, the most prudent attitude to take. The country is in an unparalleled state of unrest, the powers-that-be are confused, authority undermined, moral values are rapidly being turned on their head, and a loss of any sense of civic respect is sweeping all sectors of society, probably even god has no idea where he's taking us. There is a rumor that the maphia is negotiating another gentlemen's agreement with the funeral industry in the hope of rationalizing their efforts and spreading the workload, which means, in ordinary, everyday language, that they will supply the dead, and the undertakers will contribute the means and the technical expertise for burying them. It is also said that the maphia's proposal was welcomed with open arms by the undertakers, weary of wasting their millennia of knowledge, their experience, their know-how, and their choirs of professional mourners, on arranging funerals for dogs, cats and canaries, as well as the occasional cockatoo, a catatonic tortoise, a tame squirrel and a pet lizard whose owner used to carry it around on his shoulder. We have never sunk so low, they said. Now the future looked bright and cheerful, hopes bloomed like flowerbeds, indeed, one might even say, at the risk of the obvious paradox, that the funeral industry was reborn. And all thanks to the good offices and inexhaustible money vaults of the maphia. It provided subsidies to businesses in the capital and in other cities round the country for them to set up new branches, and the maphia was, of course, duly recompensed, in localities near the frontiers, it made arrangements for a doctor to be present when the dead person was brought back across the border and someone was required to declare them dead, and agreements were reached with local councils that the burials in the maphia's charge should have absolute priority, regardless of the hour of day or night when it chose to

carry these out. Naturally, all of this cost a lot of money, but now that the extras and the supplementary services accounted for most of the bill, the business continued to be profitable. Then, without warning, the tap from which had flowed a constant, generous supply of the terminally dying was turned off. It seemed that families, suffering an attack of conscience, had passed the word from one to the other that they were no longer going to send their loved ones far away to die, that if, in the figurative sense, we had eaten of their flesh, then now we would have to gnaw on their bones as well, that we are not here just for the good times, when our loved ones had strength and health intact, we are here, too, for the bad times and the worst, when they have become little more than a stinking rag that there is no point in washing. The undertakers went from euphoria to despair, were thrown back into ruin and the humiliation of burying canaries and cats, dogs and the rest of the menagerie, the turtle, the cockatoo, the squirrel, but not the lizard because that had been the only one that let its owner carry it about on his shoulder. The maphia remained calm, kept their nerve, and immediately set out to investigate what was going on. It was quite simple. The families told them, although not always in so many words, that acting in secret had been one thing, with their loved ones carried off at dead of night, and when there was no way the neighbors could know if they were still lying racked on their bed of pain or had simply evaporated. It was easy to lie, to say sadly, Still here, poor thing, when you met your next-door neighbor on the landing and she asked, So how's grandpa these days. Now everything would be different, there would be a death certificate, there would be plaques in the cemeteries engraved with names and surnames, in a matter of hours the whole envious, slanderous neighborhood would know that grandpa had died in the only way he could die, which meant, quite simply, that his own cruel, ungrateful family had dispatched him to the frontier. It makes us feel ashamed, they confessed. The maphia listened and listened and said they would think about it. This took no more than twenty-four hours. Following the example of the old gentleman on page thirty-three, the dead had wanted to die and their deaths would, therefore, be recorded on death certificates as suicides. The tap was turned on again.

IN THIS COUNTRY IN WHICH NO ONE DIES NOT EVERYTHING was as sordid as we have just described, nor, in this society torn between the hope of living forever and the fear of never dying, did the voracious maphia succeed in getting its talons into every section by corrupting souls, subjugating bodies and besmirching the little that remained of the fine principles of old, when an envelope containing something that smelled of a bribe would have been immediately returned to the sender, bearing a firm and clear response, something along the lines of, Buy some toys for your children with this money, or You must have got the wrong address. Dignity was then a form of pride that was within the grasp of all classes. Despite everything, despite the false suicides and the dirty dealings on the frontier, that spirit continued to hover over the waters, not the waters of the great ocean sea, for that bathed other distant lands, but over lakes and rivers, over streams and brooks, over the puddles left by the rain, over the luminous depths of wells, which is where one can best judge how high the sky is, and, extraordinary though it may seem, over the calm surfaces of aquariums too. It was precisely when he was distractedly watching a goldfish that had just come up to the surface to breathe and when he was wondering, slightly less distractedly, just how long it had been since he changed the water, because he knew what the fish was trying to say when again and again it ruptured the delicate meniscus where water meets air, it was at precisely this revelatory moment that the apprentice philosopher was presented with the clear, stark question that would give rise to the most impassioned and thrilling controversy ever known in the whole history of this country where no one dies. This is what the spirit hovering over the water of the aquarium asked the apprentice philosopher, Have you ever wondered if death is the same for all living beings, be they animals, human beings included, or plants, from the grass you walk on to the hundred-meter-tall sequoiadendron giganteum, will the death that kills a man who knows he's going to die be the same as that of a horse who never will. And, it went on, at what point did the silkworm die after having shut itself up in the cocoon and bolted the door, how was it possible for the life of one to have been born out of the death of the other, the life of the moth out of the death of the worm, and for them to be the same but different, or did the silkworm not die because the moth still lives. The apprentice philosopher replied, The silkworm didn't die, but the moth will die after it has laid its eggs, Well, I knew that before you were born, said the spirit hovering over the waters of the aquarium, the silkworm didn't die, there was no corpse inside the cocoon when the moth had left, but, as you said, one was born out of the death of the other, It's called metamorphosis, everyone knows that, said the apprentice philosopher condescendingly, That's a very fine-sounding word, full of promises and certainties, you say metamorphosis and move on, it seems you don't understand that words are the labels we stick on things, not the things themselves, you'll never know what the things are really like, nor even what their real names are, because the names you gave them are just that, the names you gave them, Which of us is the philosopher, Neither you nor me, you're merely an apprentice philosopher, and I am merely the spirit hovering over the water in the aquarium, We were talking about death, No, not about death, about deaths, what I asked was why is it that human beings aren't dying, but other animals are, why is the non-death of some not also the non-death of others, when the life of this goldfish ends, and, I

should warn you, that won't be long in coming if you don't change this water, would you be able to recognize in its death that other death from which at the moment, for reasons you don't know, you appear to be immune, Before, in the days when people died, on the few occasions when I found myself in the presence of people who had passed away, I never imagined that their death would be the same death I would one day die, Because each of you has his or her own death, you carry it with you in a secret place from the moment you're born, it belongs to you and you belong to it, And what about animals and plants, Well, I suppose it's the same with them, Each one with its own death, Exactly, So there are many deaths, as many as all the living beings that have existed, do exist and will exist, In a way, yes, You're contradicting yourself, exclaimed the apprentice philosopher, The deaths that oversee each individual are, so to speak, deaths with a limited life span, subaltern deaths, who die along with the thing they kill, but above them will be a larger death, the one that has been in charge of human beings since the dawn of the species, So there's a hierarchy, Yes, I suppose so, As there is for animals, from the most elementary protozoan to the blue whale, For them too, And for plants, from diatoms to the giant sequoia, which, because it's so big, you mentioned before with its Latin name, As far as I know, the same thing happens with them, So each thing has its own personal, untransmittable death, Yes, And then two more general deaths, one for each of nature's kingdoms, Precisely, And is that where it ends, the hierarchy of responsibilities delegated by thanatos, asked the apprentice philosopher, If I go as far as my imagination can reach, I can see another death, the last, supreme death, What death is that, The one that will destroy the universe, the one that really deserves the name of death, although when that happens, there'll be no one around to pronounce its name, the other things we've been talking about are nothing but tiny, insignificant details, So there isn't just one death, concluded the apprentice philosopher somewhat unnecessarily, That's precisely what I've been saying, So the death that used to be our death has stopped working, but the others, the deaths of animals and plants, continue to operate, so they're independent, each working in their own sector, Now are you convinced, Yes, Right, now go and tell everyone else, said the spirit hovering over the water of the aquarium. And that is how the controversy started.

The first argument against the daring thesis proposed by the spirit hovering over the water of the aquarium was that its spokesperson was not a qualified philosopher, but a mere apprentice who had never gone beyond a few textbook rudiments, almost as elementary as the protozoan, and as if that were not enough, these rudiments had been taken from here, there and everywhere, in stray snippets, with no needle and thread to sew them together even though the colors and shapes clashed horribly, it was, in short, a philosophy that one might describe as being of the harlequin or eclectic school of thought. That wasn't really the problem, though. It's true that the essence of the thesis had been the work of the spirit hovering over the water of the aquarium, however, one need only re-read the dialogue on the two previous pages to recognize that the apprentice philosopher's contribution also had some influence on the gestation of this interesting idea, if only in his role as listener, a dialectical factor which, as everyone knows, has been

indispensable ever since the days of socrates. There was one thing, at least, that could not be denied, human beings were not dying, but other animals were. As for the plants, anyone, however ignorant of botany, could easily see that, just as before, they were being born, putting out leaves, then withering and drying up entirely, and if that final phase, with or without putrefaction, could not be described as dying, then perhaps someone could step up and offer a better definition. The fact that the people here were not dying, but all other living things were, said some objectors, could only be seen as proof that normality had not entirely withdrawn from the world, and normality, needless to say, means, purely and simply, dying when our time comes. Dying and not getting caught up in arguments about whether that death was ours from birth, or if it was merely passing by and happened to notice us. In other countries, people continued to die, and the inhabitants didn't seem any unhappier for that. At first, as is only natural, there was envy, there were conspiracies, there was even the odd case of attempted scientific espionage to find out how we had managed it, but, when they saw the problems besetting us, we believe that the feeling among the populations of those countries could best be expressed in these words, We've had a very lucky escape.

The church, of course, galloped into the arena of the debate mounted on its usual war-horse, namely, that god moves, as always, in mysterious ways, which means, in layman's terms somewhat tinged with verbal impiety, that we cannot even peer through the crack in the door of heaven to see what's going on inside. The church also said that the temporary and more or less lasting suspension of natural causes and effects wasn't really a novelty, one had only to recall the infinite miracles that had happened over the last twenty centuries, the only difference, compared with what was happening now, was the sheer scale of the thing, for what was once bestowed as a favor on one individual, by the grace of his or her personal faith, had been replaced by a depersonalized, global gift, a whole country being given, so to speak, the elixir of eternal life, and not only the believers, who, as is only logical, might expect to be singled out, but also atheists, agnostics, heretics, apostates, unbelievers of every kind, devotees of other religions, the good, the bad and the worse, the virtuous and the maphiosi, executioners and victims, cops and robbers, murderers and blood donors, the mad and the sane, all, without exception, were at the same time witnesses and beneficiaries of the greatest marvel ever seen in the whole history of miracles, the eternal life of a body eternally bound to the eternal life of the soul. The catholic hierarchy, from the bishops up, were not amused by these mystical tales issuing from certain members of their middle ranks avid for wonders, and they let it be known in a very firm message to the faithful, in which, after the inevitable reference to god's impenetrably mysterious ways, they repeated the idea which had already been expressed off-the-cuff by the cardinal, during the first few hours of the crisis, in the phone conversation he'd had with the prime minister, when, imagining himself to be the pope and asking god to forgive him for such foolish presumption, he had proposed the immediate publication of a new thesis, that of death postponed, trusting in the oft-praised wisdom of time, which tells us that there will always be a tomorrow in which to resolve the problems that today seem insoluble. In a letter to the editor of his

favorite newspaper, a reader declared himself perfectly prepared to accept the idea that death had decided to postpone herself, but asked, with the greatest respect, if he could be told how the church had known about this, and that if they really were so well-informed, then they must also know how long the postponement would last. In an editor's note, the newspaper reminded the reader that it was merely a proposal, and one that had not as yet been put into practice, which must mean, he concluded, that the church knew as much about the matter as we did, that is, nothing. At this point, someone wrote an article demanding that the debate return to the question that had started it in the first place, was death one or several, should we be referring to death in the singular or death in the plural, and now that I have my pen in my hand, I would just like to say that the church, in adopting such an ambiguous stance, is merely trying to gain time and avoiding having to commit itself, which is why, as usual, it's busily trying to put a splint on a frog's leg, meanwhile running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. The first of these popular expressions caused some perplexity among journalists, who had never heard or read it in their lives before. So, faced by this enigma, and driven on by a healthy dose of professional competitiveness, they hauled down from the shelves the dictionaries they occasionally consulted when writing their articles and news items and set about discovering what that batrachian was doing there. They found nothing, or, rather, they found the frog, they found the leg, they found the splint, but what they didn't manage to do was to get at the meaning those three words clearly had when put together. Then it occurred to one of them to summon an old porter who had arrived from the provinces many years before and whom everyone laughed at because, despite all that time spent living in the city, he still spoke as if he were sitting by the fireside telling stories to his grandchildren. They asked him if he knew the expression and he said, yes, he did, they asked if he knew what it meant and he said, yes, he did. Explain it then, said the editor-in-chief, A splint, gentlemen, is a piece of wood used to hold a broken bone in place, That much we know, but what has it got to do with the frog, It has everything to do with the frog, because no one could ever put a splint on a frog's leg, Why not, Because a frog never keeps its legs still for long enough, So what does the expression mean then, It means that there's no point in trying, because the frog won't let you, But that can't be what the reader meant to say, Well, it's also used when someone is clearly just playing for time, that's when we say they're trying to put a splint on a frog's leg, And that's what the church is doing, Yes, sir, So the reader who wrote this is entirely right, Yes, I believe so, although, of course, my job is keeping an eye on who comes in and out of that door, You've been very helpful, Don't you want me to explain the other expression, Which one, The one about the hare and the hounds, No, we know that one, we practice it every day.

The polemic about death singular or deaths plural, which was started by the spirit hovering over the water in the aquarium and by the apprentice philosopher, would have ended either in comedy or in farce had the article by the economist not appeared. Although, as he himself acknowledged, actuarial calculus was not his specialty, he considered himself sufficiently knowledgeable about the subject to go public and to ask just how, in about twenty years' time, give or take a year, the country thought it would

be able to pay the millions of people who would find themselves on permanent disability pensions and would continue like that for all eternity and would, implacably, be joined by further millions, now regardless of whether you used an arithmetic or a geometric progression, disaster was assured, it would mean chaos, disorder, state bankruptcy, a case of *sauf qui peut*, except that no one would be saved. Confronted by this terrifying vision, the metaphysicians had no option but to button their lip, the church had no option but to return to their weary telling of beads and to waiting for the end of time, which, according to their eschatological visions, would resolve everything once and for all. In fact, going back to the economist's worrying arguments, the calculations were very easy to make, if a certain proportion of the active population are paying their national insurance, and a certain proportion of the inactive population are retired, either for reasons of old age or disability, and therefore drawing on the active population for their pensions, and the active population is constantly on the decrease with respect to the inactive population, and the inactive population is constantly on the increase, it's hard to understand why no one saw at once that the disappearance of death, apparently the peak, the pinnacle, the supreme happiness, was not, after all, a good thing. The philosophers and other abstractionists had first to get lost in the forest of their own lucubrations about the almost and the zero, which is the plebeian way of saying being and nothingness, before common sense could arrive prosaically, with pen and paper in hand, to demonstrate by $a + b + c$ that there were certain far more urgent matters to consider. As was foreseeable, knowing as one does the darker side of human nature, when the economist's alarming article was published, the attitude of the healthy section of the population toward the terminally dying began to change for the worse. Up until then, even though everyone was agreed that the old and the sick caused considerable upsets and problems, it was nevertheless felt that treating them with respect was one of the essential duties of any civilized society, and consequently, although it did occasionally take some effort, the care they needed was never denied to them and, in a few rare cases, this care was even sweetened with a spoonful of compassion and love before the light was turned out. It's also true, as we well know, that there were a few cruel families who allowed themselves to be carried away by their own incurable inhumanity and went so far as to employ the services of the maphia to get rid of the miserable human remains that lay dying interminably between sheets drenched in sweat and stained by natural excretions, but they deserve our disapprobation, as does the family described in the oft-told tale of the wooden bowl, although, fortunately, as you will see, they were saved at the last moment from the final execration thanks to the kindheart of a child of eight. It is a tale quickly told, and we will leave it here for the illumination of new generations who do not know it, in the hope that they do not mock it for being ingenuous or sentimental. Listen, then, to this moral lesson. Once upon a time, in the ancient land of fables, there was a family consisting of a father, a mother, a grandfather who was the father's father, and the aforementioned child of eight, a little boy. Now the grandfather was very old and because of that his hands shook and when he was at table he sometimes dropped his food, to the great irritation of his son and his daughter-in-law, who were always telling him to eat more carefully, but the poor old man, however hard he tried, could not stop his

shaking, which only got worse when they told him off, and so he was always staining the tablecloth or dropping food on the floor, not to mention on the napkin they tied around his neck and which they had to change three times a day, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. This was how things stood, with no hope of improvement, when the son decided to put a stop to the unpleasant situation. He arrived home with a wooden bowl and said to his father, From now on, you'll eat here, sitting on the doorstep, because that's easier to clean, and your daughter-in-law won't have to deal with all those dirty tablecloths and napkins. And so it was. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, the old man sat alone on the doorstep, raising the food to his mouth as best he could, losing half on the way, while part of the other half dribbled onto his chin, with very little actually making it down what common folk would call his gullet. The grandson seemed entirely unmoved by the cruel treatment being meted out to his grandfather, he would look at him, then look at his mother and father, and continue to eat as if it were none of his business. Then one afternoon, when the father came home from work, he saw his son carving a piece of wood and assumed he was making himself a toy, as was normal in those distant days. The following day, however, he realized that the boy wasn't making a toy car, or at least if he was, he couldn't see where the wheels would go, and so he asked, What are you making. The boy pretended he hadn't heard and continued whittling away at the wood with the point of his knife, this happened in the days when parents were less fearful and wouldn't immediately snatch from their children's hands such a useful tool for making toys. Didn't you hear me, I asked what you're making with that piece of wood, the father asked again, and his son, without glancing up from what he was doing, replied, I'm making a bowl for when you're old and your hands shake and you're sent to sit on the front step to eat your meals, like you did with grandpa. These words had a magical effect. The scales fell from the father's eyes, he saw the truth and its light, and went at once to ask his own father's forgiveness, and when supper-time arrived, he helped him sit down in the chair, fed him with a spoon and gently wiped his chin, because he could still do that, and his dear father could not. History fails to recount what happened afterward, but we know for certain that the boy's carving was interrupted and the piece of wood is still there. No one wanted to throw it away, perhaps because they didn't want the lesson to be forgotten or because they thought that someone might one day decide to finish the job, which was all too possible when one bears in mind the enormous capacity for survival of the aforesaid darker side of human nature. As someone once said, Everything that can happen will happen, it's only a matter of time, and if we don't get to see it while we're around, it will be because we didn't live long enough. Anyway, just so that we're not accused of painting everything with colors drawn only from the left-hand side of the palette, some believe that an adaptation of this gentle story for television, some newspaper having first rescued it from the dusty shelves of the collective memory and brushed off the cobwebs, might help to restore to the shattered consciences of families the cult or cultivation of the incorporeal values of spirituality once nurtured by society, before the base materialism that currently prevails took possession of wills we imagined to be strong, but which were, in fact, the very image of a dreadful and incurable moral weakness. Let us not, however, give up hope. We are convinced that the moment the boy

appears on the screen, half the country's population will race off in search of a handkerchief to dry their tears and the other half, being perhaps of a more stoical temperament, will allow the tears to roll down their face in silence, the better to show that remorse for some evil done or condoned is not necessarily an empty word. Let us hope we are still in time to save the grandparents.

Unexpectedly, and revealing a deplorably poor sense of timing, the republicans decided to choose this delicate occasion to make their voices heard. There were not many of them, they did not even have any representation in parliament, despite forming a political party and regularly standing for election. Nevertheless, they bragged about having a certain amount of social influence, especially in artistic and literary circles, whence came occasional manifestos which while, on the whole, well-written, were invariably bland and anodyne. They had shown no sign of life since the disappearance of death, not even, as one might expect from a supposedly radical opposition, in order to demand an explanation for the maphia's rumored participation in the ignoble traffic in the terminally dying. Now, taking advantage of the anxiety sweeping the country, torn as it was between the vanity of knowing itself to be unique on the whole planet and a feeling of deep disquiet because it was not like anywhere else, there they were bringing into question neither more nor less than the matter of the regime. Being, by definition, opponents of the monarchy and enemies of the throne, they thought they had discovered a new argument in favor of the necessary and urgent establishment of the republic. They said that it went against common logic for a country to have a king who would never die and who, even if he were to decide to abdicate tomorrow for reasons of age or declining mental health, would continue to be king, the first in an endless succession of enthronements and abdications, an endless sequence of kings lying in their beds awaiting a death that would never arrive, a stream of half-alive, half-dead kings who, unless they were kept in the corridors of the palace, would end up filling and finally overflowing the pantheon where their mortal ancestors had been received and who would now be nothing but bones detached from their hinges or musty, mummified remains. How much more logical it would be to have a president of the republic with a fixed term of office, a single mandate, at most two, and then he could go his own sweet way, live his own life, give lectures, write books, take part in congresses, colloquia and symposia, argue his point at roundtables, go around the world in eighty receptions, opine upon the length of skirts when they come back into fashion and on the reduction of ozone in the atmosphere if there is an atmosphere, he could, in short, do as he pleased. Better that than having to read every day in the newspapers and hear on television and radio the unalterable medical bulletin, still no change, about the patients in the royal infirmaries, which, it should be noted, having already been extended twice, would be about to be extended again. The plural of infirmaries is there to indicate that, as always happens with hospitals and the like, the men were kept separate from the women, that is, kings and princes on one side, queens and princesses on the other. The republicans were now challenging the people to assume their rightful responsibilities, to take destiny in their hands in order to inaugurate a new life and forge a new, flower-strewn path toward future dawns. This

time their manifesto touched not only artists and writers, other social strata proved equally receptive to the happy image of the flower-strewn path and to those invocations of future dawns, and the result was an absolutely extraordinary flood of support from new militants ready to set off on a crusade which, just as a fish is a fish before and after it has been fished, had passed into history even before anyone knew it would turn out to be an historic event. Unfortunately, in the days that followed, the verbal manifestations of civic enthusiasm from the new supporters of this forward-looking, prophetic republicanism were not always as respectful as good manners and healthy democratic coexistence demand. Some even crossed the line of the most offensive vulgarity, saying, for example, when speaking of their royal highnesses, that they were not prepared to keep donkeys or dumb beasts with rings through their noses supplied with sponge cake. All people of good taste agreed that such words were not just inadmissible, they were unforgivable. It would have sufficed to say that the state coffers would be unable to continue to support the continual increase in expenditure of the royal household and its adjuncts, and everyone would have understood. It was true, but it did not offend.

It was this violent attack by the republicans, but, more important, the article's worrying prediction that, very soon, the aforementioned state coffers would be unable, with no end in sight, to continue paying old age and disability pensions, that prompted the king to let the prime minister know that they needed to have a frank conversation, alone, without tape recorders or witnesses of any kind. The prime minister duly arrived, inquired after the royal health, in particular after that of the queen mother, who, at new year, had been on the point of dying, but who nonetheless, like so very many others, still continued to breathe thirteen times a minute, even though her prostrate body beneath the canopy covering her bed showed few other signs of life. His majesty thanked him and said that the queen mother was bearing her sufferings with the dignity proper to the blood that still ran in her veins, and then turned to the matters on the agenda, the first of which was the republicans' declaration of war. I just don't understand what these people can be thinking of, he said, here's the country plunged in the worst crisis of its entire history, and there they are talking about regime change, Oh, I wouldn't worry, sir, all they're doing is taking advantage of the situation to spread what they call their plans for government, deep down, they're nothing but poor anglers fishing in some very murky waters, And, let it be said, showing a lamentable lack of patriotism. Indeed, sir, the republicans have ideas about the nation that only they can understand, if, that is, they do understand them, Their ideas don't interest me in the least, what I want to hear from you is if there's any chance they might force a change of regime, They don't even have any representation in parliament, sir, What I'm referring to is a coup d'etat, a revolution, Absolutely not, sir, the people are solidly behind their king, and the armed forces are loyal to the legitimate government, So I can rest easy, Completely, sir. The king made a cross in his diary next to the word republicans, and said, Good, then he asked, And what's all this about pensions not being paid, We are paying them, sir, but prospects do look pretty bleak, So I must have misread it, I thought there had been, shall we say, a suspension of payments, No, sir, but, as I say, the future is very worrying indeed,

Worrying in what respect, In every respect, sir, the state could simply collapse like a house of cards, Are we the only country that finds itself in this situation, asked the king, No, sir, in the long term, the problem will affect everyone, but what counts is the difference between dying and not dying, a fundamental difference, if you'll forgive me stating the obvious, Sorry, but I don't quite understand, In other countries, it's normal for people to die, but here, sir, in our country, no one dies, think only of the queen mother, it seemed certain she was dying, but, no, she's still here, happily for us, of course, but really, I'm not exaggerating, the noose is well and truly around our necks, And yet I've heard rumors that some people are dying, That's true, sir, but it's merely a drop in the ocean, not all families can bring themselves to take that step, What step, Handing over their dying to the organization in charge of the suicides, But I don't understand, what's the point of them committing suicide if they can't die, Oh, they can, sir, And how do they manage it, It's a complicated story, sir, Well, tell it to me, we're alone, On the other side of the frontier, sir, people are still dying, You mean that this organization takes them there, Exactly, Is it a charitable organization, It helps us a little to slow down the mounting numbers of the terminally dying, but, as I said before, it's a drop in the ocean, And what is this organization. The prime minister took a deep breath and said, The maphia, sir, The maphia, Yes, sir, the maphia, sometimes the state has no alternative but to find someone else to do its dirty work, You've never said anything to me about this before, No, sir, I wanted to keep you out of a situation for which I take full responsibility, And the troops who were on the frontier, They had a job to do, What job was that, Of appearing to be an obstacle to the transportation of suicides, but not, in fact, being an obstacle at all, But I thought they were there to prevent an invasion, There never was such a danger, and, besides, we've made agreements with the governments of those other countries, and everything's under control, Apart from the matter of pensions, Apart from the matter of death, sir, if we don't start dying again, we have no future. The king made a cross beside the word pensions and said, Something needs to happen, Indeed, sir, something needs to happen.

THE ENVELOPE WAS ON THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL'S DESK WHEN the secretary went into the office. It was violet-colored and, therefore, unusual, and the paper had been embossed to resemble the texture of linen. It looked rather antique and gave the impression that it had been used before. There was no address, neither the sender's, which does occasionally happen, nor the addressee's, which never happens, and it was found in an office whose locked door had just been opened, and through which no one could have entered during the night. When she turned the envelope over to see if there was anything written on the back, the secretary felt herself thinking, with a vague sense that it was absurd both to have thought or felt such a thing, that the envelope hadn't been there when she put the key in the lock and turned it. Ridiculous, she murmured, I must simply not have noticed it here when I left yesterday. She glanced round the room to make sure everything was in order and then withdrew to her own desk. In her role as secretary, and a confidential secretary to boot, she had authorization to open that or any other envelope, especially since it bore no label indicating that it contained restricted information, nothing saying personal, private or secret, and yet she hadn't opened it, and she couldn't understand why. Twice she got up from her chair and opened the door of the office just a crack. The envelope was still there. I'm going crazy, she thought, it must be the color, I wish he would come now and put an end to the mystery. She was referring to her boss, the director-general of television, who was late. It was a quarter past ten when he finally arrived. Being a man of few words, he merely said good morning and went straight into his office, leaving his secretary with orders to join him in five minutes, the time he considered necessary to settle in and light his first cigarette of the day. When the secretary went into the room, the director-general had not yet taken off his coat or lit a cigarette. He was holding a sheet of paper the same color as the envelope, and his hands were shaking. He turned to the secretary as she approached the desk, but it was as if he didn't recognize her. He held up one hand to stop her coming nearer and said in a voice that seemed to emerge from someone else's throat, Get out this instant, close that door and don't allow anyone, anyone, you understand, to come in, it doesn't matter who they are. The secretary asked solicitously if anything was wrong, but he interrupted her angrily, Didn't you hear me, he said, I told you to get out. And almost shouting, he added, Get out, now. The poor woman withdrew, with tears in her eyes, she wasn't used to such behavior, the director has his faults, it's true, like everyone else, but he's generally very polite and not in the habit of treating his secretary like a doormat. It's something to do with that letter, there's no other explanation, she thought while she looked for a handkerchief to dry her eyes. She was quite right. If she dared go back into the office now, she would see the director-general pacing furiously from one side of the room to the other, with a wild expression on his face, as if he didn't know what to do and yet was, at the same time, all too aware that he, and only he, could do it. He looked at his watch, looked at the piece of paper, and murmured very softly, almost to himself, There's still time, there's still time, then he sat down and re-read the mysterious letter, meanwhile mechanically running his other hand over his head, as if to make sure it was still in its place and had not been swallowed up by the vortex of fear gripping his stomach. He stopped reading and sat staring into space, thinking, I must talk to

someone, then a thought came to his aid, the idea that it might be a joke, a joke in the worst possible taste, a disgruntled viewer, of whom there are so many, and one with a very macabre imagination indeed, for as anyone high up in the world of television knows, it's definitely no bed of roses, But people don't usually write to me to let off steam, he thought. Needless to say, it was this idea that finally led him to phone through to his secretary and ask, Who brought this letter, I don't know, sir, when I arrived and unlocked the door to your office, just as I always do, there it was, But that's impossible, no one has access to this office at night, Exactly, sir, Then how do you explain it, Don't ask me, sir, I tried to explain what had happened, but you didn't give me a chance, Yes, I'm sorry, I was a little brusque with you, That's all right sir, but it upset me a lot. The director-general again lost patience, If I told you what was in this letter, you'd know the real meaning of being upset. And he hung up. He looked again at his watch, then said to himself, It's the only way out, I can see no other, there are some decisions I can't make. He opened his address book, looked for the number he wanted and found it, Here it is, he said. His hands were still shaking so much that he found it hard to press the right buttons and even harder to control his voice when someone answered, Put me through to the prime minister's office, will you, it's the director-general of television. The cabinet secretary came on the line, Good morning, director-general, it's good to hear you, how can I help, Look, I need to see the prime minister as soon as possible on a matter of extreme urgency, Can't you tell me what it's about so that I can forewarn the prime minister, No, I'm very sorry, but I can't, the matter, as well as urgent, is strictly confidential, But if you could just give me an idea, Listen, I have in my possession a document which has been read only by these eyes that will one day be consumed by the earth, a document of transcendent national importance, and if that's not enough for you to put me straight through to the prime minister wherever he may be, then I very much fear for your personal and political future, So it's serious, All I can say is, from now on, each wasted minute is your sole responsibility, In that case, I'll see what I can do, but the prime minister is very busy, Well, if you want to get yourself a medal, unbusy him, Right away, Fine, I'll hang on, May I ask you another question, Oh, really, what else do you want to know, Why did you use that expression about these eyes that will one day be consumed by the earth, that's what used to happen before, Look, I don't know what you were before, but I know what you are now, a total idiot, now put me through to the prime minister, this instant. The director-general's unexpectedly harsh words show to what extent his mind was disturbed. He's in the grip of a kind of confusion, he doesn't know himself, he can't understand how he could possibly have insulted someone who had merely asked him a question that was perfectly reasonable, both in its terms and its intention. I'll have to apologize, he thought remorsefully, who knows when I might need his help. The prime minister's voice sounded impatient, What's wrong, he asked, as far as I know I don't normally deal with problems to do with television, it's not my business, It's not about television, prime minister, I've received a letter, Yes, they mentioned that you'd received a letter, and what do you want me to do about it, Just read it, that's all, beyond that, to use your own words, it's not my business, You seem upset, Yes, prime minister, I'm extremely upset, And what does this mysterious letter say, I can't tell you

over the phone, It's a secure line, No, I still can't tell you, one can't be too careful, Then send it to me, No, I'll have to deliver it myself, I don't want to run the risk of sending a courier, Well, I can send someone from here, my cabinet secretary, for example, he's about as close to me as anyone, Prime minister, please, I wouldn't be bothering you if I didn't have a very good reason, I really must see you, When, Now, But I'm busy, Prime minister, please, All right, if you insist, come and see me, and I just hope all this mystery is worth it, Thank you, I'll be right there. The director-general put down the phone, replaced the letter in its envelope, slipped it into one of the inside pockets in his overcoat and got up. His hands had stopped shaking, but his face was dripping sweat. He wiped the sweat away with his handkerchief, then spoke to his secretary on the internal phone, told her he was going out and asked her to call the car. The fact of having passed responsibility to another person calmed him a little, in half an hour his role in the matter will be over. The secretary appeared at the door, The car's waiting, sir, Thank you, I'm not sure how long I'll be, I have a meeting with the prime minister, but that information is for you alone, Don't worry, sir, I won't tell anyone, Goodbye, Goodbye, sir, I hope everything turns out for the best, In the current state of affairs, we no longer know what's for the best and what's for the worst, You're right, By the way, how's your father, Just the same, sir, he doesn't actually seem to be suffering, he's simply wasting away, burning out, he's been like that for the last two months, and given how things are going, it's just a matter of waiting my turn to lie down in a bed next to his, Who knows, said the director-general, and left.

The cabinet secretary received the director-general at the door and greeted him with evident coldness, then he said, I'll take you to the prime minister, One moment, first I want to apologize, if there was a total idiot in our conversation, it was me, It probably wasn't either of us, said the cabinet secretary, smiling, If you could read what I have in my pocket, you would understand my state of mind, Don't worry, as far as I'm concerned, you're forgiven, Thank you, it won't be long now before the bomb explodes and then everyone will know about it, Let's hope it doesn't make too much noise when it goes off, The noise will be louder than the loudest thunder ever heard, and the lightning brighter than all the lightning ever seen, You're starting to frighten me, At that point, my friend, I'm sure you'll forgive me again, Come on, the prime minister's waiting. They crossed a room, one that, in ages past, would have been called an anteroom, and a minute later, the director-general was in the presence of the prime minister, who received him with a smile, So what's this life-or-death problem you've brought me, With all due respect, prime minister, I doubt you've ever spoken more aptly. He took the letter from his pocket and held it out to him across the table. The prime minister was puzzled, It doesn't have an addressee, Nor the name of the person who sent it, said the director-general, it's as if it were a letter addressed to everyone, Anonymous, No, prime minister, as you'll see, it is signed, but read it, read it, please. The envelope was slowly opened, the piece of paper unfolded, but after reading only the first few lines, the prime minister looked up and said, This must be a joke, It could be, yes, but I don't think so, it appeared on my desk and no one knows how, That doesn't seem a very good reason why we should believe what it

says, Read on, please. When he reached the end of the letter, the prime minister, very slowly, silently moving his lips, articulated the one syllable of the word that served as signature. He put the letter down on the desk, stared across at the director-general and said, Let's imagine it's just a joke, It isn't, No, I'm inclined to believe it isn't either, but when I say let's imagine, it's only to conclude that it won't be many hours before we find out, Precisely twelve hours, given that it's midday now, That's my point, if what the letter tells us is going to happen does actually come to pass, and if we don't warn people, there'll be a repetition, only in reverse, of what happened on new year's eve, It doesn't make any difference whether we warn them or not, prime minister, the effect will be the same, But opposite, Yes, opposite, but the same, Exactly, so if we warned them and it turned out afterward that it was all a joke, we'd have worried people unnecessarily, although there would be much to say about the pertinence of that adverb, No, I really don't think it's worth it, and you've already said you don't think it's a joke, No, I don't, So what's to be done, to warn or not to warn, That is the question, my dear director-general, we must think, ponder, reflect, The matter is now in your hands, prime minister, the decision is yours, It is indeed, I could even tear this piece of paper into a thousand pieces and just wait and see what happens, But I don't think you'll do that, You're right, I won't, but a decision must be made, saying that the population should be warned isn't enough, we have to consider how, That's what the media are for, prime minister, we have the television, the newspapers, the radio, Your idea, then, is that we distribute to all these different media a photocopy of the letter accompanied by a communiqué from the government calling for calm and giving some advice on how to proceed during the emergency, You put it far better than I ever could, Thank you for the compliment, but now I must ask you to try and imagine what would happen if we did exactly that, Um, I don't understand, prime minister, Oh, I expected better from the director-general of television, Then I'm sorry not to be able to rise to the occasion, prime minister, It's only natural, you're overwhelmed by the responsibility, And you are not, prime minister, Yes, I am too, but in my case, overwhelmed doesn't mean paralyzed, Fortunately for the country, Thank you again, now, director-general, I know we've never really talked very much before, given that, generally speaking, when I discuss television, I do so with the relevant minister, but I feel the moment has come to make you a national figure, Now I really don't understand, prime minister, It's quite simple, the matter is going to remain strictly between you and me until nine o'clock this evening, at that time, the television news will open with a reading of the official communiqué which will explain what will happen at midnight tonight, as well as a summary of the letter, and the person to be charged with doing both those things is the director-general of television, firstly, because the letter was sent to him, even though it doesn't name him, and secondly, because you, the director-general of television, are the person I trust to get us both through the mission with which, implicitly, we have been charged by the lady who signed this letter, A newsreader would do a better job, prime minister, No, I don't want a newsreader, I want the director-general of television, If that's what you want, then I would consider it an honor, We are the only people who know what is going to happen at midnight tonight and we will continue to be so until the time when the population receives the

information, if we were to do what you proposed earlier, that is, pass the news to the media now, we would have twelve hours of confusion, panic, tumult, mass hysteria and who knows what, therefore, since it is not in our power, and I refer here to the government, to avoid such reactions, at least we can limit it to three hours, and from then on it will be beyond our control, there will be all kinds of responses, tears, despair, ill-disguised relief, a need to rethink life, It seems a good idea, Yes, but only because we don't have a better one. The prime minister picked up the letter again, glanced over it without reading it and said, It's odd, the initial letter of the signature should be a capital, but it's not, Yes, I found that odd too, starting a name with a lowercase letter isn't normal, Can you see anything normal in this whole affair, Not really, no, By the way, do you know how to make a photocopy, Well, I'm not an expert, but I've done it a few times, Excellent. The prime minister put the letter and the envelope in a file stuffed with documents and summoned the cabinet secretary, to whom he said, Please evacuate the room where the photocopier is, That's where the civil servants work, prime minister, that's their office, Well, tell them to go somewhere else, tell them to wait in the corridor or go out and smoke a cigarette, we'll only need it for three minutes, isn't that right, director-general, Not even that long, prime minister, Look, I can make a photocopy in absolute secrecy, if, as I assume, that is what you want, said the cabinet secretary, That's precisely what we want, secrecy, but, this time, I myself will do the job, with the technical assistance, shall we say, of the director-general, Of course, prime minister, I'll give the necessary orders for the room to be cleared. He came back within minutes, It's empty, prime minister, and now, if I may, I'll go back to my office, And I'm very glad that I don't have to ask you to do so, and please don't be offended by our excluding you from these apparently conspiratorial maneuvers, you'll find out later today the reason for such precautions and you won't need me to tell you either, Of course, prime minister, I would never doubt the wisdom of your motives, That's the spirit, my friend. When the cabinet secretary left, the prime minister picked up the file and said, Right, let's go. The room was deserted. In less than a minute, the photocopy was ready, letter for letter, word for word, but it was different, it lacked the disquieting touch of the violet-colored paper, now it's just an ordinary missive, the kind that begins, I do hope these lines find you well and happy and surrounded by your family, as for me, I certainly can't complain. The prime minister handed the copy to the director-general, There you are, I'll keep the original, he said, And the government communiqué, when will I receive that, Sit down and I'll dictate it to you, it won't take a moment, it's very simple, dear compatriots, the government considers that it has a duty to inform the country of a letter that has reached its hands only today, a document whose significance and importance cannot be exaggerated, even though we are not in a position to guarantee its authenticity and must admit, without wishing to anticipate its contents, that there is a possibility that what is announced in the document may not come to pass, however, in order that the population should be mentally prepared for a situation that will not be without its tensions and crises, the letter will now be read out, with the government's approval, by the director-general of television, just one word more before we conclude, the government, needless to say, will, as always, remain alert to the interests and needs of the population during hours which

will doubtless be among the most difficult we have experienced since we have been a people and a nation, and it is for this reason that we call on you all to preserve the calmness and serenity you have shown so often before during the various trials and tests to which we've been subjected since the beginning of the year, and, at the same time, we trust that a more benevolent future will restore to us the peace and happiness we deserve and which we once enjoyed, remember, dear compatriots, united we stand, that is our motto, our watchword, if we remain united, then the future is ours, there you are, quick work as you see, these official communiqués don't demand any great imaginative effort, they almost write themselves you might say, there's a typewriter over there, make a fair copy and keep it safe until nine o'clock tonight, don't let those papers out of your sight even for a moment, Don't worry, prime minister, I'm keenly aware of my responsibilities at this moment, I'm sure you won't be disappointed, Excellent, now you can go back to work, May I just ask two questions before I leave, Please do, You said that until nine o'clock tonight only two people will know about this matter, Yes, yourself and me, no one else, not even the government, What about the king, and forgive me if I'm butting in where I'm not wanted, His majesty will find out when everyone else finds out, that is, of course, if he happens to be watching television, He won't, I imagine, be very happy not to have been told before, Don't worry, the one excellent quality that all kings share, and I refer, of course, to constitutional monarchs, is that they are extraordinarily understanding, Ah, And your other question, It's not exactly a question, What is it then, Just that I am, quite frankly, astonished at your sangfroid, prime minister, it seems to me that what's going to happen in this country at midnight is a catastrophe, a cataclysm like no other, a kind of end-of-the-world, but when I look at you, it's as if you were merely dealing with some routine government matter, you calmly give your orders, and a little while ago, I even had the impression that you smiled, If you knew how many problems this letter will resolve for me without my having to lift a finger, I'm sure that you would smile too, director-general, now leave me to my work, I have a few orders to issue, I must tell the interior minister to put the police on high alert, I'll think up some plausible excuse, the possibility of some act of public disorder, he's not a person to waste much time on reflection, he prefers action, give him something to do and he's a happy man, Prime minister, may I just say that it's been a real privilege to have lived through this crucial time with you, Well, I'm glad you see it like that, but you can be quite sure that you would quickly change your mind if one word of what has been said in this office, by me or by you, were ever to reach the ears of someone beyond these four walls, Yes, I understand, The ears of a constitutional monarch, for example, Yes, prime minister.

It was almost eight thirty when the director-general summoned to his office the man in charge of the television news to tell him that the program that night would open with a message from the government to the country as a whole, and would be read, as usual, by the newsreader on duty, after which he himself, the director-general, would read another document to complement the first. If the producer found this procedure odd, unusual, out of the normal run of things, he did not show it, he merely asked to have the two documents so that they could be placed on the teleprompter, that wonderful piece of

apparatus which creates the vain illusion that the person speaking is doing so directly and solely to each member of the audience. The director-general replied that, in this case, the teleprompter would not be used, We'll simply read it out, as people used to do, he said, adding that he would enter the studio at five to nine precisely, when he would hand the government communiqué to the newsreader, who would be given rigorous instructions that he must open the file containing it only when he was about to begin the reading. The producer thought that now there really was some reason to show a little interest in the matter, Is it that important, he asked, You'll find out in half an hour, And the flag, sir, do you want the flag to be placed behind the chair where you'll be sitting, No, no flags, after all, I'm not the prime minister or even a minister, Nor the king, said the producer, with an ingratiating smile, as if to say that he was the king, the king of television. The director-general ignored him, You can go now, I'll be in the studio in twenty minutes, There won't be time for make-up, I don't want any make-up, what I have to read is very short, and the viewers, at that point, will have more things on their mind than whether or not I'm wearing make-up, Very well, sir, as you wish, But be sure that the lights don't cast too many shadows on my face, I wouldn't want to appear on screen looking like someone who's just been dug up from his grave, especially not tonight. At five to nine, the director-general went into the studio, handed the newsreader the file containing the government communiqué and went and sat in his appointed chair. Attracted by the unprecedented nature of the situation, for the news, as one would expect, had spread fast, there were more people than usual in the studio. The producer called for silence. At nine o'clock exactly, to the accompaniment of the familiar theme music, the urgent opening titles to the news program were flashed up, a fast-moving sequence of sundry images intended to convince the viewer that the television station, at their service twenty-four hours a day, was, as used to be said of the divinity, everywhere, and from everywhere sent news. The moment that the newsreader finished reading the government communiqué, camera two brought the director-general up on screen. He was clearly nervous, his mouth dry. He briefly cleared his throat and began to read, dear sir, I wish to inform you and all those concerned that as from midnight tonight people will start to die again, as had always happened, with little protest, from the beginning of time until the thirty-first day of December last year, I should explain that the reason that led me to interrupt my activities, to stop killing and put away the emblematic scythe that imaginative painters and engravers of yore always placed in my hand, was to give those human beings who so loathe me just a taste of what it would mean to live forever, eternally, although, between you and me, sir, I must confess that I have no idea whether those two expressions, forever and eternally, are as synonymous as is generally believed, anyway, after this period of a few months of what we might call an endurance test or merely extra time and bearing in mind the deplorable results of the experiment, both from the moral, that is, philosophical point of view, and from the pragmatic, that is, social point of view, I felt that it would be best for families and for society as a whole, both vertically and horizontally, if I acknowledged my mistake publicly and announced an immediate return to normality, which will mean that all those people who should be dead, but who, with health or without it, nevertheless remain in the world, will have the

candle of their life snuffed out as the last stroke of midnight fades on the air, and please note that the reference to the last stroke is merely symbolic, just in case someone gets the stupid idea of stopping the clocks in all the bell towers or of removing the clappers from the bells themselves, imagining that this will stop time and contradict my irrevocable decision, that of restoring the supreme fear to the hearts of men, most of the people in the studio had by now disappeared, and those who remained were whispering to each other, the buzz of their murmurings failing to provoke the producer, who was himself standing slack-jawed with amazement, into silencing them with the furious gesture he normally deployed, albeit in far less dramatic circumstances, therefore, resign yourselves and die without protest because it will get you nowhere, however, there is one point on which I feel it my duty to admit that I was wrong, and that has to do with the cruel and unjust way in which I used to proceed, taking people's lives by stealth, with no prior warning, without so much as a by-your-leave, and I recognize that this was downright brutal, often I didn't even allow them time to draw up a will, although it's true that in most cases I did send them an illness to pave the way, but the strange thing about illnesses is that human beings always hope to shake them off, and so only when it's too late do they realize that it will be their final illness, anyway, from now on everyone will receive due warning and be given a week to put what remains of their life in order, to make a will and say goodbye to their family, asking forgiveness for any wrongs done and making peace with the cousin they haven't spoken to for twenty years, and that said, director-general, all I would ask is that you make sure that, today without fail, every home in the land receives this message, which I sign with the name I am usually known by, death. When he saw that his image had gone from the screen, the director-general got up from his chair, folded the letter and put it in one of his inside jacket pockets. He saw the producer coming toward him, looking pale and distraught, So that's what it was, he said in a barely audible murmur, so that's what it was. The director-general nodded silently and headed for the exit. He didn't hear the words that the newsreader had stammeringly begun to announce, You have just been listening, followed by an account of the other news that had ceased to be of any importance because no one in the country was paying the least attention, in those households where someone lay terminally ill, the families went and gathered round the deathbed, and yet they couldn't tell the dying person that in three hours he would be dead, they couldn't tell him that he should make use of what time remained to write the will he had always refused to write or ask if he wanted to phone his cousin and make his peace with him, nor could they follow the hypocritical custom of asking if he was feeling any better, they simply stood staring at the pale, emaciated face, then glanced surreptitiously at the clock, waiting for the time to pass and for the train of the world to get back on track and make its usual journey. And a number of families who, having already paid the mafia to take away that sad remnant, and imagining that they would probably shed no tears over the money spent, saw now that if they'd had a little more charity and patience, they could have got rid of him for free. There were terrible scenes in the streets, people stood stock-still, stunned or disoriented, not knowing where to run, some wept inconsolably, others embraced as if they'd decided to begin their farewells right there, still others

discussed whether the blame for all of this lay with the government or with medical science or with the pope in rome, one skeptic protested that there was no previous record of death ever having written a letter and that it should be sent at once to a handwriting analyst, because, he said, a hand made only of bits of bone would never be able to write like a complete, authentic, living hand, with its blood, veins, nerves, tendons, skin and flesh, and since bones obviously wouldn't leave any fingerprints on the paper, which meant that they wouldn't be able to identify the author of the letter that way, a dna test might throw some light on this unexpected epistolary appearance from a being, if death is a being, who had, until then, remained silent all her life. At this moment, the prime minister is talking on the phone to the king, explaining why he had decided not to tell him about the letter, and the king says that yes, he understands perfectly, then the prime minister tells him how sorry he is about the sad conclusion that the last stroke of midnight will bring to the frail existence of the queen mother, and the king shrugs, such a life is no life at all, today it will be her, tomorrow me, especially now that the heir to the throne is showing signs of impatience and asking when it will be his turn to be constitutional monarch. After this intimate conversation, with its unusual moments of sincerity, the prime minister gave instructions to the cabinet secretary to call all the members of the government together for an emergency meeting, I want them here in forty-five minutes, at ten on the dot, he said, we will have to discuss, approve and put in place the necessary palliative measures to minimize the likely confusion and disorder that the new situation will inevitably provoke in the next few days, Are you referring to the number of dead people who will have to be evacuated in that very short space of time, prime minister, That remains the least of our problems, my friend, the reason funeral directors exist is in order to resolve problems of that nature, besides, the crisis is over for them, and they must be extremely happy as they tot up how much money they're going to earn, so let them bury the dead because that's their job, what we have to do is deal with the living, for example, organize teams of psychiatrists to help people recover from the trauma of having to die when they were convinced they were going to live forever, Yes, I've thought about that myself, and it will be hard, Don't waste any more time, tell the ministers to bring their respective secretaries of state with them, I want them here at ten o'clock prompt, and if anyone asks, tell them all that they're the first to be called, they're like little children who want their sweeties. The phone rang, it was the interior minister, Prime minister, I'm getting calls from all the newspapers, he said, they demand to be shown the letter that has just been read out on television in the name of death, and about which, regrettably, I knew nothing, There's no need for regrets, I made the decision to keep it secret so that we wouldn't have to put up with twelve hours of panic and confusion, What shall I do then, Don't worry about it, my office is going to distribute the letter to all the media now, Excellent, prime minister, The cabinet will meet at ten o'clock prompt, bring your secretaries of state, And the under-secretaries too, No, leave them to look after the house, I've often heard it said that too many cooks spoil the broth, Yes, prime minister, Be on time, the meeting will start at one minute past ten, We'll be the first to arrive, prime minister, You'll be sure to get your medal then, What medal is that, It was just a joke, take no notice.

At the same time, the undertakers' representatives, burials, cremations, funerals, round-the-clock service, are going to meet at the corporation headquarters. Faced by the overwhelming and never before experienced professional challenge that the simultaneous death and subsequent funerary dispatch of thousands of people throughout the country will bring with it, the only real solution they can come up with, which also promises to be highly profitable thanks to a rationalized reduction in costs, will be to pool, in a coordinated and orderly fashion, all the personnel and the technological means, in other words, the logistics, at their disposal, establishing along the way proportional quotas for shares in the cake, as the president of the corporation so drolly put it, provoking discreet but amused applause from the other members. They will have to bear in mind, for example, that the production of coffins, tombs, caskets, biers and catafalques for human use had ground to a halt the day people stopped dying and that, in the unlikely event of there being any stock left in some conservatively minded carpenter's shop, it will be like malherbe's little rosebud, which, once transformed into a rose, can last no longer than a morning. This literary reference came from the president who went on to say, rather spoiling the mood, but nevertheless provoking applause from the audience, At least we'll no longer have to suffer the humiliation of having to bury dogs, cats and pet canaries, And parrots, said a voice from the back, Indeed, and parrots, agreed the president, And tropical fish, added another voice, That was only after the controversy caused by the spirit hovering over the water in the aquarium, said the minutes secretary, from now on they'll be thrown to the cats, for as lavoisier said, in nature, nothing is created and nothing is lost, everything is transformed. We never found out quite to what extremes the undertakers' show of almanac wisdom would go because one of their representatives, concerned about the time, a quarter to midnight by his watch, put up his hand to propose telephoning the association of carpenters to ask how many coffins they had, We need to know what supplies we can rely on from tomorrow onward, he concluded. As one might expect, this proposal was warmly applauded, but the president, barely disguising his pique because he himself had not come up with the idea, remarked, There probably won't be anyone there at this hour, Allow me to disagree, president, the same reasons that brought us together must have prompted them to the same thing. The proposer was absolutely right. The corporation of carpenters replied that they had informed their respective members as soon as they'd heard the letter from death read out, alerting them to the need to start manufacturing coffins again as soon as possible, and, according to the information coming in all the time, not only had many businesses immediately called in their workers, most were already hard at work. That does, of course, contravene legislation regarding working hours, said the corporation's spokesperson, but, given that we're in a state of national emergency, our lawyers are sure that the government will have no option but to close their eyes to this and will, moreover, be grateful to us, what we cannot guarantee, in this first phase, is that the coffins being supplied will be of the same high quality and finish to which our clients have become accustomed, the polish, the varnishes and the crucifixes on the lid will have to be left for the second phase, when the pressure of funerals starts to diminish, but we are, nevertheless, conscious of the responsibility of being a fundamental part of this process. There was more and still

warmer applause among that gathering of undertakers' representatives, for now there really were reasons for mutual congratulation, no corpse would be left unburied, no invoice would be left unpaid. And what about the gravediggers, asked the man who had made the proposal, The gravediggers will do as they're told, replied the president irritably. This wasn't quite true. Another phone call revealed that the gravediggers were demanding a substantial salary increase and triple the going rate for any overtime. That's a problem for the local councils, said the president, let them sort it out. And what if we arrive at the cemetery and there's no one to dig the graves, asked the secretary. The debate raged on. At twenty-three hours and fifty minutes, the president had a heart attack. He died on the last stroke of midnight.

IT WAS MUCH MORE THAN A HECATOMB. THE SEVEN MONTHS that death's unilateral truce had lasted produced a waiting list of more than sixty thousand people on the point of death, or sixty-two thousand five hundred and eighty to be exact, all laid to rest in a moment, in an instant of time packed with a deadly power that would find comparison only in certain reprehensible human actions. By the way, we feel we must mention that death, by herself and alone, with no external help, has always killed far less than mankind has. Some curious-minded soul might be wondering how we came up with that precise figure of sixty-two thousand five hundred and eighty people who all closed their eyes at the same time and forever. It was very easy. Knowing that the country in which this is happening has more or less ten million inhabitants and that the death rate is more or less ten per thousand, two simple, not to say elementary arithmetical operations, multiplication and division, and factoring in, of course, the intermediate monthly and annual rates, allowed us to arrive at a narrow numerical band in which the quantity seemed like a reasonable average, and we use the word reasonable because we could have opted for the numbers on either side, sixty-two thousand five hundred and seventy-nine or sixty-two thousand five hundred and eighty-one if the death of the president of the undertakers' corporation, so sudden and unexpected, had not introduced into our calculations an element of doubt. Nevertheless, we are confident that the count made of the number of deaths, begun first thing the next morning, will confirm the accuracy of our calculations. Another curious-minded soul, of the kind who is always interrupting the narrator, will be wondering how the doctors knew which houses to go to in order to carry out a duty without which no dead person can be deemed legally dead, however indisputably dead they may be. Needless to say, in certain cases, the deceased's own family called out a locum or their g.p. but that would clearly not have been enough, since the aim was to try, in record time, to make official an entirely anomalous situation, and thus avoid confirming yet again the saying that misfortunes never come singly, which, when applied to this situation, would mean that any sudden death at home would be swiftly followed by putrefaction. Events went on to show that it is not by chance that a prime minister reaches such lofty heights and that, as the infallible wisdom of nations has demonstrated time and again, each country gets the government it deserves, although it must be said that while it is true to say that prime ministers, for good or ill, are not all the same, neither, it is no less true to say, are all countries. In short, in either case, it depends. Or if you prefer a slightly longer version of the same phrase, you never can tell. As you will see, any observer, even one not prone to making impartial judgments, will not hesitate to acknowledge that the government proved itself able to cope with the gravity of the situation. We will all remember that in the joy to which these people innocently surrendered themselves during those first, delicious and all-too-brief days of immortality, one lady, a recent widow, celebrated this new-found happiness by hanging the national flag from the flower-bedecked balcony of her dining room. We will also recall that, in less than forty-eight hours, this custom spread through the country like wildfire, like an epidemic. After seven months of continual and hard-to-bear disappointments, very few of those flags had survived, and even those that had were reduced to melancholy rags, their colors faded by the sun and washed away by the rains, the central emblem now nothing

but a sad blur. Showing admirable foresight, the government, as well as taking other emergency measures intended to mitigate any collateral damage caused by death's unexpected return, had reclaimed for themselves the national flag as a sign that there, in that third-floor apartment on the left, a dead person lay waiting. With these instructions, those families wounded by the odious *parcae* sent one of their members to the shop to buy a new flag, hung it at the window, and, as they brushed the flies from the face of the deceased, waited for the doctor to come and certify the death. It must be acknowledged that the idea was not just effective, but also extremely elegant. The doctors in each city, town, village or hamlet, in a car, on a bicycle or on foot, had only to wander the streets looking for a flag, go into the house thus marked and, having confirmed the death after a purely visual examination, without the help of instruments, since the scale of the emergency had made any closer scrutiny unfeasible, leave a signed piece of paper that would reassure the undertakers as to the specific nature of the raw material, which is to say, that, as the proverb goes, if they came to this house of the dead looking for wool, they would not go home shorn. As you will have realized, this clever use of the national flag would have a double aim and a double advantage. Having started out as a guide for doctors, it would then be a beacon for those who came to prepare the body. In the case of larger cities, and especially in the capital, which was a vast metropolis given the relatively small size of the country, the division of urban areas into sections, with a view to establishing proportional quotas for shares in the cake, as the unfortunate president of the association of funeral directors had so pithily put it, would prove an enormous help to the transporters of human freight in their race against time. The flag had another unforeseen and unexpected effect, one that shows how wrong we can be when we systematically devote ourselves to the cultivation of skepticism, and this was the virtuous gesture performed by certain citizens who were both respecters of the most deeply rooted traditions of polite social conduct as well as wearers of hats, for they would doff said hats whenever they passed a window adorned with a flag, thus leaving floating in the air a delightful doubt as to whether they were doing so because some one had died or because the flag was the living, sacred symbol of the nation.

Sales of newspapers, we hardly need say, shot up, even more so than when it seemed that death was a thing of the past. Obviously a lot of people had already heard on television about the cataclysm that had befallen them, many even had dead relatives at home awaiting the doctor's arrival, along with a flag weeping on the balcony outside, but it's easy to understand that there is a difference between the nervous image of the director-general talking last night on the small screen and these convulsive, agitated pages, emblazoned with exclamatory, apocalyptic headlines that can be folded up and put in one's pocket and carried off to be re-read at leisure in one's home and of which we are pleased to present a few of the more striking examples here, *After Paradise, Hell, Death Leads The Dance, Immortal But Not For Long, Once More Condemned To Die, Checkmate, Prior Warning From Now On, No Appeal And No Hope, A Letter On Violet Paper, Sixty-Two Thousand Deaths In Less Than A Second, Death Strikes At Midnight, No Escape From Destiny, Out Of the Dream And Into the Nightmare, Return To Normal, What*

Did We Do To Deserve This, etcetera, etcetera. All the newspapers, without exception, reprinted death's letter on the front page, but one of them, to make it easier to read, reproduced the text in a box and in a fourteen-point font, corrected the punctuation and syntax, adjusted the tenses of the verbs, added capitals where necessary, including on the final signature, which was changed from death to Death, an alteration unappreciable by the ear, but which, that same day, would provoke an indignant protest from the writer of the missive herself, again using the same violet-colored paper. According to the authorized opinion of a grammarian consulted by the newspaper, death had simply failed to master even the first rudiments of the art of writing. And then, he said, there's the calligraphy, which is strangely irregular, it's as if it combined all the known ways, both possible and aberrant, of forming the letters of the latin alphabet, as if each had been written by a different person, but that could be forgiven, one could even consider it a minor defect given the chaotic syntax, the absence of full stops, the complete lack of very necessary parentheses, the obsessive elimination of paragraphs, the random use of commas and, most unforgivable sin of all, the intentional and almost diabolical abolition of the capital letter, which, can you imagine, is even omitted from the actual signature of the letter and replaced by a lower-case d. It was a disgrace, an insult, the grammarian went on, asking, If death, who has had the priceless privilege of seeing the great literary geniuses of the past, writes like this, what of our children if they choose to imitate such a philological monstrosity, on the excuse that, considering how long death has been around, she should know everything there is to know about all branches of knowledge. And the grammarian concluded, The syntactical blunders that fill this appalling letter would lead me to think that this was some huge, clumsy confidence trick were it not for grim reality and the painful evidence that the terrible threat has come to pass. As we mentioned, on the afternoon of that same day, a letter from death reached the newspaper, demanding, in the most energetic terms, that the original spelling of her name be restored, Dear sir, she wrote, I am not Death, but death, Death is something of which you could never even conceive, and please note, mister grammarian, that I did not conclude that phrase with a preposition, you human beings only know the small everyday death that is me, the death which, even in the very worst disasters, is incapable of preventing life from continuing, one day you will find out about Death with a capital D, and at that moment, in the unlikely event that she gives you time to do so, you will understand the real difference between the relative and the absolute, between full and empty, between still alive and no longer alive, and when I say real difference, I am referring to something that mere words will never be able to express, relative, absolute, full, empty, still alive and no longer alive, because, sir, in case you don't know it, words move, they change from one day to the next, they are as unstable as shadows, are themselves shadows, which both are and have ceased to be, soap bubbles, shells in which one can barely hear a whisper, mere tree stumps, I give you this information gratis and for free, meanwhile, concern yourself with explaining to your readers the whys and wherefores of life and death, and now, returning to the original purpose of this letter, written, as was the one read out on television, by my own hand, I ask you to fulfill the provisions contained in the press regulations which demand that any error, omission or

mistake be rectified on the same page and in the same font size, and if this letter is not published in full, sir, you run the risk of receiving tomorrow morning, with immediate effect, the prior warning that I was reserving for you in a few years' time, although, so as not to ruin the rest of your life, I won't say exactly how many, yours faithfully, death. Accompanied by fulsome apologies from the editor, the letter appeared punctually the next day and in duplicate too, that is, reproduced in manuscript form as well as boxed and in the same fourteen-point font. Only when the newspaper was distributed did the editor dare to emerge from the bunker in which he had been hidden away from the moment he had read that threatening letter. And he was so frightened that he even refused to publish the graphological study delivered to him personally by an important expert. I got myself in quite enough of a mess just by printing death's signature with an upper case d, so take your analysis to some other newspaper, let's share out the misfortune and from now on leave things to god, anything to avoid getting another fright like that. The graphologist went to another newspaper, then another and another, and only at the fourth try, when he was already losing hope, did he find someone prepared to accept the fruits of the many hours of labyrinthine work he had put in, toiling day and night over his magnifying glass. The substantial and juicy report began by noting that the interpretation of writing had originally been one of the branches of physiognomy, the others being, for the information of those not au fait with this exact science, mime, gesture, pantomime and phonognomy, after which he brought in the major authorities on this complex subject, each in his or her own time and place, for example, camillo baldi, johann caspar lavater, édouard auguste patrice hocquart, adolf henze, jean-hippolyte michon, william thierry preyer, cesare lombroso, jules crépieux-jamin, rudolf pophal, ludwig klages, wilhelm helmuth müller, alice enskat, robert heiss, thanks to whom graphology had been restructured as a psychological tool, demonstrating the ambivalence of graphological details and the need to express these as a whole, and then, having set out the essential historical facts of the matter, our graphologist launched into an exhaustive definition of the principal characteristics being studied, namely, size, pressure, spacing, margins, angles, punctuation, the length of upward and downward strokes, or, in other words, the intensity, shape, slant, direction and fluidity of graphic signs, and finally, having made it clear that the aim of his study was not to make a clinical diagnosis, or a character analysis, or an examination of professional aptitude, the specialist focused his attention on the evident links with the criminological world which the writing revealed at every step, Nevertheless, he wrote in grim, frustrated tones, I find myself faced by a contradiction which I can see no way of resolving, and for which I very much doubt there is any possible resolution, and this is the fact that while it is true that all the vectors of this methodical and meticulous graphological analysis point to the authoress of the letter being what people call a serial killer, another equally irrefutable truth finally imposed itself upon me, one that to some extent demolishes that earlier thesis, which is this, that the person who wrote the letter is dead. And so it was, and death herself could not but confirm this, You're quite right, sir, she said when she read this display of erudition. What no one could understand was this, if she was dead and nothing but bones, how then could she kill? More to the point, how could she write letters? These are mysteries that

will never be explained.

Occupied as we were with explaining what happened after the fateful stroke of midnight to the sixty-two thousand five hundred and eighty people left in a state of suspended life, we put off for a more opportune moment, which happens to be this one, our indispensable reflections on the way in which the changed situation affected the eventide homes, the hospitals, the insurance companies, the maphia and the church, especially the catholic church, which was the country's majority religion, so much so that it was commonly believed that our lord jesus christ would not have wanted to be born anywhere else if he had had to repeat, from a to z, his first and, as far as we know, only earthly existence. To begin with the eventide homes, feelings were much as you would expect. If you bear in mind, as we explained at the very start of these surprising events, that the continuous rotation of inmates was a necessary condition for the economic prosperity of these enterprises, the return of death was bound to be, and indeed was, a reason for joy and renewed hope for the respective managements. After the initial shock provoked by the reading out on television of the famous letter from death, the managers immediately began to do their sums and they all came out right. Not a few bottles of champagne were drunk at midnight to celebrate this unexpected return to normality, and while such behavior may appear to show a gross indifference to and scorn for other people's lives, what it really showed was the perfectly natural sense of relief, the need to give vent to pent-up emotions, of someone who, standing outside a locked door to which he has lost the key, suddenly sees it swing open and the sun come pouring in. More scrupulous people will say that they should at least have avoided the noisy, frivolous ostentation of champagne, with corks popping and glasses overflowing, and that a discreet glass of port or madeira, a drop of cognac, a touch of brandy in one's coffee would have been celebration enough, but we know how easily the spirit lets slip the reins of the body when happiness takes over, and know, too, that even though one shouldn't condone it, one can always forgive. The following morning, the managers summoned the families to fetch their dead, then they had the rooms aired and the sheets changed, and, having gathered all the staff together to tell them that life goes on despite all, they sat down to examine the list of potential customers and to choose from among the applicants those who seemed most promising. For reasons not entirely identical in every aspect, but which, nevertheless, merit equal consideration, the mood among hospital administrators and the medical classes had also improved overnight. However, as we said before, although a large number of patients who were beyond cure or whose illness had reached its end or its final stage, if one can apply such terms to a nosological state deemed to be eternal, had been moved back to their homes and their families, What better hands could the poor wretches find themselves in, they asked hypocritically, the truth is that many of them, with no known relatives and no money to pay the rates demanded by the eventide homes, were crammed in wherever there was space, not in corridors, as has long been the custom in these worthy establishments yesterday, today and always, but in lumber rooms and attics, where they would often be left for days at a time, without anyone taking the slightest notice of them, for, as the doctors and nurses said, regardless of how

ill they might be, they couldn't die. Now they were dead, and had been taken away and buried, and the air in the hospitals, with its unmistakable aroma of ether, iodine and disinfectant, had become as pure and crystalline as mountain air. They didn't crack open any bottles of champagne, but the happy smiles of administrators and clinical directors were a salve to the soul, and as for the male doctors, suffice it to say that they had recovered their traditionally predatory gaze when they gave the female nursing staff the eye. Normality, in every sense of the word, had been restored. As for the insurance companies, third on the list, there is not as yet much to say, because they haven't quite figured out whether the present situation, in the light of the changes introduced into life insurance policies and which we described in detail earlier, will be to their advantage or disadvantage. They will not take a step without being quite sure they are walking on firm ground, but when they finally do, they will put down new roots under whatever form of contract they draw up to suit their own best interests. Meanwhile, since the future belongs to god and because no one knows what tomorrow will bring, they will continue to consider as dead any insured person who has reached the age of eighty, that bird at least they have firmly grasped in their hand, and it only remains to be seen if tomorrow they can get two more to fall into the net. Some, however, propose that they should make the most of the current confusion in society, which stands more than ever between the devil and the deep blue sea, between scylla and charybdis, between a rock and a hard place, and that it might not be a bad idea to increase the age of actuarial death to eighty-five or even ninety. The reasoning of those who defend this change is as clear as water, they say that, by the time people reach such an age, not only do they have no relatives to look after them in time of need, indeed, any such relatives might be so old that it makes no odds anyway, they also suffer a real reduction in the value of their retirement pensions because of inflation and the rising cost of living, which means that they are often forced to interrupt payment of their premiums, thus giving insurance companies the best of motives to consider the respective contract null and void. That's inhuman, object some. Business is business, say the others. We will see how it all ends.

At this same hour, the maphia were also intently talking business. Perhaps because we were too thorough, as we unreservedly admit, the description we gave of the black tunnels through which the criminal organization penetrated the world of funeral directors may have led some readers to wonder what kind of miserable maphia this is that it has no easier or more profitable ways of making money. Oh, but it has, and many and various they are, however, like any of its counterparts scattered throughout the world, skilled in balancing acts and in using tactics and strategies to best advantage, the local maphia did not merely rely on immediate gains, they were aiming higher than that, they had their eye on eternity, on neither more nor less than establishing, with the tacit agreement of families persuaded of the usefulness of euthanasia and with the blessing of politicians who would pretend to look the other way, an absolute monopoly on human deaths and burials, at the same time taking responsibility for keeping the nation's demographics at a level that was convenient for the country at any one time, turning the tap on and off, to use the image deployed before, or to use a more rigorously technical term, controlling the

fluxometer. If they could not, at least in that initial phase, speed up or slow down procreation, it would at least be in their power to accelerate or delay journeys to the frontier, not the geographical one this time, but the eternal frontier. At the precise moment when we entered the room, the debate was focused on how they could make optimum use of the work force that had been left idle since the return of death, and although there was no shortage of suggestions from around the table, some more radical than others, they ended up choosing one with a long proven track record and which would require no complicated mechanisms, namely, the protection business. The very next day, from north to south, in every part of the country, the offices of funeral directors saw two visitors come through their door, usually two men, sometimes a man and a woman, only rarely two women, who politely asked to speak to the manager, to whom they equally courteously explained that his business ran the risk of being attacked and even destroyed, either by bomb or fire, by activists from certain illegal groups of citizens who were demanding the inclusion of the right to eternal life in the universal declaration of human rights and who, frustrated in their desires, were now determined to vent their fury by letting the heavy hand of vengeance fall on innocent companies such as theirs, simply because they were the people who carried the corpses to their final resting place. We are told, said one of the emissaries, that these organized attacks, which could, if they met with any resistance, include the murder of the owner and the manager as well as their families, and if not them, then one or two employees, will start tomorrow, possibly here, possibly elsewhere, But what can I do, asked the poor manager, trembling, Nothing, you can't do anything, but if you like, we can protect you, Yes, of course, if you can, There are a few conditions to be met, Whatever they are, please, protect me, The first is that you will not talk about this to anyone, not even to your wife, But I'm not married, It doesn't matter, not even to your mother, your grandmother or your aunt, My lips are sealed, Just as well, because, otherwise, you risk having them sealed forever, And what about the other conditions, There's only one, to pay whatever we ask, Pay, We'll have to organize the protection operation, and that, dear sir, costs money, Ah, I understand, We could even protect the whole of humanity if it were prepared to pay the price, but meanwhile, since each age is always followed by another, we still live in hope, Hm, I see, How fortunate that you're so quick on the uptake, How much must I pay, It's written down on this piece of paper, That's a lot, It's the going rate, And is it per year or per month, Per week, But I don't have that kind of money, we funeral directors don't earn very much, You're lucky we're not asking you for what you, in your opinion, think your life is worth, Well, I only have one, And you could easily lose that, which is why we advise you to take good care of it, All right, I'll think about it, I need to talk to my partners, You have twenty-four hours, not a minute more, after that, we wash our hands of the matter, the responsibility will be yours alone, if anything should happen to you, we're pretty sure that the first time won't be fatal, and at that point, we'll come back and talk to you again, by then, of course, the price will have doubled and you'll have no option but to pay us whatever we ask, you can't imagine how implacable these citizens' groups demanding eternal life can be, All right, I'll pay, Four weeks in advance, please, Four weeks, Yours is an urgent case and, as we said before, it costs money to mount a protection operation, In

cash or by check, In cash, checks are for a different kind of transaction and for different sums of money, when it's best if the money doesn't pass directly from one hand to another. The manager went and opened the safe, counted out the notes and asked as he handed them over, Give me a receipt or some other document guaranteeing me protection, No receipt, no guarantee, you'll have to be content with our word of honor, Honor, Yes, honor, you can't imagine how thoroughly we honor our word, Where can I find you if I have a problem, Don't worry, we'll find you, I'll see you to the door, No, don't bother, we know the way, turn left after the storeroom for coffins, past the make-up room, down the corridor, through reception and there's the street door, You won't get lost, We have a very keen sense of direction, we never get lost, for example, in five weeks' time, someone will come here to receive the next payment, How will I know it's the right person, You'll have no doubts when you see him, Goodbye, Yes, goodbye, no need to thank us.

Finally, last but not least, the catholic apostolic church of rome had many reasons to feel pleased with itself. Convinced from the start that the abolition of death could only be the work of the devil and that to help god fight the demon's works there is nothing more powerful than perseverance in prayer, they had set aside the virtue of modesty which, with no small effort and sacrifice, they usually cultivated, to congratulate themselves unreservedly on the success of the national campaign of prayer whose objective, remember, had been to ask the lord god to bring about the return of death as quickly as possible so as to save poor humanity from the worst horrors, end of quote. The prayers had taken nearly eight months to reach heaven, but when you think that it takes six months to reach the planet mars, then heaven, as you can imagine, must be much farther off, three thousand million light-years from earth, in round numbers. A black cloud, therefore, hung over the church's legitimate satisfaction. The theologians argued and failed to reach agreement on the reasons that had led god to order death's sudden return, without at least allowing time for the last rites to be given to the sixty-two thousand dying, who, deprived of the grace of the last sacrament, had expired in less time than it takes to say so. Worrying thoughts as to whether god had authority over death or if, on the contrary, death was above god in the hierarchy quietly gnawed away at the hearts and minds of that holy institution, where the bold affirmation that god and death were two sides of the same coin had come to be considered not so much heresy as an abominable sacrilege. At least that was what was really going on beneath the surface, whereas to others it seemed that the church's main preoccupation was their participation in the queen mother's funeral. Now that the sixty-two thousand ordinary dead were safely in their final resting place and no longer holding up the traffic in the city, it was time to bear the venerable lady, suitably enclosed in her lead coffin, to the royal pantheon. As the newspapers all agreed, it was the end of an era.

IT MAY BE THAT A VERY GENTEEL UPBRINGING, OF THE KIND that is becoming increasingly rare, along, perhaps, with the almost superstitious respect that the written word can instill into certain timid souls, has prevented readers, although they are more than justified in showing signs of ill-contained impatience, from interrupting this long digression and demanding to be told what death has been up to since the fateful night when she announced her return. Now given the important role that the eventide homes, the hospitals, the insurance companies, the maphia and the catholic church played in these extraordinary events, it seemed only fitting to explain in fulsome detail how they reacted to this sudden and dramatic turn of events, but unless, of course, death, taking into account the enormous numbers of corpses that would have to be buried in the hours immediately following her announcement, had decided, in an unexpected and praiseworthy gesture of sympathy, to prolong her absence for a few more days in order to give life time to return to its old axis other, newly dead people, that is, those who died during the first few days of the restoration of the old regime would have been forced to join the unfortunates who had, for months, been hovering between here and there, and then, as is only logical, we would have been obliged to speak of those new deaths too. However, that is not what happened, Death was not so generous. The week-long pause, during which no one died and which, initially, created the illusion that nothing had, in fact, changed, came about simply because of the new rules governing the relationship between death and mortals, namely that everyone would receive prior warning that they still had a week to live until, shall we say, payment was due, a week in which to sort out their affairs, make a will, pay their back taxes and say goodbye to their family and to their closest friends. In theory, this seemed like a good idea, but practice would soon show that it was not. Imagine a person, the sort who enjoys splendid good health, who has never suffered from so much as a headache, an optimist both on principle and because he has clear and objective reasons for being so, and who, one morning, leaving his house on his way to work, meets his local and very helpful postman, who says, Lucky I caught you, mr. so-and-so, I've got a letter for you, and the man receives in his hands a violet-colored envelope to which he might pay no particular attention, after all, it's probably just more junk mail from those direct marketing fellows, except that his name on the envelope is written in a strange hand, exactly like the writing on the famous facsimile published in the newspaper. If, at that moment, his heart gives a startled leap, if he's filled by a grim presentiment of some inevitable misfortune and he tries to refuse the letter, he won't be able to, it will be as if someone, gently holding his elbow, were guiding him down the steps to avoid slipping on a discarded banana skin, helping him round the corner so that he doesn't trip over his own feet. It will be pointless, too, trying to tear the envelope into pieces, because everyone knows that letters from death are, by definition, indestructible, not even an acetylene blowtorch at full blast could do away with them, and the ingenuous trick of pretending that he has dropped it would prove equally useless because the letter won't allow itself to fall, it will stay as if glued to his fingers, and even if, by some miracle, the impossible should happen, you can be sure that some good-hearted citizen would immediately pick it up and run after the person who was busily pretending not to have noticed and say, This letter is yours, I believe, it might be

important, and the man would have to reply sadly, Yes, it is important, thank you very much for your pains. But that could only have happened at the beginning, when very few people knew that death was using the public postal service as a messenger for her funereal letters of notification. In a matter of days, the color violet would become the most hated of all colors, even more so than black, despite the fact that black represented mourning, but then this is perfectly understandable when you consider that mourning is worn by the living, not the dead, although the latter do tend to be buried wearing black. Imagine, then, the bewilderment, fear and perplexity of that man setting off to work and seeing death suddenly step into his path in the shape of a postman who will definitely not ring twice, for, if he hadn't chanced to meet the addressee in the street, he would simply have put the letter through the relevant mailbox or slipped it under the door. The man is standing there, in the middle of the pavement, with his superb health, his solid head, so solid that even now, despite the terrible shock, it still doesn't ache, suddenly the world has ceased to belong to him or he to the world, they have merely been lent to each other for seven days and not a day longer, according to this violet-colored letter he has just reluctantly opened, his eyes so full of tears that he can barely read what's written there, Dear sir, I regret to inform you that in a week your life will end, irrevocably and irremissibly. Please make the best use you can of the time remaining to you, yours faithfully, death. The signature has a lower-case d, which, as we know, acts, in some way, as its certificate of origin. The man hesitates, the postman called him mr. so-and-so, which means, as we can see for ourselves, that he's of the male sex, the man wonders whether to go home and tell his family of this irrevocable sentence or if, on the contrary, he should bite back his tears and continue on his way to where his work awaits him and fill up what days remain to him, then feel able to ask, Death where is thy victory, knowing, however, that he will receive no reply, because death never replies, not because she doesn't want to, but because she doesn't know what to say in the face of the greatest of human sorrows.

This episode in the street, only possible in a small place where everyone knows everyone else, speaks volumes about the inconvenience of the communication system instituted by death for the termination of the temporary contract which we call life or existence. It could be seen as a display of sadistic cruelty, like so many others we see every day, but death has no need to be cruel, taking people's lives is more than enough. She simply hadn't thought it through. And now, absorbed as she must be in reorganizing her support services after a long hiatus of more than seven months, she has neither eyes nor ears for the cries of despair and anguish uttered by the men and women who, one by one, are being warned of their imminent death, feelings of despair and anguish which, in some cases, are having precisely the opposite effect to the one she had foreseen, because the people condemned to disappear are not sorting out their affairs, they are not writing wills, they are not paying back taxes, and as for saying their farewells to family and close friends, they are leaving that to the last minute, which, of course, is not enough even for the most melancholy of farewells. Ill-informed about the true nature of death, whose other name is fate, the newspapers have outdone themselves in furious attacks on

her, calling her pitiless, cruel, tyrannical, wicked, bloodthirsty, disloyal and treacherous, a vampire, the empress of evil, a dracula in skirts, the enemy of humankind, a murderess and, again, a serial killer, and there was even one weekly magazine, of the humorous kind, which, squeezing every ounce of sarcasm out of its copywriters, managed to come up with the term daughter-of-a-bitch. Fortunately, in some newspapers, good sense continued to reign. One of the most respected papers in the kingdom, the doyen of the national press, published a wise editorial in which it called for a frank and open dialogue with death, holding nothing back, with hand on heart and in a spirit of fraternity, always assuming, of course, that they could find out where she lived, her cave, her lair, her headquarters. Another paper suggested that the police authorities should investigate stationer's shops and paper manufacturers, because human users of violet-colored envelopes, if ever there were any, and they would always have been very few, would be sure to have changed their epistolary tastes in view of recent events, and it would thus be as easy as pie to catch the macabre customer when she turned up to refresh her supplies. Another newspaper, a bitter rival of the latter, was quick to describe this idea as both crass and stupid, because only an arrant fool could think that death, who, as everyone knew, was a skeleton draped in a sheet, would set out, bony heels clattering along the pavement, to mail her letters. Not wishing to lag behind the press, the television advised the interior minister to have policemen guard mailboxes and pillar boxes, apparently forgetting that the first letter addressed to the director-general of television had appeared in his office when the door was double-locked and no window panes broken. Floor, walls and ceilings revealed not a crack, not even one tiny enough to slip a razor blade through. Perhaps it really was possible to persuade death to show more compassion toward the poor unfortunates condemned to die, but to do that, they would have to find her and no one knew how or where.

It was then that a forensic scientist, well informed about everything that related, directly or indirectly, to his profession, had the idea of inviting over a celebrated foreign expert in the reconstruction of faces from skulls, this expert, basing himself on representations of death in old paintings and engravings, especially those showing her bare cranium, would try to replace any missing flesh, restore the eyes to their sockets, add, in just proportions, hair, eyelashes and eyebrows, as well as appropriate touches of color to the cheeks, until before him appeared a perfect, finished head of which a thousand photographic copies would then be made so that the same number of investigators could carry it in their wallets to compare with the many women they would see. The trouble was that, when the foreign expert had concluded his work, only someone with a very untrained eye would have said that the three chosen skulls were identical, and this obliged the investigators to work with not just one photograph, but three, which would obviously hinder the death-hunt, as the operation had, rather ambitiously, been called. Only one thing had been proved beyond doubt, and about which even the most rudimentary iconography, the most complicated nomenclature, and the most abstruse symbolism had all been correct. Death, in her features, attributes and characteristics, was unmistakably a woman. As you will doubtless remember, the eminent

graphologist who studied death's first letter had clearly reached the same conclusion when he referred to the writer of the letter as its authoress, but that might have been pure habit, given that, with the exception of a very few languages, which, for some unknown reason, opt for the masculine or the neuter, death has always been a person of the female gender. Now we have given this information before, but, lest you forget, it would be as well to insist on the fact that the three faces, all of them female and all of them young, did differ from each other in certain ways, despite the clear similarities that everyone saw in them. The existence of three different deaths, for example, working in shifts, was simply not credible, so two of them would have to be excluded, although, just to complicate matters still further, it might well be that the skeletal model of the real and true death did not correspond to any of the three who had been selected. It was, as the saying goes, a question of firing a shot in the dark and hoping that benevolent chance had time to place the target in the bullet's path.

The investigation began, as it had to, in the archives of the official identification service in which were gathered photographs of all the country's inhabitants, both indigenous and foreign, classified and ordered according to certain basic characteristics, the dolichocephalic to one side, the brachycephalic to the other. The results were disappointing. At first, of course, since, as we said before, the models chosen for the facial reconstruction had been taken from old engravings and paintings, no one really hoped to find the humanized image of death in these modern identification systems, instituted just over a century ago, but, on the other hand, bearing in mind that death has always existed and since there seems no reason to suppose that she would have needed to change her face over the ages, and not forgetting that it must be difficult for her to carry out her work properly and safe from suspicion while living in clandestinity, it is therefore perfectly logical to accept the hypothesis that she might have put herself down in the civil registry under a false name, for as we know all too well, nothing is impossible for death. Whatever the truth of the matter, the fact is that, despite asking for help from those gifted in information technology and data exchange, the investigators found not a single photograph of any identifiable woman who looked anything like the three virtual images of death. As had already been foreseen, there was, then, no alternative but to return to the classic investigatory methods, to the policemanly craft of piecing together snippets of information and sending forth those one thousand agents so that, by going from house to house, from shop to shop, from office to office, from factory to factory, from restaurant to restaurant, from bar to bar, and even visiting those places reserved for the onerous exercise of sex, they could inspect all the women in the land, excluding adolescents and those of mature or advanced years, because the three photographs they had in their pocket made it quite clear that death, if ever she were found, would be a woman of about thirty-six and very beautiful indeed. According to the model they had been given, any of them could have been death, although none of them was. After enormous effort, after trudging miles and miles along streets, roads and paths, after going up flights of stairs which, placed end to end, would have carried them up to the skies, the agents managed to identify two of these women, who differed from the

existing photographs in the archives only because they had benefited from cosmetic surgery, which, by an astonishing coincidence, by a strange happenstance, had emphasized the similarities of their faces to the reconstructed faces of the models. However, a meticulous examination of their respective biographies ruled out, with no margin for error, any possibility that they had once dedicated themselves, even in their spare time, to the deadly activities of death, either professionally or as mere amateurs. As for the third woman, identified only from family albums, she had died the previous year. By a simple process of elimination, someone who had been the victim of death could not also be death. And needless to say, while the investigations were going on, and they lasted some weeks, the violet-colored envelopes continued to arrive at the homes of their addressees. It was clear that death would not budge from her agreement with humanity.

Naturally, one must ask if the government was merely standing by and impassively watching the daily drama being lived out by the country's ten million inhabitants. The answer is twofold, affirmative on the one hand and negative on the other. Affirmative, although only in rather relative terms, because dying is, after all, the most normal and ordinary thing in life, a purely routine fact, an episode in the endless legacy passed from parents to children, at least since adam and eve, and world governments would do enormous harm to the public's precarious peace of mind if they declared three days of national mourning every time some poor old man died in a home for the destitute. And negative because it would be impossible, even if you had a heart of stone, to remain indifferent to the palpable fact that the week's notice given by death had taken on the proportions of a real collective calamity, not just for the average of three hundred people at whose door ill luck came knocking each day, but also for the people who remained, neither more nor less than nine million nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand and seven hundred people of all ages, fortunes and conditions, who, each morning when they woke from a night tormented by the most terrible nightmares, saw the sword of damocles hanging by a thread over their head. As for the three hundred inhabitants who had received the fateful violet-colored letter, responses to the implacable sentence varied, as is only natural, depending on the character of each individual. As well as those people mentioned above who, driven by a twisted idea of revenge to which one could quite rightly apply the neologism prepost-humous, decided to abandon their civic and familial duties by not writing a will or paying their back taxes, there were many who, acting on a highly corrupt interpretation of the horatian carpe diem, squandered what little life was left to them by giving themselves over to reprehensible orgies of sex, drugs and alcohol, thinking perhaps that by falling into such wild excesses, they might bring down upon their own heads some fatal stroke or, if not, a divine thunderbolt which, by killing them there and then, would snatch them from the grasp of death proper, thus playing a trick on death that might well make her change her ways. Others, stoical, dignified and courageous, went for the radical option of suicide, believing that they, too, would be teaching a lesson in manners to the power of thanatos, delivering what we used to call a verbal slap in the face, of the sort that, in accordance with the honest convictions of the

time, would be all the more painful if it had its origin in the ethical and moral arena and not in some primitive desire for physical revenge. All these attempts failed, of course, apart, that is, from those stubborn people who reserved their suicide for the last day of the deadline. A masterly move, to which death could find no answer.

To its credit, the first institution to get a real sense of the mood of the people in general was the catholic apostolic church of rome, to which, since we live in an age dominated by the boom in the use of acronyms in day-to-day communications, both private and public, it might be a good idea to give the easier abbreviation of c.a.c.o.r. It is also true that you would have had to be stone-blind not to notice how, almost from one moment to the next, the churches filled up with distraught people in search of some word of hope, some consolation, a balm, an analgesic, a spiritual tranquilizer. People who, until then, had lived in the consciousness that death was inevitable and that there was no possible escape, but thinking at the same time, since there were so many other people doomed to die, that only by some real stroke of bad luck would their turn ever come around, those same people now spent their time peering from behind the curtains, waiting for the postman or trembling when they returned home, where the dreaded violet-colored letter, worse than a bloody monster with jaws gaping, might be lurking behind the door, ready to leap out at them. The churches did not stop work for a moment, the long queues of contrite sinners, constantly refreshed like factory assembly lines, wound twice round the central nave. The confessors on duty never stopped, sometimes they were distracted by fatigue, at others their attention was suddenly caught by some scandalous detail, but in the end they simply handed out a pro forma penance, so many our fathers, so many ave marias, and then muttered a hasty absolution. In the brief interval between one confessee leaving and the next confessant kneeling down, the confessors would grab a bite of the chicken sandwich that would be their lunch, meanwhile vaguely imagining some compensatory delight for supper. Sermons were invariably on the subject of death as the only way into the heavenly paradise, where, it was said, no one ever entered alive, and the preachers, in their eagerness to console, did not hesitate to resort to the highest forms of rhetoric and to the lowest tricks in the catechism to convince their terrified parishioners that they could, after all, consider themselves more fortunate than their ancestors, because death had given them enough time to prepare their souls with a view to ascending into eden. There were some priests, however, who, trapped in the malodorous gloom of the confessional, had to screw up their courage, god knows at what cost, because they, too, that very morning, had received the violet-colored envelope, and so had more than enough reason to doubt the emollient virtues of what they were saying.

The same was happening with the therapists that the health minister, hastening to imitate the therapeutic aid given by the church, had dispatched to bring succor to the most desperate. It was not infrequent for a psychiatrist, when counseling a patient that crying would be the best way to relieve the pain tormenting him, to burst into convulsive sobs himself when he remembered that he, too, might be the recipient of an identical

envelope in the next day's post. Both psychiatrist and patient would end the session bawling their eyes out, embraced by the same misfortune, but with the therapist thinking that if a misfortune did befall him, he would still have seven days to live, one hundred and ninety-two hours. A few little orgies of sex, drugs and alcohol, which he had heard were being organized, would ease his passage into the next world, although, of course, you then ran the risk that such excesses might only make you miss this world all the more intensely when you were up there on your ethereal throne.

ACCORDING TO THE WISDOM OF THE NATIONS, THERE IS AN exception to every rule, even rules that would normally be considered utterly inviolable, as for example, those regarding the sovereignty of death, to which, by definition, there never could be an exception, however absurd, and yet it really must be true because, as it happened, one violet-colored letter was returned to sender. Some will object that such a thing is impossible, that death, being ubiquitous, cannot therefore be in any one particular place, from which one can deduce the impossibility, both material and metaphysical, of locating and defining what we normally understand by the word sender, or, in the meaning intended here, the place from which the letter came. Others will also object, albeit less speculatively, that, since a thousand policemen have been looking for death for weeks on end, scouring the entire country, house by house, with a fine-tooth comb, as if in search of an elusive louse highly skilled in evasive tactics, and have still found neither hide nor hair of her, it is as clear as day that if no explanation has yet been given as to how death's letters reach the mail, we are certainly not going to be told by what mysterious channels the returned letter has managed to reach her hands. We humbly recognize that our explanations about this and much more have been sadly lacking, we confess that we are unable to provide explanations that will satisfy those demanding them, unless, taking advantage of the reader's credulity and leaping over the respect owed to the logic of events, we were to add further unrealities to the congenital unreality of this fable, now we realize that such faults seriously undermine our story's credibility, however, none of this, we repeat, none of this means that the violet-colored letter to which we referred was not returned to its sender. Facts are facts, and this fact, whether you like it or not, is of the irrefutable kind. There can be no better proof of this than the image of death before us now, sitting on a chair while wrapped in her sheet, and with a look of blank amazement on the orography of her bony face. She eyes the violet envelope suspiciously, studies it to see if it bears any of the comments postmen usually write on envelopes in such cases, for example, returned, not known at this address, addressee gone away leaving no forwarding address or date of return, or simply, dead, How stupid of me, she muttered, how could he have died if the letter that should have killed him came back unopened. She had thought these last words without giving them much importance, but she immediately summoned them up again and repeated them out loud, in a dreamy tone of voice, Came back unopened. You don't need to be a postman to know that coming back is not the same thing as being sent back, that coming back could merely mean that the violet-colored letter failed to reach its destination, that at some point along the way something happened to make it retrace its steps and return whence it had come. Letters can only go where they're taken, they don't have legs or wings, and, as far as we know, they're not endowed with their own initiative, if they were, we're sure that they would refuse to carry the terrible news of which they're so often the bearers. Like this news of mine, thought death impartially, telling someone that they're going to die on a particular date is the worst possible news, it's like spending long years on death row and then having the jailer come up to you and say, Here's the letter, prepare yourself. The odd thing is that all the other letters from the last batch were safely delivered to their addressees, and if this one wasn't, it can only have been because of some chance event, for just as there have been cases of a love

letter, god alone knows with what consequences, taking five years to reach an addressee who lived only two blocks and less than a quarter of an hour's walk away, it could be that this letter passed from one conveyor belt to another without anyone noticing and then returned to its point of departure like someone who, lost in the desert, has nothing more to go on than the trail he left behind him. The solution would be to send it again, said death to the scythe that was next to her, leaning against the white wall. One wouldn't expect a scythe to respond, and this one proved no exception. Death went on, If I'd sent you, with your taste for expeditious methods, the matter would have been resolved, but times have changed a lot lately, and one has to update the means and the systems one uses, to keep up with the new technologies, by using e-mail, for example, I've heard tell that it's the most hygienic way, one that does away with inkblots and fingerprints, besides which it's fast, you just open up outlook express on microsoft and it's gone, the difficulty would be having to work with two separate archives, one for those who use computers and another for those who don't, anyway, we've got plenty of time to think about it, they're always coming out with new models and new designs, with new improved technologies, perhaps I'll try it some day, but until then, I'll continue to write with pen, paper and ink, it has the charm of tradition, and tradition counts for a lot when it comes to dying. Death stared hard at the violet-colored envelope, made a gesture with her right hand, and the letter vanished. So now we know that, contrary to what so many thought, death does not take her letters to the post office.

On the table is a list of two hundred and ninety-eight names, rather fewer than usual, one hundred and fifty-two men and one hundred and forty-six women, and the same number of violet-colored envelopes and sheets of paper are ready for the next mailing, or death-by-post. Death added to the list the name on the letter that had been returned to sender, underlined it and replaced her pen in the pen holder. If she had any nerves at all, we could say that she felt slightly excited, and with good reason. She had lived for far too long to consider the return of the letter unimportant. It's easy enough to understand, it takes very little imagination to see why death's workplace is probably the duller of all those created since cain killed abel, an incident for which god bears all the blame. Since that first deplorable incident, which, from the moment the world began, demonstrated the difficulties of family life, and right up until the present day, the process has remained unchanged for centuries and centuries and more centuries, repetitive, unceasing, uninterrupted, unbroken, varying only in the many ways of passing from life to non-life, but basically always the same because the result was always the same. The fact is that whoever was meant to die died. And now, remarkably, a letter signed by death, written in her own hand, a letter warning of someone's irrevocable and un-postponable end, had been returned to sender, to this cold room where the author and signatory of the letter sits, wrapped in the melancholy shroud that is her historic uniform, the hood over her head, as she ponders what has happened, meanwhile drumming on the desk with the bones of her fingers, or the fingers of her bones. She's slightly surprised to find herself hoping that the letter will be returned again, that the envelope will carry, for example, a message denying all knowledge of the addressee's whereabouts, because

that really would be a new experience for someone who has always managed to find us wherever we were hidden, if, in that childish way, we thought we might escape her. However, she doesn't really believe that the supposed absence will be marked on the back of the envelope, here the archives are updated automatically with every gesture or movement we make, with every step we take, every change of house, status, profession, habit or custom, if we smoke or don't smoke, if we eat a lot or a little or nothing, if we're active or indolent, if we have a headache or indigestion, if we suffer from constipation or diarrhea, if our hair falls out or we get cancer, if it's a yes, a no or a maybe, all she will have to do is open the drawer of the alphabetical file, look for the corresponding folder, and there it will all be. And it shouldn't astonish us in the least if, at the very moment we were reading our own personal file, we saw instantaneously recorded there the sudden pang of anxiety that froze us. Death knows everything about us, and that perhaps is why she's sad. If it's true that she doesn't smile, this is only because she has no lips, and this anatomical lesson tells us that, contrary to what the living may believe, a smile is not a matter of teeth. There are those who say, with a sense of humor that owes more to a lack of taste than it does to the macabre, that she wears a kind of permanent, fixed grin, but that isn't true, what she wears is a grimace of pain, because she's constantly pursued by the memory of the time when she had a mouth, and her mouth a tongue, and her tongue saliva. With a brief sigh, she took up a sheet of paper and began writing the first letter of the day, Dear madam, I regret to inform you that in a week your life will end, irrevocably and irremissibly. Please make the best use you can of the time remaining to you, yours faithfully, death. Two hundred and ninety-eight sheets of paper, two hundred and ninety-eight envelopes, two hundred and ninety-eight names removed from the list, this is not exactly a killingly hard job, but the fact is that when she reaches the end, death is exhausted. Making that gesture with her right hand with which we're already familiar, she dispatched the two hundred and ninety-eight letters, then, folding her bony arms on the desk, she rested her head on them, not in order to sleep, because death doesn't sleep, but in order to rest. When, half an hour later, once recovered from her tiredness, she raised her head, the letter that had been returned to sender and sent again was back, right there before her empty, astonished eye sockets.

If death had dreamed hopefully of some surprise to distract her from the boredom of routine, she was well served. Here was that surprise, and it could hardly be bettered. The first time the letter was returned could have been put down to a mere accident along the way, a castor come off its axle, a lubrication problem, a sky-blue letter in a hurry to arrive that had pushed its way to the front, in short, one of those unexpected things that happen inside machines, or, indeed, inside the human body, and which can throw off even the most exact calculations. The fact that it had been returned twice was quite different, it clearly showed that there was an obstacle at some point along the road that should have taken it straight to the home of the addressee, an obstacle that sent the letter rebounding back to where it had come from. In the first instance, given that the return had taken place on the day after it had been sent, it was still possible that the postman, having failed to find the person to whom the letter should have been delivered,

instead of putting the letter through the mailbox or under the door, had returned it to the sender, but omitted to give a reason. All this was pure supposition, of course, but it could explain what had happened. Now, however, things were different. Between coming and going, the letter had taken less than half an hour, probably much less, for it was there on the desk when death raised her head from the rather hard resting-place of her forearms, that is from the cubit and the radius, which are intertwined for that very purpose. A strange, mysterious, incomprehensible force appeared to be resisting the death of that person, even though the date of his demise had been fixed, as it had for everyone, from the day of his birth. It's impossible, said death to the silent scythe, no one in this world or beyond has ever had more power than I have, I'm death, all else is nothing. She got up from her chair and went over to the filing cabinet, from which she returned with the suspect file. There was no doubt about it, the name agreed with that on the envelope, so did the address, the person's profession was given as cellist and the space for civil status was blank, a sign that he was neither married, widowed nor divorced, because in death's files the status of bachelor is never recorded, well, you can imagine how silly it would be for a child to be born, an index card filled out, and to note down, not his profession, because he wouldn't yet know what his vocation would be, but that the newborn's civil status was bachelor. As for the age given on the card that death is holding in her hand, we can see that the cellist is forty-nine years old. Now, if we needed proof of the impeccable workings of death's archives, we will have it now, when, in a tenth of a second, or even less, before our own incredulous eyes, the number forty-nine is replaced by fifty. Today is the birthday of the cellist whose name is on the card, he should be receiving flowers not a warning that in a week's time he'll be dead. Death got up again, walked around the room a few times, stopped twice as she passed the scythe, opened her mouth as if to speak or ask an opinion or issue an order, or simply to say that she felt confused, upset, which, we must say, is hardly surprising when we think how long she has done this job without, until now, ever having been shown any disrespect from the human flock of which she is the sovereign shepherdess. It was then that death had the grim presentiment that the incident might be even more serious than had at first seemed. She sat down at her desk and started to leaf back through last week's list of the dead. On the first list of names from yesterday, and contrary to what she had expected, she saw that the cellist's name was missing. She continued to turn the pages, one, then another, then another and another, one more, and only on the eighth list did she find his name. She had erroneously thought that the name would be on yesterday's list, but now she found herself before an unprecedented scandal: someone who should have been dead two days ago was still alive. And that wasn't the worst of it. The wretched cellist, who, ever since his birth, had been marked out to die a young man of only forty-nine summers, had just brazenly entered his fiftieth year, thus bringing into disrepute destiny, fate, fortune, the horoscope, luck and all the other powers that devote themselves by every possible means, worthy and unworthy, to thwarting our very human desire to live. They were all utterly discredited. And how am I going to put right a mistake that could never have happened, when a case like this has no precedents, when nothing like it was foreseen in the regulations, thought death, especially when the man was supposed to have died at

forty-nine and not at fifty, which is the age he is now. Poor death was clearly beside herself, distraught, and would soon start beating her head against the wall out of sheer distress. In all these thousands of centuries of continuous activity, there had never been a single operational failure, and now, just when she had introduced something new into the classic relationship between mortals and their one and only causa mortis, her hard-won reputation had been dealt the severest of blows. What should I do, she asked, what if the fact that he didn't die when he should have has placed him beyond my jurisdiction, how on earth am I going to get out of this fix. She looked at the scythe, her companion in so many adventures and massacres, but the scythe ignored her, it never responded, and now, oblivious to everything, as if weary of the world, it was resting its worn, rusty blade against the white wall. That was when death came up with her great idea, People say that there's never a one without a two, never a two without a three, and that three is lucky because it's the number god chose, but let's see if it's true. She waved her right hand, and the letter that had been returned twice vanished again. Within two minutes it was back. There it was, in the same place as before. The postman hadn't put it under the door, he hadn't rung the bell, and there it was.

Obviously, we have no reason to feel sorry for death. Our complaints have been far too numerous and far too justified for us to express for her a pity which at no moment in the past did she have the delicacy to show to us, even though she knew better than anyone how we loathed the obstinacy with which she always, whatever the cost, got her own way. And yet, for a brief moment, what we have before us is more like an image of desolation than the sinister figure who, according to a few unusually perspicacious individuals lying on their deathbed, appears at the foot of the bed at our final hour to make a gesture similar to the one she makes when she dispatches the letters, except that the gesture means come here, not go away. Due to some strange optical phenomenon, real or virtual, death seems much smaller now, as if her bones had shrunk, or perhaps she was always like that, and it's our eyes, wide with fear, that make her look like a giant. Poor death. It makes us feel like going over and putting a hand on her hard shoulder and whispering a few words of sympathy in her ear, or, rather, in the place where her ear once was, underneath the parietal. Don't get upset, madam death, such things are always happening, we human beings, for example, have long experience of disappointments, failures and frustrations, and yet we don't give up, remember the old days when you used to snatch us away in the flower of our youth without a flicker of sadness or compassion, think of today when, with equal hardness of heart, you continue to do the same to people who lack all the necessities of life, we've probably been waiting to see who would tire first, you or us, I understand your distress, the first defeat is the hardest, then you get used to it, but please don't take it the wrong way when I say that I hope it won't be the last, I say this not out of any spirit of revenge, well, it would be a pretty poor revenge, wouldn't it, rather like sticking my tongue out at the executioner who's about to chop off my head, although, to be honest, we human beings can't do much more than stick out our tongue at the executioner about to chop off our head, that must be why I can't wait to see how you're going to get out of the mess you're in, with

this letter that keeps coming and going and that cellist who can't die at forty-nine because he's just turned fifty. Death made an impatient gesture, roughly shrugged off the fraternal hand we had placed on her shoulder and got up from her chair. She seemed taller now, larger, a proper dame death, capable of making the earth tremble beneath her feet, with her shroud dragging behind her, throwing up clouds of smoke with each step she takes. Death is angry. It's high time we stuck out our tongues at her.

APART FROM A FEW RARE INSTANCES, AS WITH THOSE UNUSUALLY perspicacious people whom we mentioned before, who, as they lay dying, spotted her at the foot of the bed in the classic garb of a ghost swathed in a white sheet or, as appears to have happened with proust, in the guise of a fat woman dressed in black, death is usually very discreet and prefers not to be noticed, especially if circumstances oblige her to go out into the street. There is a widely held belief that since death, as some like to say, is one side of a coin of which god is the reverse, she must, like him, by her very nature, be invisible. Well, it isn't quite like that. We are reliable witnesses to the fact that death is a skeleton wrapped in a sheet, that she lives in a chilly room accompanied by a rusty old scythe that never replies to questions, and is surrounded only by cobwebs and a few dozen filing cabinets with large drawers stuffed with index cards. One can understand, therefore, why death wouldn't want to appear before people in that get-up, firstly, for reasons of personal pride, secondly, so that the poor passers-by wouldn't die of fright when, on turning a corner, they came face to face with those large empty eye-sockets. In public, of course, death makes herself invisible, but not in private, at the critical moment, as attested by the writer marcel proust and those other unusually perspicacious people. The case of god is different. However hard he tried, he could never manage to make himself visible to human eyes and not because he can't, since for him nothing is impossible, it's simply that he wouldn't know what face to wear when introducing himself to the beings he supposedly created and who probably wouldn't recognize him anyway. There are those who say we're very fortunate that god chooses not to appear before us, because compared with the shock we would get were such a thing to happen, our fear of death would be mere child's play. Besides, all the many things that have been said about god and about death are nothing but stories, and this is just another one.

Anyway, death decided to go into town. She took off the sheet, which was all she was wearing, carefully folded it up and hung it over the back of the chair where we have seen her sitting. Apart from the chair and the desk, apart, too, from the filing cabinets and the scythe, the room is otherwise bare, save for that narrow door which leads we know not where. Since it appears to be the only way out, it would be logical to think that death will pass through there in order to go into town, however, this proves not to be the case. Without the sheet, death seemed to lose height, she's probably, at most, in human measurements, a meter sixty-six or sixty-seven, and when naked, without a thread of clothing on, she seems still smaller, almost a tiny adolescent skeleton. No one would say that this is the same death who so violently rejected our hand on her shoulder when, moved by misplaced feelings of pity, we tried to offer solace in her sadness. There really is nothing in the world as naked as a skeleton. In life, it walks around doubly clothed, first by the flesh concealing it, then by the clothes with which said flesh likes to cover itself, if it hasn't removed them to take a bath or to engage in other more pleasurable activities. Reduced to what she really is, the half-dismantled scaffolding of someone who long ago ceased to exist, all that remains for death now is to disappear. And that is precisely what is happening to her, from her head to her toes. Before our astonished eyes, her bones are losing substance and solidity, her edges are growing blurred, what was solid is becoming

gaseous, spreading everywhere like a tenuous mist, it's as if her skeleton were evaporating, now she's just a vague sketch through which one can see the indifferent scythe, and suddenly death is no longer there, she was and now she isn't, or she is, but we can't see her, or not even that, she simply passed straight through the ceiling of the subterranean room, through the enormous mass of earth above, and set off, as she had privately determined to do when the violet-colored letter was returned to her for the third time. We know where she's going. She can't kill the cellist, but she wants to see him, to have him there before her gaze, to touch him without his realizing. She's convinced that she will one day find a way of getting rid of him without breaking too many rules, but meanwhile she will find out who he is, this man whom death's warnings could not reach, what powers he has, if any, or if, like an innocent fool, he continues to live, never once thinking that he ought to be dead. Shut up in this cold room with no windows and only a narrow door leading who knows where, we hadn't noticed how quickly time passes. It's three o'clock in the morning, and death must already be in the cellist's house.

So it is. One of the things that death finds most tiring is the effort it takes to stop herself seeing everything everywhere simultaneously. In that respect, too, she is very like god. For although the fact doesn't appear among the verifiable data of human sensorial experience, we have been accustomed to believe, ever since we were children, that god and death, those supreme eminences, are everywhere always, that is, omnipresent, a word, like so many others, made up of space and time. It's highly likely, however, that when we think this, and perhaps even more so when we put it into words, considering how easily words leave our mouths, we have no clear idea what we mean. It's easy enough to say that god is everywhere and that death is everywhere too, but we don't seem to realize that if they really are everywhere, then, inevitably, in all the infinite parts in which they find themselves, they see everything there is to see. Since god is duty-bound to be, at one and the same time, everywhere in the whole universe, because otherwise there would be no point in his having created it, it would be ridiculous to expect him to take a particular interest in little planet earth, which, and this is something that has not perhaps occurred to anyone else, he may know by some other completely different name, but death, the same death which, as we said a few pages earlier, is bound exclusively to the human race, doesn't take her eyes off us for a minute, so much so that even those who are not yet due to die feel her gaze pursuing them constantly. This will give some idea of the herculean effort death was obliged to make on the rare occasions when, for one reason or another, throughout our shared history, she has had to reduce her perceptive abilities down to our human level, that is, to see just one thing at a time, to be in only one place at any one moment. In the particular case that concerns us today, that is the only way to explain why she has not yet managed to get any further than the hallway of the cellist's apartment. With each step she takes, and we only call it a step to help the reader's imagination, not because she actually requires legs and feet to move, death has to struggle hard to repress the expansive tendency inherent in her nature, and which, if given free rein, would immediately explode and shatter the precarious and unstable unity so painfully achieved. The cellist who failed to receive the

violet-colored letter lives in the kind of apartment that could be categorized as comfortable, and therefore more suited to a petit bourgeois with limited horizons than to a disciple of euterpe. You enter via a corridor where, in the darkness, you can just about make out five doors, one at the far end, which, just so that we don't have to repeat ourselves, gives access to the bathroom, with two doors to either side of it. The first door on the left as you go in, which is where death decides to begin her inspection, opens onto a small dining room which shows every sign of being little used, and in turn leads into an even smaller kitchen, equipped only with the basics. From there you go back out into the corridor, immediately opposite a door which death didn't even need to touch to know that it wasn't used, that is, it neither opens nor closes, a turn of phrase which defies the simple facts, for a door of which you can say that it neither opens nor closes is merely a closed door that you cannot open, or as it is also known, a condemned door. Death, of course, could walk straight through it and through whatever lay behind it, but even though she is still invisible to ordinary eyes, it nevertheless took a great deal of effort to form and define herself into a more or less human shape, although, as we mentioned before, not to the extent of having legs and feet, and she is not prepared now to run the risk of relaxing and becoming dispersed in the wooden interior of a door or the wardrobe full of clothes that is doubtless on the other side. So death continued along the corridor to the first proper door on the right and, going through that door, she found herself in the music room, for what other name could you give to a room where you find an open piano and a cello, a music stand bearing robert schumann's three fantasy pieces opus seventy-three, as death is able to read in the pale orangish light from a street lamp pouring in through the two windows, as well as, here and there, piles of sheet music, and, of course, the tall shelves of books where literature appears to live alongside music in the most perfect harmony, she who was once the daughter of ares and aphrodite, but is now the science of chords. Death caressed the strings of the cello, softly ran her fingers over the keys of the piano, but only she could have heard the sound of the instruments, a long, grave moan followed by a brief bird-like trill, both inaudible to human ears, but clear and precise to someone who had long ago learned to interpret the meaning of sighs. There, in the room next door, must be where the man sleeps. The door is open, the darkness, although it is darker there than in the music room, nevertheless reveals a bed and the shape of someone lying there. Death advances, crosses the threshold, but then stops, hesitant, when she feels the presence of two living beings in the room. Aware of certain facts of life, although, naturally enough, not from personal experience, it occurred to death that perhaps the man had company and that another person was sleeping beside him, someone to whom she had not yet sent a violet-colored letter, but who, in this apartment, shared the shelter of the same sheets and the warmth of the same blanket. She went closer, almost brushing, if one can say such a thing of death, the bedside table, and saw that the man was alone. However, on the other side of the bed, curled up on the carpet like a ball of wool, slept a medium-sized dog with dark, probably black hair. As far as death could remember, this was the first time she had found herself thinking that, given that she dealt only with human deaths, this animal was beyond the reach of her symbolic scythe, that her power could not touch him however lightly, and that this

sleeping dog would also become immortal, although who knows for how long, if his death, the other death, the one in charge of all other living beings, animal and vegetable, were to absent herself as she had done, giving someone the perfect reason to begin a book with the words The next day no dog died. The man stirred, perhaps he was dreaming, perhaps he was still playing the three schumann pieces and had played a wrong note, a cello isn't like a piano, on the piano, the notes are always in the same places, underneath each key, while on the cello they're scattered along the length of the strings, and you have to go and look for them, to pin them down, find the exact point, move the bow at just the right angle and with just the right pressure, so nothing could be easier than to hit one or two wrong notes while you're sleeping. As death leaned forward to get a better look at the man's face, she had an absolutely brilliant idea, it occurred to her that the index cards in her archive should each bear a photograph of the person in question, not an ordinary photograph, but one so scientifically advanced that, just as the details of people's lives were continually and automatically being updated, so their image would change with passing time, from the red and wrinkled babe in arms to today, when we wonder if we really are the person we were, or if, with each passing hour, some genie of the lamp is not constantly replacing us with someone else. The man stirred again, it seems as if he's about to wake, but no, his breathing returns to its normal rhythm, the same thirteen breaths a minute, his left hand rests on his heart as if he were listening to the beats, an open note for diastole, a closed note for systole, while the right hand, palm uppermost and fingers slightly curved, seems to be waiting for another hand to clasp it. The man looks older than his fifty years, or perhaps not older, perhaps he's merely tired, or sad, but this we will only know when he opens his eyes. He has lost some of his hair, and much of what remains is already white. He's a perfectly ordinary man, neither ugly nor handsome. Looking at him now, lying on his back, his striped pajama jacket exposed by the turned-down sheet, no one would think he was first cellist in one of the city's symphony orchestras, that his life runs between the magical lines of the pentagram, perhaps, who knows, searching for the deep heart of the music, pause, sound, systole, diastole. Still annoyed by the failure of the state's postal communications system, but not as irritated as when she arrived, death looks at the man's sleeping face and thinks vaguely that he should be dead, that the heart being protected by his left hand should be still and empty, frozen forever in that last contraction. She came to see this man and now that she has, there is nothing sufficiently special about him to explain why the violet-colored letter was returned three times, the best she can do after this is to return to the cold, subterranean room whence she came and to discover a way of resolving this wretched stroke of fate that has turned this scraper of cellos into a survivor of himself. Death used those two aggressive words, wretched and scraper, in order to rouse her now dwindling sense of annoyance, but the attempt failed. The man sleeping there is not to blame for what happened with the violet-colored letter, nor can he have even the remotest idea that he is living a life that should no longer be his, that if things had turned out as they should, he would have been dead and buried now for a good week, and that his dog would be running around the city like a mad thing, looking for his master, or else sitting, without eating or drinking, at the entrance to the building, waiting for him to

come back. For a moment, death let herself go, expanding out as far as the walls, filling that whole room and flowing into the room next door, where a part of her stopped to look at the sheet music open on a chair, it was suite number six opus one thousand and twelve in d major by johann sebastian bach, composed in köthen, and she didn't need to be able to read music to know that it had been written, like beethoven's ninth symphony, in the key of joy, of unity between men, of friendship and of love. Then something extraordinary happened, something unimaginable, death fell to her knees, for she had a body now, which is why she had knees and legs and feet and arms and hands, and a face which she covered with her hands, and shoulders, which, for some reason, were shaking, she can't be crying, you can't expect that from someone who, wherever she goes, has always left a trail of tears behind her, without one of those tears shed being hers. Just as she was, neither visible nor invisible, neither skeleton nor woman, she leapt, light as air, to her feet and went back into the bedroom. The man had not moved. Death thought, There's nothing more for me to do here, I'm leaving, it was hardly worth coming really just to see a man and a dog asleep, perhaps they're dreaming about each other, the man about the dog, the dog about the man, the dog dreaming that it's morning already and that he's laying his head down beside the man's head, the man dreaming that it's morning already and that his left arm is grasping the soft, warm body of the dog and holding it close to his breast. Beside the wardrobe blocking the door that would otherwise open onto the corridor is a small sofa where death has gone to sit. She hadn't intended to, but she went to sit down in that corner anyway, perhaps remembering how cold it would be at that hour in her subterranean archive room. Her eyes are on a level now with the man's head, she can see his profile clearly silhouetted against the backdrop of that vague, orangey light coming in through the window and she repeats to herself that there's no rational reason for staying there, but she immediately argues with herself that there is, that there is a reason, and a very good one, because this is the only house in the city, in the country, in the whole world, where someone is infringing on the harshest of nature's laws, the law that imposes on us both life and death, which did not ask if you wanted to live, and which will not ask if you want to die. This man is dead, she thought, all those beings doomed to die are already dead, all it takes is for me to flick them lightly with my thumb or to send them a violet-colored letter that they cannot refuse. This man isn't dead, she thought, in a few hours' time he'll wake up, he'll get out of bed as he does every day, he'll open the back door to let the dog out into the garden to relieve itself, he'll eat his breakfast, he'll go into the bathroom from where he'll emerge refreshed, washed and shaved, perhaps he'll sally forth into the street, taking the dog with him so that they can buy the morning newspaper together at the corner kiosk, perhaps he'll sit down in front of the music stand and again play the three pieces by schumann, perhaps afterward he'll think about death as all human beings must, although he's unaware that at this very moment, he is as if immortal, because the figure of death looking at him doesn't know how to kill him. The man changed position, turned his back on the wardrobe blocking the door and let his right arm slide down toward the side on which the dog is lying. A minute later, he was awake. He was thirsty. He turned on his bedside light, got up, shuffled his feet into the slippers which were, as always, providing a pillow for the

dog's head, and went into the kitchen. Death followed him. The man filled a glass with water and drank it. At this point, the dog appeared, slaked his thirst in the water-dish next to the back door and then looked up at his master. I suppose you want to go out, said the cellist. He opened the door and waited until the animal came back. A little water remained in his glass. Death looked at it and made an effort to imagine what it must be like to feel thirsty, but failed. She would have been equally incapable of imagining it when she'd had to make people die of thirst in the desert, but at the time she hadn't even tried. The dog returned, wagging his tail. Let's go back to sleep, said the man. They went into the bedroom again, the dog turned around twice, then curled up into a ball. The man drew the sheet up to his neck, coughed twice and soon afterward was asleep again. Sitting in her corner, death was watching. Much later, the dog got up from the carpet and jumped onto the sofa. For the first time in her life, death knew what it felt like to have a dog on her lap.

WE'VE ALL HAD OUR MOMENTS OF WEAKNESS, AND IF WE manage to get through today without any, we'll be sure to have some tomorrow. Just as beneath the bronze cuirass of achilles there once beat a sentimental heart, think only of the hero's ten years of jealousy after agamemnon stole away his beloved, the slave-girl briseis, and then the terrible rage that made him return to war, howling out his wrath at the trojans when his friend patroclus was killed by hector, so, beneath the most impenetrable of armors ever forged and guaranteed to remain impenetrable until the end of time, we are referring here, of course, to death's skeleton, there is always a chance that one day something will casually insinuate itself into the dread carcass, a soft chord from a cello, an ingenuous trill on a piano, or the mere sight of some sheet music open on a chair, which will make you remember the thing you refuse to think about, that you have never lived and that, do what you may, you never will live, unless ... You had sat coolly observing the sleeping cellist, that man whom you could not kill because you got to him when it was too late, you saw the dog curled up on the carpet, and you were unable to touch that creature either, because you are not his death, and in the warm darkness of the room, those two living beings who, having surrendered to sleep, didn't even know you were there, only served to fill your consciousness with an awareness of the depth of your failure. In that apartment, you, who had grown used to being able to do what no one else can, saw how impotent you were, tied hand and foot, with your double-o-seven license to kill rendered null and void, never, admit it, not in all your days as death, had you felt so humiliated. It was then that you left the bedroom for the music room, where you knelt down before suite number six for the cello by johann sebastian bach and made those rapid movements with your shoulders which, in human beings, usually accompany convulsive sobbing, it was then, with your hard knees digging into the hard floor, that your exasperation suddenly vanished like the imponderable mist into which you sometimes transform yourself when you don't wish to be entirely invisible. You returned to the bedroom, you followed the cellist when he went into the kitchen to get a drink of water and open the back door for the dog, first, you'd seen him lying down asleep, now you saw him awake and standing up, and perhaps due to the optical illusion caused by the vertical stripes on his pajamas he seemed much taller than you, but that was impossible, it was just a trick of the eyes, a distortion due to perspective, the pure logic of facts tells us that you, death, are the biggest, bigger than everything else, bigger than all of us. Or perhaps you're not always the biggest, perhaps the things that happen in the world can be explained by chance, for example, the dazzling moonlight that the musician remembers from his childhood would have shone in vain if he had been asleep, yes, chance, because you were once again a very small death when you returned to the bedroom and went and sat down on the sofa, and smaller still when the dog got up from the carpet and jumped onto your girlish lap, and then you had such a lovely thought, you thought how unfair it was that death, not you, the other death, would one day come and douse the mild embers of that soft animal warmth, that is what you thought, imagine that, you who are so accustomed to the arctic and antarctic cold of the room to which you have returned and to which the voice of your ominous duty summoned you, the duty to kill the man who, as he slept, seemed to bear on his face the bitter rictus of one who has never

shared his bed with a truly human companion, who had an agreement with this dog that they would each dream about the other, the dog about the man, the man about the dog, this man who gets up in the night in his striped pajamas to go to the kitchen for a drink of water, obviously it would be easier to take a glass of water to his room when he goes to bed, but he doesn't do that, he prefers his little night-time saunter down the corridor to the kitchen, in the midst of the peace and silence of the night, with the dog who always follows him and sometimes asks to be let out in the garden, but not always, This man must die, you say.

Death is once again a skeleton swathed in a shroud, with the hood low over her forehead, so that the worst of her skull remains covered, although it was hardly worth going to the trouble of covering up, if this really did concern her, because there's no one here to be frightened by the macabre spectacle, and especially since all that can be seen are the tips of the bones of fingers and toes, the latter resting on the flagstones, whose icy chill they do not feel, the former leafing, like a rasp, through the pages of the complete volume of death's historic ordinances, from the first of all rules, which was set down in three simple words, thou shalt kill, to the more recent addenda and appendices, in which all the manners and variants of dying so far known are listed, and you could say of that list that it was inexhaustible. Death was not surprised by the negative results of her researches, it would, in fact, be incongruous, more than that, superfluous, to find in a book that determines for each and every representative of the human race a full stop, a conclusion, an end, a death, such words as life and live, such words as I'm alive and I will live. There is only room in that book for death, not for absurd hypotheses about what to do if someone escapes death. That has never been known. Perhaps, if you looked hard, you might find once, and only once, in some unnecessary footnote, the words I lived, but that search was never seriously attempted, which leads one to conclude that there is a very good reason why not even the fact of having lived deserves a mention in the book of death. And the reason is that the other name for the book of death, as it behooves us to know, is the book of nothingness. The skeleton pushed the regulations to one side and stood up. As was her custom when she needed to get to the nub of a problem, she walked twice round the room, then she opened the drawer in the filing cabinet that contained the cellist's card and took it out. Her gesture has just reminded us that now is the moment, now or never, yet another instance of chance, to clarify an important aspect relating to the functioning of these archives and about which, due to reprehensible neglect on the part of the narrator, we have not yet spoken. Firstly, and contrary to what you may have imagined, the ten million index cards filed away in these drawers were not filled out by death, they were not written by her. Certainly not, death is death, not a common clerk. The cards appear in their places, arranged alphabetically, at the exact moment when someone is born, only to disappear at the exact moment when that person dies. Before the invention of the violet-colored letters, death didn't even go to the trouble of opening the drawers, the comings and goings of the cards took place without any fuss or confusion, there is no memory of there ever having been any embarrassing scenes with some people saying they didn't want to be born and others protesting that they

didn't want to die. The cards of the people who die go, without anyone having to take them, to a room below this one, or, rather, they take their place in one of the rooms that lie in layer upon subterranean layer, going ever deeper, and which are already well on the way to the fiery center of the earth, where all this paperwork will one day burn. Here, in the room occupied by death and the scythe, it would be impossible to establish a similar criterion to the one adopted by a certain registrar who decided to bring together in one archive the names and documents belonging to the living and the dead under his protection, yes, every single one, alleging that only when they were brought together could they represent humanity as it should be understood, an absolute whole, independent of time and place, and that keeping them separate until then had been an attack upon the spirit. That is the enormous difference between the death we see before us now and the sensible registrar with his papers of life and death, while she prides herself on her olympian disdain for those who have died, we should remember the cruel phrase, so often repeated, which says that what's past is past, he, on the other hand, thanks to what we, in current phraseology, call historical awareness, believes that the living should never be separated from the dead and that, if they are, not only will the dead remain forever dead, the living will only half-live their lives, even if they turn out to live as long as methuselah, about whom, by the way, there is some dispute as to whether he died at nine hundred and sixty-nine as stated in the ancient masoretic text or at seven hundred and twenty as stated in the samaritan pentateuch. Clearly not everyone will be in agreement with the daring archival plan put forward by that registrar of all the names given and yet to be given, but we will leave it here, in case it should prove useful in the future.

Death examines the card and finds nothing on it that she has not seen before, that is, the biography of a musician who should have died a week ago and who, nevertheless, continues to live quietly in his modest artist's home, with his black dog who climbs onto ladies' laps, with his piano and his cello, his nocturnal bouts of thirst and his striped pajamas. There must be a way of resolving this dilemma, thought death, it would be preferable, of course, if the matter could be sorted out without drawing too much attention to it, but if the highest authorities serve any purpose, if they are not there merely to have honors and praise heaped upon them, then they now have an excellent opportunity to show that they are not indifferent to those down here laboring away on the plains, let them change the regulations, let them impose some special measures, let them authorize, if it comes to that, some act of dubious legality, anything but allow such a scandal to continue. The curious thing about this case is that death has no idea who they actually are, these high authorities who should, in theory, resolve this dilemma. It's true that in one of the letters she had written and which was published in the press, the second one if we're not mistaken, she had referred to a universal death who would, although no one knew when, do away with all manifestations of life in the universe down to the last microbe, but this, as well as being a philosophical commonplace, since nothing, not even death, can last forever, originated, in practical terms, from a common-sense deduction that had long been doing the rounds of the various deaths in their

different sectors, although it remained to be confirmed by a knowledge backed up by study and experience. It's us sectorial deaths, thought death, who do the real work of removing any excrescences, and it wouldn't surprise me in the least if, should the cosmos ever disappear, it won't be as a consequence of some solemn proclamation by that universal death, echoing around the galaxies and the black holes, but merely the accumulation of all those little private and personal deaths that are our responsibility, one by one, as if the proverbial chicken, instead of filling its crop grain by grain, grain by grain, began foolishly to empty it out, because that, I reckon, is what is most likely to happen with life, which is busily preparing its own end, with no need of any help from us, not even waiting for us to give it a helping hand. Death's perplexity is perfectly understandable. She was placed in this world so long ago that she can no longer remember from whom she received the necessary instructions to carry out the job she was charged with. They placed the regulations in her hands, pointed out the words thou shalt kill as the one guiding light of her future activities and told her, doubtless not noticing the macabre irony, to get on with her life. And she did, thinking that, in case of doubt or some unlikely mistake, she would always have her back covered, there would always be someone, a boss, a superior, a spiritual guru, of whom she could ask advice and guidance.

It's hard to believe, therefore, and here we enter at last into the cold, objective analysis for which the situation of death and the cellist has long been crying out, that an information system as perfect as the one that has kept these archives updated over millennia, continually revising the data, making index cards appear and disappear as people were born or died, it's hard to believe, we repeat, that such a system should be so primitive and so unidirectional that the information source, wherever it is, isn't, in turn, constantly receiving all the data resulting from the daily activities of death on the ground, so to speak. And if it does receive that data and fails to react to the extraordinary news that someone didn't die when they should have, then one of two things is happening, either, against all our logic and natural expectations, it finds the episode of no interest and therefore feels no obligation to intervene in order to neutralize any difficulties caused, or we must assume that death, contrary to what she herself believes, has *carte blanche* to resolve, as she sees fit, any problem that may arise during her day-to-day work. The word doubt had to be spoken once or twice here before it rang a bell in death's memory, for there was a passage in the regulations which, because it was written in very small print and appeared only as a footnote, neither attracted nor fixed the attention of the studious. Putting down the cellist's index card, death picked up the book. She knew that what she was looking for would be neither in the appendices nor in the addenda, that it must be in the early part of the regulations, the oldest and therefore the least often consulted part, as tends to be the case with basic historical texts, and there she found it. This is what it said, In case of doubt, death must, as quickly as possible, take whatever measures her experience tells her to take in order to fulfill the desideratum that should at all times guide her actions, that is, to put an end to human lives when the time prescribed for them at birth has expired, even if to achieve that effect she has to resort to

less orthodox methods in situations where the person puts up an abnormal degree of resistance to the fatal judgment or where there are anomalous factors that could not have been foreseen at the time these regulations were drawn up. It couldn't be clearer, death has a free hand to act as she thinks best. This, as our examination of the matter will show, was hardly a novelty. Just look at the facts. When death, on her own account and at her own risk, decided to suspend her activities from the first day of January this year, the idea didn't even enter her empty head that some superior in the hierarchy might ask her to justify her bizarre behavior, just as she didn't even consider the high probability that her picturesque invention of the violet-colored letters would be frowned on by that same superior or by another even higher up. These are the dangerous consequences of working on automatic pilot, of stultifying routine, of doing the same job for too long. A person, or death, it really doesn't matter, scrupulously fulfills her duties, day after day, encountering no problems, no doubts, concentrating entirely on following the rules established by those above, and if, after a time, no one comes nosing around into how she carries out her work, then one thing is sure, that person, and this is what happened with death, will end up behaving, without her realizing it, as if she were queen and mistress of all that she does, and not only that, but of when and how she should do it too. That is the only reasonable explanation for why it never occurred to death to ask her superiors for authorization when she made and implemented the important decisions we have described and without which this story, for good or ill, could not exist. She didn't even think to do so. And now, paradoxically, precisely at the moment when she cannot contain her joy at discovering that the power to dispose of human lives as she sees fit is, after all, hers alone and that she will not be called upon to explain herself to anyone, not today or ever, just when the scent of glory is threatening to befuddle her senses, she cannot suppress the kind of fearful thought that might assail someone who, just as they were about to be found out, miraculously, at the very last moment, escaped exposure, Phew, that was a close shave.

Nevertheless, the death who now rises from her chair is an empress. She shouldn't be living in this freezing subterranean room, as if she had been buried alive, but on top of the highest mountain presiding over the fates of the world, gazing benevolently down on the human herd, watching them as they rush hither and thither, unaware that they're heading in the same direction, that one step forward will take them just as close to death as one step back, that it makes no difference because everything will have but one ending, the ending that a part of yourself will always have to think about and which is the black stain on your hopeless humanity. Death is holding the index card in her hand. She is conscious that she must do something with it, but she doesn't know quite what. First, she must calm down and remember that she is the same death she was before, nothing more, nothing less, that the only difference between today and yesterday is that she is more certain of who she is. Second, the fact that she can finally have it out with the cellist is no reason to forget to send today's letters. She had only to think this and instantly two hundred and eighty-four index cards appeared on the desk, half were of men and half of women, and with them two hundred and eighty-four sheets of paper and

two hundred and eighty-four envelopes. Death sat down again, put the index card to one side and began to write. The very last grain of sand in a four-hour hourglass would have just slipped through as she finished signing the two hundred and eightieth letter. An hour later, the envelopes were sealed and ready to be dispatched. Death went to fetch the letter that had been sent three times and returned three times and placed it on the pile of violet-colored envelopes, I'm going to give you one last chance, she said. She made the customary gesture with her left hand and the letters disappeared. Not even ten seconds had passed before the letter to the musician silently reappeared on the desk. Then death said, If that's how you want it, fine. She crossed out the date of birth on the index card and changed it to the following year, then she amended his age, and where fifty was written, she changed it to forty-nine. You can't do that, said the scythe, It's done, There'll be consequences, Only one, What's that, The death, at last, of that wretched cellist who's been having a laugh at my expense, But the poor man doesn't know he should be dead, As far as I'm concerned, he might as well know it, Even so, you don't have the power or the authority to change an index card, That's where you're wrong, I have all the power and authority I need, I'm death, and never more so than from this day forward, You don't know what you're getting into, warned the scythe, There's only one place in the world that death can't get into, Where's that, What they call a coffin, casket, tomb, funeral urn, vault, sepulcher, I can't enter there, only the living can, once I've killed them, of course, All those words to say the same sad thing, That's what these people are like, they're never quite sure what they mean.

DEATH HAS A PLAN. CHANGING THE MUSICIAN'S YEAR OF birth was only the opening move in an operation which, we can tell you now, will deploy some quite exceptional methods never before used in the history of the relationship between the human race and its oldest, most mortal enemy. As in a game of chess, death advanced her queen. A few more moves should open the way to a checkmate, and the game will end. One might now ask why death doesn't simply revert to the status quo ante, when people died simply because they had to, with no waiting around for the postman to bring them a violet-colored letter. The question has its logic, but the reply is no less logical. It is, firstly, a matter of honor, determination and professional pride, for if death were to return to the innocence of former times, it would, in the eyes of everyone, be tantamount to admitting defeat. Since the current process involves the use of violet-colored letters, then these must be the means by which the cellist will die. We need only put ourselves in death's place to understand the rationale behind this. As we have seen on four previous occasions, there remains the principal problem of delivering that now weary letter to its addressee, and if the longed-for goal is to be achieved, that is where the exceptional methods we referred to above come in. But let us not anticipate events, let us see what death is doing now. At this precise moment, death is not actually doing anything more than she usually does, she is, to use a current expression, hanging loose, although, to tell the truth, it would be more exact to say that death never hangs loose, death simply is. At the same time and everywhere. She doesn't need to run after people to catch them, she will always be where they are. Now, thanks to this new method of warning people by letter, she could, if she chose to, just sit quietly in her subterranean room and wait for the mail to do the work, but she is, by nature, strong, energetic and active. As the old saying goes, You can't cage a barnyard chicken. In the figurative sense, death is a barnyard chicken. She won't be so stupid, or so unforgivably weak, as to repress what is best in her, her limitlessly expansive nature, therefore she will not repeat the painful process of concentrating all her energies on remaining at the very edge of visibility without actually going over to the other side, as she did the previous night, and at what a cost, during the hours she spent in the musician's apartment. Since, as we have said a thousand and one times, she is present everywhere, she is there too. The dog is sleeping in the garden, in the sun, waiting for his master to come home. He doesn't know where his master has gone or what he has gone to do, and the idea of following his trail, were he ever to try, is something he has ceased to think about, for the good and bad smells in a capital city are so many and so disorienting. We never consider that the things dogs know about us are things of which we have not the faintest notion. Death, however, knows that the cellist is sitting on the stage of a theater, to the right of the conductor, in the place that corresponds to the instrument he plays, she sees him moving the bow with his skillful right hand, she sees his no less skillful left hand moving up and down the strings, just as she herself had done in the half-dark, even though she has never learned music, not even the basics of music theory, so-called three-four time. The conductor stopped the rehearsal, tapping his baton on the edge of the music stand to make some comment and to issue an order, in this passage, he wants the cellists, and only the cellists, to make themselves heard, while, at the same time, appearing not to be making a sound, a kind

of musical charade which the musicians appear to have mastered without difficulty, that is what art is like, things that seem impossible to the layperson turn out not to be. Death, needless to say, fills the whole theater, right to the very top, as far as the allegorical paintings on the ceiling and the vast unlit chandelier, but the view she prefers at the moment is the view from a box just above the stage, very close, and slightly at an angle to the section of strings that play the lower notes, the violas, the contraltos of the violin family, the cellos, which are the equivalent of the bass, and the doublebasses, which have the deepest voice of all. Death is sitting there, on a narrow crimson-upholstered chair, and staring fixedly at the first cellist, the one she watched while he was asleep and who wears striped pajamas, the one who owns a dog that is, at this moment, sleeping in the sun in the garden, waiting for his master to return. That is her man, a musician, nothing more, like the almost one hundred other men and women seated in a semicircle around their personal shaman, the conductor, and all of whom will, one day, in some future week or month or year, receive a violet-colored letter and leave their place empty, until some other violinist, flautist or trumpeter comes to sit in the same chair, perhaps with another shaman waving a baton to conjure forth sounds, life is an orchestra which is always playing, in tune or out, a titanic that is always sinking and always rising to the surface, and it is then that it occurs to death that she would be left with nothing to do if the sunken ship never managed to rise again, singing the evocative song sung by the waters as they cascade from her decks, like the watery song, dripping like a murmuring sigh over her undulating body, sung by the goddess amphitrite at her birth, when she became she who circles the seas, for that is the meaning of the name she was given. Death wonders where amphitrite is now, the daughter of nereus and doris, where is she now, she who may never have existed in reality, but who nevertheless briefly inhabited the human mind in order to create in it, again only briefly, a certain way of giving meaning to the world, of finding ways of understanding reality. But they didn't understand it, thought death, nor will they, however hard they try, because everything in their lives is provisional, precarious, transitory, gods, men, the past, all gone, what is will not always be, and even I, death, will come to an end when there's no one left to kill, either in the traditional manner, or by correspondence. We know that this is not the first time such a thought has passed through whatever part of her it is that thinks, but it was the first time that thinking it had brought her such a feeling of profound relief, like that of someone who, having completed a task, slowly leans back to take a rest. Suddenly the orchestra fell silent, all that can be heard is the sound of a cello, it's what they call a solo, a modest solo that will last, at most, two minutes, it's as if from the forces invoked by the shaman a voice had arisen, speaking perhaps in the name of all those who are now silent, even the conductor doesn't move, he's looking at the same musician who left open on a chair the sheet music of suite number six opus one thousand and twelve in d major by johann sebastian bach, a suite he will never play in this theater, because he is merely a cellist in the orchestra, albeit the leader of his section, not one of those famous concert artistes who travel the world playing and giving interviews, receiving flowers, applause, plaudits and medals, he's lucky that he occasionally gets a few bars to play solo, thanks to some generous composer who happened to remember the side of the orchestra where little of

anything out of the ordinary tends to happen. When the rehearsal ends, he'll put his cello in its case and take a taxi home, a taxi with a large trunk, and maybe tonight, after supper, he'll put the sheet music for the bach suite on the stand, take a deep breath and draw the bow across the strings so that the first note thus born can console him for the irredeemable banalities of the world and so that the second, if possible, will make him forget them, the solo ends, the rest of the orchestra covers the last echo of the cello, and the shaman, with an imperious wave of his baton, has returned to his role as invoker and guide of the spirits of sound. Death is proud of how well her cellist played. As if she were a family member, his mother, his sister, his fiancée, not his wife, though, because this man has never married.

Over the next three days, apart from the time it took her to run to the subterranean room, hurriedly write the letters and send them off, death was more than his shadow, she was the very air he breathed. Shadows have a grave defect, they lose their place, they vanish the moment there's no source of light. Death traveled next to him in the taxi that took him home, she went into his apartment when he did, she observed benevolently the dog's wild effusions at the arrival of his master, and then, like someone invited to spend a little time there, she made herself comfortable. It's easy enough for someone who doesn't need to move, she doesn't mind whether she's sitting on the floor or perched on top of a wardrobe. The orchestra rehearsal had finished late, it will soon be dark. The cellist gave the dog some food, then prepared his own supper from the contents of two cans, heated up whatever needed heating up, put a cloth on the kitchen table, along with knife, fork and napkin, poured some wine into a glass and, unhurriedly, as if he were thinking about something else, put the first forkful of food in his mouth. The dog sat down beside him, any leftovers that his master might leave on his plate and proffer to him on his hand will serve as his dessert. Death looks at the cellist. She can't really tell the difference between ugly people and pretty people, because, since she is familiar only with her own skull, she has an irresistible tendency to imagine the outline of the skull beneath the face that serves as our shop window. Basically, if truth be told, in death's eyes we are all equally ugly, even in the days when we might have been beauty queens or their male equivalent. She admires the cellist's strong fingers, she guesses that the tips of the fingers on his left hand must have gradually grown harder, perhaps even slightly calloused, life can be unfair in this and other ways, the left hand is a case in point, for even though it does all the hard work on the cello, it receives far less applause from the audience than the right hand. Once supper was over, the cellist washed the dishes, carefully folded the tablecloth and the napkin, put them in a drawer in the cupboard and, before leaving the kitchen, looked around to see if anything was out of place. The dog followed him into the music room, where death was waiting for them. Contrary to the supposition we made while in the theater, the cellist did not play the bach suite. One day, in conversation with some colleagues in the orchestra who were talking jokingly about the possibility of composing musical portraits, genuine ones, not just pictures of types, like mussorgsky's portraits of samuel goldenberg and schmuyle, he said that, assuming such a thing really were possible in music, they would find his portrait not in any cello

composition, but in the briefest of chopin études, opus twenty-five, number nine, in g flat major. When asked why, he replied that he simply couldn't see himself in any other piece of music and that this seemed to him the best of reasons. And that in the space of fifty-eight seconds chopin had said all there was to say about someone he could never possibly have met. For a few days, by way of an amiable joke, the wittier orchestra members called him fifty-eight seconds, but the nickname was far too long to stick, and, besides, it's impossible to keep up a dialogue with someone who has decided to take fifty-eight seconds to reply to any question put to him. In the end, the cellist won this friendly contest. As if he had sensed the presence in his house of a third person, to whom, for unexplained reasons, he felt he should talk about himself, and wishing to avoid having to make the long speech which even the simplest of lives requires in order to say anything of substance, the cellist sat down at the piano, and after a brief pause for the audience to settle, he launched into the piece. Lying half asleep next to the music stand, the dog didn't appear to give much importance to the storm of sound unleashed above his head, perhaps because he had heard it before, perhaps because it added nothing to what he already knew about his master. Death, however, who, in the line of duty, had listened to a great deal of music, notably that same composer chopin's funeral march and the adagio assai from beethoven's third symphony, she, for the first time in her very long life, had a sense of what might well be the perfect blend of what is said and the way in which it is said. She didn't much care if it was or wasn't the musical portrait of the cellist, it's likely that he'd fabricated in his mind any alleged similarities, real or imagined, but what impressed death was that she seemed to hear in those fifty-eight seconds of music a rhythmical and melodic transposition of every and any human life, be it run-of-the-mill or extraordinary, because of its tragic brevity, its desperate intensity, and also because of that final chord, like an ellipsis left hanging in the air, something yet to be said. The cellist had fallen into one of the least forgivable of human sins, that of presumption, when he thought he could see his face, and his alone, in a portrait in which everyone could be found, a presumption which, however, if we think about it, if we choose not to remain on the surface of things, could equally be interpreted as a manifestation of its polar opposite, that is, of humility, since if it is a portrait of everyone, then I must be included in it too. Death hesitates, she can't quite decide between presumption and humility, and to break the deadlock, to decide once and for all, she amuses herself now by observing the cellist, waiting for the expression on his face to reveal to her what she needs to know, or perhaps his hands, for the hands are like two open books, not for the real or supposed reasons put forward by chiromancy, with its heart lines and its life lines, yes, life, ladies and gentlemen, you heard correctly, life, but because they speak when they open and close, when they caress or strike, when they wipe away a tear or disguise a smile, when they rest on a shoulder or wave goodbye, when they work, when they are still, when they sleep, when they wake, and then death, having finished her observations, concluded that it isn't true that the antonym of presumption is humility, even if all the dictionaries in the world swear blind that it is, poor dictionaries, who have to rule themselves and us only with the words that exist, when there are so many words still missing, for example, this word that should be the polar opposite of presumption, but

never the bowed head of humility, the word that we see clearly written on the face and hands of the cellist, but which cannot tell us what it is called.

The next day, it so happened, was a Sunday. When the weather is fine, as it is today, the cellist is in the habit of spending the morning in one of the city parks with his dog and a book or two. The dog never wanders far, even when instinct makes him move from tree to tree sniffing his fellow canines' pee. He lifts his leg now and then, but goes no further in the satisfaction of his excretory needs. The other, shall we say, complementary procedure, he conscientiously carries out in the garden of the house where he lives, so that the cellist doesn't have to chase after him to pick up his excrement and deposit it in a plastic bag with the help of a little spade specially designed for the purpose. This might have been merely a notable example of good canine training were it not for the extraordinary fact that the idea came from the dog, who is of the opinion that a musician, a cellist, an artist who struggles to be able to give a decent rendition of suite number six opus one thousand and twelve in d major by Bach did not come into this world in order to pick up the still-steaming poop of his dog or anyone else's. It simply isn't right. As he said one day during a conversation with his master, Bach never had to do that. The musician replied that times had changed a lot since then, but had to admit that Bach would certainly never have had to do that. Although the musician is clearly a lover of literature in general, a look at an average shelf in his library will show that he has a special liking for books on astronomy, the natural sciences and nature, and today he has brought with him a handbook on entomology. He doesn't have any background knowledge, and so he doesn't expect to glean very much from it, but he enjoys learning that there are nearly a million species of insects on earth and that these are divided into two orders, the terygotes, which have wings, and the apterygotes, which do not, and that they are in turn classified as orthopterus, like the grasshopper, or blattodea, like the cockroach, mantodea, like the praying mantis, neuroptera, like the chrysopa, odonata, like the dragonfly, ephemeroptera, like the mayfly, trichoptera, like the caddis fly, isoptera, like the termite, aphaniptera, like the flea, anoplura, like the louse, mallophaga, like the bird louse, heteroptera, like the bedbug, homoptera, like the plant louse, diptera, like the fly, hymenoptera, like the wasp, lepidoptera, like the death's head moth, coleoptera, like the beetle, and finally, thysanura, like the silverfish. As you can see from the image in the book, the death's head moth, a nocturnal moth, whose Latin name is *acherontia atropos*, bears on the back of its thorax a pattern resembling a human skull, it reaches a wingspan of twelve centimeters and is dark in color, its lower wings being yellow and black. And we call it atropos, that is, death. The musician doesn't know it, nor could he ever even have imagined such a possibility, but death is gazing, fascinated, over his shoulder, at the color photograph of the moth. Fascinated, and confused too. Remember that another of the parcae, not this one, is in charge of the insects' passage from life to nonlife, that is to say, of killing them, and although in many cases the *modus operandi* may be the same for both, the exceptions are numerous too, suffice it to say that insects do not die from such common human diseases as, for example, pneumonia, tuberculosis, cancer, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, more commonly known as AIDS, from car crashes or

cardiovascular diseases. This much anyone can understand. What is harder to grasp, and what is confusing death as she continues to peer over the cellist's shoulder, is that a human skull, drawn with such extraordinary precision, should have appeared, who knows in which period of creation, on the hairy back of a moth. Of course, little moths and butterflies have been known to appear on the human body too, but they have never been anything more than a primitive artifice, mere tattoos, they were not with the person from birth. There was probably a time, thinks death, when all living beings were one, but then, gradually, with increasing specialization, they found themselves divided up into five kingdoms, namely, monera, protista, fungi, plants and animals, within which, within those kingdoms that is, infinite macrospecializations and microspecializations occurred over the ages, although it is hardly surprising that, in the midst of all this confusion, this biological mêlée, the particularities of some would be repeated in others. This would explain, for example, the disquieting presence of a white skull on the back of this moth, acherontia atropos, whose name, curiously enough, contains not only another word for death, but also the name of one of the rivers that flows through hades, it would also explain the equally disquieting similarities between the mandrake root and the human body. It's hard to know what to think when confronted by all these marvels of nature, by such sublime surprises. However, the thoughts preoccupying death, who continues to stare over the cellist's shoulder, have already taken another route. Now she is feeling sad because she is comparing how it would have been had she used death's head moths as messengers rather than those stupid violet-colored letters, which, at the time, had seemed to her such a brilliant idea. It would never occur to one of those moths to turn back, it carries its duty emblazoned on its thorax, that was what it was born for. Besides, the effect as spectacle would be totally different, instead of a garden-variety postman handing us a letter, we would see twelve centimeters of moth hovering above our head, the angel of darkness showing off its black and yellow wings, and suddenly, after skimming the earth and tracing a circle around us from which we would never step free, it would rise vertically and place its skull in front of ours. We would, of course, be unstinting in our applause for their acrobatics. One can see that the death in charge of us human beings still has a lot to learn. As we well know, moths do not come under her jurisdiction. Neither they, nor any of the other, almost infinite animal species. She would have to reach an agreement with her colleague in the zoological department, the one with responsibility for these natural products, and ask to borrow a few acherontia atropos, although, regrettably, bearing in mind the vast difference in scope of their respective territories and of their corresponding populations, it is more than likely that the aforementioned colleague would reply with a proud, brusque and peremptory no, because lack of solidarity is no mere empty expression, even in the realm of death. Think only of the million species of insect cited in that basic entomology book, imagine, if you can, the number of individuals in each species, and do you not think that there must be more tiny creatures on this earth than there are stars in the sky, or in sidereal space, if you prefer to give a poetic name to the convulsive reality of the universe in which we are nothing but a tiny scrap of shit on the point of dissolving. The death in charge of the human race, who currently comprise a mere bagatelle of seven billion men and women rather

unevenly distributed over the five continents, is a secondary, subaltern death, she herself is perfectly aware of her place in the hierarchy of thanatos, as she was honest enough to acknowledge in the letter she sent to the newspaper that had printed her name with a capital d. Meanwhile, given that the door of dreams is so easy to push open, and that dreams are so freely available to everyone that we don't even have to pay tax on them, death, who has now ceased peering over the cellist's shoulder, enjoys herself imagining what it would be like to have at her command a battalion of moths all lined up on the desk, with her doing the roll call and giving the orders, go there, find such-and-such a person, show them the death's head on your back and return. The musician would think that his acherontia atropos had flown up from the open page, that would be his last thought and the last image he would take with him fixed on his retina, not some fat woman dressed in black announcing his death, like the one seen, so they say, by marcel proust, or an ogre wrapped in a white sheet, as the more perspicacious claim to have seen from their deathbed. A moth, just a rustle of silk wings from a large, dark moth with, on its back, a white mark shaped like a skull.

The cellist looked at the clock and saw that it was long past lunchtime. The dog, who had been thinking exactly this for some ten minutes, had sat down beside his owner and, with his head resting on his master's knee, was waiting patiently for him to return to the world. Nearby was a small restaurant providing sandwiches and other such culinary trifles. On the mornings that he visited the park, the cellist was a regular customer there, and he always ordered the same thing. Two tuna mayo sandwiches and a glass of wine for him, and a beef sandwich, rare, for the dog. If the weather was fine, as today, they sat on the grass, in the shade of a tree, and while they were eating, they talked. The dog always kept the best until last, he began by dispatching the slices of bread and only then did he give himself over to the pleasures of the meat, chewing unhurriedly, conscientiously, savoring the juices. The cellist ate distractedly, without giving any thought to what he was eating, he was pondering that suite in d major by bach, in particular the prelude and one fiendishly difficult passage that would sometimes make him pause, hesitate, doubt, which is the worst thing that can happen in the life of a musician. After they had eaten, they lay down side by side, the cellist dozed a little, and, a minute later, the dog was asleep. When they woke and went home, death went with them. While the dog ran into the garden to empty its bowels, the cellist placed the music for the bach suite on the stand, found the tricky bit, a truly diabolical pianissimo, and again experienced that implacable moment of hesitation. Death felt sorry for him, Poor thing, and the worst of it is that he's not going to have time to get it right, not, of course, that anyone ever does, even those who come close are always wide of the mark. Then, for the first time, death noticed that nowhere in the apartment was there a single photograph of a woman, apart from that of an elderly lady who was clearly the cellist's mother, accompanied by a man who must have been his father.

I HAVE A BIG FAVOR TO ASK OF YOU, SAID DEATH. AS USUAL, the scythe did not respond, the only sign that it had heard was a barely perceptible shudder, a generalized expression of physical dismay, for such words, asking a favor, and a big favor to boot, had never emerged from death's mouth before. I'm going to be away for a week, death went on, and during that time, I need you to take over from me as regards dispatching the letters, obviously I'm not asking you to write them, you only have to send them, all you've got to do is give out a kind of mental command and create an inner vibration in your blade, a feeling, an emotion, anything to show you're alive, that will be enough to ensure that the letters set off for their destination. The scythe remained silent, but that silence was the equivalent of a question. It's just that I can't keep coming and going to deal with the mail, said death, I must concentrate entirely on solving this problem with the cellist and finding a way of giving him that wretched letter. The scythe was waiting. Death went on, This is what I plan to do, I'll write all the letters for the week I'll be away, something which, given the exceptional nature of the situation, I can allow myself to do, and, as I said, you only have to send them, you won't even have to move from that spot, leaning against the wall, and I'm being very nice about it, you know, I'm asking you to do this as a favor to me as a friend, when, of course, I could dispense with the niceties and simply issue an order, because the fact that I haven't made much use of you in recent years doesn't mean that you're not still at my service. The scythe's resigned silence confirmed that this was true. So we agree then, concluded death, I'll spend the rest of the day writing letters, there should, I reckon, be about two thousand and fifty, imagine that, it'll mean working my fingers to the bone, I'll leave them for you on the desk, in separate groups, from left to right, don't forget, from left to right, got that, from here to here, I'll be in another fine mess if people start receiving their notifications at the wrong time, either early or late. They say that silence gives consent. The scythe remained silent, and therefore gave its consent. Wrapped in her sheet, with the hood thrown back so as not to hamper her vision, death sat down to work. She wrote and wrote, the hours passed and still she wrote, there were the letters, there were the envelopes, and then she had to fold the letters and seal the envelopes, some will ask how she could manage this if she has no tongue nor any source of saliva, that, my friends, was in the good old days of make do and mend, when we were still living in the stone age of a modernity that had barely begun to dawn, nowadays envelopes are self-seal, just peel off the little strip of paper and presto, in fact, you might say that of all the many uses to which the tongue has been put, this one is now a thing of the past. Death did indeed work her fingers to the bone, because, of course, she is all bone. This is typical of phrases that become fixed in language, and which we continue to use long after they've deviated from their original sense, forgetting that death, for example, who is, of course, a skeleton, is nothing but bone anyway, you need only look at an x-ray. The usual dismissive gesture sent today's two hundred and eighty or so envelopes off into hyperspace, which means that only from tomorrow will the scythe take up the functions of official sender with which it has just been entrusted. Without a word, without so much as a goodbye or a see you later, death got up from her chair, went over to the only door in the room, that narrow little door to which we have often referred, although we haven't the slightest idea where it might lead,

opened it, passed through and closed it after her. The thrill of this made the scythe tremble from the very tip of its blade to the base. Never in the scythe's memory had that door been used.

The hours passed, the hours necessary for the sun to come up outside, not here in this cold, white room, where the pale bulbs, which are always lit, seem to have been placed to fend off the shadows from a corpse who is afraid of the dark. It is still too early for the scythe to give the order that will make the second pile of letters vanish from the room, and so it can sleep a little more. This is what insomniacs say when they have not slept a wink all night, thinking, poor things, that they can fool sleep by asking for a little more, just a little more, when they have not yet been granted one minute of repose. Alone for all those hours, the scythe tried to find an explanation for the remarkable fact that death had made her exit through a sealed door, one that had been eternally condemned, certainly for as long as the scythe has been here. In the end, it gave up any attempt to understand, sooner or later, it will find out what's going on behind that door, for it's almost impossible for there to be secrets between death and the scythe, just as there are no secrets between the sickle and the hand that wields it. The scythe did not have to wait long. Only half an hour of clock time could have passed when the door opened and a woman appeared. The scythe had heard that such a thing was possible, that death could transform herself into a human being, preferably female, this being her normal gender, but had always thought it a mere tale, a myth, a legend like so many others, for example, the phoenix reborn from its own ashes, the man in the moon carrying a bundle of firewood on his back because he had worked on the sabbath, baron munchausen saving himself and his horse from drowning in a swamp by pulling on his own hair, the dracula of transylvania who cannot die, however many times he is killed, unless a stake is driven through his heart, and some people even doubt he'll die then, the famous stone in old Ireland that cried out when the true king touched it, the fountain of epyrus that could douse lit torches and light unlit ones, women who anointed the fields with their menstrual blood to increase the fertility of the sown seeds, ants the size of dogs, dogs the size of ants, the resurrection on the third day because it couldn't have been on the second. You look very pretty, said the scythe, and it was true, death did look very pretty and she was young, about thirty-six or thirty-seven just as the anthropologists had calculated, You spoke, exclaimed death, There seemed to me to be a good reason, it isn't every day one sees death transformed into the species of which she is the enemy, So it wasn't because you thought I looked pretty, Oh, that too, that too, but I would have spoken even if you'd emerged in the guise of a fat woman in black like the one who appeared to monsieur marcel proust, Well, I'm not fat and I'm not dressed in black, and you have no idea who marcel proust was, For obvious reasons, we scythes, both those who cut down people and those who cut down grass, have never been taught how to read, but we have good memories, mine of blood and theirs of sap, and I've heard proust's name several times and put together the facts, he was a great writer, one of the greatest who ever lived, and his file must be somewhere in the old archives, Yes, but not in mine, I wasn't the death who killed him, So this monsieur marcel proust wasn't from

here, then, asked the scythe, No, he was from another country, a place called france, replied death, and there was a touch of sadness in her words, Don't worry, you can console yourself for the fact that it wasn't you who killed proust by how pretty you look today, said the scythe helpfully, As you know, I've always considered you to be a friend, but my sadness has nothing to do with not having been the one to kill proust, What then, Well, I'm not sure I can explain. The scythe gave death a bemused look and thought it best to change the subject, Where did you find the clothes you're wearing, it asked, There are plenty to choose from behind that door, it's like a warehouse, like a vast theater wardrobe, there are literally hundreds of wardrobes, hundreds of mannequins, thousands of hangers, Take me there, pleaded the scythe, What's the point, you know nothing about fashions or style, Well, one look at you tells me that you don't know much more than I do, the clothes you're wearing don't seem to go together at all, Since you never leave this room, you have no idea what people are wearing these days, That blouse looks very like others I can remember from when I led an active life, fashions go in cycles, they come and go, they go and come, if I were to tell you what I see out in those streets, No need to tell me, I believe you, Don't you think this blouse goes well with the color of the trousers and the shoes, Yes, agreed the scythe, And with this cap I'm wearing, Yes, that too, And with this fur coat, Yes, And with this shoulder bag, Yes, you're quite right, And with these earrings, Oh, I give up, Go on, admit it, I'm irresistible, That depends on the kind of man you hope to seduce, But you think I look pretty, That's what I said to begin with, In that case, goodbye, I'll be back on sunday, or monday at the latest, don't forget to send off the mail each day, that shouldn't be too hard a task for someone who spends all his time leaning against the wall, You've got the letter, asked the scythe, deciding not to rise to such sarcasm, Yes, it's in here, said death, tapping her bag with the tips of slender, well-manicured fingers, which anyone would be pleased to kiss.

Death appeared in daylight in a narrow street, with walls on both sides, almost on the outskirts of the city. There is no door or gate through which she could have emerged, nor is there any clue that would allow us to reconstruct the path that led her from the cold subterranean room to here. The sun doesn't trouble her empty eye sockets, that's why the skulls found in archeological digs have no need to lower their eyelids when the light suddenly strikes their face and the happy anthropologist announces that his bony find shows every sign of being a neanderthal, even though a subsequent examination reveals it to be merely a vulgar homo sapiens. Death, however, this death who has become a woman, takes a pair of dark glasses out of her bag and uses them to protect her now human eyes from the risk of catching a nasty case of conjunctivitis, which is more than likely in someone who has yet to accustom herself to the brightness of a summer morning. Death walks down the street to where the walls end and the first buildings begin. From that point on, she finds herself in familiar territory, there is not one house among these and all the others spread out before her as far as the very limits of city and country that she has not visited at least once, and in two weeks' time she will even have to go into that building under construction over there in order to cause a distracted mason, who fails to notice where he's putting his feet, to fall from the

scaffolding. We often say in such cases, that's life, when it would be far more accurate to say, that's death. We wouldn't give that name to the girl in dark glasses who is just getting into a taxi, we would probably think she was the very personification of life and run breathlessly after her, we would tell the driver of another taxi, if there was one, Follow that cab, and there would be no point, because the taxi carrying her off has already turned the corner and there is no other taxi to which we might say, Please, follow that cab. Then we would be quite right in saying, that's life and in giving a resigned shrug. Be that as it may, and let this serve as some consolation, the letter that death is carrying in her bag bears the name of another addressee and another address, our turn to fall from the scaffolding has not yet come. Contrary to what you might reasonably expect, death did not give the taxi driver the cellist's address, but that of the theater where he performs. It's true that, after her two previous failures, she has decided to play safe, but it was no mere chance that had made her begin by transforming herself into a woman, indeed, as a grammatical soul might be inclined to think, and as we discussed earlier, since both death and woman are female, it was her natural gender. Despite its complete lack of experience of the outside world, particularly as regards feelings, appetites and temptations, the scythe had hit the nail on the head when, at one point in its conversation with death, it had inquired as to what kind of man she hoped to seduce. That was the key word, seduce. Death could have gone straight to the cellist's house, rung the bell and, when he opened the door, thrown him the bait of a charming smile, having first removed her dark glasses, and announced herself, for example, to be a seller of encyclopedias, a very hackneyed ploy, but one that almost always works, and then he would either invite her in to discuss things quietly over a cup of tea, or he would tell her at once that he wasn't interested and make as if to close the door, at the same time apologizing politely for his refusal. I wouldn't want one even if it was a music encyclopedia, he would say with a shy smile. In either situation, handing over the letter would be an easy matter, almost, we might say, outrageously easy, and that was precisely what death didn't like. The man didn't know her, but she knew him, she had spent a whole night in the same room as him, she had heard him play and, whether you like it or not, such things forge bonds, establish a certain rapport, mark the beginnings of a relationship, and to announce to him bluntly, You're going to die, you have a week in which to sell your cello and find another owner for your dog, would be a brutal act unworthy of the pretty woman she has become. No, she had a different plan.

A poster at the entrance to the theater informed the worthy public that this week there would be two concerts by the national symphony orchestra, one on thursday, that is, the day after tomorrow, the other on saturday. It's only natural that the curiosity of anyone following this tale with scrupulous and microscopic attention, on the look-out for contradictions, slips, omissions and logical faults, should demand to know how death is going to pay for her tickets to these concerts when only two hours have passed since she emerged from a subterranean room where there are, we believe, no a.t.m.s or banks with open doors. And now that it's in an interrogative vein, that same curiosity will also want to know if taxi drivers no longer charge women who wear dark glasses, have a

pleasant smile and a nice body. Before that ill-intentioned suggestion begins to take root, we hasten to say that not only did death pay the amount on the meter, she also gave the driver a tip. As to where that money came from, if this still worries the reader, suffice it to say that it came from the same place as the dark glasses, that is, from the shoulder bag, since, in principle, and as far as we know, there is nothing to stop one thing coming from the same place as another. It could be that the money with which death paid for the taxi and with which she'll pay for the two tickets to the concerts, as well as the hotel where she'll be staying for the next few days, is now out of circulation. It wouldn't be the first time that we go to bed with one kind of money and wake up with another. It must be assumed, therefore, that the money is of good quality and covered by the current legislation, unless, knowing as we do death's talent for mystification, the taxi driver, not noticing that he was being tricked, accepted from the woman in the dark glasses a bank note which is not of this world or, at least, not of this age, bearing the picture of a president of the republic instead of the venerable and familiar face of his majesty the king. The theater box office has just opened, death goes in, smiles, says good morning and asks for two seats in the best box, one for thursday and the other for saturday. She tells the attendant that she wants the same seats for both concerts and, more importantly, that the box should be on the right and as close to the stage as possible. Death stuck her hand into her bag at random, pulled out her purse and handed over what seemed to her the right amount of money. The attendant gave her the change. Here you are, she said, I hope you enjoy the concerts, it's the first time, isn't it, at least I don't remember seeing you before, and I have an excellent memory for people, in fact, I never forget a face, although it's true that glasses do change a person, especially dark glasses like the ones you're wearing. Death took off her glasses, What do you think now, she asked, No, I'm sure I've never seen you before, Perhaps because this is the first time that the person standing here, the person I am now, has ever had to buy tickets for a concert, why, only a few days ago, I had the pleasure of attending an orchestra rehearsal and no one even noticed me, Sorry, I don't understand, Remind me to explain it to you one day, When, Oh, one day, the day that always comes, Now you're frightening me. Death smiled her pretty smile and asked, Tell me frankly, do I look frightening, No, that isn't what I meant at all, Then do as I do, smile and think of nice things, The concert season will last another month yet, Now that is a piece of good news, perhaps we'll see each other next week, then, Well, I'm always here, I'm almost part of the theater furniture, Don't worry, I'll find you even if you're not, All right, then, I'll expect you, Oh, I'll be there. Death paused and asked, By the way, have you or any of your family received a violet-colored letter, The letter from death, That's right, No, thank god, but our neighbor's week is up tomorrow and he's in the most terrible state about it, What can we do, that's life, Yes, you're right, sighed the woman, that's life. Fortunately, by then, more people had arrived to buy tickets, otherwise, who knows where this conversation might have led.

Now it's a matter of finding a hotel not too far from the musician's house. Death strolled down into the center, went into a travel agency, asked if she could study a map of the city, on which she quickly located the theater, and from there her index finger

traveled across the map to the area where the cellist lived. It was a little out of the way, but there were hotels nearby. The assistant recommended one of them, not luxurious, but comfortable. He himself offered to make the reservation over the phone, and when death asked him how much she owed him for his efforts, he replied, smiling, Just put it on my account. What could be more normal, people say things without thinking, they utter words at random and it doesn't even occur to them to consider the consequences, Put it on my account, said the man, doubtless imagining, with incorrigible masculine vanity, some pleasurable encounter in the near future. He risked death replying with a cold eye, Be careful, you don't know who you're talking to, but she merely gave a vague smile, thanked him and set off without leaving a phone number or a visiting card. In the air hung a diffuse perfume, a mixture of rose and chrysanthemum, Yes, that's what it smells like, half rose and half chrysanthemum, murmured the assistant, while he slowly folded up the city map. Out in the street, death was hailing a taxi and giving the driver the address of the hotel. She didn't feel at all pleased with herself. She had frightened the kindly lady in the box office, she'd had fun at her expense, and that's an unforgivable thing to do. People are quite terrified enough of death without her appearing before them with a smile and saying, Hi, it's me, the latest version, the familiar version if you like, of that ominous latin tag memento, homo, quia pulvis es et in pulverem re-verteris, and then, as if that weren't enough, she had been about to skewer another extremely nice, helpful person with the stupid question that the so-called upper classes have the barefaced cheek to ask of those beneath them, Do you know who you're talking to. No, death is not pleased with her own behavior. She is sure that in her skeletal form she would never have behaved like that, Perhaps it's because I've taken on human form, she thought, these things are catching. She glanced out of the window and recognized the street they were driving along, this is the cellist's street and that's the ground-floor apartment where he lives. Death seemed to feel a tightening in her solar plexus, a sudden agitation of the nerves, like the shiver that goes through a hunter when he spies his prey, when he has it within his sights, it could be a kind of obscure fear, as if she were beginning to feel afraid of herself. The taxi stopped, This is the hotel, said the driver. Death paid him with the change that the woman at the theater had given her, The rest is for you, she said, not even noticing that the rest was more than the amount on the taxi meter. She had an excuse, this is the first time she has used the services of this form of public transport.

As she went over to the reception desk, she remembered that the man at the travel agency hadn't asked her name, he had simply said to the hotel, I'm sending you a customer, yes, a customer, right now, and there she was, this customer who could not possibly say that her name was death, with a small d, please, or that she didn't know what name to give, ah, her bag, the bag over her shoulder, the bag out of which came the dark glasses and the money, the bag out of which must surely come some identifying document, Good afternoon, may I help you, asked the receptionist, A travel agency phoned a quarter of an hour ago to make a reservation for me, Yes, madam, I was the one who took the call, Well, here I am, Would you mind filling out this form, please.

Death knows what her name is now, she found it on the identity card that lies open on the desk, and thanks to her dark glasses she will be able to copy down the facts discreetly, name, place of birth, nationality, marital status, profession, without the receptionist realizing, Here you are, she said, How long will you be staying at the hotel, Until next monday, May I make a photocopy of your credit card, Oh, I didn't bring it with me, but I can pay now, in advance, if you like, No, no, that won't be necessary, said the receptionist. She took the identity card to cross-check the information on the form and, with a puzzled expression on her face, glanced up. The photo on the document was that of a much older woman. Death took off her dark glasses and smiled. Confused, the receptionist looked again at the document, the photo and the woman before her were now as alike as two peas in a pod. Do you have any luggage, she asked, drawing one hand across her perspiring brow, No, I came to town to do some shopping, replied death.

She stayed in her room all day, taking both lunch and supper in the hotel. She watched television until late. Then she got into bed and turned out the light. She didn't sleep. Death never sleeps.

WEARING THE NEW DRESS THAT SHE BOUGHT YESTERDAY IN a shop downtown, death goes to the concert. She is sitting alone in the box, and, just as she did during the rehearsal, she is looking at the cellist. Just before the lights went down, when the orchestra was waiting for the conductor to come, he noticed her. He wasn't the only musician to do so. Firstly, because she was alone in the box, which although not rare, wasn't that frequent an occurrence either. Secondly, because she was pretty, possibly not the prettiest woman in the audience, but pretty in a very particular, indefinable way that couldn't be put into words, like a line of poetry whose ultimate meaning, if such a thing exists in a line of poetry, continually escapes the translator. And finally, because her lone figure, there in the box, surrounded by emptiness and absence on every side, as if she inhabited a void, seemed to be the expression of the most absolute solitude. Death, who had smiled so often and so dangerously since she emerged from her icy subterranean room, is not smiling now. The men in the audience observe her with ambiguous curiosity, the women with keen disquiet, but she, like an eagle diving through the air toward a lamb, has eyes only for the cellist. With one difference, though. In the gaze of this other eagle who has always caught her victims there is something like a tenuous veil of pity, eagles, as we know, are obliged to kill, that is their nature, but this eagle here, now, would perhaps prefer, faced by the defenseless lamb, to open her powerful wings and fly back up into the sky, into the cold air of space, into the untouchable flocks of the clouds. The orchestra has fallen silent. The cellist starts to play his solo as if he had been born for that alone. He doesn't know that the woman in the box has in her brand-new handbag a violet-colored letter addressed to him, he doesn't know, how could he, and yet he plays as if he were bidding farewell to the world, as if he were at last saying everything that he had always kept unsaid, the truncated dreams, the frustrated yearnings, in short, life. The other musicians stare at him in amazement, the conductor with surprise and respect, the audience sighs, a shudder runs through them, and the veil of pity that clouded the sharp gaze of the eagle is now a veil of tears. The solo is over, the orchestra washed over the cello's song like a great, slow sea, gently submerging it, absorbing and amplifying that song as if to lead it into a place where music was transmuted into silence, into the merest shadow of a vibration that touched the skin like the final, inaudible murmur of a kettledrum on which a passing butterfly had momentarily alighted. The silken, malevolent flight of acherontia atropos fluttered quickly through death's memory, but she brushed it away with a wave of her hand which could as easily have been the gesture that made the letters disappear from the desk in her subterranean room as it could a gesture of thanks to the cellist, who was now turning his head in her direction, his eyes seeking a path through the warm darkness of the theater. Death repeated the gesture and it was as if her slender fingers had perched for a moment on the hand moving the bow. However, even though his heart had done everything to make the cellist miss a note, he did not. Her fingers would not touch him again, death had realized that one must never distract an artist while he is practicing his art. When the concert was over and the audience burst into loud cheering, when the lights went up and the conductor brought the orchestra to their feet, and then indicated to the cellist that he alone should get up in order to receive his much-deserved quota of the applause, death, standing, smiling at last, pressed her

hands to her breast, in silence, and just looked, that's all, let the others clap, let the others cry bravo, let the others call the conductor back ten times, she just looked. Then, slowly, as if reluctantly, the audience began to leave, at the same time as the orchestra was packing up. When the cellist turned toward the box, she, the woman, was no longer there. Ah, well, that's life, he murmured.

He was wrong, life isn't always like that, the woman from the box will be waiting for him at the stage door. Some of the musicians stare at her intently as they leave, but they realize, without knowing how, that she is surrounded by an invisible hedge, by a high-voltage fence on which they would burn up like tiny moths. Then the cellist appeared. When he saw her, he started, nearly took a step back, as if, seen from close to, the woman was something other than a woman, something from another sphere, another world, from the dark side of the moon. He bowed his head, he tried to join his departing colleagues, to run away, but the cello case, slung over one shoulder, made escape difficult. The woman was there before him, she was saying, Don't run away, I only came to thank you for the excitement and pleasure of hearing you play, That's very kind of you, but I'm just an orchestra player, not a famous concert artiste, the kind for whom fans wait hours just to be able to touch them or ask them for their autograph, If that's the problem, I can ask you for yours, if you like, I haven't got my autograph album with me, but I have here an envelope that would serve perfectly well, No, you misunderstand me, what I meant was that, although I'm flattered by your attention, I don't feel I deserve it, The audience seemed to disagree, Well, I obviously had a good day, Exactly, and that good day just happened to coincide with my appearance here tonight, Look, I don't want you to think me ungrateful or rude, but probably by tomorrow you'll have got over tonight's excitement, and as suddenly as you appeared, you'll disappear again, You don't know me, I always stick to my resolutions, And what are they, Oh, only one, to meet you, And now that you've met me, we can say goodbye, Are you afraid of me, asked death, No, I just find you rather troubling, And is feeling troubled by my presence such a small thing, Being troubled doesn't necessarily mean being afraid, it might just be a warning to be prudent, Prudence only serves to postpone the inevitable, sooner or later, it surrenders, That won't, I hope, be my case, Oh, I'm sure it will. The cellist moved his cello case from one shoulder to the other, Are you tired, asked the woman, It's not the cello that's heavy, it's the case, especially this one, which is the old-fashioned kind, Look, I need to talk to you, But I don't see how, it's nearly midnight, everyone has left, There are still a few people over there, They're waiting for the conductor, We could talk in a bar, Can you imagine me with a cello on my back walking into a crowded bar, said the cellist, smiling, imagine if all my colleagues went there and took their instruments, We could give another concert, We, asked the musician, intrigued by that plural, Yes, there was a time when I played the violin, there are even pictures of me playing, You seem determined to surprise me with every word you say, It's up to you whether you find out just how surprising I can be, Well, that seems clear enough, That's where you're wrong, I didn't mean what you were thinking, And what was I thinking, may I ask, About bed and me in that bed, Forgive me, No, it was my fault, if I was a man and I'd heard those

words, I would certainly have thought the same, one pays the price for ambiguity, Thank you for being so honest. The woman took a few steps and then said, Come on then, Where, asked the cellist, Me to the hotel where I'm staying and you, I imagine, to your apartment, Won't I see you again, So you don't find me troubling any more, Oh, that was nothing, Don't lie, All right, I did find you troubling, but I don't now. On death's face appeared a kind of smile in which there was not a shadow of joy, Now is just when you have most reason to feel troubled, she said, It's a risk I'm willing to take, that's why I'll repeat my question, What was it, Will I see you again, I'll be at the concert on saturday and I'll be sitting in the same box, It's a different program, you know, I don't have a solo in it, Yes, I know, You seem to have thought of everything, Indeed, And how will all this end, We're still only at the beginning. A taxi was approaching. The woman hailed it and turned to the cellist, I'll take you home, No, I'll take you to your hotel and then go home from there, Either we do as I say, or I'll take another taxi, Do you always get your own way, Yes, always, You must fail occasionally, god is god and he's done almost nothing but fail, Oh, I could prove to you right now that I never fail, OK, show me, Don't be so stupid, death said abruptly, and there was in her voice an obscure, terrible, underlying threat. The cello was placed in the trunk of the taxi. The two passengers spoke not a word during the entire journey. When the taxi stopped, the cellist said before he got out, I simply can't understand what's going on between you and me, and I think it would be best if we didn't see each other again, No one can stop it now, Not even you, the woman who always gets her own way, asked the cellist, trying to be ironic, Not even me, replied the woman, So that means you'll fail then, No, it means I won't fail. The driver had got out to open the trunk and was waiting for the cellist to remove his cello case. The man and the woman didn't say goodbye, they didn't say see you on saturday, they didn't touch, it was a heartfelt parting of the ways, dramatic and brutal, as if they had sworn on blood and water never to meet again. Carrying his cello, the musician stalked off and went into the apartment block. He didn't turn round, not even when he paused for an instant on the very threshold. The woman was watching him, clutching her bag. The taxi drove on.

The cellist went into his apartment, muttering angrily, She's mad, completely mad, the one time in my life when someone comes and waits for me at the stage door to say how well I played and she turns out to be a nutcase, and I, like a fool, ask if I'll see her again, I'm just creating problems for myself, I mean, really, there are some character defects that perhaps deserve a bit of respect, or are, at least, worthy of one's attention, but stupidity is just ridiculous, infatuation is ridiculous, I was ridiculous. He distractedly patted the dog who had run to greet him at the front door and then went into the piano room. He opened the cello case and carefully removed the instrument, which he would have to retune before going to bed, because journeys in taxis, however short, weren't good for its health. He went into the kitchen to give the dog some food, and prepared himself a sandwich, which he washed down with a glass of wine. He was feeling less annoyed now, but the feeling that was gradually replacing that annoyance was no less disquieting. He remembered things the woman had said, her allusion to ambiguities that

always have a price, and he discovered that every word she had said, although each one made perfect sense in context, seemed to carry within it another meaning, something he couldn't quite grasp, something tantalizing, like the water that slips away from us when we try to drink it, like the branch that suddenly moves out of reach when we go to pluck the fruit. I wouldn't say she was mad, he thought, but she's certainly odd, there's no doubt about that. He finished his sandwich and returned to the music room or piano room, the two names we have given it up until now, when it would be far more logical to call it the cello room, since that is the instrument by which the musician earns his living, but we have to admit that it wouldn't sound right, it would be slightly degrading, slightly undignified, you just have to follow the descending scale to grasp our reasoning, music room, piano room, cello room, so far, so acceptable, but imagine if we were to start referring to the clarinet room, the fife room, the bass drum room, the triangle room. Words have their own hierarchy, their own protocol, their own aristocratic titles, their own plebeian stigmas. The dog joined his master and lay down beside him having first turned round and round three times, which was the only memory he still retained of the days when he was a wolf. The musician was tuning his cello to the a of the tuning fork, lovingly restoring the instrument's harmonies after the brutal treatment inflicted on it by the taxi rattling over the cobblestones. For a few moments, he had managed to forget the woman at the theater, not her exactly, but the troubling conversation they'd had at the stage door, although their final tense exchange of words in the taxi continued to be heard in the background, like a muffled roll on the drums. He couldn't forget the woman, he didn't want to. He could see her standing up, her two hands pressed to her breast, he could feel the touch of her intense gaze, hard as a diamond, and how it shone when she smiled. He would see her again on saturday, he thought, yes, he would see her then, but she would not stand up again, nor press her hands to her breast, nor look at him from afar, that magical moment had been swallowed up, undone by the moment that followed, when he turned to see her for the last time, or so he thought, and she was no longer there.

When the tuning fork had returned to silence and the cello was once more in tune, the phone rang. The musician started, he looked at the watch, it was half past one. Who can be calling at this hour, he wondered. He picked up the receiver and waited for a few seconds. It was absurd, of course, he was the one who should speak and give his name or number, then someone would probably say at the other end, Oh, sorry, I must have mis-dialed, but the voice that spoke asked instead, Is it the dog answering the phone, if it is, could he, please, at least bark. The cellist replied, Yes, it is the dog, but I stopped barking a long time ago, I've lost the habit of biting too, apart from biting myself when life plays tricks on me, Don't be angry, I'm phoning to apologize, our conversation took a dangerous turn, and the result, as you saw, was disastrous, Well, someone took it off along that dangerous turn, and it wasn't me, It was my fault entirely, usually I'm very balanced and calm, You didn't seem to me to be either of those things, Perhaps I suffer from a split personality, That makes us equal then, I myself am both dog and man, Irony doesn't suit you, but your musical ear will doubtless already have told you that,

Dissonance also has a role to play in music, ma'am, Don't call me ma'am, How else should I address you, since I don't know your name or what you do or what you are, You'll find out eventually, remember, haste makes a bad counselor, besides, we've only just met, You're one step ahead of me, though, since you have my phone number, That's what directory assistance is for, the receptionist found it for me, It's a shame this is such an old phone, Why, Because if it was one of those modern ones, I'd know where you were phoning from, I'm phoning from my hotel room, That much I knew, And as for the antiquity of your phone, I assumed that would be the case, so it doesn't surprise me in the least, Why, Because everything about you seems old-fashioned, it's as if you weren't fifty, but five hundred years old, How do you know I'm fifty, Because I'm very good at guessing people's ages, I never fail, It seems to me that you boast too much about never failing, Yes, you're right, today, for example, I failed twice, something which, I can assure you, has never happened before, Sorry, I don't understand, You see I have a letter to give you and I failed to do so, although I could easily have given it to you either outside the theater or in the taxi, What letter is that, Let's just say that I wrote it after attending the rehearsal for your concert, You were there, Yes, I was, But I didn't see you, Of course not, you couldn't, Anyway, it's not my concert, As modest as ever, And saying let's just say isn't the same as saying what actually happened, Sometimes it is, But not in this case, Congratulations, you're not only modest, you're very perceptive too, What letter do you mean, You'll find out in time, So why didn't you give it to me if you had the opportunity, Two opportunities, Exactly, so why didn't you give it to me, That's what I hope to find out, maybe I'll give it to you on saturday, after the concert, because by monday I'll be gone, You don't live here, Not what you would call live, no, You've lost me, talking to you is like finding oneself in a labyrinth with no doors, Now that's an excellent definition of life, But you're not life, No, I'm much more complicated than that, Someone wrote that we are all of us life, for the moment, Yes, for the moment, but only for the moment, Let's just hope all this confusion is cleared up the day after tomorrow, the letter, the reason why you didn't give it to me, everything, I'm tired of mysteries, What you call mysteries are often intended as protection, Well, protection or not, I want to see that letter, If I don't fail a third time, you will, And why would you fail a third time, If I do, it could only be for the same reason I failed before, Please, don't play cat and mouse with me, In that particular game, the cat always ends up catching the mouse, Unless the mouse manages to put a bell around the cat's neck, A good answer, but that's just a silly dream, a cartoon fantasy, even if the cat were asleep, the noise would wake it, and then goodbye mouse, Am I the mouse you're saying goodbye to, If we were playing that game, then one of us would have to be the mouse, and you don't seem to me to have either the looks or the cunning to be the cat, So I'm condemned to being a mouse for the rest of my life, For as long as that lasts, yes, a mouse cellist, Another cartoon character, Don't you think all human beings are just cartoon characters, You too, I suppose, You've seen what I look like, A very pretty woman, Thank you, Anyone listening in to this conversation would think we were flirting, If the hotel's switchboard operator amuses herself by eavesdropping on guests' conversations, she'll already have reached the same conclusion, Even if we are flirting, it won't have any serious consequences, the woman in

the box, whose name I still don't know, will be leaving on monday, Never again to return, Are you sure, It's unlikely that the reasons that brought me here will ever be repeated, Unlikely doesn't mean impossible, No, but I'll do all I can not to have to repeat the journey, It was worth it, though, despite everything, Despite what exactly, Forgive me, I was being indelicate, what I meant to say was, Please, don't bother being nice to me, I'm not used to it, besides, I can guess what you were going to say, but if you feel you owe me a more complete explanation, perhaps we can continue this conversation on saturday, So I won't see you before that, No. The line was cut. The cellist looked at the receiver still in his hand, which was damp with anxiety, I must be dreaming, he muttered, this isn't the kind of thing that happens to me. He put the receiver down and addressing the piano, the cello and the shelves, he asked, this time out loud, What does this woman want of me, who is she, why has she appeared in my life. Woken by the noise, the dog looked up at him. There was an answer in his eyes, but the cellist didn't notice, he paced the room from one side to the other, feeling even more nervous than before, and the answer was this, Now that you mention it, I do have a vague recollection of having slept in a woman's lap and it might have been hers, What lap, what woman, the cellist would have asked, You were asleep, Where, In your bed, And where was she, Over there, That's a good one, mister dog, how long has it been since a woman came into this apartment, into that bedroom, go on, tell me, As you should know, a dog's perception of time is not the same as that of a human being, but it seems to me that it really has been an age since you last received a lady in your bed, and I don't mean that ironically, So you dreamed it, Probably, we dogs are incorrigible dreamers, we even dream with our eyes open, we just have to see something in the shadows and we immediately imagine that it's a woman's lap and jump onto it, Mere doggy imaginings, the cellist would say, Even if that's true, the dog would reply, we're not complaining. Meanwhile, in her hotel room, death is standing naked before the mirror. She doesn't know who she is.

The following day, the woman didn't phone. The cellist stayed in just in case. The evening passed, and not a word. The cellist slept even worse than he had the night before. On saturday morning, before setting off to his rehearsal, a mad idea occurred to him, to go and ask around all the hotels in the area to see if they had a female guest with her figure, her smile, her way of moving her hands, but he immediately gave up this crazy project, because it was obvious that he would be dismissed with an air of ill-disguised suspicion and an abrupt We are not authorized to give out that information. The rehearsal went reasonably well, he merely played what was there on the page, doing his best not to play too many wrong notes. When it was over, he rushed back home. He was thinking that if she had phoned in his absence, she wouldn't even have found a miserable answering machine to record her message. I'm not a man born five centuries ago, I'm a troglodyte from the stone age, everyone uses answering machines except me, he muttered. If he needed proof that she hadn't phoned, the next few hours provided it. In principle, someone who had phoned and got no reply would call again, but the wretched machine remained silent all afternoon, indifferent to the cellist's ever more desperate looks. All right, so it looks like she won't get in touch, perhaps for one reason

or another she hasn't had the chance, but she'll be there at the concert, they'll come back together in the same taxi, as happened after the last concert, and when they arrive here, he'll invite her in, and then they can talk calmly, she'll finally give him the longed-for letter and then they'll both laugh at the exaggerated words of praise which she, swept away by artistic enthusiasm, had written after the rehearsal where he hadn't seen her, and he'll say that he's certainly no rostopovich, and she'll say who knows what the future may hold, and when they run out of things to say or when the words start to go one way and their thoughts another, then we'll see if something happens that will be worth remembering in our old age. It was in this state of mind that the cellist left home, it was this state of mind that carried him to the theater, with this state of mind that he went on stage and sat down in his usual place. The box was empty. She's late, he said to himself, she must be just about to arrive, there are still people coming into the theater. This was true, the late arrivals were taking their seats, apologizing for disturbing those already seated, but the woman did not appear. Perhaps in the intermission. She still didn't come. The box remained empty until the end of the performance. Nevertheless, there was a reasonable hope that, having been unable to attend the concert, for reasons she would explain, she'll be waiting for him outside, at the stage door. She wasn't there. And since the fate of hopes is always to breed more hopes, which is why, despite so many disappointments, they have not yet died out in the world, she might be waiting for him outside his building with a smile on her lips and the letter in her hand, Here you are, as promised. She wasn't there either. The cellist went into his apartment like an old-fashioned, first-generation automaton, the sort that had to ask one leg to move in order to move the other one. He pushed away the dog who had come to greet him, put his cello down in the first convenient place and went and lay on his bed. Now will you learn your lesson, you idiot, you've behaved like a complete imbecile, you gave the meanings you wanted to words which, in the end, meant something else entirely, meanings that you don't know and never will know, you believed in smiles that were nothing but deliberate muscular contractions, you forgot that you're really five hundred years old, even though the years very kindly reminded you of this, and now here you are, washed up, lying on the bed where you were hoping to welcome her, while she's laughing at the foolish figure you cut and at your ineradicable stupidity. His master's rebuff forgotten, the dog came over to the bed to console him. He put his front paws on the mattress and pulled himself up to the height of his master's left hand, which lay there like something futile and vain, and gently rested his head on it. He could have licked it and licked it again, as is the way with ordinary dogs, but nature had, for once, revealed her benevolent side and reserved for him a very special sensitivity, one that allowed him even to invent different gestures to express emotions that are always the same and always unique. The cellist turned toward the dog, and adjusted his position so that his head was only a few inches from the dog's head, and there they stayed, looking at each other, saying, with no need for words, When I think about it, I have no idea who you are, but that's not important, what matters is that we care about each other. The cellist's bitterness gradually ebbed away, the fact is the world is full of such episodes, he waited and she never arrived, she waited and he never came, and just between ourselves,

unbelieving skeptics that we are, rather than a broken leg. This is easy enough to say, but it's best not to, because words often have very different effects from those intended, so much so that these men and women quite often curse and swear, I hate her, I hate him, then burst into tears when they've done so. The cellist sat up in bed, put his arms around the dog, which, in a final gesture of solidarity, had placed his paws on his master's knees, and said, like someone telling himself off, A little dignity, please, no whining. Then, to the dog he said, You must be hungry. Wagging his tail, the dog replied, Yes, I am hungry, I haven't eaten for hours, and the two went into the kitchen. The cellist didn't eat, he didn't feel like it. Besides, the lump in his throat wouldn't allow him to swallow. Half an hour later, he was back in bed, having taken a pill to help him sleep, not that it did much good. He kept waking and sleeping, waking and sleeping, always with the same obsessive idea that he should be running after sleep to catch it up and thus prevent insomnia from occupying the other side of the bed. He didn't dream about the woman, but there was a moment when he woke and saw her standing in the middle of the music room, with her hands pressed to her breast.

The next day was sunday, and sunday is the day he takes the dog for a walk. Love repays love, the animal seemed to be saying, with his lead in his mouth and eager to be off. They entered the park, and the cellist was just heading toward the bench where he usually sat, when he saw that a woman was already sitting there. Park benches are free, public and, usually, gratis, we can't say to someone who arrives before us, This bench is mine, kindly find another one. A well-brought-up man like the cellist would never do that, and certainly not if he thought he recognized that person as the woman from the theater, the woman who had stood him up, the woman he had seen in the middle of the music room with her two hands pressed to her breast. As we know, at fifty, we can't always trust our eyes, we start to blink, to screw them up as if we were trying to imitate the heroes of the wild west or the navigators of long ago, on top of a horse or at the prow of a caravel, one hand shading their eyes as they scan distant horizons. The woman is dressed differently, in trousers and a leather jacket, she must be someone else, says the cellist to his heart, but his heart, which has better eyesight, tells him, open your eyes, it's her, now you behave yourself. The woman looked up, and the cellist knew for certain then that it was she. Good morning, he said, when he stopped by the bench, the last thing I would have expected today was to find you here, Good morning, I came to say goodbye and to apologize for not coming to the concert yesterday. The cellist sat down, removed the dog's lead, said, Off you go, and without looking at the woman, replied, There's nothing to apologize for, that sort of thing is always happening, people buy a ticket and then, for one reason or another, they can't go, it's perfectly normal, And about our saying goodbye, do you have any views on that, asked the woman, It's extremely kind of you to think that you should come and say goodbye to a stranger, although I really can't imagine how you could possibly know that I come to this park every sunday, There are very few things I don't know about you, Oh, please, let's not go back to the absurd conversations we had on thursday at the stage door and afterward on the phone, you don't know anything about me, we'd never even met before then, Remember, I was

at the rehearsal, And I really don't know how you managed that, because the maestro is very strict about strangers being present, and please don't go telling me now that you know him too, Not as well as I know you, but you are an exception, It would be better if I wasn't, Why, Do you want me to tell you, do you really want me to tell you, asked the cellist with a vehemence that bordered on despair, Yes, I do, Because I've fallen in love with a woman I know nothing about, who is amusing herself at my expense, who will go off tomorrow who knows where, and who I'll never see again, It's actually today that I'll be leaving, not tomorrow, But you said, And it isn't true that I've been amusing myself at your expense, Well, if you haven't, you certainly did an excellent imitation, As for you falling in love with me, you can hardly expect me to respond, there are certain words my mouth is forbidden to speak, Another mystery, And it won't be the last, Once we've said goodbye, all the mysteries will be resolved, Others might take their place, Please, go away, don't torment me any more, The letter, Look, I don't want to know anything about the letter, The fact is I couldn't give it to you even if I wanted to, I left it at the hotel, said the woman, smiling, Then tear it up, Yes, I'll have to think what to do with it, There's no need to think, tear it up and be done with it. The woman got to her feet. Are you leaving already, asked the cellist. He hadn't moved, he was sitting with his head bowed, he still had something to say. I've never even touched you, he murmured, No, I was the one who stopped you touching me, How did you manage that, It wasn't that difficult, Not even now, Not even now, We could at least shake hands, My hands are cold. The cellist looked up. The woman was no longer there.

Man and dog left the park early, the sandwiches were bought to eat at home, there were no naps in the sun. The afternoon and evening were long and sad, the musician picked up a book, read half a page, then threw it down. He sat at the piano to play a little, but his hands would not obey him, they were clumsy, cold, as if dead. And when he returned to his beloved cello, it was the instrument itself that rejected him. He dozed in a chair, hoping to fall into an endless sleep, never to wake again. Lying on the floor, waiting for a sign that did not come, the dog was looking at him. Perhaps the reason for his master's despondency was the woman they had met in the park, he thought, so it wasn't true what the proverb said, that what the eyes don't see, the heart doesn't grieve over. Proverbs are so deceiving, concluded the dog. It was eleven o'clock when the doorbell rang. Some neighbor with a problem, thought the cellist, and got up to open the door. Good evening, said the woman, standing on the threshold. Good evening, replied the musician, trying hard to control the spasm making his throat tighten, Aren't you going to ask me in, Of course, please, come in. He stepped aside to allow her to pass, then closed the door, moving very slowly and carefully, so that his heart would not burst. Legs shaking, he invited her to take a seat. I thought you would have left already, he said, As you see, I decided to stay, said the woman, But you'll leave tomorrow, That's what I've agreed, You've come, I presume, to bring the letter, which you decided not to tear up, Yes, I have it here in my bag, Are you going to give it to me, then, We have time, I remember telling you that haste was a bad counselor, As you wish, I'm at your disposal, Are you serious, That's my worst defect, I say everything seriously, even when I make

people laugh, no, especially when I make people laugh, In that case, may I ask you a favor, What's that, Make it up to me for having missed yesterday's concert, How can I do that, The piano's over there, Oh, forget it, I'm a very mediocre pianist, The cello then, Now that's another matter, I can play you a couple of pieces if you really want me to, May I choose the music, asked the woman, Yes, but only if it's something I can play, that's within my range. The woman chose the sheet music for bach's suite number six and said, This, It's very long, it takes more than half an hour, and it's getting late, As I said, we have time, There's a passage in the prelude that I always have difficulties with, It doesn't matter, you could just skip it when you get there, said the woman, although that won't be necessary, you'll see, you'll play even better than rostopovich. The cellist smiled, You bet. He placed the sheet music on the stand, took a deep breath, placed his left hand on the neck of the cello, his right hand holding the bow poised over the strings, and then he began. He knew perfectly well that he was no rostopovich, that he was only an orchestra soloist when the program happened to require this of him, but here, sitting opposite this woman, with his dog lying at his feet, at that late hour of the night, surrounded by books, sheet music, scores, he was johann sebastian bach himself composing in cöthen what would later be called opus one thousand and twelve, almost as many as the works of creation. He got through the difficult passage without even noticing this great feat, his happy hands made the cello murmur, speak, sing, roar, this is what rostopovich had lacked, this room, this hour, this woman. When he finished playing, her hands were no longer cold and his hands were on fire, which is why their hands were not in the least surprised when hand reached out to hand. It was long after one o'clock in the morning when the cellist asked, Would you like me to call you a taxi to take you back to the hotel, and the woman replied, No, I'll stay here with you, and she offered him her mouth. They went into the bedroom, got undressed, and what was written would happen finally happened, and again, and yet again. He fell asleep, she did not. Then she, death, got up, opened the bag she had left in the music room and took out the violet-colored letter. She looked around for a place where she could leave it, on the piano, between the strings of the cello, or else in the bedroom itself, under the pillow on which the man's head was resting. She did none of these things. She went into the kitchen, lit a match, a humble match, she who could make the paper vanish with a single glance and reduce it to an impalpable dust, she who could set fire to it with the mere touch of her fingers, and yet it was a simple match, an ordinary match, an everyday match, that set light to death's letter, the letter that only death could destroy. No ashes remained. Death went back to bed, put her arms around the man and, without understanding what was happening to her, she who never slept felt sleep gently closing her eyelids. The following day, no one died.

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THE ELEPHANT'S JOURNEY

Translated from the Portuguese by
Margaret Jull Costa

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For Pilar, who wouldn't let me die

In the end, we always arrive at the
place where we are expected.

—Book of Itineraries

STRANGE THOUGH IT MAY seem to anyone unaware of the importance of the marital bed in the efficient workings of public administration, regardless of whether that bed has been blessed by church or state or no one at all, the first step of an elephant's extraordinary journey to austria, which we propose to describe hereafter, took place in the royal apartments of the portuguese court, more or less at bedtime. And it is no mere accident that we chose to use the vague expression more or less. For this enables us, with admirable elegance, to avoid having to go into details of a physical and physiological nature, often sordid and almost always ridiculous, and which, set down on paper, would offend the strict catholicism of dom joão the third, king of portugal and of the algarves, and of dona catarina of austria, his wife and the future grandmother of the same dom sebastião who will go off to lead the attack on alcácer-quibir and die there during the first assault, or perhaps the second, although there are also those who say he died of an illness on the eve of battle. This is what the king, with furrowed brow, said to the queen, I'm worried about something, my lady, About what, my lord, The gift we gave to our cousin maximilian at the time of his marriage four years ago always seemed to me unworthy of his lineage and his merits, and now that we have him close to home, so to speak, in his role as regent of spain in the city of valladolid, I would like to offer him something more valuable, more striking, what do you think, my lady, A monstrance would be a good idea, my lord, a monstrance, I find, is always most welcome, perhaps because it has the virtue of combining material value and spiritual significance, Our holy church would not appreciate such liberality, it doubtless still retains in its infallible memory cousin maximilian's confessed sympathies for the reforms of the lutheran protestants, or were they calvinists, I was never quite sure, Vade retro, satana, exclaimed the queen, crossing herself, such a thought had never even occurred to me, now I'll have to go to confession first thing in the morning, Why tomorrow in particular, my lady, given that it is your custom to go to confession every day, asked the king, Because of the vile idea that the enemy placed on my vocal cords, oh, I can feel my throat burning as if it had been scorched by a breath from hell itself. Accustomed to the queen's sensory excesses, the king shrugged and returned to the difficult task of finding a present that might satisfy archduke maximilian of austria. The queen was murmuring a prayer and had just begun another when, suddenly, she stopped and almost shouted out, There's always solomon, What, asked the king, perplexed by this untimely invocation of the king of judah, Yes, my lord, solomon the elephant, And what has the elephant got to do with anything, asked the king somewhat waspishly, He could be the gift, my lord, answered the queen, standing up, euphoric and very excited, He's not exactly an appropriate wedding present, That doesn't matter. The king nodded slowly three times, paused and then nodded another three times, after which he said, Yes, it's an interesting idea, It's more than interesting, it's a very good idea, an excellent idea, retorted the queen, unable to suppress a gesture of impatience, almost of insubordination, the creature came from india more than two years ago, and since then he's done nothing but eat and sleep, with his water trough always full and a constant supply of food, it's as if he were a kept beast, but one who'll never earn his keep, That's hardly the poor creature's fault, there's no suitable work for him here, unless we were to send him to the docks on the river tagus to

transport planks, but the poor thing would only suffer, because his professional specialty is transporting felled trees, so much better suited to the curve of his trunk, Send him off to vienna, then, But how, asked the king, That's not our affair, once cousin maximilian is the owner, it will be a matter for him to resolve, he is, I assume, still in valladolid, As far as I know, yes, Obviously, solomon would have to travel to valladolid on foot, he has the legs for it after all, And then on to vienna as well, he'll have no alternative, It's a long way, said the queen, A very long way, agreed the king gravely, and added, I'll write to cousin maximilian tomorrow, and if he accepts, we'll have to agree on dates and ascertain certain facts, for example, when he intends leaving for vienna, and how many days it would take for solomon to travel from lisbon to valladolid, after that, it's up to him, we wash our hands of the affair, Yes, we wash our hands, said the queen, but deep inside, which is where the contradictions of the self do battle, she felt a sudden sadness at the thought of sending solomon off to such distant lands and into the care of strangers.

Early the following morning, the king summoned his secretary, pêro de alcáçova carneiro, and dictated a letter that did not come out well at the first attempt, nor at the second or the third, and in the end it had to be handed over entirely to his secretary, who had the necessary rhetorical skills as well as a knowledge of the etiquette and epistolary formulae used between sovereigns, all of which he had learned at the best of all possible schools, namely, from his father, antonio carneiro, from whom he had inherited the post. The resulting letter was perfect as regards both penmanship and argument, not even omitting the theoretical possibility, diplomatically expressed, that the gift might not be to the liking of the archduke, who would, nevertheless, find it extremely hard to reply in the negative, for the king of portugal also stated, in a key passage in the letter, that there was nothing in the whole of his kingdom as precious as the elephant solomon, both because he represented the unifying force of the divine creation that connects and establishes a kinship between all the species, why, some even say that man himself was made out of what was left over after the elephant had been created, and because of the symbolic, intrinsic and worldly values that the creature embodied. When the letter had been signed and sealed, the king summoned his master of the horse, a gentleman who enjoyed his complete confidence and to whom he first summarized the contents of the missive, then ordered him to select an escort worthy of his rank, but one, above all, that would prove equal to the responsibility of the mission with which he was being charged. The gentleman kissed the hand of the king, who, with all the solemnity of an oracle, spoke these sibylline words, Be as swift as the north wind and as sure as the flight of the eagle, Yes, my lord. Then, the king adopted quite a different tone and offered some pieces of practical advice, I don't need to remind you to change horses as often as proves necessary, that is what staging-posts are for, and this is no time for false economies, I will give instructions for the stables to be supplied with more horses, and one other thing, I think you should, if you can, in order to gain time, try to sleep on your horse while you gallop along the roads of castile. The master of the horse did not understand the king's little joke, or else preferred to let it pass, and merely said, Your highness's orders will be carried out to the letter, I pledge my word and my life on it, and then he withdrew,

walking backwards and bowing every three steps. No one could have a finer master of the horse, said the king. The secretary decided not to give voice to the adulatory sentiment that would consist in saying that the king's master of the horse could hardly be anything else or behave any differently, given that he had been personally chosen by his royal highness. He had the feeling that he had said something similar only a few days before. At the time, he had recalled some advice of his father's, Be careful, my son, any flattering remark, if repeated too often, will always wear thin in the end and become, instead, as wounding as any insult. And so the secretary, although not for the same reasons as the master of the horse, also chose to say nothing. It was during this brief silence that the king finally gave expression to a worrying thought that had occurred to him on waking, I've been thinking, I feel that I should go and see solomon, Does your highness wish me to call the royal guard, asked the secretary, No, two pageboys will be more than enough, one to carry messages and the other to go and find out why the first has not yet returned, oh, and yourself, secretary, if you would care to accompany me, You do me great honor, highness, far more than I deserve, Perhaps I do so in order that you may deserve still more, like your father, may he rest in peace, Allow me to kiss your highness's hand with all the love and respect with which I kissed his, Now that is far more than I deserve, said the king, smiling, Ah, no one can outdo your highness in dialectic and response, Although there are those who say that the fates who presided over my birth did not endow me with a gift for words, Words are not everything, my lord, going to visit the elephant solomon today is a poetic act and will perhaps be seen as such in the future, What is a poetic act, asked the king, No one knows, my lord, we only recognize it when it happens, So far, though, I have only mentioned my intention of visiting solomon, Ah, but the word of a king would, I'm sure, be enough, That, I believe, is what rhetoricians call irony, Forgive me, your highness, You are forgiven, secretary, and if all your sins are of like gravity, your place in heaven is guaranteed, Possibly, but I'm not sure that this would be the best time to go to heaven, What do you mean by that, There is the inquisition to consider, sir, confession and absolution are no longer the safe-conduct passes they once were, The inquisition will maintain unity among christians, that is its objective, And a very holy objective it is, highness, but what means will it use to achieve that, If the end is holy, then the means to that end will also be holy, retorted the king rather sharply, Forgive me, your highness, and may I, May you what, May I ask you to excuse me from todays visit to solomon, I feel that I would not prove to be very agreeable company for your highness, No, I will not excuse you, I need your presence in the enclosure, But why, sir, if I may be so bold as to ask, Because I lack the intelligence to know if what you termed a poetic act will take place or not, replied the king with a half-smile that gave his beard and mustache a mischievous, almost mephistophelian look, I await your orders, my lord, At five o'clock prompt, I want four horses to be brought round to the palace gate, and make sure that my mount is large, strong and docile, I've never been much of a rider and I'm even less of one now, what with all the aches and pains that age brings with it, Yes, my lord, And choose the pageboys who are to come with me very carefully, I don't want the kind who laugh at the slightest thing, it makes me feel like wringing their necks, Yes, my lord.

In the end, they did not leave until half past five because the queen, when she found out about the planned excursion, declared that she wanted to go too. It was very hard to convince her that it made no sense at all to prepare a carriage merely to go as far as belém, where solomon's enclosure had been built. And you certainly don't intend going on horseback, said the king peremptorily, determined not to allow any arguments. The queen obeyed this ill-disguised prohibition and withdrew, muttering that no one in portugal, or indeed in the whole world, loved solomon as much as she did. As can be seen, the contradictions of the self were multiplying. Having called the poor animal a kept beast, the worst possible insult for an irrational creature who had been forced to labor in india, on no pay, for years and years, catarina of austria was now revealing a hint of chivalrous remorse that had almost led her to challenge, at least outwardly, the authority of her lord, her husband and her king. It was basically a storm in a teacup, a minor conjugal crisis that would, inevitably, vanish with the return of the master of the horse, regardless of what answer he might bring. If the archduke accepted the elephant, the problem would resolve itself or, rather, the journey to vienna would resolve it, and if he didn't accept it, then they would simply have to say, once again, with the centuries-old experience of all peoples, that, despite the disappointments, frustrations and disillusionments that are the daily bread of men and elephants alike, life goes on. Solomon has no idea what awaits him. The master of the horse, the emissary of his fate, is riding toward valladolid, having recovered from the unfortunate results of trying to sleep while on horseback, and the king of portugal, with his modest escort of secretary and pageboys, is about to arrive at the river's edge at belém, within sight of the jerónimos monastery and solomon's enclosure. Given time, everything in the universe will dovetail perfectly with everything else. There is the elephant. Although he is smaller than his african relatives, one can still see, beneath the layer of dirt covering him, the fine figure nature had in mind when she created him. Why is the animal so dirty, asked the king, where is his keeper, I assume there is a keeper. A man with indian features approached, he was dressed in little more than rags, a mixture of his original clothes and others made locally, barely covered by or barely covering scraps of the more exotic fabrics that had arrived, along with the elephant, on that same body, two years before. He was the mahout. The secretary soon realized that the keeper had not recognized the king, and since this was clearly not the moment for any formal introductions, along the lines of, your highness, allow me to introduce solomon's keeper, and this, sir indian, is the king of portugal, dom joão the third, who will come to be known as dom joão the pious, instead, he ordered the two pageboys to go into the enclosure and inform the bewildered mahout of the titles and qualities of the bearded personage currently fixing him with a stern gaze that boded no good, It's the king. The man stopped, as if he had been struck by a bolt of lightning, and then made as if to escape, but the pageboys caught hold of him by his rags and propelled him toward the stockade. The king, meanwhile, was standing on a rustic ladder that had been propped against the stockade, and was observing the spectacle with an air of irritation and repugnance, regretting having given in to that early-morning impulse to pay a sentimental visit to this pachyderm, to this ridiculous proboscidean more than four ells high, who, god willing, will soon be depositing his malodorous excretions on the

pretentious austrian city of vienna. The blame, at least in part, lay with the secretary and his comment about poetic acts, a comment that was still going round and round in the king's head. He shot a challenging glance at the otherwise estimable functionary, who, as if he had read his mind, said, Your coming here, my lord, was, indeed, a poetic act, and the elephant was merely the pretext, nothing more. The king muttered some inaudible remark, then said in a clear, firm voice, I want that animal washed, right now. He felt like a king, he was a king, and that feeling is understandable when you consider that never in his entire life as monarch had he uttered such a sentence. The pageboys passed the sovereign's order on to the mahout, and the man ran to a shed in which were stored things that looked like and may well have been tools, as well as others that no one could have said quite what they were. Beside the shed was a building, presumably the keeper's house, made out of planks and with an unboarded roof. He returned carrying a long-handled broom, filled a bucket from the wine vat that served as water trough and set to work. The elephant's pleasure was plain to see. The water and the scrubbing motion of the broom must have awoken in him some pleasant memory, a river in india, the rough trunk of a tree, and the proof was that for as long as the washing lasted, a good half hour, he did not move from the spot, standing firm on his powerful legs, as if he were hypnotized. Knowing as one does the preeminent virtues of bodily cleanliness, it was no surprise to find that in the place where one elephant had been there now stood another. The dirt that had covered him before, and through which one could barely see his skin, had vanished beneath the combined actions of water and broom, and solomon revealed himself now in all his splendor. A somewhat relative splendor, it must be said. The skin of an asian elephant like solomon is thick, a grayish coffee color and sprinkled with freckles and hairs, a permanent disappointment to the elephant, despite the advice he was always giving himself about accepting his fate and being contented with what he had and giving thanks to vishnu. He surrendered himself to being washed as if he were expecting a miracle, a baptism, but the result was there for all to see, hairs and freckles. The king had not visited the elephant for over a year, he had forgotten the details and did not like what he was seeing at all. Apart, that is, from the pachyderm's long tusks, resplendently white and only slightly curved, like two swords pointing forward. But there was worse. Suddenly, the king of portugal, and of the algarves, who, a little earlier, had been so thrilled to have found the perfect present to give the emperor charles the fifth's son-in-law, felt as if he were about to fall off the ladder and into the gaping maw of ignominy. This is what the king was thinking, What if the archduke doesn't like him, what if he finds him ugly, what if he accepts the gift in principle, sight unseen, then sends him back, how will I bear the shame of being slighted in the compassionate or ironic eyes of the european community. What do you think of him, what impression does the creature make on you, the king asked his secretary, desperate for the scrap of hope that could only come from him, Pretty and ugly, my lord, are merely relative terms, to the owl even his owlets are pretty, what I see here, to apply a general law to one particular case, is a magnificent example of the asian elephant, with all the hairs and freckles proper to its nature, which will be sure to delight the archduke and astonish not only the court and the population of vienna, but also the ordinary people who see him along the way. The king

gave a sigh of relief, Yes, I suppose you're right, Indeed, sir, and if I know anything about that other nature, the human variety, I would even go so far as to say, if your majesty will allow me, that this elephant with its hairs and freckles will become a political tool of the first order for the archduke of austria, if he is as astute as the evidence thus far suggests. Help me down, this conversation is making me dizzy. With the help of the secretary and the two pageboys, the king managed, without too much difficulty, to descend the few rungs he had climbed. He took a deep breath when he felt terra firma beneath his feet again and, for no apparent reason, unless, and this is pure speculation, for it is far too early to know for sure, the sudden oxygenation of his blood and the consequent renewal of the blood circulating around his brain made him think of something which, in normal circumstances, would probably never have occurred to him. It was this, The man cannot possibly go to vienna looking like that, dressed in rags, so order two suits to be made for him, one for work, when he has to ride on top of the elephant, and the other for social occasions, so that he does not cut a poor figure at the austrian court, nothing fancy, you understand, but worthy of the country sending him there, Of course, my lord, By the way, what is his name. A page was dispatched to find out, and the answer, passed on by the secretary, was more or less this, subhro. Subro, repeated the king, what kind of name is that, It's spelled with an h, sir, at least so he said, explained the secretary, We should have just called him joaquim when he first arrived in portugal, grumbled the king.

THREE DAYS LATER, toward the close of the afternoon, the master of the horse, at the head of his escort, its pomp now somewhat dimmed by the grime of the roads and the inevitable stench of sweat exuded by both equines and humans, dismounted at the palace gates, brushed off the dust, went up the steps and was hurriedly ushered into the antechamber by the lackey-in-chief, a title which, as we had best confess at once, may not actually have existed at the time, but seemed to us appropriate, given the fellow's own corporeal odor, which he positively oozed, a mixture of presumption and false humility. Anxious to know the archduke's answer, the king received the new arrival at once. The queen was also present in the state room, which, given the importance of the moment, should surprise no one, especially given that, at the behest of the king, she regularly participates in meetings of state, where she has always been more than a mere passive spectator. There was another reason why she wanted to hear the letter read out as soon as it arrived, for the queen nurtured the vague hope, however unlikely she knew this to be, that archduke maximilian's missive would be written in german, in which case she, the most highly placed of translators, would be there, on hand so to speak, ready to be of service. Meanwhile, the king had received the scroll from his master of the horse, and had himself unrolled it, once he had untied the ribbons sealed with the archduke's coat of arms, but a quick glance was enough for him to see that it was written in latin. Now dom joão, the third king of portugal to bear that name, although not entirely ignorant of the latin language, for he had studied it in his youth, knew all too well that his inevitable stumblings, prolonged pauses and downright errors of interpretation would give those present a wretched and erroneous impression of his royal self. The secretary, with the agility of mind we have noted before and equally quick reflexes, had already taken two discreet steps forward and was waiting. In the most natural of tones, as if the scene had been rehearsed, the king said, My secretary will read the letter, translating into portuguese the message in which our beloved cousin maximilian is doubtless responding to our offer of the elephant solomon, it seems to me unnecessary to read the whole letter now, all we need, at the moment, is the gist, Of course, sir. The secretary ran his eyes over the superabundance of polite salutations, which, in the epistolary style of the time, proliferated like mushrooms after rain, then read further on and found what he was looking for. He did not translate, he merely announced, The archduke maximilian of austria gratefully accepts the king of portugal's gift. Among the hairy mass formed by beard and mustache, a smile of satisfaction appeared on the royal face. The queen smiled too, at the same time putting her hands together in a gesture of gratitude which, while intended, first, for the archduke maximilian of austria, had, as its ultimate recipient, almighty god. The contradictory feelings doing battle inside the queen had reached a synthesis, the most banal of all, namely that no one can escape his fate. The secretary went on, explaining the further contents of the letter in a voice in which the monastic gravity of the latin seemed to find an echo in the day-to-day portuguese into which he was translating. He says that he has not yet decided when he will leave for vienna, possibly around the middle of october, but he is not sure, And it's the beginning of august already, said the queen rather unnecessarily, The archduke also says, sir, that if it suits your highness, you need not wait until a time nearer the date of his departure to send

suleiman to valladolid, What suleiman is that, asked the king angrily, he hasn't even got the elephant yet and already he wants to change his name, Suleiman the magnificent, sir, the ottoman sultan, What would I do without you, secretary, how else could I possibly know who suleiman was if your brilliant memory were not there to enlighten and guide me at all times, Forgive me, sir, said the secretary. There was an awkward silence during which those present avoided looking at each other. The secretary's face, which had initially flushed bright red, was now deathly pale. No, I'm the one who should ask your forgiveness, said the king, and I do so unprompted save by the promptings of my own conscience, Sir, stammered pêro de alcáçova carneiro, who am I to forgive you anything, You're my secretary, to whom I have been disrespectful, Please, sir. The king made a gesture imposing silence, and then said, Solomon, as he will continue to be called for as long as he remains here, can have no idea of the anxiety he's caused us ever since the day I de cided to make a present of him to the archduke, my feeling is, that, deep down, no one here really wants him to go, it's odd, isn't it, he's not a cat who comes rubbing around our legs or a dog who gazes up at us as if we were its creator, and yet here we all are, in a state of distress and near despair, as if something were being wrenched from us, No one could have put it better, sir, said the secretary, But let us return to the matter in hand, now where had we got to in this business of dispatching solomon to valladolid, asked the king, The archduke writes that it would be best if the elephant came sooner rather than later so that he can become accustomed to the change of people and surroundings, well, the latin word he uses doesn't mean quite that, but it's the best I can find at the moment, Well, don't go racking your brains any further, we understand what you mean, said the king. Then, after a moment's reflection, he added, My master of the horse will be in charge of organizing the expedition, he'll need two men to help the mahout in his work, plus a few more to ensure that there are always plentiful supplies of food and water, an ox-cart just in case one proves necessary, for example, to transport the elephant's water trough, although in portugal, of course, there'll be no shortage of rivers or riverbanks where solomon can drink and wallow, although they might meet problems in that wretched place castile, which is always as dry as a bone left out in the sun, and, finally, a troop of cavalry in the unlikely event of someone trying to steal our precious solomon, our master of the horse will give our secretary of state regular progress reports, and forgive me, secretary, for involving you in such trivialities, Hardly trivialities, sir, the matter is of particular relevance to me since what we're dealing with here is neither more nor less than the transfer of a state asset, Solomon, I'm sure, has never thought of himself as a state asset, said the king with a wry smile, He would only have to consider, sir, that the water he drinks and the food he eats do not fall from the heavens, Well, as far as I'm concerned, said the queen, I hereby give orders that no one should come and tell me when solomon has left, I will ask when I'm ready to know and only then will I expect an answer. This last word was barely audible, as if tears had suddenly constricted the royal throat. A queen crying is a spectacle from which, out of decency, we are all obliged to avert our gaze. Which is precisely what the king, the secretary of state and the master of the horse did. Then, once she had left and the rustle of her skirts on the floor had ceased to be heard, the king said, You see, that's what I

mean, none of us wants solomon to go, It's not too late for a change of heart, sir, Oh, my heart has changed, no doubt about that, but time has run out, solomon is already on his way, Your highness has more important matters to deal with, don't allow an elephant to become the center of your concerns, What's the mahout's name, the king asked suddenly, Subhro, I believe, sir, What does it mean, I don't know, sir, but I could ask him, Yes, do, I want to know into whose hands I am entrusting solomon, The same hands he was in before, sir, for, if I may make so bold as to remind you, the elephant traveled from india with the very same mahout, Being far away and being near at hand changes everything, up until now, I never cared what the man's name was, but now I do, Of course, sir, I understand, That's what I like about you, secretary, you don't need to have things spelled out in order to understand what a person means, My father was a good teacher and your highness is in no way his inferior, Such praise is, at first glance, of little worth, but since you're measuring me against your father, it pleases me, May I withdraw, sir, asked the secretary, Yes, go about your business, and don't forget those new clothes for the mahout, what did you say his name was again, Subhro, sir, with an h, Right.

TEN DAYS AFTER this conversation, when the sun had barely appeared above the horizon, solomon finally left the enclosure in which he had languished for two years. The convoy was precisely as the king had ordered, with the mahout, who presided from on high, seated on the elephant's back, the two men who were there to help him in whatever way proved necessary, the other men in charge of food supplies, the ox-cart bearing the water trough, which the bumps in the road constantly sent sliding from one side to the other, as well as a gigantic load of fodder of varying types, the cavalry troop who were responsible for security along the way and the safe arrival of all concerned, and, finally, something that the king had not thought of, the quartermaster's wagon drawn by two mules. The absence of curious onlookers and other witnesses could be explained by the extremely early hour and the secrecy that had shrouded the departure, although there was one exception, a royal carriage that set off in the direction of lisbon as soon as elephant and company had disappeared around the first bend in the road. Inside were the king of portugal, dom joão the third, and his secretary of state, pêro de alcáçova carneiro, whom we may not see again, although perhaps we will, because life laughs at predictions and introduces words where we imagined silences, and sudden returns when we thought we would never see each other again. I've forgotten the meaning of the mahout's name, what was it again, the king was asking, White, sir, subhro means white, although you'd never think it to look at him. In a room in the palace, in the gloom of the bed canopy, the sleeping queen is having a nightmare. She is dreaming that solomon has been taken from belem and that she keeps asking everyone, Why didn't you tell me, but when she does finally decide to wake up, around midmorning, she will not repeat that question and cannot be sure that she, on her own initiative, ever will. It may be that in the next few years, someone will chance to mention the word elephant in her presence and then the queen of portugal, catarina of austria, will say, Speaking of elephants, whatever happened to solomon, is he still in belem or has he already been dispatched to vienna, and when they tell her that he is indeed in vienna, living in a kind of zoological garden along with other wild animals, she will respond, feigning innocence, What a fortunate creature, there he is enjoying life in the most beautiful city in the world, and here am I, trapped between today and the future and with no hope in either of them. The king, if he's present, will pretend not to hear, and the secretary of state, the same pêro de alcáçova carneiro whom we have already met, even though he is not a man given to praying, we need only recall what he said about the inquisition and, more important, what he thought best not to say, will offer up a silent prayer to heaven asking for the elephant to be enveloped in a thick cloak of oblivion that will so disguise his shape that he could be mistaken by lazy imaginations for that other strange-looking beast the dromedary, or for some other type of camel, whose unfortunate two-humped appearance would be unlikely to linger in the memory of anyone interested in these insignificant events. The past is an immense area of stony ground that many people would like to drive across as if it were a road, while others move patiently from stone to stone, lifting each one because they need to know what lies beneath. Sometimes scorpions crawl out or centipedes, fat white caterpillars or ripe chrysalises, but it's not impossible that, at least once, an elephant might appear, and that the elephant might carry on its shoulders

a mahout named subhro, meaning white, an entirely inappropriate word to describe the man who, in the sight of the king of portugal and his secretary of state, appeared in the enclosure in belem looking every bit as filthy as the elephant he was supposed to be taking care of. There may be some truth in the wise saying that warns us that even the brightest blade grows dim with rust, because that is precisely what had happened to the mahout and his elephant. When they first fetched up in belém, popular curiosity reached astonishing heights and the court itself organized select excursions comprising noblemen and noblewomen, ladies and gentlemen, to view the pachyderm, however, that initial interest soon faded, and the result was plain to see, the mahout's indian clothes were transformed into rags and the elephant's hairs and freckles had almost vanished beneath the crust of dirt accumulated over two years. This is not the case now, however. Although the inevitable dust from the road is already coating his legs from foot to knee, solomon nevertheless walks proudly along, as clean as a new pin, and the mahout, although no longer dressed in colorful indian garb, is resplendent in his new uniform for which, even better, either out of forgetfulness or generosity on the part of his employers, he had not had to pay. Sitting astride the part of the elephant where neck meets sturdy body and wielding the stick with which he steers his mount, one moment delivering light flicks, the next sharp jabbing movements that leave their mark on the animal's tough skin, the mahout subhro, or white, is about to become the second or third most important character in the story, the first being the elephant solomon, who, naturally, takes precedence as the main protagonist, followed by the aforementioned subhro and the archduke, jockeying with each other for the lead role, now this one, now that. However, the character currently occupying center stage is the mahout. Glancing from one end of the convoy to the other, he cannot help but notice its distinctly motley appearance, understandable given the diversity of animals involved, namely, elephant, men, horses, mules and oxen, each walking at a different pace, either natural or enforced, because on a journey such as this no one can go much faster than the slowest, and the slowest, of course, are the oxen. The oxen, said subhro, suddenly alarmed, where are the oxen. Not a sign of them, nor of the heavy load they were pulling, the trough full of water and the bundles of forage. They must have got left behind, he thought, reassuring himself, there's nothing for it but to wait. He prepared to slide down from the elephant's back, but stopped. He might have to get back on again and not be able to. In principle, the elephant would proffer his trunk to raise him up and practically deposit him on his seat. However, prudence told him that one should always foresee situations in which the animal, out of ill will, irritation or sheer contrariness, might refuse to offer his services as a lift, which is where the ladder came in, although it was hard to believe that an angry elephant would agree to be a mere support and unresistingly allow the mahout or whoever to climb aboard. The ladder was of merely symbolic value, like a small reliquary worn round the neck or a medal bearing the figure of some saint. In this case, though, he could not make use of the ladder because it was on the cart that had fallen behind. Subhro summoned one of his assistants so that he could warn the commanding officer of the cavalry troop that they would have to wait for the ox-cart. Besides, the rest would do the horses good, although, if truth be told, they had hardly had to exert themselves,

never once breaking into a gallop or even a trot, but proceeding at a sedate walking pace. This was nothing like the master of the horse's recent expedition to valladolid, which was still fresh in the memories of those who had gone with him, veterans of that heroic cavalcade. The horsemen dismounted, the men on foot sat or lay down on the ground, and several took the opportunity to have a nap. From his perch high up on the elephant, the mahout reviewed the journey so far and was not pleased. To judge by the height of the sun, they must have been walking for about three hours, although that put rather too favorable a gloss on things because some considerable part of that time had been taken up with solomon's long bathing sessions in the river tagus, which alternated with voluptuous wallowings in the mud, which, in turn, according to elephant logic, called for further prolonged baths. It was clear that solomon was excited and nervous, and needed to be treated with great patience and calm. We must have wasted a good hour on solomon's little games, thought the mahout, and then, passing from a reflection on time to a meditation on space, How far have we traveled, a league, possibly two, he wondered. A cruel doubt, an urgent question. If we were still living among the ancient greeks and romans, we would say, with the serenity that practical knowledge always confers, that the main itinerary measures of distance at the time were the stadium, the mile and the league. Setting aside the stadium and the mile, with their divisions into feet and paces, let us consider the league, which was the word used by subhro, a distance that was also composed of paces and feet, but which has the enormous advantage of placing us in familiar territory. Yes, but everyone knows what leagues are, our contemporaries will say with an ironic smile. The best answer we can give them is this, Yes, everyone did in the age in which they lived, but only in the age in which they lived. The old word league, or leuga, which should, one would think, have meant the same to everyone at all times, has in fact made a long journey from the seven thousand five hundred feet or one thousand five hundred paces of the romans and the early middle ages to the kilometers and meters with which we now divide up distance, no less than five and five thousand respectively. It's the same with other measurements as well. And if you need evidence to back this statement up, consider the case of the almude, a measure of capacity that was divided into twelve canadas or forty-eight quarts, and which, in lisbon, was equal, in round numbers, to sixteen and a half liters, and in oporto, to twenty-five liters. How did they manage, the curious reader and lover of learning will ask, How do we manage, asks the person who first mentioned this whole weights and measures problem, thus skillfully avoiding giving an answer. Now, having presented the matter with such dazzling clarity, we can make an absolutely crucial, almost revolutionary decision, namely this, while the mahout and his companions, given that they would have no other means at their disposal, will continue to speak of distances in accord with the uses and customs of their age, we, so that we can understand what is going on in this regard, will use our own modern itinerary units of measurement, which will avoid constantly having to resort to tiresome conversion tables. It will be as if we were adding subtitles in our own language to a film, a concept unknown in the sixteenth century, to compensate for our ignorance or imperfect knowledge of the language spoken by the actors. We will, therefore, have two parallel discourses that will never meet, this one,

which we will be able to follow without difficulty, and another, which, from this moment on, will remain silent. An interesting solution.

All these observations, ponderings and cogitations led the mahout finally to descend from the elephant's back via its trunk and to stride boldly over to the cavalry troop. It was easy enough to find the commanding officer. There was a kind of awning that was doubtless protecting some eminent personage from the punishing august sun, so the conclusion was easy to draw, if there was an awning, there must be a commanding officer beneath it, and if there was a commanding officer, there would have to be an awning to protect him. The mahout had an idea which he didn't quite know how to introduce into the conversation, but the commanding officer unwittingly made his job easy. Where have those oxen got to, he asked. Well, I haven't actually seen them yet, sir, but they should be here any moment, Let's hope so. The mahout took a deep breath and said in a voice hoarse with excitement, If you'll permit me, sir, I've had an idea, If you've already had the idea, you obviously don't need my permission, You're quite right, sir, forgive my imperfect grasp of grammar, Tell me what your idea is then, The main problem is the oxen, Yes, they haven't yet arrived, What I mean, sir, is that the problem will remain the same even once they have arrived, Why, Because oxen are, by nature, very slow creatures, sir, Well, that much I know, and I don't need an indian to tell me, If we had another pair of oxen and yoked them up to the cart we already have, we would be able to travel more quickly and all at the same pace, Sounds like a good idea, but where are we going to find another pair of oxen, There are villages nearby, sir. The commanding officer frowned, he could not deny that there were indeed villages nearby where they could buy a pair of oxen. Although why buy them, he thought, we'll requisition the oxen in the name of the king and, on the way back from valladolid, leave them here, in as good a state as I hope they'll be in now. Just then, a roar went up, the oxen had finally come into view, the men applauded and even the elephant raised his trunk and trumpeted contentedly. His poor sight did not allow him to see the bundles of forage from that distance, but the vast cavern of his stomach echoed with protests that it was high time he had something to eat. This doesn't mean that a healthy elephant has to eat at regular hours like a human being. Amazing though it may seem, an elephant gets through about two hundred liters of water a day and between one hundred and fifty and three hundred kilos of forage. So we shouldn't imagine him with a napkin tied around his neck and sitting down at table to eat his three square meals a day, no, an elephant eats what he can, as much as he can and where he can, and his guiding principle is not to leave anything behind that he might need later on. He still had to wait nearly half an hour before the ox-cart arrived. Meanwhile, the commanding officer gave the order to pitch camp, although they first had to find a place less exposed to the sun if soldiers and civilians were not to be burned to a crisp. About five hundred meters away there was a small copse of poplar trees for which the company duly headed. The shade was fairly sparse, but better that than stay and roast beneath the implacable metal disc of the king of planets. The men who had come with the party in order to work and of whom very little, indeed absolutely nothing, had so far been required, had the usual kind of food in

their saddlebags and haversacks, a large piece of bread, some dried sardines, a few dried figs, and a wedge of goat's cheese, of the sort that becomes hard as stone and which, rather than chew, you have to gnaw at patiently, thus allowing you to enjoy the flavor for longer. As for the soldiers, they had their own arrangements. A cavalryman, with sword unsheathed or spear at the ready, whether charging the enemy at a gallop or simply accompanying an elephant to valladolid, has no need to worry about supplies. He's not interested in where the food comes from or who prepares it, what matters is that his plate is full and the stew not entirely inedible. In scattered groups, everyone, apart from solomon, was now busily engaged in masticatory and deglutitory activities. Subhro, the mahout, gave the order for two bundles of forage to be carried to where solomon was waiting his turn, to untie them and leave him be, If necessary, take him another bundle, he said. Many will doubtless disapprove of this deliberate excess of detail, but this description serves a useful purpose, that of encouraging subhro's mind to reach an optimistic conclusion regarding the future of this journey, If solomon eats at least three or four bundles of forage a day, he thought, the weight in the cart will gradually be reduced and if we get that extra pair of oxen, then, however many mountains may step into our path, there'll be no holding us. The same thing happens with good ideas, and, on occasions, with bad ones, as happens with democritus's atoms or with cherries in a basket, they come along linked one to the other. When subhro imagined the oxen pulling the cart up a steep hill, he realized that a mistake had been made in the original composition of the convoy, a mistake that had not been corrected during the journey so far, an oversight for which he considered himself responsible. The thirty men who had come as assistants, and whom subhro took the trouble to count one by one, had done nothing since their departure from lisbon, apart from going off for morning walks in the countryside. The two men on the ox-cart would be perfectly capable of untying and dragging the bundles of forage over to solomon, and in case of need, he himself could always lend a hand. What should I do, send them back, and free myself of that weight of responsibility, wondered subhro. That would have been a good idea if there hadn't been a better one. The idea brought a bright smile to the mahout's face. He shouted to the men and gathered them round him, some of them still chewing on their last dried fig, and he said, From now on, you will be divided into two groups, in order to help push or pull the ox-cart, because the load is clearly too much for the animals, who are, besides, slow by nature, so, every two kilometers, the groups will swap over, and that will be your principal work until we reach valladolid. There was a murmur of what sounded very much like discontent, but subhro pretended not to hear it and went on, Each group will have a foreman, who, as well as having to answer to me for the good results of the work, will have to maintain discipline and develop the team spirit essential in any collective task. This language obviously failed to please his audience, because the same murmur was repeated. Fine, said subhro, if anyone is unhappy with the orders I've just given, he can go to the commanding officer, who, as the king's representative, is the supreme authority here. The air seemed suddenly to grow colder, and the murmur was replaced by an embarrassed scuffling of feet. Subhro asked, Right, any volunteers for the post of foreman. Three hesitant hands went up, and the mahout explained, I need two foremen,

not three. One of the hands shrank back, disappeared, while the others remained raised. You and you, said subhro, choose your men, but do so in an equitable manner, so that the strength of the two groups is evenly balanced, and now off you go, I need to speak to the commanding officer. Before he did so, however, he was obliged to attend to one of his assistants, who had approached to inform him that they had untied another bundle of forage, but that solomon appeared to have had enough and all the signs were that he wanted to sleep, I'm not surprised, he's eaten well and this is the time he usually takes his nap, The trouble is he's drunk nearly all the water in the trough, Well, that's only natural after eating so much, We could take the oxen down to the river, there must be a path somewhere, He wouldn't drink the water from that part of the river, it's still salty, How do you know, asked one assistant, Because solomon has bathed in the river several times, the last time just near here, and he never once put his trunk in to drink, If the seawater comes up as far as this, that only shows what a short distance we've covered, True enough, but I can assure you that we'll be traveling much faster from now on, my word as a mahout. Leaving behind him this solemn commitment, subhro went in search of the commanding officer. He found him asleep in the shade of one of the more densely leaved poplars, sleeping the light sleep that marks out the good soldier, always ready to pick up his weapons at the slightest suspicious noise. He was guarded by two soldiers who, with an authoritative gesture, ordered subhro to stop. Subhro raised his hand to indicate that he had understood and sat down on the ground to wait. The commanding officer woke up half an hour later, stretched and yawned, then yawned and stretched again, until he felt that he had properly reawoken to life. Nevertheless, he had to look twice when he saw that the mahout was there again, What do you want now, he asked gruffly, don't tell me you've had another idea, Indeed I have, sir, Out with it then, Well, I've divided the men into two groups and they're going to take turns, every two or so kilometers, in helping the oxen, that will mean fifteen men at a time pushing the cart, you'll definitely notice the difference, Good thinking, no doubt about it, that round thing on your shoulders obviously serves some purpose, and my horses will certainly feel the benefit, being able to break into a trot now and then, rather than trudging along at parade-ground pace, Yes, that occurred to me too, sir, And to judge by the look on your face, something else has occurred to you as well, hasn't it, asked the commanding officer, Yes, sir, it has, What is it then, It seems to me that we should organize our lives in accordance with solomon's needs and habits, right now, for example, he's asleep, and if we woke him up, he'd be really irritable and only cause us trouble, But how can he possibly sleep standing up, asked the commanding officer, incredulous, He does lie down to sleep sometimes, but normally he sleeps on his feet, Hm, I really don't think I'll ever understand elephants, Well, I've been working with them almost since I was born and I still can't understand them, And why is that, Perhaps because an elephant is much more than just an elephant, Right, that's enough talk, But I have another idea to put to you, sir, Another idea, said the officer, laughing, you're clearly no ordinary mahout, you're a veritable mine of ideas, You're too kind, sir, What else has that remarkable mind of yours produced, Well, I thought that since it's the cart that's setting the pace, it might be a better plan if you brought up the rear with your soldiers, with the ox-cart at the front,

followed by me and the elephant, the men on foot and the quartermaster's wagon, Now that's what I call an idea, Yes, I thought so too, A stupid idea, I mean, Why, asked subhro, stung, and unaware of the insulting nature of that blunt question asked directly of an officer, Because I and my soldiers would have to eat the dust kicked up by the feet of everyone else in front, Oh, how dreadful, I should have thought of that and I didn't, I beg you, sir, by all the saints in heaven's court, to forgive me, So what we'll do is gallop ahead now and then and wait for the rest of you to catch up, Yes, sir, that seems the perfect solution, may I go now, asked subhro, Wait, I have two further matters to take up with you, the first is this, if you ever again ask me why in the tone of voice you did just now, I will give orders for you to receive a good ration of lashes on your back, Yes, sir, murmured subhro, head bowed, The second has to do with that head on your shoulders and with this journey that has barely begun, I would like to know, always assuming there are still any useful ideas left in that noddle of yours, if you expect us to stay here until the end of time, forever and ever, amen, Solomon is still asleep, sir, So the elephant's in charge here, is he, asked the commanding officer, half-annoyed and half-amused, No, sir, but you will doubtless recall that I mentioned earlier organizing ourselves in accordance with, and I confess I don't know where I got that expression from, solomon's needs and habits, Meaning what, asked the commanding officer, who was beginning to lose patience, Well, solomon, in order to be at his best, and so that we can deliver him in good health to the archduke of austria, needs to rest during the hottest part of the day, Agreed, replied the commanding officer, slightly troubled by this reference to the archduke, but the fact is he has done almost nothing but sleep all day, Today doesn't count, sir, it's the first day and, as everyone knows, nothing ever goes well on the first day, So what should we do, We divide the days into three parts, the first, from early morning on, the third, lasting until sunset, so that we advance as quickly as we can, the second part of the day, where we are now, should be set aside for eating and resting, That seems to me a good plan, said the commanding officer, deciding to opt for a more benevolent attitude. The change of tone encouraged the mahout to express the troubling thought that had been bothering him all day, There's something about this journey, sir, that I don't understand, And what is that, We haven't met a soul all the time we've been traveling and that, in my modest opinion, does not seem normal, You're mistaken, we've met quite a lot of people, coming from both directions, How is it I didn't see them then, asked subhro, his eyes wide with surprise, You were bathing the elephant, Do you mean to say that people passed each time solomon was taking a bath, Don't make me repeat myself, That's a strange coincidence, it's almost as if solomon didn't want to be seen, That's possible, yes, But we've been camped here for a good few hours now and no one has passed, That's for a different reason, people see the elephant in the distance, like a ghost, and immediately turn back or take a different route, perhaps thinking that solomon has been sent by the devil, How extraordinary, why, it had even occurred to me that our king had given orders to clear the roads, You're not that important, No, I'm not, but solomon is. The officer preferred not to respond to what seemed to be the beginning of a whole new discussion and said, Before you go, I'd like to ask you something, Please, I'm all ears, Do you remember, just now, having invoked all the saints in heaven's court, Yes,

sir, I do, Does that mean you're a christian, now think carefully before you answer, More or less, sir, more or less.

A FULL MOON, august moonlight. Everyone is sleeping, with the exception of the two mounted guards patrolling the camp, the only sound the creaking of leather. The sleepers are enjoying a well-deserved rest, for although, during the first part of the day, the men enlisted to push the ox-cart may have given the impression of being a band of lazy good-for-nothings, they had set to work with great brio and shown themselves to be out-and-out professionals. True, the flat terrain had helped a great deal, but you could safely bet that, in the whole venerable history of that ox-cart, there had never been a day like it. During the three and a half hours they had been traveling, and despite a few short breaks, they had covered more than seventeen kilometers. This was the figure finally decided upon by the commanding officer after a lively exchange of words with the mahout subhro, who thought that the distance had been somewhat shorter and that it was best not to deceive themselves. The commanding officer disagreed, believing that it would help to encourage the men, What difference does it make if we did only travel fourteen kilometers, we'll cover the missing three tomorrow and it'll all work out in the end, you'll see. The mahout gave up trying to persuade him, I did my best, he thought, and if the commanding officer's false accounting prevailed, that doesn't alter the reality of the kilometers we really did travel, yes, subhro, you really must learn not to argue with the man in charge.

He had woken with the impression that he had experienced a sharp pain in his stomach while sleeping, and although it seemed to him unlikely that this would recur, his insides felt suspiciously restless, with a few silent gurglings in his intestines, and then suddenly there it was again, that same stabbing pain. He got up as quickly as he could, indicated to the nearest guard that he needed to leave the encampment and then strode toward a dense row of trees at the top of the gentle slope on which they had pitched camp, so gentle that it was as if they were lying in a bed with the bedhead slightly raised. He arrived just in time. Let us avert our gaze while he takes down his breeches, which, miraculously, he has not yet soiled, and wait for him to look up and see what we have seen already, a village bathed in the marvelous august moonlight that molded every contour, softened the very shadows it created and, at the same time, illuminated the places where it fell unimpeded. The words we were waiting for finally appeared, A village, a village. Doubtless because they were tired, no one else had yet thought to climb the hill to see what was on the other side. It's always good to see a village, if not this one then another, but it seems improbable that in the very first one we come across we'll find a powerful pair of oxen capable of righting the leaning tower of pisa with a single tug. Having finished his urgent business, the mahout cleaned himself as best he could with a handful of the greenery growing round about, and it was fortunate indeed that no nettles, also known as fireweed, were to be found, because they would have made him leap about like a victim of saint vitus dance, so badly would they have burnt and stung his delicate lower mucous membrane. A thick cloud suddenly covered the moon, and the village was plunged in darkness, as if it had vanished like a dream into the surrounding gloom. It didn't matter, the sun would rise at the appropriate hour and show the way to the stable, where the ruminating oxen already had a sixth sense that their

lives were about to change. Subhro walked back through the dense trees and returned to his place alongside the other men in the encampment. On the way, it occurred to him that if the commanding officer was awake, this information would give him the greatest satisfaction in the world, to resort to grandiose planetary terminology. And the glory of having discovered the village would be all mine, he murmured. Because there was no point in fostering vain illusions. During what remained of the night, other men might feel the need to empty their bowels, and the only place where they could do so discreetly was in the middle of those trees, but even supposing that this didn't happen, it would only be a matter of waiting for the dawn when we would witness a whole procession of men obeying the calls of intestines and bladder, hardly surprising given that we're all animals under the skin. Feeling mildly disgruntled, the mahout decided to make a detour to the place where the commanding officer was sleeping, you never know, sometimes people suffer from insomnia or wake up distraught because they had a dream that they were dead, or else were being bitten by a bedbug, one of the many that hide in the hems of blankets, come to drink the sleeper's blood. Let it be set down here, by the way, that the bedbug was the unwitting inventor of blood transfusions. Vain hope. The commanding officer was sleeping, and not just sleeping, but snoring. A guard came over to ask the mahout what he was doing there, and subhro replied that he had a message for the commanding officer, but seeing that he was asleep, he would return to his own bed, This is no time to be giving anyone messages, wait until morning, It's important, answered the mahout, but, as elephant philosophy would have it, what cannot be cannot be, If you'd like to give me the message, I'll pass it on to him as soon as he wakes up. The mahout considered the favorable probabilities and decided that it was worth betting on this one card, that the guard would already have informed the commanding officer of the village's existence when, at first light, the cry went up, Village ahoy. Hard experience of life has shown us that, generally speaking, it is inadvisable to trust too much in human nature. From now on, we will also know that we should not trust the cavalry either, at least when it comes to keeping secrets. Thus, even before the mahout had fallen asleep again, the other guard had already learned the news, and shortly after that, all the soldiers sleeping nearby knew as well. There was intense excitement, with one soldier even suggesting a reconnaissance trip to the village in order to collect firsthand information, which, given the authenticity of the source, would help strengthen the strategy to be drawn up in the morning. Fear that the commanding officer might wake, get out of bed and find none of the soldiers there, or worse still, find some and not others, forced them to abandon this promising adventure. The hours passed, a pale glow in the east began to trace the curved outline of the door through which the sun would enter, while, on the opposite side, the moon was slipping gently into the arms of another night. And we were thus engaged, postponing the moment of revelation, still wondering if there wasn't perhaps another more dramatic solution to be found, or, which would be the icing on the cake, one with more symbolic power, when the fateful cry rang out, There's a village over there. Absorbed in our own lucubrations, we had failed to notice that a man had got up and climbed the slope, but now we see him appear among the trees, we hear him repeat the triumphal news, although the words he uses are not, as we had imagined, Village

ahoy, but There's a village over there. It was the commanding officer. Destiny, when it chooses, is as good or even better than god at writing straight on crooked lines. Sitting on his blanket, subhro thought, It could be worse, he could always say that he had got up in the middle of the night and been the first to see the village. He'll risk the commanding officer asking him scornfully, as we know he will, And do you have witnesses, to which he will have to reply, metaphorically putting his tail between his legs, No, sir, I was alone, You must have dreamed it then, Not only did I not dream it, I gave the information to one of your guards so that he would tell you when you woke up, None of my soldiers spoke to me about this, But you could speak to him, I'll tell you which one it was. The commanding officer reacted badly to this proposal, If I didn't need you to ride the elephant, I would send you straight back to lisbon, and imagine your position then, it would be your word against mine, and I leave you to draw your own conclusions as to the result, or do you want to be deported to india. Having resolved the question of who, officially, had been the first to discover the village, the commanding officer was about to turn his back on the mahout when the latter said, That isn't what matters, what matters is finding out if the village has a decent pair of oxen, We'll find out soon enough, meanwhile, you take care of your business and leave the rest to me, Don't you want me to go to the village, sir, asked subhro, No, I don't, I'll take the sergeant with me and the ox-driver. For once, subhro agreed with the commanding officer. If anyone had a natural right to be there it was the ox-driver. The commanding officer was already busily issuing orders to the sergeant and to the quartermaster's men, whom he now wanted to provide food both for the soldiers and for the strong men pushing or pulling the cart, for they would lose what strength they had in no time if they had to exist on nothing but dried figs and moldy bread, Whoever planned this journey should be ashamed of themselves, the bigwigs at court must think we live on air, he muttered. The men were already striking camp, rolling up blankets and packing away tools, of which there were many, although most would probably never be used, unless the elephant happened to fall down a ravine and had to be winched up. The commanding officer's plan was to set off, with or without the new pair of oxen, as soon as he returned from the village. The sun had now detached itself from the horizon and day had dawned, with only a few clouds floating in the sky, let's just hope it doesn't get so hot that your muscles melt and you feel as if the sweat on your skin was about to come to the boil. The commanding officer summoned the ox-driver, explained what they were going to do and urged him to take a good look at the oxen, assuming there were any, because on them would depend the speed of the expedition and its prompt return to lisbon. The ox-driver said Yes, sir twice, not that he cared, he didn't even live in lisbon, but in a nearby village called mem martins or something of the sort. Since the ox-driver didn't know how to ride a horse, a flagrant example, as you can see, of the negative consequences of overspecialization, he hoisted himself with some difficulty onto the back of the horse behind the sergeant and off he went, repeating, in a voice that he himself could barely hear, an interminable our father, a prayer of which he was particularly fond because of that bit about forgiving our debts. The problem, and there is always a problem, which sometimes even leaves its tail sticking out just so that we have no illusions about the nature of the beast we're dealing

with, comes in the next line, where it says that it is also our duty as christians to forgive our debtors. It just doesn't make sense, it's either one thing or the other, grumbled the ox-driver, if some forgive debts and others don't pay what they owe, where's the profit in that, he wondered. They walked down the first street they came to, although you would need a very vivid imagination to call that path a street, for what it most resembled was a roller coaster, had such things existed then, and the commanding officer asked the first person they met what the name of the village was and where they could find the village's principal landowner. The man, an old peasant carrying his hoe over his shoulder, knew the answers, The principal landowner is the count, but he's not here, The count, repeated the commanding officer, feeling slightly uneasy, Yes, sir, he owns three quarters or more of the land around here, But you say he's not at home, Speak to his steward, sir, he's the captain of the ship, Did you once work at sea, Indeed I did, sir, but the mortality rate was so high, what with drownings and scurvy and other misfortunes, that I resolved to come back home and die on land, And where would I find the steward, If he's not in the fields, he'll be up at the palace, There's a palace here, asked the commanding officer, looking around, It's not one of those tall palaces with towers, it's just two floors, ground floor and first, but they say it holds more treasures than all the mansions and palaces in lisbon, Could you show us the way, asked the commanding officer, That's where I'm heading now, And this count is the count of what. The old man told him, and the commanding officer gave a whistle of amazement, I know him, he said, but I had no idea he owned land hereabouts, And they say he owns land elsewhere too.

The village was of a kind not to be found anymore, if it were winter, it would have been a pigsty awash with water and asquelch with mud, now, though, it reminds one of something else, the petrified ruins of an ancient civilization, covered in dust, as happens sooner or later to all outdoor museums. They emerged into a square and there was the palace. The old man rang the bell at the service door, and after a minute or so someone opened it and the old man went in. Things were not happening as the commanding officer had imagined, but perhaps it was better that way. The old man would begin negotiations, so to speak, and then it would fall to him to explain precisely why they were there. After a good fifteen minutes, there appeared at the door a fat man sporting a large, droopy mustache resembling nothing so much as a ship's mop. The commanding officer rode over to him and addressed his first words to him from the saddle, just to keep the social demarcations absolutely clear, Are you the count's steward, At your service, sir. The commanding officer then dismounted and, showing unusual astuteness, grasped the words that the steward had presented to him as if on a plate, In that case, serving me and serving the count and his highness the king is all one, If you will be so kind as to explain what you want, sir, and as long as it does not compromise the salvation of my soul or the interests of my master, then I am your man, Neither the interests of your master nor the salvation of your soul will be put at risk by me, I can assure you, but let us get down to the matter that brings me here. He paused, beckoned to the ox-driver to join him and said, I am an officer in the king's cavalry, and the king has charged me with taking to valladolid, in spain, an elephant to be delivered to archduke maximilian of

austria, who is currently a guest at the palace of his father-in-law, charles the fifth. The steward's eyes bulged and his mouth dropped open, and the commanding officer made a mental note of both these encouraging signs. Then he went on, We have with us in the convoy an ox-cart to transport bundles of forage for the elephant to eat and a water trough in which he can quench his thirst, now this cart is drawn by a pair of oxen who have, up until now, performed valiantly, but I very much fear that they will not be up to the task when it comes to climbing mountain slopes. The steward nodded, but said nothing. The commanding officer took a deep breath, leaped over a few ornamental phrases he had been lining up in his head and came straight to the point, I need another pair of oxen for the cart and I thought I might find them here, The count is not at home, and only he. The commanding officer interrupted him, You do not seem to have heard what I said, that I am here in the name of the king, it is not I who am asking you for the loan of a pair of oxen for a few days, but his highness the king of portugal, Oh, I heard you, sir, but my master, Is not at home, I know, but his steward is, and he understands his duty to the nation, The nation, sir, Have you never seen it, asked the commanding officer, launching into a lyrical flight of fancy, you see those clouds that know not where they go, they are the nation, you see that sun, which is sometimes there and sometimes not, that is the nation, you see that line of trees, where, with my trousers round my ankles, I first spotted the village this morning, they, too, are the nation, you cannot, therefore, deny me or obstruct my mission, If you say so, sir, My word as a cavalry officer, but enough talk, let us go to the stable and see what oxen you have there. The steward stroked his grubby mustache as if asking its advice, and finally came to a decision, the nation above all else, however, still fearing the consequences of what he was about to do, he asked the officer if he could leave him some kind of guarantee, to which the commanding officer replied, I will leave you a letter written in my own hand in which I will undertake to return the pair of oxen to you as soon as the elephant has been delivered to the archduke of austria, so you will only have to wait for as long as it takes us to travel from here to valladolid and from valladolid to here, Let's go to the stable, then, where we keep the oxen, said the steward, This is my ox-driver, who will come with me, said the commanding officer, for I know more about horses and war, when there is a war. There were eight oxen in the stable. We have another four, said the steward, but they're out in the fields. At a signal from the commanding officer, the ox-driver went over to the animals and examined them closely, one by one, then made two that were lying down stand up, examined them as well, and finally declared, This one and this one, A good choice, they're the best we have, said the steward. The commanding officer felt a wave of pride rise up from his solar plexus to his throat. Every gesture, every step, every decision he made, revealed him to be a strategist of the first water, deserving of the highest recognition and, for a start, swift promotion to the rank of colonel. The steward, who had left the stable, returned with quill and paper, and there the agreement was set down in writing. When the steward received the document, his hands were trembling with excitement, but he calmed down when he heard the ox-driver say, We need harnesses too, They're over there, said the steward. Now, this story has not so far lacked for reflections, of varying degrees of acuity, on human nature, and we have recorded and

commented on each one according to their relevance and the mood of the moment. We never expected, however, that one day we would set down such a generous, exalted, sublime thought as that which then passed like lightning through the commanding officer's mind, namely, that to the coat of arms of the count who owned those animals should be added a pair or yoke of oxen, in memory of this event. May that wish be granted. The oxen had been yoked up and the ox-driver was already leading them out of the stable, when the steward asked, And the elephant. Put in this way, as rustic as it was direct, the question could simply have been ignored, but the commanding officer felt that he owed the man a favor, and a feeling akin to gratitude made him say, He's behind those trees, where we spent the night, You know I've never in my life seen an elephant, said the steward sadly, as if his happiness and that of his loved ones depended entirely on him seeing an elephant, Well, we can put that right this minute, come with us, You go on ahead, sir, I'll harness the mule and catch up. The commanding officer returned to the square, where his sergeant was waiting for him, and he said, Right, we've got the oxen, Yes, sir, they passed by here just now, and the ox-driver looked as pleased as a dog with two tails, Come on then, said the commanding officer, mounting his horse, Yes, sir, said the sergeant, following suit. It did not take them long to reach the rest of their men, and there the commanding officer was faced with a serious dilemma, should he gallop into camp and announce this victory to the assembled hosts or ride alongside the oxen and receive the applause in the presence of that living proof of his ingenuity. It took a good one hundred meters of intense reflection to find an answer to this problem, a solution which, anticipating the term by some five centuries, we might call the third way, and this was to send the sergeant on ahead with the news in order to predispose the men to offer him the most enthusiastic of receptions. And so it was. They had not gone very far when they heard the mule approaching with ungainly step, for the creature had never been required to break into a trot before, still less a gallop. Out of politeness, the commanding officer stopped, as did the sergeant, although he did not know why, and only the ox-driver and the oxen, as if they belonged to another world and were ruled by different laws, continued at their usual pace, that is, a very slow one. The commanding officer gave orders for the sergeant to ride on ahead, but soon regretted having done so. His impatience was growing by the minute. It had been a gross error to send the sergeant on ahead. By then, he would already have received the kind of rapturous applause that always greets good news when given at first hand, and any subsequent applause, however loud, always has a taste of yesterday's warmed-up stew about it. He was wrong. When the commanding officer reached the camp, whether accompanied by or accompanying the ox-driver and the oxen it would be hard to say, the men had formed up into two lines, the laborers on one side, the soldiers on the other, and, in the middle, the elephant with the mahout perched on top, and everyone whooping and applauding wildly, and if this were a pirate ship, it would be the moment to say, A double ration of rum all round. Although this does not preclude the possibility of a quart of red wine being served to the whole company later on. When everyone had calmed down, the convoy began to get itself organized. The ox-driver yoked the count's oxen to the cart, because they were stronger and fresher, and the two that had traveled all the way from lisbon went ahead of

them, so that they could rest a little. Whatever the steward may have been thinking, mounted on his mule, he kept crossing himself and then crossing himself again, scarcely able to believe what his eyes were seeing, An elephant, so that's an elephant, he murmured, why, he must be at least four ells high, and then there's the trunk and the tusks and the feet, look how big those feet are. When the convoy set off, he followed it as far as the road. He bade farewell to the commanding officer, to whom he wished a good journey and an even better return, and waved furiously as he watched them move off. Well, it isn't every day that an elephant appears in our lives.

IT ISN'T TRUE THAT heaven and the heavens are indifferent to our preoccupations and desires. They're constantly sending us signs and warnings, and the only reason we don't add good advice to that list is that experience, heaven's and ours, has shown that memory, which isn't anyone's strong point, is best not overburdened with too much detail. Signs and warnings are easy to interpret if we remain alert, as the commanding officer discovered when, at one point along the route, the convoy was caught in a heavy drenching shower. For the men engaged in the hard work of pushing the ox-cart, that rain was a blessing, an act of charity for the suffering to which the lower classes have always been subject. Solomon and his mahout subhro also enjoyed that sudden cooling rain, although this did not prevent subhro from thinking that, in future, he really could do with an umbrella in such situations, perched up high and unprotected from the water falling from the clouds, especially on the road to vienna. The only ones not to appreciate this atmospheric precipitation were the cavalry men, proudly got up as usual in their colorful uniforms, now stained and sodden, as if they had just returned, defeated, from a battle. As for their commanding officer, he, with his already proven agility of mind, had understood at once that they were facing a very grave problem. Once again, it just showed that the strategy for this mission had been drawn up by incompetents incapable of foreseeing the most ordinary of eventualities, such as rain in august, when popular wisdom has been warning since time immemorial that winter always begins in august. Unless that shower was a chance occurrence and the good weather returned for a lengthy period, those nights spent out under the moon or the starry arc of the milky way were over. And that was not all. Having to spend the night in villages meant finding in them a covered area large enough to shelter the horses and the elephant, the four oxen, and several dozen men, and that, as you can imagine, was not easy to find in sixteenth-century portugal, where they had not yet learned to build industrial warehouses or inns for tourists. And what if we get caught in the rain while on the road, not in a shower like this, but in a continuous downpour of the sort that doesn't stop for hours and hours, wondered the commanding officer, concluding, We'll have no option but to get soaked. He looked skyward, scrutinized the heavens and said, It seems to have cleared up for the moment, let's hope it was just a passing threat. Unfortunately, it wasn't. Before they reached safe harbor, if such a description can be applied to a couple of dozen hovels built some distance from each other, and a headless church, that is, one with only half a tower, with not an industrial warehouse to be seen, they met with two more downpours, which the commanding officer, by now an expert in this system of communications, immediately interpreted as two more warnings from the heavens, which had doubtless grown impatient because the necessary preventative measures had not yet been taken to save the rain-drenched convoy from falling victim to colds, chills, flu and doubtless pneumonia. That is the great mistake made by heaven, for whom nothing is impossible, imagining, as it does, that mankind, created, it is said, in the image and likeness of heaven's powerful occupant, enjoys the same privileges. We would like to see what heaven would do in the commanding officer's place, having to go from house to house with the same old story, I'm the officer in charge of a cavalry unit at the service of his highness the king of portugal, our mission being to accompany an elephant to the spanish

city of valladolid, and meeting with only distrustful faces, hardly surprising really, given that the people in that part of the world had never even heard of the elephantine species and hadn't the slightest idea what an elephant was. We would like to see heaven asking if there was a large empty barn available or, if not, an industrial warehouse, where both animals and people could shelter for the night, which shouldn't be impossible when one recalls that the famous jesus of galilee, in his prime, boasted of being able to tear down a temple and rebuild it in only three days. We cannot know if the only reason he failed to do so was a lack of manpower or cement, or if he simply reached the sensible conclusion that it wasn't worth the trouble, considering that if he was going to destroy something merely in order to build it up again, it would be better to leave it be. On the other hand, that business with the loaves and fishes really was impressive, and we mention it here only because, by order of the commanding officer and thanks to the efforts of the quartermaster, today there will be hot food for everyone in the convoy, which is no small miracle if one bears in mind the general lack of facilities and the uncertain weather. Luckily, it stopped raining. The men took off their heavier clothes and placed them on poles to dry by the heat of the fires they had lit. Then it was just a matter of waiting for the big pot of stew to arrive and of enjoying the consoling pang in the stomach when they smelled it, knowing that their hunger was finally going to be satisfied, and of feeling just as much a man as those who are brought a plate of food and a slice of bread at regular hours, as if such things were ordained by some beneficent fate. This commanding officer is not like other officers, in that he is as concerned about his men, soldiers and non-soldiers alike, as if they were his children. More than that, he is little concerned with hierarchy, at least in the current circumstances, so much so that he has not gone elsewhere to eat, but is here, taking his place around the fire, and if he hasn't yet participated very much in the conversation, this is only in order to put the men at their ease. One of the cavalrymen has just asked the question that has been preoccupying them all, And what are you going to do with the elephant in vienna, mahout, Probably the same as in lisbon, nothing very much, replied subthro, there'll be a lot of applause, a lot of people crowding the streets, and then they'll forget all about him, that's the law of life, triumph and oblivion, Not always, For elephants and men it is, although I shouldn't really speak of men in general, I'm just an indian in a foreign land, but, as far as I know, only one elephant has ever escaped that law, What elephant was that, asked one of the laborers, An elephant who was dying and whose head was cut off once he was dead, That would be the end of him, then, No, the head was placed on the neck of a god called ganesh, who was also dead, Tell us about this ganesh, said the commanding officer, Sir, the hindu religion is so very complicated that only an indian can really understand it, and even then not always, Now I seem to recall you telling me that you were a christian, And I recall answering, more or less, sir, more or less, What does that mean, though, are you or are you not a christian, Well, I was baptized in india when I was a child, And then, Then, nothing, replied the mahout with a shrug, So you never practiced your faith, Sir, I was not called, they must have forgotten about me, You didn't miss anything, said an unknown voice that no one could quite locate, but which, incredible though it may seem, appeared to have come from the embers of the fire. A great silence fell, interrupted only

by the crackling of the burning wood. According to your religion, who was it who created the world, asked the commanding officer, Brahma, sir, In other words, god, Yes, but he's not the only god, What do you mean, It's not enough just to have created the world, there has to be someone to preserve it, and that's the job of another god, called vishnu, Are there more gods apart from them, mahout, We've got thousands of them, but the third most important god is shiva, the destroyer, Do you mean that what vishnu preserves shiva destroys, No, sir, with shiva, death is understood as the main creator of life, So, if I understand you correctly, those three gods form part of a trinity, indeed, they are a trinity, just like in christianity, In christianity there are four, sir, if you'll forgive my boldness, Four, exclaimed the commanding officer, astonished, and who's the fourth member, The virgin, sir, The virgin doesn't count, we have the father, the son and the holy ghost, And the virgin, If you don't explain yourself, I'll cut off your head like they did to that elephant, Well, I've never heard anyone ask anything of god or jesus or the holy spirit, but the virgin can barely cope with the torrent of requests and prayers and supplications that arrive at her door at all hours of the day and night, Careful now, the inquisition's out there somewhere, so for your own good, don't go straying into dangerous waters, If I get to vienna, I won't be coming back, Won't you go home to india, asked the commanding officer, No, I'm not an indian anymore, And yet you obviously know a lot about hinduism, More or less, sir, more or less, Why do you say that, Because it's all words and only words, and beyond the words there's nothing, Is ganesh a word, asked the commanding officer, Yes, a word, which, like all the others, can only be explained by more words, but since the words we use to explain things, successfully or not, will, in turn, have to be explained, our conversation will lead nowhere, the mistaken and the true will alternate, like some kind of curse, and we'll never know what's right and what's wrong, Tell me about ganesh, Ganesh is the son of shiva and parvati, who is also known as durga or kali, the goddess of a hundred arms, If she'd had a hundred legs we could have called her centipede, said one of the men with an embarrassed laugh, as if regretting his words as soon as they were out of his mouth. The mahout ignored him and went on, It has to be said that, exactly as happened with your virgin, ganesh was engendered by his mother, parvati, alone, without the intervention of her husband, shiva, who, being eternal, felt no need to have children. One day, when parvati had decided to take a bath, it happened that there were no guards around to protect her should anyone chance to come into the room. And so she created an idol in the form of a little boy, made out of a paste, a kind of soap I suppose, that she herself had prepared. The goddess breathed life into the doll and that was ganesh's first birth. Parvati told ganesh that he must let no one in and he followed his mother's orders to the letter. A short time afterwards, shiva returned from the forest and tried to get into the house, but ganesh wouldn't let him, and that, naturally, made shiva very angry. The following dialogue took place, I'm parvati's husband, therefore her house is my house, Only the people whom my mother wants to come in can enter here, and she did not tell me to let you in. Shiva finally lost patience and launched into a fierce battle with ganesh, which ended with the god cutting off his opponent's head with his trident. When parvati came out and saw the lifeless body of her son, her cries of grief soon became howls of fury. She ordered shiva to

bring ganesh back to life at once, but unfortunately, the blow that had decapitated ganesh had been so powerful that his head had been thrown far away and was never seen again. Then, as a last re-sort, shiva asked for help from brahma, who suggested that he replace ganesh's head with that of the first living being he met on the road, as long as the creature was facing north. Shiva then dispatched his celestial army to go in search of just such a creature. They came across a dying elephant lying with its head to the north and, once it had died, they cut off its head. They returned to shiva and parvati and gave them the elephant's head, which was placed on ganesh's body, thus restoring him to life. And that is how ganesh was born again after having lived and died.

Fairy tales, muttered a soldier, Like the one about the man who, having died, rose on the third day, retorted subhro, Careful, mahout, you're going too far, warned the commanding officer, Look, I don't believe in the story about a boy made out of soap who turned into a god with the body of a paunchy man and the head of an elephant, but you asked me to explain who ganesh was, and I did as asked, Yes, but you made some rather rude comments about jesus christ and the virgin that didn't go down at all well with some of the men here, Well, I apologize to anyone who may have felt offended, it was quite unintentional, replied the mahout. There was a conciliatory murmur, and the truth is that those men, both soldiers and civilians, cared little for religious disputes, what troubled them was that such arcane matters should be discussed beneath the celestial vault itself. They say that walls have ears, well, imagine the size of the stars' ears. Anyway, it was time to go to bed, even though the sheets and blankets were the clothes they had worn during the day, the main thing was that they wouldn't get rained on, and the commanding officer had achieved precisely this by going from house to house asking the residents if they would be prepared to provide shelter that night for a few of his men, who thus ended up sleeping in kitchens, stables and haylofts, but this time with a full belly, which made up for these and other inconveniences. With them went a few villagers, too, most of them men, who had walked over to the camp, attracted by the novelty of seeing an elephant, although, out of fear, they dared not approach nearer than twenty paces. Coiling his trunk around a bundle of forage that would have been enough to take the edge off the appetite of a squadron of cows, solomon, despite his poor sight, shot them a stern glance, making it clear that he was not some fairground animal, but an honest worker who had been deprived of his job by unfortunate circumstances too complicated to go into, and had, so to speak, been forced to accept public charity. At first, one of the village men, out of bravado, went a few steps beyond the invisible line that would soon become a closed frontier, but solomon shooed him away with a warning kick, which, even though it didn't hit its target, gave rise to an interesting debate among the men about animal families and clans. John mules and molly mules, jacks and jennies, stallions and mares, are all quadrupeds who, as everyone knows, some by painful experience, can deliver a kick, and that's perfectly understandable, since they have no other weapons, either offensive or defensive, but an elephant, with that trunk and those tusks, with those huge great legs that look like steam-hammers, can also, as if this weren't enough, kick with the best of them. He may appear to be mildness incarnate, but, when necessary, he can turn into a wild beast. It's odd, though, that, belonging as he does to the

aforementioned family of animals, namely, the family that kicks, he doesn't wear horseshoes. One of the villagers said, There's not much to an elephant really. The others agreed, When you've walked round him once, you've seen all there is to see. They could have returned to their homes then, but one of them said he was going to stay a little longer, that he wanted to hear what was being talked about around the fire. His companions went with him. At first, they couldn't understand what the topic of conversation was, they couldn't catch the names, which had strange pronunciations, then all became clear when they reached the conclusion that these men were talking about the elephant and that the elephant was god. They were walking back to their houses now, to the comfort of their own hearth, each one taking with him two or three guests, both soldiers and laborers. Two cavalymen stayed behind to guard the elephant, which reinforced in the villagers the idea that they needed to talk to the priest urgently. The doors closed and the village shrank into the darkness. Shortly afterwards, a few of those doors swung cautiously open again, and the five men who emerged from them set off for the well in the square, where they had agreed to meet. They had decided to go and talk to the priest, who would, at that hour, doubtless be asleep in his bed. The priest was known to have a foul temper if woken at an inconvenient hour, and that, for him, was any hour during which he was safe in the arms of morpheus. One of the men suggested an alternative, Why don't we come back in the morning, he asked, but another, more determined, or simply more susceptible to the logic of caution, objected, If they've decided to leave at dawn, we risk finding no one, and then we'll look a right bunch of fools. They were standing at the gate to the priest's garden, and it seemed that none of the night visitors dared lift the knocker. There was also a knocker on the door of the priest's house, but it was too small to wake the inhabitant. Finally, like a cannon shot in the stony silence of the village, the knocker on the garden gate boomed into life. They had to knock twice more before they heard, coming from within, the hoarse, angry voice of the priest, Who is it. Obviously, it was neither prudent nor comfortable to talk about god in the middle of the street, with thick walls and a heavy wooden door between the two parties to the conversation. It would not be long before the neighbors were pricking up their ears to listen to the loud voices in which both sides of the dialogue would be obliged to speak, transforming a very serious theological matter into the latest piece of gossip. The door of the house finally opened and the priest's round head appeared, What do you want at this hour of the night. The men left the other door and walked reluctantly up the path to the house. Is someone dying, asked the priest. They all said No, sir. So what is it then, insisted this servant of god, drawing the blanket covering his shoulders more tightly about him, We can't talk out here in the street, said one of the men. The priest grumbled, Well, if you can't talk in the street, come to the church tomorrow, We have to talk to you now, father, tomorrow might be too late, the matter that brings us here is very serious, a church matter, A church matter, repeated the priest, suddenly uneasy, thinking that one of the church's rotten ceiling beams must finally have given way, Come in, then, come in. He herded them into the kitchen, where a few logs were still glowing in the hearth, then he lit a candle, sat down on a stool and said, Speak. The men looked at one another, unsure who should be the spokesman, but it was clear that

the only legitimate candidate was the one who had said he was going to listen to what was being discussed in the group that included the commanding officer and the mahout. No vote was necessary, the man in question took the floor, God is an elephant, father. The priest gave a sigh of relief, this was certainly preferable to the roof falling in, what's more, the heretical statement was easy enough to answer, God is in all his creatures, he said. The men nodded, but the spokesman, conscious of his rights and responsibilities, retorted, But none of them is god, That's all we'd need, replied the priest, the world would be bursting with gods then, and they'd never agree, each one trying to heap up the coals beneath his particular pot, Father, what we heard, with these ears that will one day be dust, is that the elephant over there is god, Who said such an outlandish thing, asked the priest, using a word that wasn't common currency in the village, and this, in him, was a clear sign that he was angered, The cavalry officer and the man who rides on top, On top of what, Of god, of the animal. The priest took a deep breath and, suppressing the urge to take more extreme measures, merely said, You're drunk, No, father, they replied in chorus, it's really quite difficult to get drunk these days, what with the price of wine, Well, if you're not drunk, and if despite this cock-and-bull story, you're still good christians, listen to me closely. The men drew nearer so as not to miss a word, and the priest, having first cleared his throat of catarrh, the result, he thought, of being dragged so abruptly from his warm sheets into the cold outside world, launched into a sermon, I could send you home with a penance, a few our fathers and a few hail marys, and think no more of the matter, but since you seem to me men of good faith, tomorrow morning, before the sun is up, we will all go, along with your families and the other villagers, whom I leave it up to you to tell, to find this elephant, not in order to excommunicate him, since, being an animal, he has never received the holy sacrament of baptism nor could he ever have enjoyed the spiritual benefits granted by the church, but in order to cleanse him of any diabolical possession that may have been introduced into his brute nature by the evil one, as happened to those two thousand swine that drowned in the sea of galilee, as I'm sure you'll remember. He paused, then asked, Understood, Yes, father, they replied, all except the spokesman who was clearly taking his role very seriously indeed, Father, he said, I always found that story most puzzling, Why, Well, I don't understand why those swine had to die, it's good that je sus performed the miracle of driving out the unclean spirits from the body of the gadarene demoniac, but letting those spirits then enter the bodies of a few poor creatures who had nothing to do with the matter never seemed to me a good way of finishing the task, especially since demons are immortal, because if they weren't, god would have killed them off at birth, what I mean is that by the time the pigs had fallen in the water, the demons would have escaped anyway, and it just seems to me that je sus didn't really think it through, And who are you to say that je sus didn't really think it through, It's written down, father, But you don't know how to read, Ah, but I know how to listen, Is there a bible in your house, No, father, only the gospels, they were part of a bible, but someone tore them out, And who reads them, My eldest daughter, she can't read very quickly yet, but she's read the same thing to us over and over now and we're beginning to understand it better, The trouble is that if the inquisition were ever to hear that you held such ideas and opinions,

you'd be the first to be consigned to the flames, Well, we all have to die of something, father, Don't talk such nonsense, leave your gospels and pay more attention to what I say in church, indicating the right path is my mission and no one else's, just remember, better to go the long way round than fall into a ditch, Yes, father, And not a word about what's been said here, if anyone outside of this group ever mentions the matter to me, then the one of you who let his tongue wag will be instantly excommunicated, even if I have to go to rome myself to give personal testimony. He paused for dramatic effect, and then asked in a portentous voice, Do you understand, Yes, father, we understand, Tomorrow, before the sun comes up, I want everyone gathered outside the church, I, your pastor, will go in front, and together, with my word and your presence, we will fight for our holy religion, and just remember, the people united will never be defeated.

The dawn was a foggy one, but despite a mist almost as thick as a soup made solely of boiled potatoes, no one had got lost, everyone had found their way to the church just as the guests to whom the villagers had given shelter had found their way back to the encampment earlier. The whole village was there, from the tiniest babe-in-arms to the oldest man still capable of walking, thanks to the aid of a stick that functioned as his third leg. Fortunately, he didn't have as many legs as a centipede, for centipedes, when they get old, require an enormous number of sticks, a fact that tips the scales in favor of the human species, who need only one, except in the very gravest of cases, when the aforementioned sticks change their name and become crutches. Of these, thanks to the divine providence that watches over us all, there were none in the village. The column was advancing at a steady pace, screwing up its courage in readiness to write a new page of selfless heroism in the annals of the village, the other pages not having much to offer the erudite reader, only that we were born, we worked and we died. Almost all the women had come armed with their rosaries and were murmuring prayers, doubtless in order to strengthen the resolve of the priest, who walked in front, bearing an aspergillum and a container of holy water. Now because of the mist, the men in the convoy had not yet dispersed as would have been natural, but were waiting in small groups to be given their usual breakfast chunk of bread, including the soldiers, who, being earlier risers, had already harnessed the horses. When the villagers began to emerge from the potato soup, the people in charge of the elephant instinctively went forward to meet them, with the cavalymen in the vanguard, as was their duty. When the two groups were within hailing distance, the priest stopped, raised his hand in a sign of peace, said good morning and asked, Where is the elephant, we want to see it. The sergeant considered both question and request quite reasonable and replied, Behind those trees, although if you want to see him, you'll have to speak first to the commanding officer and the mahout, What's a mahout, The man who rides on top, On top of what, On top of the elephant, what do you think, So mahout means the person who goes on top, Search me, I've no idea what it means, all I know is that he rides on top, it's an indian word apparently. This conversation would have looked set to continue for some time in this vein had not the commanding officer and the mahout approached, attracted by the curious sight, glimpsed through the now slightly thinning mist, of what could have been two armies face to face.

Here's the commanding officer now, said the sergeant, glad to be able to leave a conversation that was already beginning to get on his nerves. The commanding officer said, Good morning, then asked, How may I help you, We would like to see the elephant, It really isn't the best moment, said the mahout, he's a bit grumpy when he wakes up. To which the priest responded, As well as seeing the elephant, my flock and I would like to bless him before he sets off on his long journey, which is why I've brought the aspergillum and the holy water, That's a very nice idea, said the commanding officer, none of the other priests we've met along the way so far has offered to bless solomon, Who's solomon, asked the priest, The elephant's name is solomon, replied the mahout, It doesn't seem right to me to give an animal the name of a person, animals aren't people and people aren't animals, Well, I'm not so sure, said the mahout, who was starting to get fed up with all this blather, That's the difference between those who are educated and those who are not, retorted the priest with reprehensible arrogance. And with that, he turned to the commanding officer and asked, Would you allow me, sir, to do my duty as a priest, That's fine by me, father, although I'm not the person in charge of the elephant, that's the mahout's job. Instead of waiting for the priest to address him, subhro said in suspiciously friendly tones, Please, father, solomon is all yours. It is time to warn the reader that two of the characters here are not acting in good faith. First and foremost, there is the priest, who, contrary to what he said, has not brought with him holy water, but water from the well, taken directly from the jug in the kitchen, without ever having been touched by the empyrean, not even symbolically, secondly, there is the mahout, who is hoping something will happen and is praying to the god ganesh that it does. Don't get too close, warned the commanding officer, he's three meters high and weighs about four tons, if not more, He can't be as dangerous as the leviathan, a beast that has been subjugated forever by the holy catholic and apostolic roman church to which I belong, The responsibility is yours, but I've given you due warning, said the commanding officer, who, during his time as a soldier, had listened to many brave boasts and witnessed the sad outcome of almost all of them. The priest dipped the aspergillum in the water, took three steps forward and sprinkled the elephant's head with it, at the same time murmuring words that sounded like latin, although no one understood them, not even the tiny educated minority present, namely, the commanding officer, who had spent some years in a seminary, the result of a mystical crisis that eventually cured itself. The priest continued his murmurings and gradually worked his way round to the other end of the animal, a movement that coincided with a rapid increase in the mahouts prayers to the god ganesh and the sudden realization on the part of the commanding officer that the priest's words and gestures belonged to the manual of exorcism, as if the poor elephant could possibly be possessed by a demon. The man's mad, the commanding officer thought, and in the very instant in which he thought this, he saw the priest thrown to the ground, with the holy water container to one side, the aspergillum to the other, and the water spilled. The flock rushed to help their pastor, but the soldiers stepped in to avoid people getting crushed in the confusion, and quite right too, because the priest, helped by the village titans, was already trying to get up and had clearly sustained an injury to his left hip, although everything indicated that no bones were broken, which,

bearing in mind his advanced age and his stout, flabby body, could almost be considered one of the most remarkable miracles ever performed by the local patron saint. What really happened, and we will never know why, yet another inexplicable mystery to add to all the others, was that solomon, when he was less than a span or so from the target of the tremendous kick he was about to unleash, held back and softened the blow, so that the effects were only those that might result from a hard shove, but not a deliberate one and certainly not one intended to kill. Lacking that important piece of information, the dazed priest merely kept repeating, It was a punishment from heaven, a punishment from heaven. From that day on, whenever anyone mentions elephants in his presence, and this must have happened many times given what occurred here, on this misty morning, with so many witnesses present, he will always say that these apparently brutish animals are, in fact, so intelligent that, as well as having a smattering of latin, they are also capable of distinguishing ordinary water from holy water. The priest let himself be led, limping, to the rosewood chair, a magnificent piece of joinery almost worthy of an abbot's throne, that four of his most devoted followers had run to the church to fetch. We will not be here when they finally return to the village. The discussion will be a stormy one, as is only to be expected among people not much given to exercising their reason, men and women who come to blows over the slightest thing, even when, as in this case, they are trying to decide on the pious task of how best to carry their pastor back to his house and put him to bed. The priest will not be of much help in settling the dispute because he will fall into a torpor that will be a cause of great concern to everyone, except the local witch, Don't worry, she said, there are no signs of imminent death, not today or tomorrow, and nothing that can't be put right by a few vigorous massages of the affected parts and some herbal tea to purify the blood and avoid corruption, meanwhile, stop this bickering, it will only end in tears, all you need do is to take turns carrying him and change places every fifty paces, that way friendship will prevail. And the witch was quite right.

The convoy of men, horses, oxen and elephant has been swallowed up by the mist, so that you cannot even make out the vast general shape of them. We'll have to run to catch up to them. Fortunately, considering the brief time we spent listening to the village titans' arguments, the convoy won't have gone very far. In normal visibility or when the mist bore less of a resemblance to potato purée, we would only have to follow the tracks left in the soft soil by the thick wheels of the ox-cart and the quartermaster's wagon, but, now, even with your nose pressed to the ground, you still wouldn't be able to tell if anyone had passed. And not just people, but animals too, some of considerable size, like the oxen and the horses, and, in particular, the pachyderm known in the portuguese court as solomon, whose feet would leave in the earth enormous almost circular footprints, like those of the round-footed dinosaurs, if they ever existed. And speaking of animals, it seems impossible that no one in lisbon thought to bring a few dogs with them. A dog is a life insurance policy, a tracker of noises, a four-legged compass. You would just have to say to it, Fetch, and in less than five minutes, it would be back, tail wagging and eyes shining with happiness. There is no wind, although the mist seems to form slow

whirlpools as if boreas himself were blowing it down from the far north, from the lands of eternal ice. However, to be honest, given the delicacy of the situation, this is hardly the moment for someone to be honing his prose in order to make some, frankly, not very original poetic point. By now, the people traveling with the caravan will have realized that someone is missing, indeed two of them will probably have volunteered to go and save the poor castaway, an action that would be most welcome if it weren't for the reputation as a coward that will follow the castaway for the rest of his days. Honestly, the public voice will say, imagine him just sitting there, waiting for someone to rescue him, some people have no shame at all. It's true that he had been sitting down, but now he's standing up and has courageously taken the first step, right foot first, to drive away the evil spells cast by fate and its powerful allies, chance and coincidence, however, his left foot has grown suddenly hesitant, and who can blame it, because the ground is invisible, as if a new tide of mist had just begun to roll in. With his third step, he can no longer see his own hands held out in front of him as if to keep his nose from bumping against some unexpected door. It was then that another idea occurred to him, what if the road curved this way and that, and the direction he had taken, in what he hoped would be a straight line, led him into desert places that would mean perdition for both soul and body, in the case of the latter with immediate effect. And, o unhappy fate, without even a dog to lick away his tears when the great moment arrived. He again considered turning back to ask for shelter in the village until the bank of mist lifted of its own accord, but now, completely disoriented, with as little idea of where the cardinal points might be as if he were in some entirely unfamiliar place, he decided that his best bet was to sit down on the ground again and wait for destiny, chance, fate, any or all of them together, to guide those selfless volunteers to the tiny patch of ground on which he was sitting, as on an island in the ocean sea, with no means of communication. Or, more appropriately, like a needle in a haystack. Within three minutes, he was fast asleep. What a strange creature man is, so prone to terrible insomnias over mere nothings and yet capable of sleeping like a log on the eve of a battle. And so it was. He fell into a deep sleep, and it's quite likely that he would still be sleeping now if, somewhere in the mist, solomon had not unleashed a thunderous trumpeting whose echoes must have been heard on the distant shores of the gan ges. Still groggy after his abrupt awakening, he could not make out precisely where it was coming from, that foghorn come to save him from an icy death or, worse, from being eaten by wolves, because this is a land of wolves, and a man, alone and unarmed, is helpless against a whole pack of them or, indeed, against one. Solomon's second blast was even louder than the first and began with a kind of quiet gurgling in the depths of his throat, like a roll on the drums, immediately followed by the syncopated clamor that typifies the creature's call. The man is now racing through the mist like a horseman charging, lance at the ready, thinking all the while, Again, solomon, again. And solomon granted his wish and let out another trumpet blast, quieter this time, as if merely confirming that he was there, because the castaway is no longer adrift, he's on his way, there's the wagon belonging to the cavalry quartermaster, not that he can make out details because things and people are nothing but blurs, it's as if the mist, and this is a much more troubling idea, were of a kind that can corrode the skin, the skin of

people, horses, even elephants, yes, even that vast, tiger-proof elephant, not all mists are the same, of course, one day, someone will cry Gas, and woe betide anyone not wearing a tight-fitting mask. The ex-castaway asks a soldier who happens to be passing, leading his horse by the reins, if the volunteers have returned from their rescue mission, and the soldier responds with a distrustful glance, as if he were speaking to some kind of provocateur, because, as a quick flick through the inquisition's files will confirm, there were plenty of them around in the sixteenth century, and says coolly, Wherever did you get an idea like that, there was no call for volunteers here, the only sensible course of action in a situation like this is to do exactly as we did and sit tight until the mist lifts, besides, asking for volunteers isn't really the captain's style, usually, he just points, you, you and you, quick march, and anyway, the captain says that when it comes to heroics, either all of us are going to be heroes or none. To make clearer still that he considered the conversation to be at an end, the soldier rapidly hoisted himself up onto his horse, said goodbye and galloped off into the mist. He was displeased with himself. He had given explanations that no one had asked him for, and made statements he was not authorized to make. However, he was consoled by the fact that the man, although he didn't really have the physique, probably belonged, what other possibility was there, to the group of men hired to help push or pull the ox-carts whenever the going got rough, men of few words and even less imagination. Generally speaking, that is, because the man lost in the mist certainly didn't appear to lack imagination, just look at the way he had plucked out of nothing, out of nowhere, the volunteers who should have come to his rescue. Fortunately for the man's public credibility, the elephant is a different matter altogether. Large, enormous, big-bellied, with a voice guaranteed to terrify the timid and a trunk like that of no other animal in creation, the elephant could never be the product of anyone's imagination, however bold and fertile. The elephant either existed or it didn't. It is, therefore, time to visit him and thank him for the energetic way in which he used his god-given trumpet to such good purpose, for if this had been the valley of jehoshaphat, the dead would undoubtedly have risen again, but being what it is, an ordinary scrap of portuguese earth swathed in mist where someone very nearly died of cold and indifference, and so as not entirely to waste the rather la bored comparison with which we chose to encumber ourselves, we might say that some resurrections are so deftly handled that they can happen even before the poor victim has passed away. It was as if the elephant had thought, That poor devil is going to die, and I'm going to save him. And here's the same poor devil heaping thanks on him and swearing eternal gratitude, until finally the mahout asks, What did the elephant do to deserve such thanks, If it wasn't for him, I would have died of cold or been devoured by wolves, And what exactly did he do, because he hasn't left this spot since he woke up, He didn't need to move, he just had to blow his trumpet, because I was lost in the mist and it was his voice that saved me, If anyone is qualified to speak of the works and deeds of solomon, I'm that man, which is why I'm his mahout, so don't come to me with some story about hearing him trumpet, He didn't just trumpet once, but three times, and these same ears that will one day be dust heard him trumpet. The mahout thought, The fellow's stark staring mad, the mist must have seeped into his brain, that's probably it, yes, I've heard of such cases, then, out loud

he added, Let's not argue about whether it was one, two or three blasts, you ask those men over there if they heard anything. The men, whose blurred outlines seemed to vibrate and tremble with every step, immediately gave rise to the question, Where are you off to in weather like this. We know, however, that this wasn't the question asked by the man who insisted he'd heard the elephant speak and we know the answer they were giving him. What we don't know is whether any of these things are related, which ones, or how. The fact is that the sun, like a vast broom of light, suddenly broke through the mist and swept it away. The landscape revealed itself as it had always been, stones, trees, ravines, and mountains. The three men are no longer there. The mahout opens his mouth to speak, then closes it again. The man who insisted he'd heard the elephant speak began to lose consistency and substance, to shrink, then grow round and transparent as a soap bubble, if the poor-quality soaps of the time were capable of forming the crystalline marvels that someone had the genius to invent, then he suddenly disappeared from view. He went plof and vanished. Onomatopoeia can be so very handy. Imagine if we'd had to provide a detailed description of someone disappearing. It would have taken us at least ten pages. Plof.

BY CHANCE, PERHAPS as the result of some change in the atmosphere, the commanding officer found himself thinking about his wife and children, she five months pregnant and they, a boy and a girl, six and four years old respectively. The primitive people of the time, barely emerged from primeval barbarism, pay so little attention to delicate feelings that they rarely make use of them. Certain emotions may already be fermenting away in the laborious process of creating a coherent and cohesive national identity, but that quintessentially portuguese feeling of yearning and nostalgia known as saudade, and all its by-products, had not yet been embraced by portugal as a habitual philosophy of life, and this has given rise to not a few communication difficulties in society in general and to some degree of perplexity on a personal level as well. For example, basic common sense tells us that it would be inadvisable to go over to the commanding officer now and ask, Tell me, sir, would you describe what you feel for your wife and your little children as saudade. The officer, although not entirely lacking in taste and sensibility, as we have had the opportunity to observe already at various points in this story, although always maintaining the utmost discretion so as not to offend against the character's natural modesty, would stare at us, astonished by our patent lack of tact, and give us some vague and airy answer, neither here nor there, that would leave us, at the very least, with serious concerns about the couple's private life. It's true that the commanding officer has never sung a serenade nor, as far as we know, written a single sonnet, but that doesn't mean that he is not, by nature shall we say, perfectly capable of appreciating the beautiful things created by his ingenious fellow creatures. One of these, for example, he could have brought with him in his knapsack, carefully swathed in cloth, as he had done on other more warlike expeditions, but this time he had chosen to leave it safely at home. Given how little money he earns, an amount, often paid in arrears, that was evidently not intended by the treasury to allow the troops to enjoy any luxuries, the commanding officer, in order to purchase his particular jewel, a good twelve or more years ago now, had to sell a baldric made of the finest materials, delicate in design and richly decorated, intended, it's true, to be worn more in the drawing room than on the battlefield, a magnificent piece of military equipment that had been the property of his maternal grandfather and which, ever since, had been an object of desire for whoever laid eyes on it. In its place, but not intended for the same ends, is a large volume bearing the title amadis of gaul, whose author, as certain of our more patriotic scholars claim, was a certain vasco de lobeira, a portuguese writer of the fourteenth century, whose work was published in zaragoza, in fifteen hundred and eight, in a castilian translation by one garci rodriguez de montalvo, who besides adding a few extra chapters of love and adventure, also amended and corrected the original texts. The commanding officer suspects that his copy is of bastard stock, what we would call a pirate edition, which just goes to show how long certain illicit commercial practices have been going on. Solomon, and we are speaking here of the king of judah and not the elephant, was quite right when he wrote that there was nothing new under the sun. It's hard for us to imagine that in those biblical times everything was much the same as it is now, for our stubborn innocence insists on imagining them as lyrical, bucolic, pastoral, perhaps because they are still so close to our own first fumbling attempts at creating our western civilization.

The commanding officer is on his fourth or fifth reading of amadis. As in any other chivalric novel, there is no shortage of bloody battles, with arms and legs lopped off at the root and bodies sliced in two, which says a great deal for the brute force of those spiritual knights, given that the cutting virtues of metal alloys made of vanadium and molybdenum, to be found nowadays in any ordinary kitchen knife, were unknown then, indeed unimaginable, which just goes to show how far we have progressed, and in the right direction too. The book recounts in pleasurable detail the troubled loves of amadis of gaul and oriana, both of whom were the children of kings, although this did not prevent amadis being abandoned by his mother, who gave orders that he be placed in a wooden box, with a sword beside him, and put to sea, at the mercy of the maritime currents and the force of the waves. As for oriana, poor thing, she found herself, against her will, promised in marriage by her own father to the emperor of rome, when she had placed all her desires and hopes in amadis, whom she had loved since she was seven and he was twelve, although physically he looked more like a fifteen-year-old. Seeing each other and falling in love had taken but one dazzling moment that continued to dazzle them all their lives. This was a time when knights errant had pledged to complete god's work and eliminate evil from the planet. It was also a time when love was only deemed to be love if it was of an extreme and radical nature, when absolute fidelity was a spiritual gift as natural as eating and drinking are to the body. And speaking of bodies, it is worth pondering just what state amadis's body would have been in, covered in scars as it was, when he embraced the perfect body of the peerless oriana. Armor, without the help of molybdenum and vanadium, would be of little use, and the narrator of the story makes no attempt to disguise the frailty of corselets and coats of mail. A simple blow with a sword was enough to render a helmet useless and to split open the head inside. It's astonishing that those people survived into the present century. That's what I'd like to do, sighed the commanding officer. He wouldn't mind giving up the rank of captain, at least for a while, in exchange for setting out on horseback, like a new amadis of gaul, along the beaches of ilha firme or through the woods and mountains where the enemies of the lord were hiding. In times of peace, the life of a portuguese cavalry captain is one of complete idleness, and you really have to rack your brains to find something with which you can usefully occupy the empty hours of the day. The captain imagines amadis riding through the rugged countryside, with the pitiless stones punishing his horse's hooves and his squire gandalim telling his friend that it is time to rest. This fantastical wish caused the captain's thoughts to deviate onto an entirely non-literary matter to do with the most basic rules of military discipline, that of carrying out orders. If the commanding officer had been able to enter into the cogitations of king dom joão the third at the moment we described earlier, when that royal personage imagined solomon and his entourage crossing the vast, monotonous lands of castile, he would not be here now, going up and down these ravines, dodging dangerous slopes, while the ox-driver tries to find paths that do not take him too far out of his way whenever the incipient and ill-defined tracks disappear beneath rubble and shale. Although the king did not actually express an opinion and no one dared ask him to opine on such a trivial matter, the general of the cavalry gave his approval, yes, the route across the plains of castile was definitely the

best and the easiest, almost, one might say, a stroll in the country. This, then, was how things stood, and there would, it seemed, have been no reason to reconsider the itinerary had the king's secretary, pêro de alcáçova carneiro, not happened to learn of this agreement and decided to intervene. What you are calling a stroll in the country, sir, is not, I feel, a good idea, he said, if we're not very careful, it could have negative consequences of a serious, even grave nature, Well, I don't see why, What if we should meet with difficulties in obtaining food or water supplies from the local population while we're crossing castile, what if the people there refuse to do business with us, even though that goes against their own best interests at the time, That is a possibility, agreed the general, What if bandits, far more numerous there than here, seeing the meager protection given to the elephant, because, after all, a troop of thirty cavalrymen is nothing, Now there I must disagree with you, sir, the general broke in, if there had been thirty portuguese soldiers at thermopylae, for example, on whichever side, the battle would have turned out quite differently, Forgive me, sir, it was certainly not my intention to cast doubt upon the bravery of our glorious army, but, as I was saying, what if those bandits, who doubtless know the value of ivory, were to join forces and attack us, kill the elephant and tear out his tusks, Some claim that the hide of an elephant is impermeable to bullets, That may be true, but there would certainly be other ways of killing him, what I'm asking your majesty to consider, above all, is the shame that would befall us if we lost our gift to archduke maximilian in a skirmish with spanish bandits and on spanish territory, So what do you think we should do then, There is only one alternative to the castile route, our own, along the frontier, heading north, as far as castelo rodrigo, Those are very bad roads, said the general, you clearly don't know the area, No, but we have no other option, and it does bring with it another advantage, Which is, That of being able to make most of the journey on portuguese soil, An important detail, no doubt about it, you think of everything, secretary.

Two weeks after this conversation, it became evident that the secretary, pêro de alcáçova carneiro, had not, in fact, thought of everything. A messenger from the archduke's secretary arrived bearing a letter in which, amongst other trifles that seemed to have been deliberately included in order to distract the reader's attention, he asked precisely where on the frontier the elephant would cross, because a detachment of spanish or austrian soldiers would be there to receive him. The portuguese secretary replied through the same messenger, informing him that they would cross the frontier at castelo rodrigo, and then he immediately launched a counterattack. Now while such an expression may seem a gross exaggeration, bearing in mind that peace reigns between the two iberian countries, pêro de alcáçova carneiro's sixth sense had reared up at the word used by his spanish colleague, receive. The man could have used such words as greet or welcome, but no, he had either said more than he intended or, as they say, the truth had slipped out by mistake. A few instructions to the cavalry captain on how to proceed will avoid any misunderstandings, thought pêro de alcáçova carneiro, if the other side is of the same mind. The result of this strategic planning is being announced by the sergeant, in another place and a few days later, at this very moment, There are two

horsemen behind us, sir. The commanding officer looked at the approaching horses, which were obviously thoroughbreds judging by their long stride and their speed, and they were clearly in a hurry. The sergeant had ordered the column to halt, and just in case, made sure that a few muskets were kept discreetly trained on the new arrivals. Limbs shaking and foam dripping from their mouths, the horses were breathing hard when they came to a stop. The two riders greeted the officer and one of them said, We come bearing a message from secretary pêro de alcáçova carneiro for the commanding officer of the troops accompanying the elephant, I am that commanding officer. The man opened his knapsack and took out a piece of paper folded in four and sealed with the official stamp of the king's secretary, then handed it to the commanding officer, who moved a few paces away in order to read it. When he rejoined them, his eyes were shining. He called the sergeant to one side and said, Sergeant, tell the quartermaster to give these men some food and prepare them some provisions for the journey back, Yes, sir, And announce that the time allowed today for the afternoon rest will be reduced by half, Yes, sir, We have to reach castelo rodrigo before the spanish do, which should be possible, since they, unlike us, have not been forewarned, And if we don't, sir, the sergeant made so bold as to ask, We will, but anyway, the first to arrive will have to wait. As simple as that, the first to arrive will have to wait, it hardly seemed worth pêro de alcáçova carneiro writing such a letter. There must be more to it than that.

THE WOLVES APPEARED the following day. Perhaps they had heard us mention them earlier and finally decided to show up. They don't appear to have come in a spirit of war, possibly because the results of their hunting during the latter part of the night were enough to fill their stomachs, besides, a convoy like this of more than fifty men, many of them armed, instills a certain sense of respect and prudence, wolves might be bad, but they're not stupid. They're experts at weighing up the relative strength of the forces involved on either side and never let themselves be carried away by enthusiasm, never lose their heads, perhaps because they have no flag or military band to sweep them to glory, no, when they launch an attack, they do so in order to win, a rule to which, however, as we will see later on, there is the occasional exception. These wolves had never seen an elephant. It would not surprise us to learn that some of the more imaginative wolves, always assuming wolves have thought processes parallel to those of human beings, had thought how lucky it would be for the pack to have at its disposal all those tons of meat just outside the lair, the table always set for lunch, dinner and supper. The ingenuous *canis lupus signatus*, the latin name of the iberian wolf, does not know that the elephant's skin is impervious to bullets, although one must, of course, bear in mind the enormous difference between old-fashioned bullets, which you could never be sure would go precisely where you wanted them to, and the teeth of these three representatives of the lupine race gazing down from the top of a hill at the lively spectacle of that column of men, horses and oxen preparing for the next stage of their journey to castelo rodrigo. It's quite possible that solomon's skin would not have resisted for long the concerted action of three lots of very sharp teeth honed over the centuries by the need to survive and to eat absolutely anything that crossed their path. The men are talking about the wolves, and one of them says to those nearby, If you're ever attacked by a wolf and all you have is a stick to defend yourself with, on no account let the wolf get his teeth round it, Why, asked someone, Because the wolf will gradually work his way up the stick, all the time keeping a firm grip on the wood, until he's close enough to pounce, Devilish creatures, To be fair, though, wolves are not the natural enemies of man, and if they sometimes appear to be, that's only because we're an obstacle to their having a free run of everything the world has to offer an honest wolf, Those three don't look as if they harbor any particularly hostile intentions, They must have eaten already, besides there are too many of us for them to dare to attack, say, one of those horses, which for them would be a very tasty morsel indeed, There they go, shouted a soldier. It was true. The wolves, who, from the moment they arrived, had been sitting utterly motionless, silhouetted against the backdrop of clouds, were now moving off, as if gliding rather than walking, until they disappeared, one by one. Will they be back, asked the soldier, Possibly, perhaps just to see whether or not we're still here or if an injured horse has been left behind, said the man who knew about wolves. Up ahead, the bugle sounded the order to assemble. More or less half an hour later, the column lumbered into action, with the ox-cart at the front, followed by the elephant and the porters, then the cavalry and, bringing up the rear, the quartermaster's wagon. They were all exhausted. Meanwhile, the mahout had informed the commanding officer that solomon was tired, not so much because of the distance they had traveled from lisbon, but because of the

terrible state of the roads, if they merited that name. The commanding officer informed him that in a day or, at most, two, they would be within sight of castelo rodrigo, If we arrive first, he added, the elephant will be able to rest for however many days or hours it takes for the spanish to join us, as will everyone else in our party, men and beasts, And what if we arrive after them, That depends on how much of a hurry they're in and what their orders are, although I imagine that they, too, will want at least one day's repose, We're in your hands, sir, and my one desire is that your interests might also be our interests, They are, said the commanding officer. He dug in his spurs and rode on ahead, to encourage the ox-driver, for the speed of the convoy's progress depended in large measure on his driving skills, Come on, man, get those oxen moving, he shouted, it's not far to castelo rodrigo now and it won't be long before we can sleep under a roof again, And eat like human beings, I hope, said the ox-driver in a low murmur so that no one would hear him. At any rate, the commanding officer's orders did not fall on deaf ears. The driver used his prod to urge the oxen on, then shouted a few words of encouragement in that dialect common to all ox-drivers, with immediate and effective results, an impetus that was maintained for the next ten minutes or quarter of an hour, or for as long as the ox-driver could keep the flame burning. Feeling more dead than alive, starving but too weary to eat, the convoy pitched camp when the sun had already set and night was upon them. Fortunately, the wolves had not come back. If they had, they would have been able to saunter round half the encampment and choose the most succulent victim from among the horses. True, such a grandiose theft would have come to no good, a horse being too large an animal to be dragged off just like that, but if they had succeeded, we would not have found words strong enough to describe the travelers' fear when they realized that wolves had infiltrated the camp, and it would be a matter then of every man for himself. Let us give thanks to heaven that we were spared that test. Let us also thank heaven that the imposing towers of the castle have just come into view, it makes one feel like saying, as someone else once did, Today you will be with me in paradise, or, to use the commanding officer's more down-to-earth words, Tonight we'll sleep under a roof, but then, no two paradises are alike, some have houris and some do not, however, to find out just what kind of paradise we're in, all we need do is peer round the door. With a wall to protect you from the cold north wind, a roof to keep off the rain and the damp night air, you need very little else to enjoy the greatest comfort in the world. Or the delights of paradise.

Anyone who has been following this story with due attention will have found it odd that, after the amusing episode in which solomon kicked the village priest, there has been no further reference to other encounters with the local inhabitants, as if we were crossing a desert rather than a civilized european country, a country, moreover, as even schoolchildren know, that gave new worlds to the world. There were some encounters, but only in passing, in the most literal sense of the phrase, in that people came out of their houses to see who was coming and found themselves face to face with the elephant, and while some crossed themselves in amazement and fear, others, though equally afraid, burst out laughing, probably at the sight of the elephant's trunk. This,

however, is nothing in comparison with the enthusiasm and the sheer number of boys and the occasional idle adult who came running from the town of castelo rodrigo when they heard the news about the elephant's journey, although no one knows quite how it got there, the news, that is, not the elephant, who will take some time yet to hove into view. Nervous and excited, the commanding officer gave orders to the sergeant to send someone to ask one of the older boys if the spanish soldiers had arrived. The boy was obviously a galician because he replied with another question, Why are they coming here, is there going to be a war, Answer the question, have the spaniards arrived or not, No, sir, they haven't. The information was passed to the commanding officer, on whose face there immediately appeared the most beatific of smiles. There was no doubt about it, fate seemed determined to favor the portuguese troops.

It took nearly an hour for the whole convoy to enter the town, a caravan of men and beasts so tired that they could barely stand, and with scarcely enough strength to raise an arm or twitch an ear in acknowledgment of the applause with which the inhabitants of castelo rodrigo greeted them. A representative of the mayor guided them to the castle's parade ground, which could easily have accommodated at least ten such convoys. Three members of the castellan's family were waiting there, and they then accompanied the commanding officer on an inspection of the areas available to provide shelter for the men, not forgetting any shelter that the spaniards might need should they decide not to camp outside the castle. The mayor, whom the commanding officer went to see afterwards in order to pay his respects, said, They'll probably pitch camp outside the castle walls, which, apart from anything else, would have the advantage of reducing any possibility of a confrontation, What makes you think there might be a confrontation, asked the commanding officer, You never can tell with spaniards, they've been very cocky since they've had an emperor, and it will be even worse if, instead of the spaniards, the austrians appear, Are they bad people, asked the commanding officer, They think they're superior to everyone else, That's a common enough sin, I, for example, judge myself to be superior to my soldiers, and my soldiers judge themselves to be superior to the porters who came with us to do the heavy work, And the elephant, asked the mayor, smiling, The elephant doesn't have an opinion, he's not of this world, replied the commanding officer, Yes, I watched from a window to see him arrive, and he really is a superb creature, might I have a closer look, He's all yours, Why, I wouldn't know what to do with him, apart from feed him, Well, I should warn you, sir, that he gets through a lot of food, So I've heard, and I certainly have no ambitions to own an elephant, I'm just a town mayor, af ter all, That is to say neither a king nor an archduke, Precisely, neither a king nor an archduke, I have only what I can call my own. The commanding officer got to his feet, I won't take up any more of your time, sir, thank you very much for your kind welcome, In welcoming you, captain, I was merely serving the king, however, if you would accept my invitation to be a guest in my house for as long as you stay in castelo rodrigo, that would be another matter, Thank you for an invitation that does me far more honor than you can imagine, but I must stay with my men, Yes, I understand, indeed, I have no option but to understand, but I hope you will at least come to supper one day

soon, With great pleasure, although that depends on how long I have to wait, what if the spaniards turn up tomorrow, for example, or even today, My scouts outside the walls will give us due warning, How will they do that, With carrier pigeons. The commanding officer gave him a skeptical look, Carrier pigeons, he asked, I've heard of them, but frankly, I can't believe that a pigeon can fly for as many hours as people say, covering enormous distances, only to end up unerringly in the pigeon-house it was born in, You will have the opportunity to see this phenomenon with your own eyes, for with your permission, I will send for you when the pigeon arrives so that you can witness for yourself the removal and reading of the message tied to the bird's leg, If it's true, it won't be long before messages can fly through the air with no need of a pigeon, That would be rather more difficult, I imagine, said the mayor, smiling, but as long as there's a world, anything's possible, As long as there's a world, That's the only way, captain, the world is essential, Look, I mustn't take up any more of your time, It's been a great pleasure talking to you, For me too, sir, indeed, after this long journey, it's been like a glass of cool water, A glass of water that I failed to offer you, Next time perhaps, Don't forget my invitation, said the mayor as the captain was going down the stone steps, I'll be there, sir.

As soon as he entered the castle, the commanding officer summoned the sergeant, to whom he gave orders regarding the immediate fate of the thirty porters. Since they would no longer be needed, they would rest the next day, but go back to lisbon the day after, Tell the quartermaster to prepare a reasonable amount of food for them, thirty men means thirty mouths, thirty tongues and an enormous number of teeth, obviously it won't be possible to provide them with enough food for the entire journey back to lisbon, but they can sort themselves out en route, working or, Or stealing, said the sergeant to fill in the pause, Let's just say they can make do as best they can, said the commanding officer, resorting, for lack of anything better, to one of those phrases that form part of the universal panacea, the perfect example of which is that most barefaced expression of personal and social hypocrisy, namely, urging patience on the poor person to whom one has just refused alms. Those who had taken on the role of foreman wanted to know when they would be paid for their work, and the commanding officer sent word that he did not know, but that they should present themselves at the palace and ask to speak to the secretary or his representative, But I advise you, and the sergeant repeated this advice word for word, not to go there as a group, because that might give entirely the wrong impression, thirty ragamuffins standing outside the palace gate as if about to launch an attack, in my view, only the foremen should go and, when they do, they should make every effort to look as clean and tidy as possible. Later on, one of these men, happening to meet the commanding officer, asked permission to speak and said how much he regretted not being able to continue on to valladolid. The commanding officer didn't know what to say, and for a few seconds, the two men looked at each other in silence, then went about their business.

The commanding officer gave his soldiers a rapid summary of the situation, they would wait for the spanish to arrive, although it wasn't yet known when this would be,

there having been no news on that point so far, and he refrained at the last moment from making any reference to carrier pigeons, aware of the dangers of any relaxation of discipline. He was unaware that among his subordinates were two pigeon-fanciers, a term that did not exist at the time, except perhaps among initiates, but which was doubtless going around knocking at doors, with the absent-minded air affected by all new words, asking to be let in. The soldiers were standing at ease, a position they assumed *ad libitum*, without making any attempt at elegance. The time will come when standing formally at ease will cost a soldier as much effort as standing to attention does the guards, with the enemy lying in wait on the other side of the street. Bales of hay had been strewn about the floor, thick enough to cushion the soldiers' shoulder blades against the intractable hardness of the flagstones. The muskets were arranged in stacks along one wall. Let's just hope they don't have to use them, thought the commanding officer, concerned that the act of handing over solomon might, through a lack of tact on one side or the other, become instead a *casus belli*. He clearly remembered the words of the secretary *pêro de alcáçova carneiro*, not just those in the letter, of course, but the unwritten words he could read between the lines, namely, that if the spanish, or the austrians, or both, behaved in an unpleasant or provocative manner, he should proceed accordingly. The commanding officer could not imagine why the soldiers marching toward them, be they spanish or austrian, would behave provocatively or indeed unpleasantly. A cavalry captain lacks both the intelligence and the political nous of a secretary of state, and he would therefore be wise to allow himself to be guided by someone who knows more than he does, until the moment for action arrived, if it did. The commanding officer was pondering these thoughts when subhro came into the improvised bedroom for which the sergeant had thoughtfully reserved a few bales of hay. When he saw subhro, the commanding officer felt an awkwardness that could only be attributed to an uneasy awareness that he had not yet inquired about solomon's state of health, had not even been to see him, as if once they had reached castelo rodrigo, his mission would be at an end. How's solomon, he asked, When I left him, he was sleeping, replied the mahout, He's a valiant creature, exclaimed the commanding officer with feigned enthusiasm, He just went where he was led, and he was born with whatever strength and resistance he has, they're not personal virtues, You're being very hard on poor solomon, Perhaps because of a story that one of my assistants just told me, What story is that, asked the commanding officer, The story of a cow, Do cows have stories, asked the commanding officer, smiling, This one did, she spent twelve days and twelve nights in the galician mountains, in the cold, rain, ice and mud, among stones as keen as knives and scrub as sharp as nails, enjoying only brief intervals of rest in between fighting and fending off attacks, amid howls and mooing, the story of a cow who was lost in the fields with her calf and found herself surrounded by wolves for twelve days and twelve nights, and was obliged to defend herself and her calf during a long-drawn-out battle, enduring the agony of living on the very edge of death, encircled by teeth and gaping jaws, prone to sudden assaults, knowing that every thrust with her horns had to hit home, as she fought for her own life and for that of the little creature who could not yet fend for itself, and dreading those moments when the calf sought its mother's teats and slowly suckled, while the

wolves closed in, crouching low, ears pricked. Subhro took a deep breath, then went on, At the end of those twelve days, the cow and her calf were found and saved and led in triumph to the village, but the story doesn't end there, it went on for two more days, at the end of which, because the cow had turned wild and learned to defend herself, and because no one could tame her or even get near her, she was killed, slaughtered, not by the wolves she had kept at bay for twelve whole days, but by the very men who had saved her, possibly by her actual owner, incapable of understanding that a previously docile, biddable creature, having learned how to fight, could never stop fighting.

A respectful silence reigned for a few seconds in the large stone room. The soldiers present were not very experienced in war, indeed the youngest of them had never even smelled gunpowder on a battlefield, and thus they were astonished at the courage shown by an irrational creature, a cow, imagine that, who had revealed herself to have such human sentiments as love of family, the gift of personal sacrifice, and self-denial carried to the ultimate extreme. The first to speak was the soldier who appeared to know a lot about wolves, That's a very nice story, he said to subhro, and that cow deserved, at the very least, a medal for bravery and merit, but there are a few things about your account that remain unclear and don't quite ring true, For example, asked the mahout in the tone of someone squaring up for a fight, For example, who told you the story, A galician, And where did he hear it, He must have heard it from someone else, Or read it, As far as I know he can't read, All right, perhaps he heard it and memorized it, Possibly, but I was simply interested in retelling it as best I could, You have an excellent memory, and the language in which you told the story was far from ordinary, Thank you, said subhro, but now I would like to know which bits of the story remain unclear to you and failed to ring true, The first is that we are given to understand or, rather, it is explicitly stated that the struggle between the cow and the wolves lasted twelve days and twelve nights, which would mean that the wolves attacked the cow on the very first night and only withdrew on the twelfth, presumably having sustained some losses, We weren't there to see what happened, No, but anyone who knows anything about wolves would know that, although they live in a pack, they hunt alone, What are you getting at, asked subhro, I'm saying that the cow wouldn't have been able to withstand a concerted attack by three or four wolves for one hour, let alone twelve days, So the whole story of the battling cow is a lie, No, the lie consists only in the exaggerations, linguistic affectations and half-truths that try to pass themselves off as whole truths, So what do you think happened, asked subhro, Well, I think the cow really did get lost, was attacked by a wolf, fought him off and forced him to flee, possibly badly injured, and then stayed where she was, grazing and suckling her calf until she was found, Couldn't another wolf have come along, Yes, but that would be unlikely, and having fought off one wolf is more than enough to justify a medal for bravery and merit. The audience applauded, thinking that, all things considered, the galician cow deserved the truth as much as she deserved the medal.

GATHERED TOGETHER EARLY the next morning, the general assembly of porters made a unanimous decision to take an easier and less perilous route back to lisbon, following friendlier paths that were softer underfoot and where they need not fear the yellow gaze of wolves and the sinuous, roundabout way in which those creatures gradually corral the minds of their victims. Not that wolves are never to be seen in coastal regions, on the contrary, they often are and in large numbers, and make regular raids on flocks of sheep, but there is an enormous difference between walking among craggy outcrops of rock, the mere sight of which makes the heart tremble, and treading the cool sand of beaches frequented by fisherfolk, kindly people always willing to give you half a dozen sardines in exchange for a little help, however symbolic, when hauling in a boat. The porters already have their provisions and are waiting for subhro and the elephant to come and say goodbye. This was probably the mahout's idea, but since there is nothing written on the subject, no one knows quite how it arose. Now one can see how a person could be embraced by an elephant, but the corresponding gesture is simply unimaginable. And as for shaking hands, that would be impossible, five insignificant human fingers could never grasp one huge great foot the size of a tree trunk. Subhro had ordered the men to form two lines, five in front and five behind, leaving a distance of about one ell between every two men, which indicated that the elephant was going to do no more than walk past them as if reviewing the troops. Subhro then spoke again to explain that solomon would stop in front of each of them and that they should then hold out their right hand, palm uppermost, and wait for solomon to say goodbye. And don't be afraid, solomon is sad, but he's not angry, he'd grown used to you and has only just found out that you're leaving, How did he find out, That's one of those questions not even worth asking, if you were to ask him directly, he probably wouldn't answer, Is that because he wouldn't know or because he doesn't want to, In solomon's mind, not wanting and not knowing form part of a much larger question about the world in which he finds himself, it's probably the same question we all need to ask, both elephants and men. Subhro immediately felt that he had just said something stupid, a remark that deserved a place of honor on the list of platitudes, Fortunately, he murmured, as he walked off to fetch the elephant, no one had understood, that's one good thing about ignorance, it protects us from false knowledge. The men were growing impatient, they couldn't wait to set off, and for safety's sake, they have decided to follow the left bank of the douro river as far as oporto, which had a reputation for offering people a warm welcome and where some of the men had already considered setting up home, once the problem of their wages had been resolved, and that could only be done in lisbon. Each man was thus immersed in his own thoughts when solomon appeared, lumbering along on his four tons of flesh and bones and his three meters of height. Some of the less daring among the men felt a sudden tightening in the stomach when they thought about what could go wrong at this farewell parade, for this is a topic, that of different animal species saying goodbye to one another, on which there is no bibliography. Accompanied by his assistants, whose state of dolce far niente since they left lisbon will soon come to an end, subhro arrived seated on solomon's broad shoulders, and this only served to increase the unease of the men waiting in their lines. The question in every mind was, How can he possibly say goodbye to us when he's so high

up. The two lines kept wavering as if shaken by a strong wind, but the porters stood firm and did not scatter. Besides, there would have been no point, the elephant was nearly upon them. Subhro made him stop in front of the man at the extreme right of the first line and said clearly, Hold out your hand, palm uppermost. The man did as ordered, there was his hand, apparently steady. Then the elephant placed the end of his trunk on the open palm, and the man responded instinctively, squeezing the proffered trunk as if it were someone's hand, at the same time trying to suppress the lump forming in his throat, which would, if left unchecked, end in tears. He was shaking from head to toe, while subhro, up above, gazed sweetly down upon him. More or less the same thing happened with the next man, but there were also cases of mutual rejection, where the man preferred not to offer his hand and the elephant withheld his trunk, a kind of powerful, instinctive antipathy that no one could explain, since during the journey nothing had passed between the two that could have presaged such hostility. On the other hand, there were moments of intense emotion, as was the case with one man who burst into heartfelt sobs as if he had been reunited with a loved one from whom he'd been parted for years. The elephant treated him with particular indulgence. He touched the man's head and shoulders with his trunk, bestowing on him caresses that seemed almost human, such was the gentleness and tenderness implicit in every movement. For the first time in the history of humanity, an animal was bidding farewell, in the literal sense, to a few human beings, as if he owed them friendship and respect, an idea unconfirmed by the moral precepts in our codes of conduct, but which can perhaps be found inscribed in letters of gold in the fundamental laws of the elephantine race. A comparative reading of these two documents would doubtless prove most enlightening and would perhaps help us understand the mutually negative reaction that, much to our regret, but for the sake of truth, we were obliged to describe above. Perhaps elephants and men will never really understand each other. Solomon has just trumpeted so loudly that he must have been heard for a whole league around figueira de castelo rodrigo, not a modern league, but one of the older, shorter ones. It's not easy for people like us, who know so little of elephants, to decipher the motives and intentions behind this strident call erupting from solomon's lungs. And if we were to ask subhro what he, in his capacity as expert, thinks about the matter, he would doubtless prefer not to commit himself and would give us instead one of those evasive answers that close the door to any further questions. Despite these uncertainties, inevitable when people are speaking different languages, we feel justified in saying that solomon the elephant enjoyed the farewell ceremony. The porters had already set off. The experience of living alongside soldiers had, almost without their realizing it, led them to take on certain habits of discipline such as those that can result from learning how to form into ranks, choosing, for example, between making a column two or three men deep, because these choices make a difference when organizing thirty men, the first method would give a column of fifteen rows, a ridiculously long line that could easily break up at the slightest upset, whether individual or collective, whereas the second method would provide a solid block of ten rows, to which you would only have to add shields for it to resemble the roman tortoise formation. The difference is, above all, psychological. Remember, these men have a long march ahead of them

and, as is only natural, they will talk to each other, as they go, in order to pass the time. Now, if two men have to walk along together for two or three hours at a time, even if they feel a really strong desire to communicate, they will inevitably, sooner or later, fall into awkward silences and possibly end up loathing each other. One of these men might be unable to resist the temptation to hurl his companion down a steep riverbank. People are quite right when they say that three is god's number, the number of peace and concord. When there are three in a group, one of the three can remain silent for a few minutes without that silence being noticed. Trouble could arise, however, if one of the three men has been walking along plotting how best to get rid of his neighbor in order to make off with his share of the provisions, and then invites the third man in the group to collaborate in this reprehensible scheme, only to be met with the regretful answer, I can't, I'm afraid, I've already agreed to help him kill you.

The sound of galloping hooves was heard. It was the commanding officer who had come to say goodbye to the porters and wish them a safe journey, a courtesy one would not expect from an army officer, however good a man he's known to be, and a courtesy that would not be viewed favorably by his superiors, staunch defenders of a precept as old as the cathedral in Braga, and which states that there is a place for everything and everything in its place. As a basic principle for running an efficient home, nothing could be more praiseworthy, but it proves to be a bad principle if used to try and tidy people neatly away in drawers. It is clear that the porters, if the murder plots hatching in some of their heads ever come to anything, do not deserve such courteous treatment. Let us then leave them to their fate and turn our attention to this man hurrying toward us as fast as his aged legs will carry him. His breathless words, when he was finally within range, were these, The mayor says to tell you that the pigeon has arrived. So, it was true, carrier pigeons really could find their way home. The mayor's house was not far from there, but the commanding officer rode his horse as hard as if he were hoping to reach Valladolid by lunchtime. Less than five minutes later, he was dismounting at the door to the mansion, running up the stairs and asking the first servant he encountered to take him to the mayor. There was no need, however, for the mayor was already hurrying to greet him, with a look of satisfaction on his face such as only appears, one imagines, on the faces of pigeon-fanciers proud of their protégés' achievements. He's here, he's here, come with me, he cried eagerly. They went out onto a broad, covered balcony in which a huge wicker cage took up most of the wall to which it was affixed. There's our hero, said the mayor. The pigeon still had the message tied to one leg, as its owner was quick to point out, Normally, I remove the message as soon as the bird arrives so that the pigeon won't think he's wasted his time, but in this instance, I wanted to wait so that you could see for yourself, Thank you very much, sir, this is a big day for me, too, you know, Oh, I don't doubt it, captain, there's more to life than halberds and muskets. The mayor opened the door of the cage, reached in and grabbed the pigeon, who put up no resistance and made no attempt to escape, as if he had been wondering why they had been ignoring him all this time. With quick, deft movements the mayor untied the knots, unrolled the message, which was written on a narrow strip of paper that had doubtless

been cut to just that size so as not to hamper the bird in any way. In brief sentences, the scout reported that the soldiers were cuirassiers, about forty of them, all austrians, as was their captain, and as far as he could see, they were not accompanied by any civilians. They're traveling light, remarked the portuguese captain, So it would seem, said the mayor, What about weapons, There's no mention of weapons, presumably because he thought it imprudent to include such information, on the other hand, he says that, at the rate they're traveling, they should reach the frontier tomorrow, at around midday, Early, Perhaps we should invite them to lunch, Forty austrians, sir, I don't think so, however lightly they're traveling, they'll have their own food with them or money to buy it with, besides, they probably won't like the food we eat, anyway, feeding forty mouths isn't something you can do at a moment's notice, and we're already beginning to run short, no, in my view, sir, it would be best if each side took care of itself, and let god take care of us all, Be that as it may, I won't let you off supper tomorrow, Oh, you can count on me, but unless I'm very much mistaken, you're thinking of inviting the austrian captain too, Well spotted, And why, if I may be so bold, are you inviting him, As a politic and placatory gesture, Do you really think such a gesture is necessary, asked the commanding officer, Experience has taught me that when you have two detachments of troops facing each other across a border, anything can happen, Well, I'll do what I can to avoid the worst, because I don't want to lose any of my men, but if I have to use force, I won't hesitate, and now, sir, if you'll permit me, my men are going to have a lot to do, trying to clean up their uniforms to start with, after all, they've been wearing them, come rain or shine, for nearly two weeks now, and having slept in them and got up in them, we look more like an advance party of beggars than a detachment of soldiers, Of course, captain, tomorrow, when the austrians arrive, I'll be with you, as is my duty, Thank you, sir, if you need me before then, you know where to find me.

Back at the castle, the commanding officer mustered the troops. He did not give a long speech, but in it he said everything that needed to be said. Firstly, that under no circumstances were the austrians to be allowed into the castle, even if they, the portuguese, had to resort to violence to keep them out. That would be war, he went on, and I hope we don't have to go that far, but the more quickly we can convince the austrians that we mean business, the more quickly we will achieve our aims. We will await their arrival outside the castle walls, and we won't move from there even if they attempt to force their way in. As your commanding officer, I will do all the talking, and initially I require just one thing of you, I want each man's face to be like a book open at the page on which these words are written, No entry. If we succeed, and whatever it takes, we must succeed, the austrians will be obliged to camp outside the walls, which will place them, right from the start, in a position of inferiority. It may be that things will not go as smoothly as my words seem to promise, but I guarantee that I will do all I can to say nothing to the austrians that might offend against the honor of the cavalry unit to which we have devoted our lives. Even if there is no fighting, even if not a single shot is fired, victory will be ours, as it will be if they force us to use weapons. These austrians have, in principle, come to figueira de castelo rodrigo solely to welcome us and

accompany us to valladolid, but we have reason to suspect that their real aim is to take solomon with them and leave us here looking like fools. If they think that, though, they have another think coming. Tomorrow, by ten o'clock, I want two lookouts posted on the tallest of the castle's towers, just in case the austrians have simply put it about that they'll be arriving at midday in order to catch us out still watering our horses. You never can tell with austrians, added the commanding officer, forgetting that these would be the first and probably the only austrians he would ever meet.

THE COMMANDING OFFICER'S suspicions proved correct, for shortly after ten o'clock, cries of alarm issued from the lookouts on the towers, Enemy in sight, enemy in sight. While it's true that the austrians, at least in their military version, do not enjoy a good reputation among these portuguese soldiers, the lookouts, by bluntly calling them enemies, are taking a step that common sense cannot but reprove most severely, pointing out to the rash fellows the dangers of making hasty judgments and condemning people without proof. There is, however, an explanation. The lookouts were under orders to give the alarm, but no one, not even the usually prudent commanding officer, had thought to tell them what form that alarm should take. Faced by the dilemma of having to choose between Enemy in sight, which any civilian could understand, and a very unmartial Our visitors are arriving, the uniform they were wearing made the decision for them, and they expressed themselves using the appropriate vocabulary. Even as the last echo of that alert was still ringing in the air, the soldiers had gathered on the battlements to see the enemy, who, at that distance, four or five kilometers away, were nothing but a dark smudge that barely seemed to move and in which, against expectations, one could not even see the glint of their breastplates. A soldier gave an explanation, That's because they've got the sun at their backs, which, we must say, is a much nicer, far more literary way of saying, The light's behind them. The horses, all of them chestnuts or sorrels of varying shades of brown, hence the dark smudge, were advancing at a smart trot. They could even have approached at a walking pace and the difference would have been minimal, but then they would have lost the psychological effect of an apparently unstoppable advance, which, at the same time, gives the impression that everything is completely under control. Obviously a good gallop with swords held high, in charge-of-the-light-brigade mode, would provide their audience with far more spectacular special effects, but it would be absurd to tire the horses more than was strictly necessary for what promised to be such an easy victory. So thought the austrian captain, a man with long experience on the battlefields of central europe, and that is what he told his troops. Meanwhile, castelo rodrigo was preparing itself for combat. The soldiers, having saddled up their horses, led them outside and left them there, guarded by half a dozen of their comrades, those most fitted for a mission, which, had there been any suitable pasture at the door of the castle, would seem to have simply been a matter of letting the animals graze. The sergeant had gone to tell the mayor that the austrians were coming, They'll be a while yet, but we have to be prepared, he said, Fine, said the mayor, I'll go with you. When they reached the castle, the troops were already formed up at the entrance, blocking all access, and the commanding officer was preparing to give his final speech. Attracted by this free equestrian display and by the possibility that the elephant might be brought out, a large part of the town's population, men and women, young and old, had gathered on the parade ground, which led the commanding officer to say quietly to the mayor, With all these people watching, it's unlikely there'll be any hostilities, My thoughts exactly, but you never can tell with austrians, Have you had some bad experiences with them, asked the commanding officer, Neither good nor bad, none in fact, but I know the austrians are always there and that, for me, is enough. The commanding officer nodded in agreement, but had not, in fact, understood the mayor's cryptic remark, unless you

took austrian as a synonym for adversary or enemy. For this reason, he decided to move on at once to the speech with which he hoped to raise the possibly flagging spirits of some of the men. Soldiers, he said, the austrian troops are near. They will come and demand to take the elephant to valladolid, but we will not grant their request, even if they try to impose their wishes on us by force. Portuguese soldiers obey only orders issued by their king, by their military and civil superiors and no one else. The king's promise to make a gift of the elephant solomon to his highness the archduke of austria will be kept to the letter, but the austria must show due respect for the way in which that is done. When we return home, with heads held high, we can be sure that this day will be remembered forever, and that as long as there is a portugal, it will be said of each man here today, He was at figueira de castelo rodrigo. There wasn't time for this speech to reach its natural conclusion, the point when eloquence runs out of steam and peters out into still worse commonplaces, because the austria had already reached the parade ground, with, at their head, their commanding officer. There was a smattering of rather lukewarm applause from the assembled crowd. With the mayor at his side, the captain of the lusitanian hosts rode forward the few meters necessary to make it clear that he was receiving the visitors in accordance with the most refined rules of etiquette. It was then that a particular maneuver by the austrian soldiers caused their polished steel breastplates to glitter in the sun. This made a great impression on the waiting crowds. Given the applause and the exclamations of surprise coming from all sides, it was clear that the austrian empire had won the initial skirmish without firing a single shot. The portuguese commanding officer realized that he must counterattack at once, but couldn't see how. He was saved from this predicament by the mayor saying in a whisper, As mayor, I should be the first to speak, keep calm. The commanding officer made his horse step back a little, conscious of the vast difference in power and beauty between his mount and the sorrel mare ridden by the austrian captain. The mayor had already begun to speak, In the name of the population of figueira de castelo rodrigo, whose mayor I am proud to be, I welcome our brave austrian visitors and wish them the greatest success in carrying out the mission that has brought them here, convinced as I am that they will contribute to strengthening the ties of friendship that bind our two countries, so, once more, welcome to figueira de castelo rodrigo. A man mounted on a mule rode forward and whispered in the ear of the austrian captain, who impatiently averted his face. The man was the translator, the interpreter. When he had finished translating, the captain spoke in a resonant voice, a voice unaccustomed to being listened to by inattentive ears, far less disobeyed, You know why we're here, you know that we have come to fetch the elephant and take him with us to valladolid, it is vital then that we lose no time and begin immediate preparations for the transfer, so that we can leave tomorrow as early as possible, those are the instructions I was given by the person best fitted to issue them, and I will carry out those orders with the authority invested in me. This was clearly no invitation to the waltz. The mayor muttered, That takes care of supper then, So it would seem, said the commanding officer. Then he, in turn, spoke, The instructions I received, likewise from the person best fitted to issue them, are rather different, but quite simple, namely to accompany the elephant to valladolid and hand him over to the archduke

personally, with no intermediaries. From these deliberately provocative words onwards, words that may have serious consequences, we will omit the interpreter's alternating versions, not just in order to expedite the verbal jousting, but to introduce, with some skill, the preliminary idea that the ensuing duel of arguments is being understood by both parties in real time. Here is the austrian captain, I fear that your somewhat narrow attitude will impede a peaceful solution to this dispute, at the center of which, of course, is the elephant, who, regardless of who takes him, still has to travel to valladolid, there are, though, certain important details to take into consideration, the first of which is the fact that the archduke maximilian, in declaring that he would accept the present, became, ipso facto, the elephant's owner, which means that his highness the archduke's ideas on the matter should prevail over all others, however deserving of respect those may be, I insist, therefore, that the elephant be handed over to me at once, without further delay, otherwise my soldiers will have no option but to enter the castle by force and seize the animal, That's certainly something I'd like to see, but I have thirty men covering the entrance to the castle and I have no intention of telling them to step aside or to make way for your forty men to pass. By now, the parade ground had almost emptied of townspeople, and a smell of burning had begun to fill the air, in cases such as this, there is always the possibility of being hit by a stray bullet or of receiving a blind, slashing blow to the back with a sword, for as long as war is just a spectacle, that's fine, the trouble starts when they want to involve us as players, especially when we lack any preparation or experience. For this reason, few of them heard the austrian captain's response to the portuguese captain's insolence, At a simple order from me and in less time than it takes me to give it, the cuirassiers under my command could sweep away this feeble military force, more symbolic than real, set up to oppose them, and they will do precisely that unless you, as commanding officer, abandon this show of foolish obstinacy, and I feel obliged to warn you that the inevitable human losses, which, on the portuguese side, depending on the degree of their résistance, could well be total, will be your sole and entire responsibility, so don't come to me afterwards with complaints, Since, if I have understood you rightly, you propose killing us all, I hardly see how we could complain, but I imagine that you would have some difficulty in justifying such violence committed against soldiers who are merely defending the right of their king to lay down the rules for the handing over of an elephant offered as a gift to the archduke maximilian of austria, who, in this case, seems to me to have been very poorly advised, both politically and militarily. The austrian captain did not respond at once, the idea that he would have to justify an action with such drastic consequences to both vienna and lisbon was still going round in his head, and each time it went round, the more complicated the matter seemed. Finally, he felt that he had reached a conciliatory proposal, that he and his men should be allowed into the castle so that they could ascertain the elephant's state of health. Your soldiers are not, I assume, horse doctors, replied the portuguese commanding officer, although as for yourself, I can't be sure, but I rather think that you are not an expert in animal husbandry, therefore I see no point in allowing you to enter, at least not until you have recognized my right to go to valladolid and deliver the elephant personally to his highness the archduke of austria. Another

silence from the austrian captain. When no response came, the mayor said, Let me speak to him. After a few minutes, he returned, looking pleased, He agrees, Tell him, said the portuguese captain, that it would be an honor for me to accompany him on that visit. While the mayor was coming and going, the portuguese captain told the sergeant to instruct the troops to form up into two ranks. Once this had been done, he rode forward until he was side by side with the austrian captain's mare, and he then asked the interpreter to translate his words, Once again, welcome to castelo rodrigo, and now let us go and see the elephant.

APART FROM A MINOR SCUFFLE among some soldiers, three from either side, the journey to valladolid passed off pretty much without incident. In a gesture of goodwill, worthy of mention, the portuguese captain left the organization of the convoy, that is, the decision as to who should go in front and who behind, to the austrian captain, who was very clear about his choice, We'll go in front, the others can sort themselves out as they think best or, if they're happy with how things were when they left lisbon, they can stick to that. There were two excellent and obvious reasons why the austrians chose to go in front, the first was the fact that they were, to all intents and purposes, on home territory, and the second, albeit uncon-fessed, was that, as long as the sky was clear, as it was now, and until the sun reached its zenith, that is, during the mornings, they would have the sun-king straight ahead of them, with obvious benefits for their glittering breastplates. As for recreating the column of men as it was before, we know that this will not be possible, given that the porters are already on their way to lisbon, passing through the place that will, in a still distant future, be the unconquered and ever loyal city of oporto. Anyway, there was no need to give the matter much thought. If they keep to the rule that the slowest in the convoy should be the one to set the pace and therefore the speed of their advance, then it is obvious that the oxen should go behind the cuirassiers, who will, naturally, be free to gallop ahead whenever they wish, so that anyone who comes to the road to watch the procession will not risk confusing, as the castilian proverb has it, chums and merinas, churns being the unwashed fleeces and merinas the clean ones, and we use this saying because we are currently in castile and know how effective a little touch of local color can be. Or, put slightly differently, horses are one thing, especially when ridden by cuirassiers clothed in sunlight, and quite another are two pairs of scrawny oxen drawing a cart laden with a water trough and a few bundles of forage for the elephant that follows immediately behind with a man astride its shoulders. After the elephant comes the detachment of portuguese cavalry, still trembling with pride at their valiant stance on the previous day, when they blocked with their own bodies the entrance to the castle. None of the soldiers will forget, however long they may live, the moment when, having visited the elephant, the austrian captain gave orders to his sergeant to set up camp outside, in the parade ground, It's only for one night, he said to justify this decision, in the shelter of a few oak trees which, given their age, must have seen many things, but never soldiers sleeping in the damp night air beside a castle that could easily have accommodated three whole infantry divisions and their respective military bands. This absolute triumph over the arrogant pretensions of the austrians was also, unusually in the circumstances, a triumph for common sense, because, however much blood might have been spilled in castelo rodrigo, any war between portugal and austria would be, not only absurd, but impracticable, unless the two countries were to rent an area of land in france, for example, more or less halfway between the two contenders, so that they could marshal their respective armies and organize a battle. Anyway, all's well that ends well.

Subhro is not entirely sure that he can take much solace from that soothing dictum. Seeing him, perched three meters up and dressed in his brightly colored new suit of clothes, smart enough to wear to visit his godmother, if he had one, and which he's

wearing now, not out of any personal vanity, but to honor the country from which he has come, the gawpers who watch him pass imagine a being endowed with extraordinary powers, when the fact is that the poor indian is shaking at the thought of what his immediate future may hold. He thinks that until they reach valladolid, his job is guaranteed and someone will pay him for his time and his work, because although it may seem easy traveling on the back of an elephant, this could only be the view of someone who has never tried, for example, to make solomon turn right when he wants to turn left. Beyond valladolid, though, the waters grow murky. He thought he had good reason to believe that, from the very first day, his mission was to accompany solomon to vienna, this assumption, however, exists in the realm of the implicit, that if an elephant has his own personal mahout, it's only natural that where one goes, the other goes too. But no one has ever actually looked him in the eye and told him so. That he'll travel as far as valladolid, yes, but nothing more. It is, therefore, inevitable that subhro's imagination should lead him to expect the worst of all possible situations, arriving in valladolid and finding another mahout waiting to take up the baton and continue the journey to vienna, where, thereafter, that new mahout will live high on the hog in the court of archduke maximilian. However, contrary to what one might think, accustomed as we are to placing base material interests above genuine spiritual values, it wasn't the food and the drink and the freshly made bed each day that made subhro sigh, but the sudden revelation that he loved the elephant and did not want to be parted from him, this was not, strictly speaking, either sudden or a revelation, more a latent state of mind, but such states of mind are not to be discounted. If another mahout really was waiting in valladolid to take charge, subhro's reasons of the heart would weigh very little in the archduke's impartial scales. It was then that subhro, swaying to the rhythm of the elephant's steps, said out loud, up there where no one could hear him, I need to have a serious talk with you, solomon. Fortunately, there was no one else present, because they would have thought the mahout was mad and that, as a consequence, the safety of the convoy was at serious risk. From that moment on, subhro's dreams took a different direction. As if he and solomon were a pair of star-crossed lovers, to whose love everyone, for some reason, was violently opposed, subhro, in his dreams, fled with the elephant across plains, climbed hills and scaled mountains, skirted lakes, waded rivers and crossed forests, always keeping one step ahead of their pursuers, the cuirassiers, whose swift-galloping horses proved of little advantage, because an elephant, when he wants to, can move at a fair old pace. That night, subhro, who never slept far from solomon, went over to him, taking care not to wake him, and began to whisper in his ear. He poured his words into that ear in an unintelligible murmur, that could have been hindi or bengali or some other tongue known only to them, a language born and raised during their years of solitude, which was still solitude even when interrupted by the shrieks of the petty noblemen from the court at lisbon, or the mocking cries of the populace of the city and environs, or, before that, the sailors' jibes on the long voyage that brought him and solomon to portugal. Since we have no idea what language he was speaking, we cannot reveal what subhro was saying, but knowing, as we do, the uneasy thoughts preoccupying him, it is not impossible to imagine the conversation. Subhro was simply asking for solomon's help,

making certain practical suggestions to him as to how he might behave, for example, showing, by all the expressive, even radical, means open to an elephant, how unhappy he was at his enforced separation from his mahout, should that prove to be the case. A skeptic will object that you can't expect much from a conversation like that, given that the elephant not only did not respond to the mahout's plea, but continued to sleep serenely. That person clearly knows nothing about elephants. If you whisper in their ear in hindi or in bengali, especially when they're asleep, they're just like the genie in the lamp, which, as soon as it's out of the bottle, asks, What is your wish, sir. Whatever the facts, we happen to know that nothing untoward will happen in valladolid. Indeed, the following night, subhro, feeling repentant, asked solomon to ignore what he had said, he had been acting out of rank egotism, which was no way to solve matters, If things turn out as I fear they will, I'm the one who will have to take responsibility and try to convince the archduke to allow us to stay together, but whatever happens, don't do anything, all right, nothing. The same skeptic, were he here, would have no option but to set aside his skepticism for a moment and say, A very nice gesture, this mahout is a very decent fellow, and it's quite true that the best lessons always come from simple folk. With his spirit at peace, subhro went back to his straw mattress and, within a matter of moments, was asleep. When he woke the following morning and remembered his decision of the previous night, he could not help but ask himself, What would the archduke want with another mahout when he already has one. And he continued to unravel his own reasoning, I have the captain of the cuirassiers as my witness and guarantor, he saw us in the castle and couldn't have failed to think how rare it was to see such a perfect conjunction of man and beast, true, he doesn't know much about elephants, but he knows a lot about horses, and that's something. Everyone recognizes that solomon has a good heart, but I wonder if, with another mahout, he would have bade farewell to the porters in the way he did. Not that I taught him to do that, I want to make that quite clear, it just sprang spontaneously from his soul, I myself assumed he would go over to them and would, at most, give a little wave with his trunk or trumpet loudly, do a couple of dance steps and then, so long, goodbye, but, knowing him as I do, I began to get an inkling that he was concocting something in that great head of his, something that would astonish us all. I expect a lot has been written about elephants as a species and much more will be written in the future, but I doubt that any of those authors will have been witness to or even heard of an elephantine prodigy that could compare with what I witnessed in castelo rodrigo, barely believing what my own eyes were seeing.

There is some dissension among the cuirassiers. Some, perhaps the younger, still impetuous and more hot-blooded among them, say that their commanding officer, whatever the cost, should have defended to the last the strategy with which he arrived at castelo rodrigo, namely, gaining the immediate and unconditional surrender of the elephant, even if it proved necessary to use force as a persuasive tool. Anything but his sudden capitulation to the provocative stance adopted by the portuguese captain, who seemed almost eager for a fight, even though he must have known with mathematical certainty that, in any confrontation, he would be defeated. They thought that a mere

gesture for effect, such as forty swords being simultaneously unsheathed ready for the attack, would have demolished the apparent intransigence of these grubby portuguese and made the doors of the castle swing open to let in their austrian conquerors. Others, equally bemused by the captain's submissive attitude, felt that his first mistake had been to arrive at the castle and, without more ado, declare, Hand over the elephant, we have no time to lose. Any austrian, born and brought up in central europe, knows that in circumstances such as these, you have to know how to talk and charm, that you should first inquire after the health of the family, make some flattering comment about the excellent condition of the portuguese horses and the imposing majesty of castelo rodrigo's fortifications, and only then, like someone suddenly remembering that he had some other matter to deal with as well, Ah, of course, the elephant. Still other soldiers, more aware of the harsh realities of life, argued that if things had gone as their colleagues had wished, they would now be on the road with the elephant, but with nothing to give him to eat, because it would hardly have made sense for the portuguese to dispatch the ox-cart, laden with the bundles of forage and the water trough, while they stayed on at castelo rodrigo for who knows how long, waiting to go home, There's only one explanation, said a rather studious-looking corporal, which is that the captain did not, in fact, have orders from the archduke or whoever to demand that the elephant be handed over immediately, and it was only later, en route or once he had reached castelo rodrigo, that the idea occurred to him, If I could cut the portuguese out of this game of cards, he thought, all the glory would go to me and my men. It would be reasonable to ask how anyone harboring such thoughts and so totally lacking in sincerity could possibly have been appointed captain of a troop of austrian cuirassiers, because, as even a child could understand, that friendly allusion to the soldiers was a mere tactic to disguise his own, all-excluding ambition. A shame really. We are, more and more, our own defects and not our qualities.

AS IF IN PREPARATION for a major procession, the city of valladolid had decided to put on all its pomp to receive the long-awaited pachyderm, even going so far as to adorn the balconies with draperies and some rather faded bunting that fluttered in the now almost autumnal breeze. Dressed as cleanly as was feasible in those unhygienic times, families filled the not so clean streets, impelled by two principal objectives, finding out where the elephant was and what would happen afterwards. There were a few spoilsports who declared that the elephant was just a rumor, who might possibly appear one day, although there was no telling when that might be. There were others who swore that the poor, exhausted creature had been resting since its arrival yesterday, after the long, hard road it had traveled in order to reach valladolid, first from lisbon to figueira de castelo rodrigo, and then from the portuguese frontier to this city which, for the last two years, has had the honor of being home to those lofty personages, his royal highness the archduke maximilian and his wife, maria, daughter of the em peror charles the fifth, in their roles as regents of spain. We note this only to show the importance of these people, all of them belonging to the most royal of royalties, who lived in the time of solomon and, somehow or another, not only had direct knowledge of his existence, but also of his epic and so far pacific exploits. Right now, the archduke and his wife are watching, entranced, as the elephant is being washed, in the presence of distinguished members of the court and the clergy and a few artists expressly summoned in order to immortalize on paper, wood and canvas the animal's face and his imposing physique. The elephant's alter ego subhro is in charge of operations, which, once again, feature large quantities of water and that same long-handled broom. Subhro is happy because, since he arrived more than twenty-four hours ago, he has seen no sign of a replacement mahout, although he has been told officially by the archduke's steward that, from now on, solomon will be called suleiman. He disliked this change of name intensely, but, as they say, you might lose your rings, but you still have your fingers. Suleiman, let us resign ourselves, we have no option but to call him that, was greatly improved by this general clean-up, but he became truly splendid, dazzling even, when a few servants, after much effort, managed to throw over him a vast saddlecloth on which twenty embroiderers had labored ceaselessly for weeks, a work whose peer it would be hard to find anywhere in the world, such was the abundance of gems, which, while not all precious stones, glittered as if they were, not to mention the gold thread and the opulent velvets. A ridiculous waste, grumbled the archbishop to himself, from his seat not far from the archduke, instead of squandering money on that beast, they could have embroidered a magnifi cent canopy for the cathedral, so that we don't always have to process beneath the same old one, as if we were some second-rate village somewhere, not the city of valladolid. A gesture from the regent interrupted these subversive thoughts. There was no need to understand his words, the movements made by the royal hands were enough, pointing first up, then down, it was clear that the archduke wished to speak to the mahout. Accompanied by a minor court dignatory, subhro felt as if he were dreaming a dream he had already dreamed, when, in the filthy enclosure at belém, he was led over to a man with a long beard who turned out to be the king of portugal, joão the third. The gentleman who has just summoned him has no beard, his face is perfectly clean-shaven, and he is, we can

say without fear or favor, a fine figure of a man. Beside him sits his beautiful wife, the archduchess maria, the beauty of whose face and body will not last long because she will go on to give birth no less than sixteen times, ten boys and six girls. Monstrous. Subhro is now standing before the archduke, waiting for the questions to begin. As was perfectly foreseeable, the first question was inevitably, What is your name, My name is subhro, sir, Sub what, Subhro, sir, that is my name, And does your name mean anything, It means white, sir, In which language, In bengali, sir, one of the languages of india. The archduke fell silent for a few seconds, and then asked, Are you from india, Yes, sir, I traveled to portugal with the elephant two years ago, Do you like your name, It wasn't my choice, it was the name I was given, sir, Would you choose another if you could, I'm not sure, sir, I've never thought about it, What would you say if I made you change your name, Your highness would need to have a reason, And I do. Subhro did not respond, he knew all too well that one is not allowed to ask questions of kings, that must be why it has always been so difficult, not to say impossible, to get an answer out of any of them regarding the doubts and perplexities besetting their subjects. Then archduke maximilian said, Your name is hard to pronounce, So I have been told, sir, No one in vienna will be able to understand it, That will be my misfortune, sir, But there is a remedy, from now on you will be called fritz, Fritz, said subhro in a pained voice, Yes, it's an easy name to remember, besides there are an enormous number of fritzes in austria already, so you'll be one among many, but the only one with an elephant, If your highness permits, I would prefer to keep my own name, No, I've decided, and I warn you, I'll be angry if you ask again, just get it into your head that your name is fritz and no other, Yes, sir. Then the archduke, rising from his sumptuous seat, said in a loud and sonorous voice, Listen closely, this man has just accepted the name of fritz, which I have bestowed on him, and this fact, as well as the responsibility he bears as keeper of the elephant suleiman, leads me to determine that he be treated by all of you with consideration and respect, and anyone disregarding my wishes will suffer the consequences of my displeasure. This warning was not well received, the momentary murmur that followed was full of all kinds of emotions, disciplined deference, benevolent irony, wounded irritation, imagine, having to behave as respectfully toward a mahout, an animal-tamer, a man who stinks of wild beasts, as if he were a peer of the realm, although one thing is sure, the archduke will soon forget this caprice of his. It should be said, for truth's sake, that another murmur quickly followed the first, one devoid of any hostile or contradictory feelings, because it was a murmur of pure admiration, when the elephant lifted the mahout up with the aid of his trunk and one of his tusks and deposited him on his ample shoulders, as spacious as a threshing floor. Then the mahout said, We were subhro and solomon, now we will be fritz and suleiman. He was not speaking to anyone in particular, he was talking to himself, knowing that those names meant nothing, even though they had replaced their original names, which did mean something. I was born to be subhro, not fritz, he thought. He guided suleiman into the enclosure assigned to him, a courtyard in the palace, which, despite being an inner courtyard, had easy access to the outside, and there he left him with his food and his water trough, as well as the company of the two assistants who had come with them from lisbon. Subhro, or fritz, it's going to be hard to get used to that

change of name, needs to speak to the commanding officer, our commanding officer, for the captain of the austrian cuirassiers has not reappeared, he must be doing penance for the pathetic figure he cut at figueira de castelo rodrigo. It isn't quite time to say goodbye, for the portuguese don't leave until tomorrow, he simply wants to talk a little about the life that awaits him and to tell the captain that his name and the elephant's have been changed. And to wish the captain and his soldiers a safe journey home and, yes, to say goodbye forever. The soldiers are camped a little way from the city, in a leafy place with a clear stream running through it, a stream in which most of them have already bathed. The commanding officer went to meet subhro and, seeing the worried look on his face, asked, Has something happened, They've changed our names, I'm fritz now and solomon is suleiman, Who changed them, The only person who could, the archduke, But why, He presumably has his reasons, but in my case it was because he found subhro too hard to pronounce, We got used to it, Yes, but he doesn't have anyone to tell him that he ought to get used to it. There was an awkward silence, which the commanding officer broke as best he could, We're leaving tomorrow, he said, Yes, I know, replied subhro, I'll come and say goodbye then, Will we see each other again, asked the commanding officer, Probably not, vienna is a long way from lisbon, That's a shame, now that we're friends, Friend is a big word, sir, and I'm just a mahout who has been ordered to change his name, And I'm just a captain of cavalry who has undergone some inner change during this journey, Was it seeing wolves for the first time, Oh, I saw one years ago, when I was a child, I can't quite remember when, Seeing wolves must change people a lot though, They weren't the reason for the change, The elephant then, That's more likely, although, while I can more or less understand a cat or a dog, I can't understand an elephant, Cats and dogs live side by side with us, and that makes the relationship easier, even if we get things wrong, that continuous intimacy is sure always to resolve any problems, on the other hand, we don't know if they, too, get things wrong and are aware that they do, And the elephant, As I said to you once before, the elephant is a different matter altogether, every elephant contains two elephants, one who learns what he's taught and another who insists on ignoring it all, How do you know, When I realized that I'm just like the elephant, that a part of me learns and the other part ignores everything I've learned, and the longer I live, the more I ignore, Your word games are beyond me, It's not me playing games with words, it's them playing games with me, When does the archduke leave, In three days' time, I believe, Well, I'll miss you, And I'll miss you, said subhro, or fritz. The commanding officer held out his hand to him, and subhro shook it very gently, as if not wanting to hurt him, We'll see each other tomorrow, he said, Yes, we'll see each other tomorrow, repeated the captain. Then they turned their backs on each other and walked away. Neither of them turned round.

Early the following day, subhro returned to the encampment, this time with the elephant. He was accompanied by the two assistants, who had immediately climbed aboard the ox-cart, looking forward to the most pleasant of rides. The soldiers were awaiting the order to mount. The commanding officer went over to the mahout and said, This is where we go our separate ways, Well, I wish you and your men a good journey,

captain, You and solomon still have a long journey ahead of you, it will be winter, I reckon, before you reach vienna, Solomon carries me on his back, so it won't prove too tiring for me, Those lands, I've heard, are very cold, full of snow and ice, things you never had to suffer in lisbon, Although you must admit it could be chilly sometimes, sir, Yes, lisbon is, of course, the coldest city in the world, said the captain, smiling, what saves it from being so is its geographical position. Subhro smiled too, he was enjoying the conversation, they could stay there all morning and afternoon and leave the next day, what difference would it make, I wonder, to arrive home twenty-four hours later. It was then that the commanding officer decided to make his farewell speech, Soldiers, subhro has come to say goodbye to us, and to our great joy, he has brought with him the elephant whose safekeeping has been our responsibility for the last few weeks. Sharing my time with this man has been one of the happiest experiences of my life, perhaps because india knows things that we do not. I couldn't say with confidence that I know him well, but I can say with absolute certainty that he and I could be, not just friends, but brothers. Vienna is a long way away, lisbon is farther still, and we probably will not see each other again, and perhaps it's better that way, to keep the recollection of these past days so that it can be said of us modest portuguese soldiers that we, too, have the memory of an elephant. The captain spoke for another fifteen or so minutes, but he had said what was most important. While he was speaking, subhro was wondering what solomon would do, if he would behave as he had when he said good-bye to the porters, but repetitions almost always disappoint, the shine goes off them, they noticeably lack spontaneity, and if spontaneity is lacking, so is everything else. It would be best if we simply parted, thought the mahout. The elephant, however, thought otherwise. When the speech had ended, and the captain came over to subhro in order to embrace him, solomon took two steps forward and with the end of his trunk, that vital, feeling lip, he touched the captain's shoulder. The farewell to the porters had been, shall we say, more theatrical, but this, perhaps because the soldiers were used to a different sort of farewell, Do honor to your country, for your country's eyes are upon you, that kind of thing, touched their hearts, and not a few, with some embarrassment, had to wipe away tears with the sleeve of their pea coat or jacket, or whatever they called that item of military clothing then. The mahout accompanied solomon on this inspection, which was also his way of saying goodbye. He was not a man to show his feelings in public, even when, as now, invisible tears are running down his cheeks. The column of men set off, with the ox-cart at the front, and that was that, we will not see them in this theater again, but such is life, the actors appear, then leave the stage, as is only fitting, it's what usually and always will happen sooner or later, they say their part, then disappear through the door at the back, the one that opens onto the garden. Up ahead, the road curves, the soldiers rein in their horses in order to raise one arm and wave a last goodbye. Subhro does likewise and solomon trumpets in his loudest, most heartfelt way, and that is all they can do, the curtain has fallen and will not rise again.

It was raining on the morning of the third day, which was especially irritating for the archduke, because, although he did not lack for people to organize the convoy in the

most useful and efficient way, he had insisted on deciding for himself just where in the cortège the elephant should be. This was a simple matter, suleiman would travel immediately in front of the carriage that would transport the archduke and the archduchess. A trusted confidant begged him to consider the well-known fact that elephants, like horses, for example, defecate and urinate while on the move, Such a spectacle will, inevitably, offend the sensibilities of your highnesses, said the confidant, adopting an expression of the profoundest civic concern, but the archduke told him not to worry, there would always be people in the convoy who could sweep the road whenever these natural depositions occurred. The worst thing was the rain. The rain would affect neither the mood nor the pace of the elephant, indeed, so accustomed was he to the monsoon that, for the last two years, he had missed it greatly, no, the problem requiring a solution was the archduke. It's perfectly understandable really. Crossing half of spain behind an elephant and not being able to use what was, perhaps, the finest embroidered saddlecloth in the world, which he himself had ordered to be made, simply because the rain would leave it so badly damaged that it wouldn't even serve as the canopy for a village church, that, as far as the archduke was concerned, would be the worst disappointment of his entire reign as archduke. Maximilian would not move one step until suleiman was properly covered, with the ornate saddlecloth glinting in the sun. This is what he said, The rain is sure to stop at some point, so let us wait until it does. And so it was. The rain did not stop for two whole hours, but after that, the sky began to clear, there were still a few clouds, but not so dark, and suddenly, it stopped raining, and when the sun finally showed itself, the air, in those first rays, grew lighter, almost transparent. The archduke was so pleased that he allowed himself to give the archduchess's thigh a mischievous squeeze. Then, having recovered his composure, he summoned an aide-de-camp whom he ordered to gallop to the head of the convoy, to where the glittering cuirassiers were waiting, Tell them to set off at once, he said, we have to make up for lost time. Meanwhile, the relevant servants had arrived bearing the vast saddlecloth and, with some difficulty, following fritz's instructions, they spread it over suleiman's powerful back. Then fritz, wearing a suit of clothes, which, in quality of fabric and luxury of cut, far outshone the one he had brought with him from lisbon and which had made such a dent in the treasury's coffers, was lifted onto suleiman's back, from where, to front and rear, he enjoyed an imposing view of the whole convoy. No one was above him, not even the archduke of austria with all his power. The archduke might be able to change the names of a man and an elephant, but with his eyes at the level of the most ordinary of people, he was being carried along inside a carriage where all the perfumes in the world could not quite disguise the foul smells wafting in from without. You will probably want to know whether this whole convoy will be going to vienna. The answer is no. Most of those traveling here in great state will go no further than the seaport of the town of rosas, near the french border. There they will say farewell to the archduke and archduchess, will doubtless watch the embarkation, and, above all, observe with some trepidation what effect suleiman's four brute tons will have on the ship, if its quarterdeck will withstand such a weight, or if they will have to return to valladolid with the tale of a shipwreck to tell. The gloomier among them foresee the damage that could be caused to the vessel

and its safety if the elephant, alarmed by the swaying of the boat, became nervous and unable to keep its footing, I don't even want to think about it, they said woefully to their companions, savoring the possibility of being able to announce later on, I told you so. Ignore those wet blankets, this elephant has come from far away, from distant india, fearlessly facing the storms of the indian ocean and the atlantic, and here he is, steadfast and determined, as if he had never done anything all his life but travel by boat. Now, though, it is a matter of covering distances, long distances. A glance at the map is enough to make you feel tired. And yet it looks as if everything were so close, within easy reach, so to speak. The explanation, of course, lies in the scale. It's easy to accept that a centimeter on the map equals twenty kilometers in reality, but what we tend not to consider is that, in the process, we ourselves suffer an equivalent dimensional reduction, which is why, being but specks on the earth's surface, we are still smaller on maps. It would be interesting to know, for example, how much a human foot would measure on that same scale. Or the foot of an elephant. Or archduke maximilian of austria's entire entourage.

Only two days had passed and already the cortège had lost much of its splendor. The persistent rain that fell on the morning of their departure had dire effects on the draperies of both coaches and carriages, but also on the clothes of those who, in the line of duty, had to brave the elements for longer or shorter periods of time. Now the convoy is traveling through a region where it appears not to have rained since the world began. The dust begins to rise up at the passing of the cuirassiers, whom the rain had not spared either, for a breastplate is not a hermetically sealed box, its component parts do not always fit perfectly together and the chains connecting them leave gaps through which swords and spears can easily penetrate, in the end, all that splendor, proudly displayed in figueira de castelo rodrigo, is of little practical use. Then comes a huge line of carts, wagons, coaches and carriages of all types and for all purposes, whether carrying baggage or transporting squadrons of servants, and they raise still more dust which, for lack of wind, will hang in the air until close of day. This time those in charge failed to observe the precept that the speed of the slowest should determine the speed of the whole convoy. The two ox-carts laden with the elephant's food and water were relegated to the rear of the cortège, which means that every now and then the whole convoy has to stop so that the laggards can catch up. What really gets on everyone's nerves, starting with the archduke, who can barely disguise his irritation, is suleiman's obligatory afternoon nap, a rest that benefits only him, but which, in the end, they all take advantage of, not that this prevents them complaining, At this rate we'll never arrive. The first time that the convoy stopped and word went round that this was because suleiman had to rest, the archduke summoned fritz to ask just who did he think was in charge, well, he didn't put the question quite like that, an archduke of austria would never stoop so low as to admit that anyone other than himself could possibly be in charge wherever he happened to be, but even given the decidedly popular tone in which we have couched the question, the only appropriate response would have been for fritz, out of shame, to have prostrated himself on the ground. Over the days, though, we have had occasion to

note that subhro is not a man to be easily cowed, and now, in his new incarnation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine him struck dumb by an attack of timidity, with his tail between his legs, saying, What are your orders, sir. His reply was exemplary, Unless the archduke of austria delegates his authority, absolute power belongs to him by right and tradition, as is acknowledged by his subjects, both natural and, as in my own case, acquired, You speak like a scholar, Oh, I am merely a mahout who has read a little of life's book, What's this business with suleiman, what's all this about him having to rest during the early part of the afternoon, That is the custom in india, sir, We're in spain now, not india, If your highness knew elephants as I believe I do, you would know that india exists wherever an indian elephant happens to be, and I am not speaking here of african elephants, of whom I have no experience, and that same india will, whatever happens, always remain intact inside him, That's all very well, but I have a long journey ahead of me and that elephant is making me lose three or four hours a day, from now on, suleiman will rest for one hour and one hour only, Regretfully, your highness, and believe me, I feel an utter wretch not to be able to agree with you, one hour will not be enough, We'll see. The order was given, but swiftly canceled the following day. We have to be logical, fritz was saying, just as I would not expect anyone to think it a good idea to reduce by one third the amount of food and water suleiman needs to live, I cannot agree, without protest, to taking away from him the larger part of his deserved rest, without which he could not survive the huge effort demanded of him each day, it's true that an elephant in the indian jungle walks many kilometers from dawn till dusk, but there he is in his own land, not in this bleak place without enough shade to accommodate a cat. Let us not forget that when fritz was called subhro he raised no objection to solomon's rest being reduced from four hours to two, but those were different times, the captain of the portuguese cavalry was a man with whom one could speak, a friend, not an authoritarian archduke, who, aside from being charles the fifth's son-in-law, has no other obvious merits to recommend him. Fritz was being unfair, he should at least have felt obliged to acknowledge that no one had ever treated suleiman as had this now despised archduke of austria. Think only of that saddlecloth. Not even elephants owned by rajahs in india were spoiled like that. Nevertheless, the archduke was not happy, there was too much rebellion in the air for his liking. Punishing fritz for his dialectical boldness would be more than justified, but the archduke knows perfectly well that he would not find another mahout in vienna. And if, by some miracle, that rara avis should exist, there would have to be an interim period during which he and the elephant got to know each other, otherwise there could be no saying how such a large animal would behave, for as far as any human being was concerned, archdukes included, predicting his mind was like placing an entirely random bet with few prospects of winning. The elephant was, in truth, a completely alien being. So much so that he had nothing whatever to do with this world, he governed himself by rules that would not fit any known moral code, to the point that, as soon became evident, he couldn't care less whether he traveled in front of or behind the archducal coach. The archduke and archduchess could no longer bear the repeated spectacle of suleiman's dejecta, not to mention having to breathe in the fetid odors that these gave off, their delicate nostrils being accustomed to very different aromas. In fact,

the archduke wanted to punish fritz not the elephant, who was now relegated to a secondary position after a few days of seeming to everyone present to be one of the grand figures of the entourage. He is still near the head of the convoy, but now he will never see anything but the rear of the archduke's coach. Fritz suspects that he is being punished, but he can't plead for justice because that same justice, in deciding to change the position of the elephant in the convoy, was merely preventing the sensorial discomforts caused to archduke maximilian and his wife, maria, daughter of charles the fifth. Having resolved that problem, the other problem was also resolved, and that very night too. Cheered to see the elephant demoted to the status of mere follower, maria asked her husband to relieve suleiman of the saddlecloth, I think that wearing it on his back is a punishment poor suleiman does not deserve, and besides, Besides what, asked the archduke, Once one has got over the shock of seeing such a large, imposing animal clothed in what looks like some kind of ecclesiastical vestment, the sight rapidly becomes ridiculous, grotesque, and the longer one looks at him, the more grotesque he becomes, It was my idea, said the archduke, but I think you're right, I'll have the saddlecloth sent to the bishop of valladolid, I'm sure he'll find some use for it, and I'm sure, too, that if we were to stay in spain, we would have the pleasure of seeing one of the best-dressed generals of our holy mother church processing beneath a saddlecloth turned canopy.

THERE WERE EVEN THOSE who had predicted that the elephant's journey would end right here, in the sea at rosas, either because the gangway collapsed, unable to bear suleiman's four tons of weight, or because a large wave knocked him off balance and hurled him headfirst into the deep, and thus the once happy solomon, now sadly baptized with the barbarous name of suleiman, would have met his final hour. Most of the noble personages who had come to rosas to bid farewell to the archduke had never in their lives set eyes on an elephant. They do not know that such an animal, especially if, at some point in its life, it has traveled by sea, has what is usually termed good sea legs. Don't ask him to help steer the ship, use the octant or the sextant, or climb the yardarms to reef the sails, but place him at the helm, on the four stout stakes that serve him as legs, and summon up the stiffest of storms. Then you'll see how an elephant can happily face the fiercest of headwinds, close-hauling with all the elegance and skill of a first-class pilot, as if that art were contained in the four books of the vedas that he had learned by heart at a tender age and never forgotten, even when the vicissitudes of life determined that he would earn his sad daily bread carrying tree trunks back and forth or putting up with the loutish curiosity of certain lovers of vulgar circus shows. People have very mistaken ideas about elephants. They imagine that elephants enjoy being forced to balance on a heavy metal ball, on a tiny curved surface on which their feet barely fit. We're just fortunate that they're so good-natured, especially those that come from india. They realize that a lot of patience is required if they are to put up with us human beings, even when we pursue and kill them in order to saw off or extract their tusks for the ivory. Among themselves, elephants often remember the famous words spoken by one of their prophets, Forgive them, lord, for they know not what they do. For "they" read "us," especially those who came here to see if suleiman would die and who have now begun the journey back to valladolid, feeling as frustrated as that spectator who used to follow a circus company around wherever it went, simply in order to be there on the day that the acrobat missed the safety net. Ah, yes, there was something else we meant to say. As well as the elephant's indisputable competence at the helm, over all the centuries in which man has put to sea, no one has yet found anyone to rival an elephant for working the capstan.

Having installed suleiman in a part of the deck surrounded by bars, whose function, despite their apparent robustness, was more symbolic than real, since they were entirely dependent on the animal's frequently erratic moods, fritz went off in search of news. The first and most obvious thing he needed to know was the answer to the question, Where is the boat heading, a question he asked of an old sailor with a kindly face, and from whom he received the prompt, brief and enlightening answer, To genoa, And where's that, asked the mahout. The man seemed to have difficulty understanding how it was possible for anyone anywhere in the world not to know where genoa was, and so he merely pointed eastward and said, Over there, In italy, then, suggested fritz, whose limited geographical knowledge nevertheless allowed him to take certain risks. Yes, in italy, confirmed the sailor, And vienna, where is that, asked fritz, Much further north, beyond the alps, What are the alps, The alps are huge great mountains, very difficult to cross, especially in winter, not that I've been there myself, but I've heard tell of travelers who

have, If that's true, poor solomon is going to have a bad time of it, he comes from india, you see, which is a hot country, he's never experienced real cold, neither of us has, because I'm from india too, Who's solomon, asked the sailor, Solomon was the name the elephant had before he was renamed suleiman, just as I am now fritz even though my name has been subhro ever since I came into the world, Who changed your names, The only person with the power to do so, his highness the archduke, who is traveling on this boat, Is he the elephant's owner, asked the sailor, Yes, and I am his keeper, his carer, or his mahout, which is the correct term, solomon and I spent two years in portugal, which isn't the worst of places to live, and now we're on our way to vienna, which, they say, is the very best, It has that reputation, Well, let's hope it lives up to its reputation and that they finally let poor solomon rest, he wasn't made for all this traveling about, the voyage we had to make from goa to lisbon was quite enough, solomon, you see, originally belonged to the king of portugal, dom joão the third, but when he offered him as a gift to the archduke, it fell to me to accompany solomon, first on the voyage to portugal and now on this long journey to vienna, That's what they call seeing the world, said the sailor, Not as much of it as you would see traveling from port to port, replied the mahout, but he could not complete his sentence because the archduke was approaching, followed by the inevitable entourage, but without the archduchess, who, it would seem, now viewed suleiman rather less sympathetically. Subhro shrank back out of the way, as if thinking that he would thus go unnoticed, however, the archduke spotted him, Fritz, come with me, I'm going to see the elephant, he said. The mahout stepped forward, not knowing quite where to stand, but the archduke clarified matters for him, Go on ahead and see if everything is in order, he said. This proved fortunate because suleiman, in the absence of his mahout, had decided that the wooden deck was the best possible place on which to do his business and, as a consequence, he was literally skating about on a thick carpet of excrement and urine. Beside him, so that he could quench any sudden thirst without delay, was the water trough, still almost full, as well as a few bundles of forage, although only a few, since the others had been taken down into the hold. Subhro thought quickly. With the help of some five or six sailors, all reasonably strong, he managed to tip the water out of the trough so that it poured in a cascade across the deck and straight into the sea. The effect was almost instantaneous. Thanks to that rush of water and its dissolving properties, the stinking soup of excrement was swept overboard, apart from what remained stuck to the soles of the elephant's feet, but a second, less abundant stream left him in a more or less acceptable state, proving, yet again, that not only is the best the enemy of the good, the good, however hard it tries, will never even be fit to tie best's shoelaces. The archduke can now appear. Before he does, though, let us reassure those readers concerned by the lack of information about the ox-cart that had transported the water trough and the bundles of forage the whole one hundred and forty leagues from valladolid to rosas. The french have a saying, which they were just beginning to use around that time, pas de nouvelles, bonnes nouvelles, so our readers can stop worrying, the ox-cart is on its way back to valladolid, where damsels of every social class are weaving garlands of flowers in order to adorn the horns of the oxen when they arrive, and don't ask them precisely why they are doing this, one of them was apparently heard to

say, although we don't know to whom, that the crowning of working oxen with a wreath was an ancient custom, dating perhaps from the time of the greeks or romans, and given that walking to rosas and back, a distance of some two hundred and eighty leagues, definitely counted as work, the idea was received with enthusiasm by the community of nobles and plebeians in valladolid, which is now considering putting on a great popular festival with jousting, fireworks, the distribution of food, clothes and alms to the poor and whatever else occurs to the inhabitants' excited imaginations. Now what with all these explanations, indispensable to our readers' present and future peace of mind, we missed the moment when the archduke actually reached the elephant, not that you missed very much, for in the course of this story, the same archduke, as we have both described and not described, has arrived many times at various places entirely without incident, as court protocol demands, for if it did not, it would not be protocol. We know that the archduke inquired after the health and well-being of his elephant suleiman and that fritz gave him the appropriate replies, especially those that his archducal highness would most like to hear, which shows just how much the once shabby mahout has learned during his apprenticeship in the delicacies and wiles of the perfect courtier, for the innocent portuguese court, more inclined to the religious hypocrisy of the confessional and the sacristy than to the refinements of the salon, had not served him as a guide, indeed, confined to that rather grubby enclosure in belém, he had never been given the least opportunity to broaden his education. It was noticed that the archduke occasionally wrinkled his nose and made constant use of his perfumed handkerchief, which would, of course, have surprised the cast-iron olfactory systems of the sailors, accustomed to all kinds of pestilential smells and therefore insensitive to the odor that, despite the wind, still lingered in the air after that sluicing down of the decks. Having done his duty as a proprietor concerned for the safety of his possessions, the archduke hurriedly retreated, followed by the usual colorful peacock's tail of court parasites.

Once the loading of the ship was completed, and this required more than usually complex calculations, given that there were four tons of elephant stowed on one small area of the deck, the ship was ready to set sail. Having weighed anchor and hoisted its sails, one square and the others triangular, the latter reclaimed a century or so before from their remote mediterranean past by portuguese sailors, and which, later on, were called lateens, the ship, initially, swayed clumsily on the waves, and then, after the first flap of the sails, headed east, for genoa, just as the sailor had told the mahout. The crossing lasted three long days, with mostly rough seas and gale-force winds that hurled furious squalls of rain down onto the elephant's back and onto the sacking with which the sailors on deck were trying to protect themselves from the worst. There was not a sign of the archduke, who was safe inside in the warm with the archduchess, doubtless keeping in practice in order to produce his third child. When the rain stopped and the wind ran out of puff, the passengers from below decks began to emerge, unsteady and blinking, into the dim light of day, looking very green about the gills and with dark circles under their eyes, and the cuirassiers' attempt, for example, to dredge up an artificially martial air from now distant memories of terra firma, including, if they really had to, the memory of

castelo rodrigo, even though they had been most shamefully defeated there by those humble, ill-mounted, ill-equipped portuguese horsemen, and without a single shot being fired. When the fourth day dawned, with a calm sea and a clear sky, the horizon had become the coast of liguria. The beam sent out from the genoa lighthouse, a landmark known affectionately by the locals as the lantern, faded as the morning brightness grew, but it was still strong enough to guide any vessel into port. Two hours later, with a pilot on board, the ship was entering the bay and slipping slowly, with almost all its sails furled, toward a vacant mooring at the quay where, as became immediately patent and manifest, all kinds of carriages and carts of various types and for various purposes, almost all of them harnessed to mules, were awaiting the convoy. Given how slow, laborious and inefficient communications were in those days, one must presume that carrier pigeons had once again played an active part in the complex logistical operation that made this quayside welcome possible, bang on time, with no delays or setbacks that would have meant one contingent having to wait for the other. We hereby recognize that the somewhat disdainful, ironic tone that has slipped into these pages whenever we have had cause to speak of austria and its people was not only aggressive, but patently unfair. Not that this was our intention, but you know how it is with writing, one word often brings along another in its train simply because they sound good together, even if this means sacrificing respect for levity and ethics for aesthetics, if such solemn concepts are not out of place in a discourse such as this, and often to no one's advantage either. It is in this and other ways, almost without our realizing it, that we make so many enemies in life.

The first to appear were the cuirassiers. They led their horses out so that they would not slip on the gangway. The cavalry horses, normally the objects of great care and attention, have a rather neglected air about them, evidence that they need a good brushing to smooth their coats and make their manes gleam. As they appear to us now, one might say that they bring shame upon the austrian cavalry, a most unfair judgment that would seem to have forgotten the long, long journey from valladolid to rosas, seven hundred kilometers of continuous marching, of wild winds and rain, interspersed by the occasional bout of sweltering sun and, above all, dust and more dust. It's hardly surprising, then, that the newly disembarked horses have the rather faded look of secondhand goods. Nevertheless, we can see how, at a short distance from the quay, behind the curtain formed by the carts, carriages and wagons, the soldiers, under the direct command of the captain we have already met, are doing their best to improve the appearance of their mounts, so that the guard of honor for the archduke, when the moment arrives for him to disembark, will be as dignified as one would expect at any event involving the illustrious house of habsburg. Since the archduke and the archduchess will be the last to leave the ship, it is highly likely that the horses will have time to recover at least a little of their usual splendor. At the moment, the baggage is being unloaded, along with the dozens of chests, coffers and trunks containing the clothes and the thousand and one objects and adornments that constitute the noble couple's ever-expanding trousseau. The general public are also here, and in great numbers too. The rumor that the archduke of austria was about to disembark and with him an elephant

from india had raced through the city like a lit fuse, and the immediate result was that dozens of men and women, all equally curious, had rushed down to the port, and in no time there were hundreds of them, so many that they were getting in the way of the unloading and loading. They couldn't see the archduke, who had not yet emerged from his cabin, but the elephant was there, standing on the deck, huge and almost black, with that thick trunk as flexible as a whip, with those tusks like pointed sabers, which, in the imagination of the inquisitive, unaware of suleiman's placid temperament, would doubtless be used as powerful weapons of war before being transformed, as they inevitably will be, into the crucifixes and reliquaries that have filled the christian world with objects carved out of ivory. The person gesticulating and giving orders on the quay is the archduke's steward. One rapid glance of his experienced eye is enough to decide which cart or wagon should carry which coffer, chest or trunk. He is a compass, who, however much you turn him this way and that, however you twist and twirl him, will always point north. We would go so far as to say that the importance of stewards, and indeed street-sweepers, to the proper functioning of the nations has yet to be studied. Now they are unloading the forage from the hold in which it has traveled alongside all the luxury items belonging to the archduke and the archduchess, but which, from now on, will be transported in carts chosen mainly for their functional nature, that is, being capable of accommodating the largest possible number of bundles. The water trough travels with the forage, but this time it is empty, since, as we will see, on the wintry roads of northern italy and austria, there will be no lack of water to fill it as often as proves necessary. Now it is time for the elephant suleiman to be disembarked. The noisy crowd of ordinary genoans is abuzz with impatience and excitement. If one were to ask these men and women who they were keenest to see close up, the archduke or the elephant, we think the elephant would win by a large margin. The eager expectation of this small multitude found release in a great roar, when, with his trunk, the elephant lifted onto his back a man carrying a small bag of belongings. It was subhro or fritz, depending on your preference, the carer, the keeper, the mahout, who had suffered such humiliation at the hands of the archduke and who now, in the eyes of the people of genoa gathered on the quay, will enjoy an almost perfect triumph. Seated on the elephant's shoulders, his bag between his legs, and dressed now in his grubby work clothes, he gazed down with all the arrogance of a conqueror at the people watching him open-mouthed, which, they say, is the most absolute sign of amazement, but which, perhaps because it is so absolute, is rarely, if ever, seen in real life. Whenever he was riding on solomon's back, the world always seemed small to subhro, but today, on the quay of the port of genoa, when he was the main focus of interest for the hundreds entranced by the spectacle before them, whether that consisted of his own person or the vast animal obeying his every order, fritz contemplated the crowd with a kind of scorn, and, in a rare flash of lucidity and relativity, it occurred to him that, all things considered, archdukes, kings and emperors were really nothing more than mahouts mounted on elephants. With a flick of his cane, he directed suleiman toward the gangway. Those members of the public who were closest drew back in alarm, even more so when the elephant, halfway down the gangway, and for reasons that will remain forever unknown, decided to trumpet so loudly that, if you'll forgive the

comparison, it sounded to their ears like the trumpets of jericho and sent the more fearful among them scattering. When it stepped onto the quay, though, perhaps as the result of an optical illusion, the elephant appeared to have suddenly shrunk in height and bulk. He still had to be viewed from below, but it was no longer necessary to lean back one's head quite so much. That is the effect of habit, the beast, while still of a terrifying size, seemed to the genoans to have lost its initial aura of eighth wonder of the sublunary world, now it was just an animal called an elephant, nothing more. Still full of his recent discovery about the nature of power and its supports, fritz was most displeased by the change that had taken place in the minds of the people, but the coup de grâce was still to be delivered by the emergence on deck of the archduke and archduchess, accompanied by their immediate entourage, and, above all, by the novel sight of two children being carried in the arms of two women, who doubtless were or still are their wet nurses. We can tell you now that one of these children, a little girl of two, will become the fourth wife of philip the second of spain and the first of portugal. As they say, small causes, large effects. We hope thus to satisfy the curiosity of those readers puzzled by the lack of information about the archduke and archduchess's numerous offspring, sixteen children, if you recall, of whom little ana was the first. As we were saying, the archduke had only to appear for there to be an explosion of applause and cheering, which he acknowledged with an indulgent wave of his gloved right hand. The archduke and archduchess did not use the gangway that had, until then, served as the unloading ramp, but another beside it, newly washed and scrubbed, in order to avoid the slightest contact with any grime left behind by the horses' hooves, the elephant's huge legs or the bare feet of the longshoremen. We should congratulate the archduke on the efficiency of his steward, who has gone back on board to inspect the berths, just in case a diamond bracelet should have fallen down a gap between two floorboards. Outside, the cuirassiers waiting for his highness to descend have formed up into two tight lines so as to accommodate all the horses, twenty-five on either side. Now, if we did not fear committing a grave anachronism, we would like to imagine that the archduke walked to his carriage beneath a canopy of fifty unsheathed swords, however, it is more than likely that such acts of homage were thought up by some frivolous future century. The archduke and the archduchess have just stepped into the ornate, brilliant and yet sturdy carriage awaiting them. Now we only have to wait for the convoy to organize itself, with twenty cuirassiers in front to forge the way ahead and thirty behind to close it off, like a rapid intervention force, in the unlikely but not impossible event of an attack by bandits. True, we are not in calabria or sicily, but in the civilized lands of liguria, to be followed by lombardy and the veneto, but since, as popular wisdom has so often warned us, the fairest silk is soonest stained, the archduke is quite right to protect his rearguard. It remains to be seen what will fall from the heavens. Meanwhile, the transparent, luminous morning has gradually clouded over.

THE RAIN WAS WAITING for them as they left genoa. This is not so very odd, it is, after all, getting on for late autumn, and this downpour is merely the prelude to the concerto, with an ample array of tubas, percussion and trombones, that the alps is already holding in reserve to bestow on the convoy. Fortunately for those with fewest defenses against the bad weather, we refer in particular to the cuirassiers and to the mahout, the former clothed in cold, uncomfortable steel, as if they were some kind of newfangled beetle, the latter perched on top of the elephant, where the north winds and flailing snow are at their most cutting, maximilian finally paid heed to the infallible wisdom of the people, in this instance, to the saying that has been trotted out since the dawn of time, that prevention is better than cure. On the way out of genoa, he ordered the convoy to stop twice at shops selling ready-made clothes so that overcoats could be bought for the cuirassiers and for the mahout, said overcoats being, for understandable reasons, given the lack of planning in their production, disparate in both cut and color, but at least they would protect their fortunate recipients. Thanks to this providential move on the part of the archduke, we can see the speed with which the soldiers removed the new greatcoats from the saddle trees on which they had been hung when distributed, and how, without pausing or dismounting, they put them on, displaying a military joy rarely seen in the history of armies. The mahout fritz, formerly known as subhro, did the same, albeit more discreetly. Snug inside the coat, it occurred to him that the saddlecloth, so charitably returned to valladolid for the benefit of the bishop, would have been of great use to suleiman, who was being treated most uncharitably by the mountain rain. The result of the fierce storm that so swiftly followed on those first intermittent downpours was that very few people came out onto the roads to welcome suleiman and to greet his highness. They were wrong not to do so, because they won't have another opportunity in the near future to see a real live elephant. As for the archduke, our uncertainty derives from our lack of information about any short trips which that almost imperial person might make, he might return, he might not. As for the elephant, though, we have no doubts, he will not travel these roads again. The weather cleared up even before they reached piacenza, which allowed them to cross the city in a manner that accorded better with the grandeur of the important people traveling in the convoy, for the cuirassiers were able to take off their coats and appear in all their familiar splendor, rather than continuing to cut the same ridiculous figure they had since leaving genoa, with warriors' helmets on their heads and coarse woolen greatcoats on their backs. This time, a lot of people came out onto the streets, and, while the archduke was applauded for who he was, the elephant was no less warmly applauded and for the same reason. Fritz had not taken off his coat. He felt that the generous cut of this rather crude apparel, more like a cape than a coat, gave him an air of sovereign dignity that fitted well with suleiman's majestic gait. To tell the truth, he didn't really care anymore that the archduke had changed his name. Fritz, it is true, did not know the old saying, when in rome do as the romans do, but although he felt no inclination to be an austrian in austria, he thought it advisable, if he wanted to live a quiet life, to go unnoticed by the masses, even if their first sight of him was on the back of an elephant, which, right from the start, would make of him an exceptional being. Here he is then, wrapped in his greatcoat, delighting in the faint smell of billy goat given off by

the damp cloth. He was following the archdukes carriage, as he had been ordered to do when they left valladolid, and so anyone seeing him from afar would gain the impression that he was dragging after him the vast column of carts and wagons that made up the cortège, with, immediately behind him, the cart carrying the bundles of forage and the water trough that the rain had filled to overflowing. He was a happy mahout, far from the narrowness of his life in portugal, where they had pretty much left him to vegetate during those two years spent in the enclosure in belém, watching the ships set sail for india and listening to the chanting of the hieronymite friars. It's possible that our elephant is thinking, if that enormous head is capable of such a feat, it certainly doesn't lack for space, that he has reason to miss his former state of dolce far niente, but that could only occur thanks to his natural ignorance of the fact that indolence is highly prejudicial to the health. The one thing worse for it is tobacco, as people will find out later on. Now, however, after traveling three hundred leagues, mostly along roads that the devil himself, despite his cloven hooves, would refuse to take, suleiman could never be called indolent. He might have been called that during his stay in portugal, but that's all water under the bridge, he only had to set foot on the roads of europe to discover energies whose existence even he did not suspect. This phenomenon has often been observed in people who, due to circumstances, to poverty or unemployment, were forced to emigrate. Often indifferent and shiftless in the land where they were born, they become, almost from one hour to the next, as active and diligent as if they had the proverbial ants in their pants. Not even waiting for camp to be pitched on the outskirts of piacenza, suleiman is already asleep in the arms of the elephant's equivalent of morpheus. And fritz, beside him, covered by his coat, is sleeping the sleep of the just and snoring to boot. Early the next morning, the bugle sounded. It had rained during the night, but the sky was clear. Let us only hope that it doesn't fill up with gray clouds, as it did yesterday. Their nearest objective now is the city of mantua, in lombardy, which, though famous for many things, is perhaps best known as being home to one rigoletto, a certain jester at the duke's court, whose fortunes and misfortunes, much later on, will be set to music by the great giuseppe verdi. The convoy will not pause in mantua to appreciate the marvelous works of art that abound in that city. There will be more in verona, a city that will be the backdrop chosen by william shakespeare for his most excellent and lamentable tragedy of romeo and juliet, and where, given the settled weather, the archduke has ordered them to proceed not because max imilian the second of austria is particularly interested in any other loves than his own, but because verona, if we don't count padua, will be their last major stop before venice, after that, it will be one long climb in the direction of the alps, toward the cold north. Apparently, the archduke and archduchess have already visited, on previous journeys, the beautiful city of the doges, where, on the other hand, it would be no easy matter to accommodate suleiman's four tons, always assuming that they were thinking of taking him with them as a mascot. An elephant is hardly an animal that could be fitted into a gondola, if gondolas existed then, at least in their current design, with the raised prow and painted the funereal black that distinguishes them from all other navies in the world, and there would certainly have been no singing gondolier at the stern. The archduke and archduchess might decide to take a turn along the grand canal and be

received by the doge, but suleiman, the cuirassiers and the rest of the cortège will remain in padua, facing the basilica of saint anthony, whom we hereby reclaim as rightfully belonging to lisbon not to padua, in a space bare of trees and other vegetation. Keeping everything in its place will always be the best way of achieving world peace, unless divine wisdom disposes otherwise.

It happened, early the following morning, when the soldiers were still barely awake, that an emissary from the basilica of saint anthony appeared in the camp. He had, he said, although not perhaps in these exact words, been sent by a superior of the church's ecclesiastical team to speak to the man in charge of the elephant. Now any object three meters high can be seen from some distance away, and suleiman almost filled the celestial vault, but, even so, the priest asked to be taken to him. The cuirassier who accompanied him shook the mahout awake, for he was still asleep, snug in his greatcoat. There's a priest here to see you, he said. He chose to speak in castilian, and that was the best thing he could have done, given that the mahout's as yet limited grasp of the german language was not sufficient for him to understand such a complex sentence. Fritz opened his mouth to ask what the priest wanted, but immediately closed it again, preferring not to create a linguistic confusion that might lead him who knows where. He got up and went over to the priest who was waiting at a prudent distance, You wish to speak to me, father, he asked, Indeed, I do, my son, replied his visitor, putting into those five words all the warmth of feeling he could muster, How can I help you, father, Are you a christian, came the question, I was baptized, but as you can see from my complexion and my features, I am not from here, No, I assume you're an indian, but that is no impediment to your being a good christian, That is not for me to say, for, as I understand it, self-praise is a shameful thing, Now, I have come to make a request, but first, I would like to know if your elephant is trained, Well, he's not trained in the sense that he can perform circus tricks, but he usually comports himself in as dignified a fashion as any self-respecting elephant, Could you make him kneel down, even if only on one knee, That is something I've never tried, father, but I have noticed that suleiman does kneel motu proprio when he wants to lie down, but I can't be certain that he would do so to order, You could try, This is not the best time, father, suleiman tends to be rather bad-tempered in the morning, If it would be more convenient, I can come back later, for what brings me here is certainly not a life-or-death affair, although it would be very much in the interests of the basilica if it were to happen today, before his highness the archduke of austria leaves for the north, If what happens today, if you don't mind my asking, The miracle, said the priest, putting his hands together, What miracle, asked the mahout, feeling his head beginning to spin, If the elephant were to kneel down at the door of the basilica, would that not seem to you a miracle, one of the great miracles of our age, asked the priest, again putting his hands together in prayer, I know nothing of miracles, where I come from there have been no miracles since the world was created, for the creation, I imagine, must have been one long miracle, but then that was that, So you are not a christian, That's for you to decide, father, but even though I was anointed a christian and baptized, perhaps you can still see what lies beneath, And what does lie beneath,

Ganesh, for example, our elephant god, that one over there, flapping his ears, and you will doubtless ask me how I know that Suleiman the elephant is a god, and I will respond that if there is, as there is, an elephant god, it could as easily be him as another. Given that I need you to do me a favor, I forgive you these blasphemies, but, when this is over, you will have to confess. And what favor do you want from me, father, To take the elephant to the door of the basilica and make him kneel down there, But I'm not sure I can do that, Try, Imagine if I take the elephant there and he refuses to kneel down, now I may not know much about these things, but I assume that even worse than no miracle would be a failed miracle, It won't have failed if there are witnesses, And who will those witnesses be, First of all, the whole of the basilica's religious community and as many willing Christians as we can gather at the entrance to the church, secondly, the public, who, as we know, are capable of swearing that they saw what they didn't and stating as fact what they don't know, And does that include believing in miracles that never happened, asked the mahout, They're usually the best ones, and although they involve a lot of preparation, the effort is usually worth it, besides, that way we relieve our saints of some of their duties, And God as well, We never pester God for miracles, one has to respect the hierarchy, at most, we consult the virgin, who also has a gift for working miracles, There seems to be a strong vein of cynicism in your Catholic church, Possibly, but the reason I'm speaking so frankly, said the priest, is so that you will see how much we need this miracle, this or another, Why, Because Luther, even though he's dead, is still stirring up a lot of prejudice against our holy religion, and anything that will help us curtail the effects of Protestant preaching will be welcome, remember, it's only thirty years since he nailed his vile theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, and since then, Protestantism has swept through the whole of Europe like a flood, Look, I don't know anything about those theses or whatever, You don't need to, you just need to have faith, Faith in God or in my elephant, asked the mahout, In both, replied the priest, And what do I stand to gain from this, One does not ask things of the church, one gives, In that case, you should speak to the elephant first, since the success of the miracle depends on him, Be careful, you have a most impertinent tongue, mind you don't lose it, And what will happen to me if I take the elephant to the door of the basilica and he doesn't kneel down, Nothing, unless we suspect that you're to blame, And if I was, You would have good reason to repent. The mahout thought it best to give in, At what time do you want me to bring you the animal, he asked, At midday on the dot, not a minute later, Well, I hope I have enough time to get the idea into Suleiman's head that he must kneel at your feet, Not at our feet, for we are unworthy, but at the feet of our saint Anthony, and with those pious words, the priest went off to tell his superiors the results of his evangelical work, Is there any hope of success, they asked, Very much so, even though we are in the hands of an elephant, Elephants don't have hands, That was just a manner of speaking, like saying, for example, that we're in the hands of God, The main difference being that we are in the hands of God, Praised be his name, Indeed, but getting back to the point, why exactly are we in the elephant's hands, Because we don't know what he will do when he arrives at the door of the basilica, He'll do whatever the mahout tells him to do, that's what education is for, Let us trust in God's benevolent

understanding of the facts of this world, if god, as we suppose, wants to be served, it will suit him to help his own miracles, those that will best speak of his glory, Brothers, faith can do anything, and god will do what is necessary, Amen, they chorused, mentally preparing an arsenal of auxiliary prayers.

Meanwhile, fritz was trying, by all possible means, to get the elephant to understand what was required of him. This was no easy task for an animal of firm opinions, who immediately associated the action of kneeling with the subsequent action of lying down to sleep. Little by little, though, after many blows, innumerable oaths and a few desperate pleas, light began to dawn in suleiman's hitherto obstinate brain, namely, that he had to kneel, but not lie down. Fritz even went so far as to say, My life is in your hands, which just goes to show how ideas can spread, not only directly, by word of mouth, but simply because they hang about in the atmospheric currents around us, constituting, you might say, a veritable bath in which one learns things quite without realizing. Given the scarcity of clocks, what counted then was the height of the sun and the length of the shadow it cast on the ground. That is how fritz knew that midday was approaching and, therefore, the moment to lead the elephant to the door of the basilica, and then it would all be up to god. There he goes, riding on suleiman's back, just as we have seen him do before, but now his hands and heart are trembling, as if he were a mere apprentice mahout. He need not have worried. When he reached the door of the basilica, before a crowd of witnesses who will, forever after, confirm that the miracle occurred, the elephant, obeying a light touch to his right ear, bent his knees, not just one, which would have been enough to satisfy the priest who came with the request, but both, thus bowing to the majesty of god in heaven and to his representatives on earth. Suleiman received in return a generous sprinkling of holy water that even reached the mahout on top, while the watching crowd, as one, fell to their knees, and a shiver of pleasure ran through glorious saint anthony's mummified corpse where it lay in his tomb.

THAT SAME AFTERNOON, two carrier pigeons, one male and one female, set off from the basilica in the direction of trent, taking with them the news of this marvelous miracle. Why trent and not rome, where the head of the church is to be found, you will ask. The answer is simple, because, since fifteen forty-five, an ecumenical council has been taking place in trent, engaged, according to them, in preparing a counterattack on luther and his followers. Suffice it to say that decrees had already been issued on the sacred scriptures and tradition, on original sin, justification and the sacraments in general. It is understandable, therefore, that the basilica of saint anthony, a pillar of the faith at its purest, needs to be kept permanently informed about what is going on in trent, which is so close, only twenty leagues away, a mere vol d'oiseau, appropriately enough, for pigeons, who have been flying between the two locations for years. This time, however, padua is the first with the news, because it isn't every day that an elephant solemnly kneels at the door of a basilica, thus bearing witness to the fact that the message of the gospels is addressed to the whole animal kingdom and that the regrettable drowning of those hundreds of pigs in the sea of galilee could be put down to inexperience, occurring as it did before the cogs in the mechanism for performing miracles were properly oiled. What matters now are the long lines of believers forming in the encampment, all eager to see the elephant and take advantage of the chance to buy a tuft of elephant hair, a business rapidly set up by fritz when the payment he naïvely assumed he would receive from the basilica's coffers was not forthcoming. Let us not censure the mahout, for others who did far less for the christian faith were nonetheless amply rewarded. Tomorrow it will be claimed that an infusion of elephant hair taken three times a day is a sovereign remedy for cases of acute diarrhea and that if the same tuft of hair is soaked in almond oil and the oil massaged energetically into the scalp, again three times a day, it will halt even the most galloping of alopecias. Fritz can barely cope with the demand, the purse tied to his belt is already heavy with coins, if the camp were to stay there a whole week, he would be a rich man. His customers are not all from padua, some are from mestre and even venice. It is said that the archduke and archduchess are having such a good time at the doge's palace that they will not return today, or even tomorrow, a piece of news that makes fritz very happy, indeed, he never thought he would have so many reasons to feel grateful to the house of habsburg. He wonders why it had never occurred to him before to sell elephant hair when he lived in india and then he thinks to himself that, despite the ridiculous number of deities, subdeities and demons infesting that country, there are far fewer superstitions in the land where he was born than in this particular part of civilized and very christian europe, which is capable of blithely buying some elephant hair and piously believing the vendor's lies. Having to pay for your own dreams must be the most desperate of situations. In the end, contrary to the prognostications of the so-called barracks gazette, the archduke and archduchess returned on the afternoon of the following day, ready to resume their journey as soon as possible. News of the miracle had reached the doge's palace, but in somewhat garbled form, the result of the successive transmissions of facts, true or assumed, real or purely imaginary, based on everything from partial, more or less eyewitness accounts to reports from those who simply liked the sound of their own voice, for, as we know all too well, no one telling a story can resist

adding a period, and sometimes even a comma. The archduke summoned his steward to clarify what had happened, not so much the miracle itself, but the reasons that had led to it. On this particular matter, the steward lacked sufficient information, and so it was decided to summon the mahout fritz, who, given the nature of his role, should have something more substantial to tell. The archduke did not beat about the bush, They tell me that a miracle took place during my absence, Yes, sir, And that suleiman was involved, That is so, sir, You mean that the elephant decided, of his own volition, to go and kneel at the door of the basilica, That isn't quite how I would put it, sir, How would you put it, then, asked the archduke, Sir, I was the one who took suleiman there, So I thought, although that's not what interests me, what I want to know is in whose head was the idea born, All I had to do, sir, was to teach the elephant to kneel at my command, And who gave you the order to do so, Sir, I'm not allowed to discuss the matter, Did someone forbid you to, Not exactly, but a word to the wise is enough, And who proffered you that word, Forgive me, sir, but, If you don't answer my question at once you will have reason to regret it most bitterly, It was a priest from the basilica, And what did he say, He said that they needed a miracle and that suleiman could provide that miracle, And what did you answer, That suleiman wasn't used to performing miracles and that the attempt might result in failure, And what was the priest's response, He said that I would have reason to repent if I didn't obey, almost the same words that your highness just used, And then what happened, Well, I spent the rest of the morning teaching suleiman to kneel at a signal from me, which wasn't easy, but I managed it in the end, You're a good mahout, You're too kind, sir, Would you like some advice, Yes, sir, Don't tell anyone else about our conversation, No, sir, That way you'll have no reason to regret anything, Right, sir, I won't forget, Off you go and be sure to remove from suleiman's head the idiotic idea that he can go around performing miracles by kneeling down at the doors of churches, one expects much more from a miracle, for example, that someone should grow a new leg to replace one that was cut off, imagine the number of such prodigies that could be performed on the battlefield, Yes, sir, Off you go. Once alone, the archduke began to think that perhaps he had said too much, that his words, if the mahout let his tongue run away with him, would be of no benefit whatsoever to the delicate political balance he has been trying to keep between luther's reforms and the ongoing conciliar response. After all, as henry the fourth of france will say in the not too distant future, paris is well worth a mass. Even so, a look of painful melancholy appears on maximilian's slender face, perhaps because few things in life hurt as much as the awareness that one has betrayed the ideas of one's youth. The archduke told himself that he was old enough not to cry over spilled milk, that the superabundant udders of the catholic church were there, as always, waiting for a pair of skillful hands to milk them, and events so far had shown that his archducal hands had a certain talent for that diplomatic milking, as long as the said church believed that the results of those matters of faith would, in time, bring them some advantage. Even so, the story of the elephant's false miracle went beyond the bounds of what was tolerable. The people at the basilica, he thought, must have gone mad, after all, they already had a saint who could make a new pitcher out of the fragments of a broken one and who, while living in padua, was

able to fly through the air to lisbon to save his father from the gallows, why then go and ask a mahout to get his elephant to fake a miracle, ah, luther, luther, you were so right. Having vented his feelings, the archduke summoned his steward, whom he ordered to prepare for departure the following morning, traveling, if possible, directly to trent or, if necessary, spending at most one night encamped en route. The steward replied that he thought the second option more prudent, for experience had shown that they could not count on suleiman when it came to speed, He's more of a long-distance runner, he concluded, adding, The mahout has been taking advantage of people's credulity and is selling them elephant hair so that they can make potions that won't cure anyone, Tell him from me that if he doesn't cease doing so this instant he will have reason to regret it for the rest of his life, which will certainly not be a long one, Your highness's orders will be carried out at once, we have to put a stop to this fraud as quickly as possible, this elephant hair business is demoralizing the whole convoy, especially the balder members of the cuirassiers, Right, I want this matter resolved, I can't prevent suleiman's so-called miracle pursuing us for the rest of the journey, but at least no one will be able to say that the house of habsburg is profiting from the crimes of a lying mahout and collecting value-added tax as if it were a commercial operation covered by the law, Sir, I will deal with the matter forthwith, he'll be laughing on the other side of his face when I've finished, it's just a shame that we need him to get the elephant to vienna, but I hope, at least, that this will teach him a lesson, Go on, put out that fire before anyone gets burned. Fritz did not really deserve such harsh judgments. It's only right that the criminal should be accused and condemned, but true justice should always bear in mind any extenuating circumstances, the first of which, in the mahout's case, would be that the idea of the fake miracle came not from him, but from the priests of the basilica of saint anthony, who thought up the hoax in the first place, if they hadn't, it would never have occurred to fritz that he could grow rich by exploiting the capillary system of the maker of that apparent miracle. In recognition of their own greater and lesser sins, given that no one in this world is blameless, and they far less than most, both the noble archduke and his obliging steward had a duty to remember that famous saying about the beam and the mote, which, adapted to these new circumstances, teaches how much easier it is to see the beam in your neighbor's eye than the elephant's hair in your own. Besides, this is not a miracle that will linger long in people's memories or in those of future generations. Contrary to the archduke's fears, the story of the false miracle will not pursue them for the rest of the journey and will quickly fade. The people in the convoy, both noble and plebeian, military and civilian, will have far more to think about when the clouds building up over the region around trent, above the mountains that immediately precede the wall of the alps, become, first, rain, then possibly hard-hitting hail and, doubtless, snow, and the roads become covered in slippery ice. And then it is likely that some members of the convoy will recognize, at last, that the poor elephant was nothing but an innocent dupe in that grotesque entry in the church's accounting records and that the mahout is merely an insignificant product of the corrupt times in which we happen to live. Farewell, world, you go from worse to worse.

Despite the archduke's express wishes, it was impossible to cover the distance between padua and trent in one day. Suleiman tried his hardest to obey the mahout's urgent commands, indeed the mahout seemed determined to take it out on him for the failure of a business that had begun so well and ended so badly, but elephants, even those who weigh four tons, also have their physical limits. In fact, it all turned out for the best. Instead of reaching their destination in the half-light of evening, in near-darkness, they arrived in trent at midday, when they were greeted by people in the streets and by applause. The sky was still covered from horizon to horizon by what seemed like solid cloud, but it wasn't raining. The convoy's meteorologists, who are, by vocation, the majority, were unanimous, It's going to snow, they said, and hard. When the cortège reached trent, a surprise was awaiting them in the square outside the cathedral of saint vigilius. In the exact center of that square stood a more or less half-life-size statue of an elephant, or, rather, a construction made out of planks that bore every appearance of having been hastily nailed together, with little attempt to achieve anatomical exactitude, although they had included a raised trunk and a pair of tusks, the ivory of which was represented by a lick of white paint, this, one assumes, was intended to represent suleiman, well, it must have, since no other animal of his species was expected in that part of the country nor was there any record of another elephant having visited trent, not at least in the recent past. When the archduke saw the elephantoid figure, he trembled. His worst fears were confirmed, news of the miracle had clearly arrived in trent, and the religious authorities of the city, which had already benefited, materially and spiritually, from the fact that the council was being held within its walls, had found confirmation of, how shall we put it, a kind of shared sanctity with padua and the basilica of saint anthony, and had decided to demonstrate this by erecting a hasty construction representing the miracle-working creature in front of the very cathedral where the cardinals, bishops and theologians had been meeting now for years. When he took a closer look, the archduke noticed that there were large holes in the elephant's back, rather like trapdoors, which immediately made him think of the celebrated trojan horse, although it was perfectly clear that there wouldn't be room in the statue's belly for even a squadron of children, unless they were lilliputians, but that was impossible, because the word hadn't even been invented yet. To clarify the situation, the anxious archduke ordered his steward to go and find out what the devil that worrying, cobbled-together monstrosity was doing there. The steward went and returned. There was no reason to be alarmed. The elephant had been created in order to celebrate maximilian of austria's visit to the city of trent, and its other purpose, and this was true, was as a frame for the fireworks that would erupt from the wooden carcass when darkness fell. The archduke gave a sigh of relief, the elephant's actions were obviously deemed to be of little importance in trent, apart, perhaps, from providing an object capable of being burned to a cinder, for there was a strong likelihood that the fuses attached to the fireworks would ignite the wood, providing spectators with a finale that would, many years later, merit the adjective wagnerian. And so it was. After a storm of colors, in which the yellow of sodium, the red of calcium, the green of copper, the blue of potassium, the white of magnesium and the gold of iron all performed miracles, in which stars, fountains, slow-

burning candles and cascades of lights poured out of the elephant as if from an inexhaustible cornucopia, the celebrations ended with a huge bonfire around which many of trent's inhabitants would take the opportunity to stand and warm their hands, while suleiman, in the shelter of a lean-to built for the purpose, was finishing off his second bundle of forage. The fire was gradually becoming a glowing heap of embers, but this did not last long in the cold, and the embers rapidly turned into ashes, although by then, once the main spectacle was over, the archduke and the archduchess had both retired to bed. The snow began to fall.

THERE ARE THE ALPS. Yes, there they are, but you can hardly see them. The snow is falling softly, like scraps of cotton wool, but that softness is deceiving, as our elephant will tell you, for he is carrying on his back an ever more visible layer of ice, which the mahout should have noticed by now, were it not for the fact that he is from a hot country where this kind of winter is almost unimaginable. Of course in old india, in the north, there is no shortage of mountains and snowy peaks, but subhro, now known as fritz, never had the money to travel for his own pleasure and to see other places. His one experience of snow was in lisbon, a few weeks after arriving from goa, when, one cold night, he saw falling from the sky a white dust, like flour being sieved, which melted as soon as it touched the ground. Nothing like the white vastness before his eyes now, stretching for as far as he can see. Very soon, the scraps of cotton wool had become large, heavy flakes which, driven by the wind, beat against the mahout's face. Sitting astride suleiman and wrapped in his greatcoat, fritz did not feel the cold particularly, but those continuous, endless blows to the face troubled him as if they were some kind of dangerous threat. He had been told that from trent to bolzano was a mere stroll, some ten leagues, or a little less, a flea-jump away, but not in this weather, when the snow seemed to be possessed of claws with which to grasp and delay any and every movement, even breathing, as if unwilling to allow the imprudent traveler to leave, as suleiman knows, for despite the strength given him by nature, he can only drag himself painfully up those steep paths. We do not know what he is thinking, but, in the midst of these alps, we can be sure of one thing, he is not a happy elephant. Apart from the occasions when the cuirassiers ride past as best they can on their frozen mounts, uphill and downhill, to see how the convoy is coping and to avoid any dispersals or diversions that could mean death to anyone who might lose their way in that icy place, the path seems to exist only for the elephant and his mahout. Having grown used, since their departure from valladolid, to being close to the carriage carrying the archduke and archduchess, the mahout misses seeing it there before him, although we dare not speak for the elephant because, as we said earlier, we do not know what he is thinking. The archducal carriage is somewhere up ahead, but there is no sign of it, nor of the cart laden with forage, which should be following immediately behind them. The mahout looked back to see if this was so, and that providential glance made him notice the layer of ice covering suleiman's hindquarters. Although he knew nothing of winter sports, it seemed to him that the ice was fairly thin and fragile, probably due to the heat from the animal's body, which would not allow the ice to set completely. At least that's something, he thought. However, before things got any worse, he needed to remove it. Taking infinite care so as not to slip, the mahout crawled along the elephant's back until he reached the offending sheet of ice, which turned out to be neither as thin nor as fragile as had at first seemed. One should never trust ice, that is the first important lesson to learn. Stepping onto a frozen sea might give others the impression that we can walk on water, but it is an entirely false one, as false as the miracle of suleiman kneeling at the door of the basilica of saint anthony, for suddenly the ice gives way and who knows what will happen then. Fritz's problem now is how to remove that wretched ice from the elephant's skin without recourse to some kind of tool, a spatula with a fine, rounded blade, for example, would be ideal, but there are

no such spatulas to be had, if, indeed, such things existed then. The only solution, therefore, is to use his bare hands, and we are not speaking figuratively. The mahout's fingers were already numb with cold when he realized where the nub of the problem lay, namely, that the elephant's thick, coarse hair had made common cause with the ice, so that any small advance was won only after a desperate battle, for just as there was no spatula to help scrape the ice off the skin, so there were no scissors with which to cut that hairy tangle. It quickly became clear that removing each hair from the ice was far beyond fritz's physical and mental capabilities, and he was obliged to abandon the task before he himself turned into a pathetic snowman, lacking only a pipe in his mouth and a carrot instead of a nose. The very same hairs that had been at the heart of a promising business, nipped in the bud by the archduke's moral scruples, were now the cause of a fiasco whose consequences to the elephant's health were as yet unknown. As if this were not enough, another apparently urgent matter had just arisen. Disconcerted to feel that the mahout's familiar weight had transferred from his shoulders to his hindquarters, the elephant was showing clear signs of disorientation, as if he had lost sight of the path and did not know where to go. Fritz had no alternative but to scramble rapidly back to his accustomed place and, so to speak, take up the reins again. As for the covering of ice on the elephant's back, let us pray to the god of elephants that nothing worse happens. If there was a tree nearby with a really strong branch three meters up and more or less parallel to the ground, suleiman could free himself from that uncomfortable and possibly dangerous sheet of ice, by rubbing against it, as all elephants have done since time immemorial, whenever an itch became unbearable. Now that the snow had redoubled in intensity, although this is not to say that one was a consequence of the other, the road had grown steeper, as if it were weary of dragging itself along on the flat and wanted to ascend to the skies, even if only to one of its lower levels. Just as the wings of the hummingbird cannot even dream of the powerful beating of the petrel's wings as it battles against the stormy wind nor of the majestic flight of the golden eagle as it soars above the valleys. Each of us is made for the thing for which we were born, but there is always the possibility that we might encounter important exceptions, as was the case with suleiman, who was not born for this, but whose only option was to invent some way of coping with that steep incline, which he did by stretching out his trunk in front of him, looking every inch the warrior charging into battle to meet either death or glory. And all around is snow and solitude. Someone who knows the region might say that this whiteness conceals a landscape of extraordinary beauty. But no one would think so, least of all us. The snow devoured the valleys, buried the vegetation, and if there are any inhabited houses around, they can barely be seen, a little smoke from a chimney is the only sign of life, someone inside must have lit some damp kindling and is now waiting, with the door practically blocked by a snowdrift, for the aid of a saint bernard with a barrel of brandy tied round its neck. Almost without his noticing, suleiman had reached the top of the slope, and he can now breathe normally again and, after all that sheer painful effort, especially with a mahout on his back and a sheet of ice weighing on his hindquarters, can resume an easy walking pace. The curtain of snow had thinned slightly, allowing one to see a few hundred meters of path ahead, as if the world had decided, at

last, to restore the lost meteorological norm. Perhaps that really was what the world intended, but something odd has obviously happened, how else explain this gathering of people, horses and carts, as if they had come upon a good place for a picnic. Fritz urged suleiman to quicken his step and saw that he was back once more among his companions and the convoy, which, it must be said, did not take much perspicacity because, as we know, there is only one archduke of austria. Fritz climbed down from the elephant and the question he asked of the first person he met, What happened, received an instant reply, The front axle of his highness's coach has broken, How dreadful, exclaimed the mahout, The carpenter is already installing a new axle with the help of his assistants, and we'll be ready to head off again within the hour, How come they had one with them, One what, An axle, You may know a lot about elephants, but it obviously hasn't occurred to you that no one would risk setting out on a journey like this without taking with them some spare parts, And were their highnesses injured at all, No, they just got a bit of a fright when the coach suddenly lurched to one side, Where are they now, Taking shelter in another coach, further on, It will be night soon, With heavy snow like this, the road is always light, no one will get lost, said the sergeant of the cuirassiers, who was the man he was speaking to. And it was true because, at that moment, the cart carrying the forage arrived, and just in time too, because suleiman, having dragged his four tons up those mountains, desperately needed to recharge his energies. In less time than it takes to say amen, fritz had untied two of the bundles right there, and a second amen, if there was one, found the elephant eagerly munching his ration of food. Immediately behind came the cuirassiers from the rear of the convoy and with them the rest of the company, numb with cold and exhausted by the tremendous efforts they'd been obliged to make for leagues and leagues, but glad to rejoin the group. When one thinks about it, the accident to the archducal coach could only have been an act of divine providence. As that never sufficiently praised popular wisdom teaches us, and as has more than once been shown, god writes straight on crooked lines, and even seems to prefer the latter. When the axle had been replaced and the soundness of the repair tested, the archduke and archduchess returned to the comfort of their coach, and the convoy, fully regrouped, set off, with strict orders having been issued to all its members, both military and civilian, to keep together at all costs and not to slide again into the same state of almost total fragmentation, which had only avoided the direst of consequences thanks to the greatest of good fortune. It was late at night when the convoy reached bolzano.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, the convoy slept in until late, the archduke and archduchess in the house of a local family of nobles, the others scattered here and there throughout the small town of bolzano, the cuirassiers' horses distributed among whichever stables still had room, and the men billeted in private houses, because camping outside would have been a most unappealing prospect, if not impossible, unless the company still had strength enough to spend the rest of the night clearing snow. The hardest task was to find a billet for suleiman. After looking high and low, they found a kind of shelter, a tiled roof supported by four pillars, which offered him little more protection than if he were to sleep à la belle étoile, which is the lyrical french version of the portuguese expression ao relento, although that is equally inappropriate, really, because relento means the night damp, a kind of dew or mist, meteorological trifles when compared with these alpine snows that would easily justify such poetical descriptions as spotless blanket or mortal bed. There he was left no fewer than three bun dies of forage to satisfy his appetite, whether there and then or during the night, for suleiman is as subject to his appetite as any human being. As for the mahout, he was lucky enough, when lodgings were being allocated, to be given a merciful mattress on the floor and a no less merciful blanket, whose calorific power was increased when he spread his greatcoat on top, even though said coat was still somewhat damp. The family who took him in had but one room with three beds, one for the mother and father, another for their three boys, aged between nine and fourteen, and the third for the septuagenarian grandmother and the two maids. The only payment they demanded of fritz was that he tell them some stories about elephants, which fritz was glad to do, beginning with his pièce de résistance, namely, the birth of ganesh, and finishing with the recent, and in his view, heroic ascent of the alps of which, we believe, quite enough has been said. Then the father, from his bed, while his wife lay snoring beside him, mentioned that, according to ancient histories and subsequent legends, the famous carthaginian general hannibal, having crossed the pyrenees, had marched through more or less this same region of the alps with his army of men and african elephants, who had given the soldiers of rome such a hard time, although more modern versions state that they were not really african elephants, with huge ears and vast bodies, but so-called forest elephants, not much bigger than horses. But there were heavy snowfalls then too, he added, and no clear paths to follow either, You don't seem to like the romans very much, said fritz, The truth is that we're more austrian than italian here, in german our town is called bozen, To be honest, I prefer bolzano, said the mahout, it's easier on the ear, That's because you're portuguese, Having traveled from portugal doesn't make me portuguese, Where are you from then, sir, if you don't mind my asking, I was born in india and I'm a mahout, A mahout, Yes, mahout is the name given to people who drive elephants, In that case, the carthaginian general must have had mahouts in his army too, He wouldn't be able to take elephants anywhere if he didn't have someone to drive them, He took them to war, To a war waged by men, Well, there isn't really any other kind. The man was a philosopher.

Late the next morning, his strength restored and his stomach more or less consoled, fritz thanked the family for their hospitality and went to see if he still had an elephant to

look after. He had dreamed that suleiman had left bolzano at dead of night and wandered off into the surrounding mountains and valleys, in the grip of a kind of intoxication that could only have been the effect of the snow, although the bibliography on the subject, with the exception of hannibal's disasters of war in the alps, has, in more recent times, been limited to recording, with tedious monotony, the broken legs and arms of those who love skiing. Yes, those were the days, when a person would fall from the top of a mountain and arrive, splat, a thousand meters below, at the bottom of a valley already crammed with the ribs, tibias and skulls of other equally unfortunate adventurers. Ah, yes, that was the life. A few cuirassiers were already gathered in the square, some on horseback, others not, and the rest were arriving to join them. It was snowing, but only lightly. Ever curious, out of necessity, given that no one bothered to tell him anything directly, the mahout went to ask the sergeant what was happening. He needed to say only a polite good morning, because the sergeant, knowing at once what he wanted, told him the latest news, We're going to bressanone, or brixen, as we say in german, it will be a short journey today, less than ten leagues. Then, after a pause intended to arouse expectation, he added, Apparently, in brixen, we're going to get a few days of much-needed rest, Well, I can only speak for myself, but suleiman can barely put one foot in front of the other, this is no climate for him, he might catch pneumonia and I'd like to see what his highness would do then with the poor creature's bones, It'll be all right, said the sergeant, things haven't gone so badly up to now. Fritz had no option but to agree and then he went to see how suleiman was. He found him in his shelter, apparently perfectly calm, but the mahout, still under the spell of that uncomfortable dream, couldn't escape the feeling that suleiman was pretending, as if he really had left bolzano in the middle of the night to romp around in the snows, perhaps climbing to the highest peaks, where the snow, they say, is eternal. On the ground there wasn't a trace of the food they had left him, not even a piece of straw, which at least meant that they could reasonably expect that he wouldn't start whining with hunger as small children do, even though, and this is not widely known, he, the elephant, is really another kind of child, not in his physical makeup, but as regards his imperfect intellect. In fact, we don't know what the elephant is thinking, but then we don't know what a child is thinking either, apart from what the child chooses to tell us, and one shouldn't, on principle, place too much trust in that. Fritz signaled that he wanted to get on, and the elephant, quickly and precisely as if wanting to be forgiven for some mischief, offered him one tusk to rest his foot on, just as if it were a stirrup, then coiled his trunk around his body, like an embrace. In one movement, he lifted fritz onto his back, where he left him comfortably installed. Fritz glanced behind him, and, contrary to his expectations, found not the slightest trace of ice on his hindquarters. Therein lay a mystery that he would probably never be able to solve. Either the elephant, any elephant and this one in particular, has some kind of self-regulating heating system capable, after a necessary period of mental concentration, of melting a reasonably thick layer of ice, or else the effort of going up and down mountains at some speed had caused the aforesaid ice to detach itself from his skin despite the labyrinthine tangle of hairs that had given fritz so much grief. Some of nature's mysteries seem, at first sight, impenetrable, and prudence perhaps counsels us to leave them be, in case a

piece of raw knowledge should bring us more bad than good. Just look, for example, at what happened to adam in paradise when he ate what appeared to be an ordinary apple. It may be that the fruit itself was a delicious piece of work by god, although there are those who say that it wasn't an apple at all, but a slice of watermelon, but, in either case, the seeds had been placed there by the devil. They were black after all.

The archducal coach is waiting for its noble, illustrious, distinguished passengers. Fritz directs the elephant to the place reserved for him in the cortège, behind the coach, but at a prudent distance, not wishing to anger the archduke by the near presence of a trickster like him, who, while not going to the classic extreme of selling a pig in a poke, had nevertheless duped a few poor bald men, among them some brave cuirassiers, with the promise that their hair would grow as thick as the hair of that unfortunate mythic figure samson. He need not have worried, the archduke didn't even look in his direction, he seemed to have other things on his mind, he wanted to reach bressanone before nightfall and they were already late. He dispatched the aide-de-camp to take his orders to the head of the convoy, orders that could be summarized in three almost synonymous words, speed, alacrity, haste, allowing, of course, for the delaying effects of the snow that had begun to fall more thickly now, and the state of the roads, which, normally bad, were now even worse. It may only be a journey of ten leagues, as the helpful sergeant had informed the mahout, but if, by current calculations, ten leagues are fifty thousand meters or some tens of thousands of paces in old measurements, there's no avoiding the facts, numbers are numbers, then the people and animals who have just set off for yet another painful day's journeying are going to suffer greatly, especially those who are not blessed with a roof, which is most of them. How pretty the snow looks seen through the glass, the archduchess maria remarked ingenuously to her husband, the archduke maximilian, but for those of us outside, our eyes blinded by the wind and our boots sodden with snow, with the chilblains on our hands and feet burning like the fires of hell, it would be timely to ask the heavens just what we did to deserve such a punishment. As the poet said, the pine trees may wave at the sky, but the sky does not answer. It doesn't answer men either, even though most of them have known the right prayers since they were children, the problem is finding a language that god can understand. They say that the cold, when it's born, is intended for everyone, but some get more than their fair share of it. There is a vast difference between traveling in a coach lined with furs and blankets fitted with a thermostat and having to walk along in the flailing snow or with your foot in a frozen stirrup that feels, in the cold, as tight as a tourniquet. What did cheer them up was the news the sergeant had passed on to fritz about the possibility of having a good rest in bressanone, news that spread like a spring breeze throughout the convoy, but then the pessimists, singly and altogether, reminded the forgetful of the dangers of the isarco pass, not to mention another still worse that lies ahead, in austrian territory, the brenner pass. Had hannibal dared to go through either, we would probably not have had to wait for the battle of zama in order to watch, at our local cinema, the last, definitive defeat of the carthaginian army by scipio africanus, a film about the romans produced by benito's eldest son, vittorio mussolini. On that occasion, the

elephants proved of no use to the great hannibal.

Mounted on suleiman's shoulders and receiving in his face the full brunt of the snow being whipped up by the incessant wind, fritz is not in the best of positions to elaborate and develop elevated thoughts. Nevertheless, he keeps trying to think of ways to improve his relations with the archduke, who not only refuses to speak to him, he won't even look at him. Things had begun rather well in valladolid, but suleiman, with his intestinal upsets on the way to rosas, had seriously damaged the noble cause of creating harmony between two social classes as far removed from one another as mahouts and archdukes. With a little goodwill, all this could have been forgotten, but the offense committed by subhro or fritz or whoever the devil he is, the madness that had made him want to grow rich by illicit and morally reprehensible means, put paid to any hopes of restoring the almost fraternal esteem which, for one magical moment, had brought the future emperor of austria closer to that humble driver of elephants. The skeptics are quite right when they say that the history of humanity is one long succession of missed opportunities. Fortunately, thanks to the inexhaustible generosity of the imagination, we erase faults, fill in lacunae as best we can, forge passages through blind alleys that will remain stubbornly blind, and invent keys to doors that have never even had locks. This is what fritz is doing while suleiman, painfully lifting his heavy legs, one, two, one, two, makes his way through the snow that continues to accumulate on the path, while the pure water out of which it is made insidiously transforms itself into the slipperiest of ice. Fritz thinks bitterly that only an act of heroism on his part would restore him to the archduke's favor, but, however hard he tries, he can come up with nothing sufficiently grandiose to attract his highness's approving eye even for a second. It is then that he imagines the axle of the archducal coach, having broken once, breaking again, the coach lurching violently to one side, the carriage door flying open, and the helpless archduchess being hurled out into the snow, where she slides on her many skirts down a relatively gentle slope, not stopping until she, fortunately unhurt, reaches the bottom of the ravine. The mahout's hour has come. With an energetic prod of the stick that sometimes serves as his steering wheel, he directs suleiman to the edge of the ravine and makes him descend slowly and steadily to the place where charles the fifth's daughter lies, still half dazed. Some cuirassiers make as if to follow him, but the archduke stops them, Leave him, let's see how he copes. Barely has he spoken than the archduchess, lifted up by the elephant's trunk, finds herself seated between fritz's spread legs, in a position of physical proximity that, in other circumstances, would seem utterly scandalous. If she were the queen of portugal, she would have to go straight to confession afterwards, that's for sure. Up above, the cuirassiers and the other people in the convoy would be enthusiastically applauding the heroic rescue, while the elephant, apparently aware of what he had done, would climb slowly and steadily back up the slope to the path, where the archduke would embrace his wife and, looking up at the mahout, say in castilian, Muy bien, fritz, gracias. Fritz's soul would have burst right there and then with happiness, always assuming that this were possible in something that is not even pure spirit and if everything we have described were not merely the morbid fruit of a guilty imagination. Reality revealed itself

to him exactly as it was, himself hunched on the elephant's back, almost invisible beneath the snow, the desolate image of a defeated conqueror, demonstrating yet again how close the tarpeian rock is to the capitoline hill, on the latter they crown you with laurels and from the former they fling you down, all glory vanished, all honor lost, to the place where you will leave your wretched bones. The axle on the coach did not break again, the archduchess is dozing peacefully, resting her head on her husband's shoulder, unaware that she had been saved by an elephant and that a mahout from portugal had served as an instrument of divine providence. Despite all the criticisms that have been heaped upon the world, it daily discovers ways of functioning tant bien que mal, if you will allow us this small homage to french culture, the proof of which is that when good things don't happen of their own accord in reality, the free imagination helps create a more balanced composition. It's true that the mahout did not save the archduchess, but the fact that he had imagined it meant that he could have done, and that is what counts. He may find himself pitilessly returned to his solitary state and to the icy teeth of the cold and the snow, but thanks to certain fatalistic beliefs internalized or absorbed in lisbon, fritz considers that if it was written on the tablets of destiny that the archduke would one day make his peace with him, then that day will inevitably arrive. Filled by this comfortable certainty, he abandoned himself to suleiman's rolling gait, once more alone in the landscape, for, in the continuing snow, the rear of the archduke's coach was nowhere in sight. The poor visibility still allowed them to see where they should put their feet, but not where their feet would take them. Meanwhile, the scenery around them had changed, first to something that one might describe as discreet, gentle, almost undulating, now to one so violent it made you think that the mountains must have undergone an apocalyptic series of fractures whose severity had increased in geometric progression. It had taken only twenty leagues to go from rounded spurs that could pass for hills to a tumult of rocks that either split open to form ravines or rose up in peaks that scaled the sky and down whose slopes occasional swift avalanches hurled themselves, thus forming new landscapes and new tracks to delight the skiers of the future. We seem to be approaching the isarco pass, which the austrians insist on calling eisack. We will have to walk for at least another hour before we reach it, but a providential diminution in the thick curtain of snow means that, for a brief moment, we can see it in the distance, a vertical tear in the mountain. The isarco pass, said the mahout. And so it was. It's hard to understand just why the archduke maximilian should have decided to make such a journey at this time of year, but that is how it's set down in history, as an incontrovertible, documented fact, supported by historians and confirmed by the novelist, who must be forgiven for taking certain liberties with names, not only because it is his right to invent, but also because he had to fill in certain gaps so that the sacred coherence of the story was not lost. It must be said that history is always selective, and discriminatory too, selecting from life only what society deems to be historical and scorning the rest, which is precisely where we might find the true explanation of facts, of things, of wretched reality itself. In truth, I say to you, it is better to be a novelist, a fiction writer, a liar. Or a mahout, despite the harebrained fantasies to which, either by birth or profession, they seem to be prone. Although fritz has no option but to be carried

along by suleiman, we have to acknowledge that the edifying story we have been telling would not be the same with another mahout in charge. So far, fritz has been a vital character at every turn, be it dramatic or comic, even at the risk of cutting a ridiculous figure whenever a pinch of the ludicrous was felt to be necessary or merely tactically advisable for the narrative, putting up with humiliations without a word of protest or a flicker of emotion, careful not to let it be known that, without him, there would be no one to deliver the goods, or in this case, to take the elephant to vienna. These remarks may seem unnecessary to readers more interested in the dynamic of the text than in general expressions of supposed solidarity, but it was clear that fritz, after recent disastrous events, needed someone to place a friendly hand on his shoulder, and that is all we did, place a hand on his shoulder. When the mind wanders, when it carries us off on the wings of daydreams, we do not even notice the distances traveled, especially when the feet carrying us are not our own. Apart from the odd stray flake that has lost its way, it has pretty much stopped snowing now. The narrow path ahead of us is the famous isarco pass. Rising almost vertically on either side, the walls of the ravine seem about to crash down onto the path. Fritz's heart contracted with fear, his bones were filled with a cold quite different from anything he had ever known before. He was alone in the midst of that terrible all-pervading threat, for the archduke's imperative orders that the convoy should remain united and cohesive as their sole guarantee of safety, just as mountaineers rope themselves together, had been quite simply ignored. A proverb, if it can be called such, and which is as portuguese as it is indian and universal, sums up such situations elegantly and eloquently, do as I tell you, not as I do. That is precisely how the archduke had behaved, he had given an order, Stay together, but when it came to it, instead of waiting, as he should have done, for the elephant and his mahout who were following behind, especially given that he was the owner of one and the master of the other, he had, figuratively speaking, dug his spurs into his horse and legged it, straight for the far end of the dangerous pass before it was too late and darkness fell. But just imagine if the vanguard of cuirassiers had ridden into the pass and waited there for those behind them to catch up, the archduke and his archduchess, the elephant suleiman and the mahout fritz, the cart carrying the forage, and finally their fellow cuirassiers bringing up the rear, as well as all the wagons in between, laden with coffers and chests and trunks, and the multitude of servants, all fraternally gathered, waiting for the mountain to fall on them or for such an avalanche as had never before been seen to shroud them all in snow, blocking the pass until springtime. Egotism, generally held to be one of the most negative and repudiated of human characteristics, can, in certain circumstances, have its good side. Having saved our own precious skin, by fleeing the deadly mousetrap that the isarco pass had become, we also saved the skins of our traveling companions, who, when they arrived, could continue on their way unobstructed by untimely bottlenecks of traffic, the conclusion, therefore, is easy to draw, every man for himself so that all can be saved. Who would have thought it, not only is a moral act not always what it appears to be, but the more it contradicts itself the more effective it is. Faced by such crystal-clear proofs and roused by the sudden thud, a hundred yards behind them, of a mass of snow, which, while not aspiring to the name of avalanche, was more than enough to give them a real

fright, fritz signaled to suleiman to get walking, now. This order seemed to suleiman rather on the conservative side. Such a perilous situation called not for a walk, but a trot or, better still, a rapid gallop that would save him from the dangers of the isarco pass. Rapid it was, as rapid as saint anthony when he used the fourth dimension to travel to lisbon and save his father from the gallows. Unfortunately, suleiman overestimated his own strength. A few meters after he had left the pass behind him, his front legs crumpled under him and he knelt down, lungs bursting. The mahout, however, was lucky. Such a fall would normally have sent him flying over the head of his unfortunate mount, with god alone knows what tragic consequences, but in suleiman's celebrated elephantine memory there surfaced the recollection of what had happened with the village priest who tried to exorcise him, when, at the last second, at the very last moment, he, suleiman, had softened the blow he had unleashed and that would otherwise have proved fatal. The difference now was that suleiman somehow managed to use what little reserves of energy he had left to reduce the impetus of his own fall, so that his huge knees touched the ground as lightly as a snowflake. How he did this, we have no idea, and we're not going to ask him either. Like magicians, elephants have their secrets. When forced to choose between speaking and remaining silent, an elephant always chooses silence, that is why his trunk grew so long, so that, apart from being capable of transporting tree trunks and serving as an elevator for his mahout, it has the added advantage of being a serious obstacle to any bouts of uncontrolled loquacity. Fritz carefully intimated to suleiman that it was time to make a small effort and get to his feet. He didn't order him, he didn't resort to any of his varied repertoire of flicks and pokes with the stick, some more aggressive than others, he merely intimated his wishes to him, which shows yet again that respect for other people's feelings is the best way to ensure a prosperous and happy life as regards one's relationships and affections. It's the difference between a categorical Get up and a tentative What about trying to get up. There are even those who maintain that jesus actually used the latter phrase and not the former, which provides absolute proof that the resurrection was, ultimately, dependent on lazarus's free will and not on the nazarene's miraculous powers, however sublime they may have been. If lazarus came back to life it was because he was spoken to kindly, as simple as that. And it was clear that the method continues to produce good results, for suleiman, straightening first his right leg and then his left, restored fritz to the relative safety of a rather uncertain verticality, since, up until then, fritz had been entirely dependent on a few stiff hairs on the back of the elephant's neck if he was not to be precipitated down suleiman's trunk. Suleiman is now back on his four feet, suddenly cheered by the arrival of the forage cart which, having battled through the aforementioned mound of snow, thanks to valiant work from the two yoke of oxen, was moving at a sprightly pace toward the end of the pass and the elephant's voracious appetite. Suleiman's almost failing soul now received its reward for the remarkable feat of having restored life to its own prostrate body, which, in the middle of that cruel, white landscape, had looked as if it would never rise again. The table was set right there and then, and while fritz and the ox-driver were celebrating their salvation with a few swigs of brandy provided by the latter, suleiman was devouring bundle after bundle of forage with touching enthusiasm.

All that was lacking was for flowers to bloom in the snow and for the little birds of spring to return to the tyrol and sing their sweet songs. But you can't have everything. It's quite enough that fritz and the ox-driver, putting their two intelligences together, should have found a solution to a worrying tendency among the various components of the convoy to drift apart as if they had nothing to do with each other. It was, shall we say, a bipartite solution, but doubtless a precursor to a different way of approaching problems, that is, even if the aim of the scheme is to serve one's own interests, it's always a good idea to know that one can count on the other party. An integrated solution, in other words. From now on, the oxen and the elephant will, at all times, travel together, the forage cart in front and the elephant behind, with the smell of the hay in his nostrils, so to speak. However logical and rational the topographical distribution of this small group may appear, and as no one would dare to deny, nothing of what has been achieved here, thanks to a genuine desire for unanimity, will apply, well, how could it, to the archduke and archduchess, whose coach has gone on ahead, indeed, it may even have reached bressanone already. If that is so, we are authorized to reveal that suleiman will enjoy a richly deserved two weeks of rest in this well-known tourist spot, in an inn called am hohen feld, which means, appropriately enough, steep land. It's only natural that it will strike some as strange that an inn located in italian territory should have a german name, but this is easily explained when we remember that most of the guests who come here are austrians and germans who like to feel at home. For similar reasons, in the algarve, as someone will later take the trouble to point out, a praia will no longer be called a praia but a beach, a pescador a fisherman, whether he likes it or not, and, as for tourist complexes, they will no longer be called aldeias, but holiday villages, villages de vacances or ferienorte. Things will reach such a pitch that there will no longer be any lojas de modas, because these will be called, in a kind of portuguese by adoption, a boutique and, in english, inevitably, fashion shop, less inevitably, modes in french, and quite bluntly modegeschäft in german. A sapataria will become a shoe shop, and that will be that. And if a traveler were to start collecting the names of bars and nightclubs, like someone hunting for lice, by the time he had gone all around the coast to sines, he would still know hardly a word of portuguese. So despised is that language there that one could say of the algarve, in an age when the civilized are descending into barbarism, that it is the land of portuguese as she is not spoke. And bressanone is the same.

IT IS SAID, once Tolstoy had said it first, that all happy families are alike, and there is really little more to say about them. It would seem that the same is true of happy elephants. One need look no further than Suleiman. During the two weeks he spent in Bressanone, he rested, slept, ate and drank his fill, until he could eat no more, demolishing something like four tons of forage and drinking about three thousand liters of water, thus making up for the many enforced slimming regimes imposed on him during his long journey through the lands of Portugal, Spain and Italy, when it wasn't always possible to replenish his larder on a regular basis. Now that Suleiman has re-covered his strength, he is plump and handsome, after only a week, his flaccid, wrinkled skin has ceased to hang in folds about him like a coat on a hook. The archduke was given the good news and made a point of visiting the elephant in his house, or, rather, stable, rather than having him parade around in the square simply to show off Suleiman's now excellent physical form and magnificent appearance to himself, the archduchess and the assembled populace. Naturally, Fritz was present at this visit, but, conscious that the reconciliation between him and the archduke had not been formalized, if indeed it ever would be, he was discreet and solicitous, careful not to draw attention to himself, but hopeful that the archduke would, at the very least, utter some brief words of congratulation or praise. And so it was. At the end of the visit, the archduke shot him a rapid glance and said, You've done a good job, Fritz, Suleiman must be very pleased, to which Fritz replied, That is all I desire, sir, my life is at your highness's service. The archduke did not respond, apart from muttering a laconic Hmm, a primitive sound, if not the very first, and one which every man is at liberty to interpret as he wishes. Fritz was predisposed by temperament and philosophy of life to take an optimistic view of events, and despite the apparent brusqueness of that grunt and the inappropriateness of such a sound in the mouth of an archduke and soon-to-be emperor, Fritz interpreted it as a step, a small, but definite step, in the direction of much-desired concord. Let us wait until Vienna to see what happens.

The distance from Bressanone to the Brenner Pass is so short that there surely won't be time for the convoy to become dispersed. Neither time nor distance. Which means that we will bump up against the same moral dilemma we met before in the Isarco Pass, namely, should we travel together or separately. It's frightening just to imagine the whole long convoy, from the cuirassiers in the vanguard to those bringing up the rear, being stuck between the walls of the ravine and under constant threat from avalanches or rockfalls. It's probably best to leave the solution of this problem in God's hands and let him decide. Just keep moving and see what happens. This anxiety, however understandable, should not make us forget another worrying factor. According to people who know, the Brenner Pass is ten times more dangerous than the Isarco Pass, others say twenty times, adding that every year it claims a few victims, buried beneath avalanches or crushed by the huge boulders that roll down the mountainside, even though, when their fall begins, there is nothing about them that indicates such a fateful destiny. Let's hope that a time will come when, by building viaducts that span the heights, they can do away with these deep passes in which we are already almost buried alive. The interesting thing is that the people obliged to travel through these passes always do so with a kind

of fatalistic resignation, which, while it may not prevent their bodies from being assailed by fear, at least appears to leave their souls intact and serene, like a steadily burning light that no hurricane could extinguish. People say a lot of things, and not all of them are true, but that is what human beings are like, they can as easily believe that the hair of an elephant, marinated in a little oil, can cure baldness, as imagine that they carry within them the one solitary light that will lead them along life's paths, even through mountain passes. One way or another, as the wise old hermit of the alps once said, we will all have to die.

The weather is not good, which, at this time of year, as has been abundantly demonstrated, is hardly a novelty. It's true that the snow is falling only lightly and that visibility is almost normal, but the wind's chill blasts are like sharp blades come to cut through our clothes, however warm. Just ask the cuirassiers. According to the rumor doing the rounds, the reason they are setting out today is that the meteorological situation is expected to worsen tomorrow, and that, once we have traveled a few kilometers further north, the worst of the alps will, in theory, be behind us. In other words, strike before you are struck. Many of bressanone's inhabitants came to watch the departure of the archduke maximilian and his elephant and were rewarded with a surprise. When the archduke and his wife were about to enter their carriage, suleiman knelt down on the frozen ground, a gesture that provoked a flurry of applause and cheers loud enough to merit being set down in the records. The archduke smiled, but his smile immediately turned to a frown at the thought that this new miracle was probably a crafty maneuver on the part of fritz, desperate to make peace with him. The noble archduke is quite wrong, the elephant's gesture was entirely spontaneous and sprang, if we may put it so, from his soul, it was a way of saying thank you to those who most deserved his thanks, for the excellent treatment meted out to him at the am hohen feld inn during the two weeks he spent there, a whole fortnight of perfect happiness and, therefore, happily uneventful. Although one should also not exclude the possibility that our elephant, quite rightly concerned by the obvious cooling in relations between his mahout and the archduke, intended this charming gesture as a way of pouring oil on troubled waters, as people will say in the future and then cease to say. Then again, so that we are not accused of partiality by perhaps ignoring the real key to the matter, we cannot exclude the hypothesis, not merely academic, that fritz, either deliberately or accidentally, touched suleiman's right ear with his stick, and as we saw from what happened in padua, that ear was a miracle-working organ par excellence. We should know by now that the most exact, most precise representation of the human heart is the labyrinth. And where the human heart is involved, anything is possible.

The convoy is ready to depart. There is a general feeling of apprehension and overt anxiety, it is clear that people cannot get out of their minds the idea of the brenner pass and all its dangers. And the chronicler of these events has no qualms in confessing that he fears he may lack the ability to describe the famous pass that lies ahead, an inability he had to disguise as best he could at the isarco pass by diverting the reader onto

secondary matters, which, while possibly of importance in themselves, were clearly a way of sidestepping the fundamental issue. It's a shame that photography had not yet been invented in the sixteenth century, because then the solution would have been as easy as pie, we would simply have included a few photos from the period, especially if taken from a helicopter, and readers would then have every reason to consider themselves amply rewarded and to recognize the extraordinarily informative nature of our enterprise. By the way, it is time we mentioned that the next small town, a very short distance from Bressanone, is called in Italian, given that we're still in Italy, Vipiteno. The fact that the Austrians and Germans call it Sterzing is beyond our comprehension. Nevertheless, we would accept the possibility, although we'd stop short of actually putting our hand in the fire, that Italian is still more widely spoken here than Portuguese is in the Algarve.

We have left Bressanone now. It's hard to understand why in such a rugged region as this, where there is no shortage of vertiginous mountain ranges one after the other, it was thought necessary to gouge out such deep scars as the Isarco and the Brenner Pass, rather than putting them in places on the planet less blessed with natural beauty, where such exceptional, amazing geological phenomena could, with the aid of the tourist industry, materially benefit the modest, long-suffering lives of the local inhabitants. Contrary to what you might, quite rightly, think, bearing in mind our problems when it came to describing the Isarco Pass, these comments are not intended to replace the foreseeable paucity of descriptions of the Brenner Pass that we are about to enter. They are merely a humble recognition of how much truth is contained in that well-known phrase, Words fail me. Because words really do fail us. They say that in one of the languages spoken by the indigenous peoples of South America, possibly in Amazonia, there are more than twenty ways, about twenty-seven we seem to recall, of describing the color green. Compared with the poverty of our own vocabulary in that respect, you would think it would be easy for them to describe the forests in which they live, in the midst of all those minutely differentiated greens, distinguished by subtle, almost imperceptible nuances. We don't know that they ever tried nor, if they did, whether they were satisfied with the result. What we do know is that a monochromatic approach won't solve the problem, why, one need look no further than the apparently pure whiteness of these mountains, because, for all we know, there may be more than twenty different shades of white that the eye cannot perceive, but whose existence it can intuit. The truth, if we want to accept it in all its crudity, is that it's simply not possible to describe a landscape in words. Or rather, it's possible, but not worthwhile. I wonder if it's even worth writing the word mountain when we don't know what name the mountain would give itself. Painting, though, is a different matter, it's perfectly capable of creating on the palette twenty-seven different shades of green that have eluded nature, plus a few others that don't even seem green, but that, of course, is what we call art. Painted trees do not lose their leaves.

We are now inside the Brenner Pass. On the archduke's express orders, utter silence reigns. This time, the convoy, as if fear had produced a congregational effect, shows not

the slightest tendency to disperse, the muzzles of the horses drawing the archduke's carriage are almost touching the hindquarters of the cuirassiers' horses immediately in front, suleiman is so close to the archduchess's little bottle of perfume that he can breathe in the delicious scent that issues from it whenever the daughter of charles the fifth feels a need to refresh herself. The rest of the convoy, beginning with the ox-cart carrying the forage and the water trough, follows right behind as if there were no other way to reach their destination. Everyone is shivering with cold, but also, and above all, with fear. The tortuous crevices of the sheer escarpments are filled with the snow that occasionally breaks free and falls with a dull thud on the convoy, and these small avalanches, while not dangerous in themselves, only serve to increase the levels of fear. No one feels confident enough to use their eyes to enjoy the beauty of the landscape, although there are those familiar with the place who remark to their neighbor, It's much prettier here when there's no snow, What do you mean prettier, asked their companion, intrigued, Well, it's not really something you can put into words. The greatest disrespect we can show for reality, whatever that reality might be, when attempting the pointless task of describing a landscape, is to do so with words that are not our own and never were, by which we mean words that have already appeared on millions of pages and in millions of mouths before our turn to use them finally comes, weary words, exhausted from being passed from hand to hand, leaving in each one part of their vital substance. If we were to write, for example, the words crystalline stream, so often used in describing landscapes, we never stop to wonder if the stream is still as crystalline as it was when we saw it for the first time, or if it has ceased to be a stream and become instead a rushing river, or, unhappy fate, the foulest and most malodorous of swamps. It may not seem so at first sight, but all of this is closely related to our earlier brave affirmation that it is simply not possible to describe a landscape or, by extension, anything else. In the mouth of a trusted person who, for example, knows these places as they appear at all the different seasons of the year, such words would give us food for thought. If that person, in all honesty and basing himself on long experience, were to say that it's impossible to describe what your eyes see by translating it into words, whether it be snow or a garden in full bloom, how could anyone dare to do so who has never in his life been through the brenner pass and certainly not in the sixteenth century, when there were no roads or gas stations, hot snacks and cups of coffee, not to mention a motel where you could spend the night in the warm, while outside the storm rages and a lost elephant utters the most anguished of cries. We were not there, we have been guided by whatever information we could garner, possibly of dubious value, for example, an old engraving, deserving of our respect only because of its great age and ingenious design, shows an elephant in hannibal's army falling into a ravine when, according to the experts, during the carthaginian army's laborious crossing of the alps, not one elephant was lost. No one was lost here either. The convoy is still keeping together, close and resolute, qualities that are no less praiseworthy for being based, as we explained earlier, on entirely selfish motives. There are, however, exceptions. The cuirassiers' biggest concern, for example, has nothing to do with their own personal safety, but with that of their horses, obliged now to walk on slippery, compacted, blue-gray ice, where a metacarpal fracture would have the

most fatal of consequences. However this may rankle with the stubborn lutheranism of archduke maximilian the second of austria, the miracle performed by suleiman at the door of the basilica of saint anthony in padua has so far protected the convoy, not only the powerful people traveling in it, but the ordinary ones too, which stands as proof, if proof were needed, of the rare and excellent thaumaturgical virtues of a saint who was born fernando de bulhões and over whom two cities, lisbon and padua, have been arguing for centuries, rather pointlessly it must be said, because it is clear to everyone that padua ended up flying the flag of victory, while lisbon had to make do with parades through the streets, red wine, grilled sardines, as well as balloons and pots of marjoram. It isn't enough to know how and where fernando de bulhões was born, one has to wait and find out how and where saint anthony will die.

It's still snowing and, if you'll forgive the slight vulgarity of the expression, it's absolutely perishing. Immense care must be taken when walking because of the wretched ice, but, although we have not yet seen the back of the mountains, our lungs seem to breathe more easily, seem less constricted, free now from the strangely oppressive feeling that descends from the inaccessible heights. The next town is innsbruck, on the banks of the river inn, and, unless the archduke has abandoned the idea he mentioned to his steward while they were still in bressanone, much of the distance that separates us from vienna is to be covered by boat, downstream, first on the river inn as far as passau, and then on the danube, mighty rivers both, especially the danube, which, in austria, is called the donau. It is more than likely that we will have a quiet journey, as quiet as our two-week stay in bressanone, during which nothing of note happened, no burlesque episode to be recounted of an evening, no ghost story to tell the grandchildren, and that is why people felt particularly fortunate, having arrived safe and sound at the am hohen feld inn, far from their families, all anxieties postponed, any creditors forced to rein in their impatience, no compromising letter fallen into the wrong hands, in short, the future, as the ancients used to say, belongs to god alone, so seize the day and trust not in the morrow. This change to the itinerary is not merely some whim of the archduke's, although it does now include two visits that were partly courtesy calls and partly to do with lofty matters concerning the political situation in central europe, the first to the duke of bavaria in wasserburg, the second, rather longer, to müldhorf, to see ernst, also duke of bavaria, prince-archbishop of salzburg. But returning to the subject of roads, it is true that the road from innsbruck to vienna is relatively good, with no cataclysmic geological features like the alps, and although it may not follow a completely straight line, it is at least pretty sure of where it's going. However, the advantage of rivers is that they are like roads that can walk, they can travel under their own steam, especially such mighty rivers as the inn and the danube. The greatest beneficiary of this change will be suleiman who, if he needs a drink, will have only to go over to the side of the boat, stick his trunk in the water and suck. On the other hand, he would not be at all pleased if he knew what a chronicler from the riverside town of hall just outside innsbruck, a scribe called franz schweyher, had written, Maximilian returned in splendor from spain, bringing with him an elephant that is twelve feet tall and mouse-

colored. Given what we know of suleiman, his riposte would have been quick, direct and incisive, It isn't elephants who are mouse-colored, it's mice who are elephant-colored. And he would add, A little more respect, please.

Swaying to the rhythm of suleiman's stately step, fritz brushes off the snow that has adhered to his eyebrows and wonders what his future in vienna will be, he's a mahout and will continue to be a mahout, nor could he ever be anything else, but the memory of his time in lisbon, where he was initially feted by the populace, even nobles from the royal court, who are, strictly speaking, also members of the populace, then promptly forgotten by everyone, leads him to ask himself if, in vienna, they will also place him in a stockade with the elephant and leave him there to rot. Something is sure to happen, solomon, he said, this journey has been only an interval, and just be glad that the mahout subhro has given you back your real name, you will have the life, be it good or bad, for which you were born and from which you cannot escape, but I wasn't born to be a mahout, in fact, no man was born to be a mahout even if no other door opens for him in his entire existence, basically, I'm a kind of parasite on you, a louse hidden among the bristles on your back, I probably won't live for as long as you will, men's lives are short compared with those of elephants, that's a known fact, I wonder what will become of you if I'm not around, they'll summon another mahout, of course, some one will have to take care of suleiman, perhaps the archduchess will offer her services, that would be funny, an archduchess serving an elephant, or else one of the princes when they're grown up, but, one way or another, dear friend, while your future is guaranteed, mine isn't, I'm a mahout, a parasite, a mere appendage.

Weary from such a long journey, we reached innsbruck on a notable date in the catholic calendar, epiphany, in the year fifteen hundred and fifty-two. There was a terrific party as one would expect in the first big austrian town to welcome the archduke. It's not quite clear whether the applause was for him or for the elephant, not that this matters much to the future emperor, for whom suleiman is, apart from anything else, a political tool of the first order, whose importance could never be diminished by petty jealousy. The success of their reception in wasserburg and müldhorf is bound to owe something to the presence of a creature hitherto unknown in austria, as if maximilian the second had conjured it out of thin air to please his subjects, from the lowest to the highest. The whole final stage of the elephant's journey will be a constant joyful clamor that will spread from one town to another like wildfire, as well as providing inspiration to the artists and poets of each place we pass through and who will outdo themselves producing paintings, engravings and commemorative medals, or composing poetic inscriptions like those written by the well-known humanist caspar bruschi, intended for the town hall of linz. And speaking of linz, where the convoy will abandon ships, boats and rafts to continue the rest of the journey on foot, it is only natural that someone will want to know why the archduke didn't continue on in comfort down the river, since the same river danube that brought them to linz would also have taken them on to vienna. Such thoughts are at best naïve and, at worst, ignorant, showing, as they do, a complete

failure to grasp the importance in the lives of nations in general and of politics and other commercial enterprises in particular of a well-thought-out publicity campaign. What would happen if archduke maximilian of austria were to make the mistake of disembarking in the port of vienna. Now, ports, whether large or small, whether they serve river or sea, have never been noted for their orderliness or cleanliness, and when, by chance, they present themselves to us with every appearance of organized normality, it is wise to remember that such an appearance is merely one of the countless and not infrequently contradictory faces of chaos. What would happen if the archduke were to disembark along with all his convoy, elephant included, onto a quay crammed with crates and sacks and sundry bundles, in the midst of all that detritus, with the crowds getting in the way, just how would he manage to make his way through to the city's new avenues and there prepare for a proper parade. It would be a very sad entrance after more than three years' absence. And that is not what will happen. In müldhorf, the archduke will give orders to his steward to draw up plans for a reception party in vienna befitting the event, or events, firstly, and most obviously, the arrival of himself and the archduchess, secondly, the arrival of that marvel of nature, the elephant suleiman, who will astonish the viennese just as he has astonished all those who laid eyes on him in portugal, spain and italy, which, to be fair, are not exactly barbarous lands. Messengers on horseback left for vienna with orders intended for the burgermeister, orders in which the archduke expressed his wish to see reflected in people's hearts and in the streets all the love that he and the archduchess felt for the city. Well, a nod is as good as a wink to a blind man. Other instructions were issued, for internal use only, suggesting that it would be a good idea to take advantage of the journey down the rivers inn and danube to carry out a general clean-up of people and animals, although, since, for understandable reasons, this could not include bathing in the ice-cold waters of the river, said clean-up would have to be a fairly superficial affair. Every morning, the archduke and archduchess were provided with a goodly quantity of hot water for their ablutions, and this led those members of the convoy concerned with their own personal hygiene to sigh sadly and murmur, I wish I was an archduke. They didn't want the power that maximilian the second held in his hands, indeed, they might not even have known what to do with it, but they did covet that hot water, about whose utility they appeared to have no doubts.

When he disembarked in linz, the archduke already had very clear ideas about how to organize the convoy to his best advantage, especially as regards the psychological impact of his return on the population of vienna, which was, after all, the capital and, therefore, a place of heightened political sensibilities. The cuirassiers, who had up until then been divided into vanguard and rearguard, became one unit at the head of the convoy. Immediately behind them came the elephant, which, we must admit, was a strategic move worthy of an alekhine, especially when we learn that the archduke's carriage will come only third in the convoy. The objective was clear, to give greatest prominence to suleiman, which made perfect sense, since vienna had seen archdukes of austria before, whereas this would be their first sighting of an elephant. It is thirty-two leagues from linz to vienna and there will be two planned intermediate stops, one in melk

and the other in the town of amstetten, where they will sleep, small stages, so that the convoy can enter vienna looking reasonably fresh. The weather is far from perfect, the snow continues to fall and the wind has still not lost its cutting edge, but compared with the isarco and brenner passes, this could easily be the road to paradise, although it's unlikely that roads exist in that celestial place, because souls, once they've fulfilled the necessary entrance requirements, are immediately equipped with a pair of wings, the only authorized means of locomotion up there. There will be no further rest after amstetten. The people from the villages came down to the road to see the archduke and found themselves face to face with an animal of whom they had vaguely heard and who provoked both understandable curiosity and the most absurd explanations, as happened to the lad who, when he asked his grandfather why the elephant was called an elephant, received the answer, Because he has a trunk. An austrian, even one from the lower classes, is not just anyone, he always has to know everything. Another idea that sprang up among these good people, as we tend so patronizingly to call them, was that in suleiman's country of origin everyone owned an elephant, just as here people owned a horse, a mule, or more often a donkey, and that they must be pretty rich if they could afford to feed an animal that size. The proof of this came when we had to stop in the middle of the road so that suleiman could eat, because for some unknown reason, he had turned up his nose at breakfast. A small crowd gathered round, amazed at the speed with which the elephant, with the aid of his trunk, stuffed the bundles of hay into his mouth and swallowed them, having first turned them over a couple of times with his powerful molars, which, although invisible from the outside, were easy enough to imagine. As the convoy neared vienna, there was a gradual but noticeable improvement in the weather. Nothing extraordinary, there was still a lot of low cloud, but it had stopped snowing. Someone said, If it goes on like this, we'll arrive in vienna with a clear blue sky and in brilliant sunshine. That isn't quite what happened, but things would have been very different on this journey if the weather in general had followed the example of what will one day become known as the city of the waltz. Now and then, the convoy was obliged to stop because the men and women from the surrounding villages wanted to show off their singing and dancing skills, which particularly pleased the archduchess, whose pleasure the archduke shared in a benevolent, almost fatherly manner, corresponding to a still common attitude, What do you expect, that's women for you. The towers and domes of vienna were already on the horizon, the doors of the city stood wide open, and the people were out in the streets and in the squares, dressed in their best clothes in honor of the archduke and archduchess. That is how valladolid had greeted the elephant too, but iberian folk are as easily pleased as children. Here, in austrian vienna, they cultivate discipline and order, there's something almost teutonic about it, as the future will show. The most powerful figure of authority is arriving in the city, and what prevails among the population is a feeling of respect and unconditional deference. Life, however, has many cards up its sleeve and often produces them when we least expect it. The elephant was proceeding unhurriedly, at a measured pace, the pace of one who knows that more haste does not necessarily mean more speed. Suddenly, a girl of about five, as we later learned, who was watching the cortège with her parents, let go of her mothers hand and

ran toward the elephant. A horrified gasp left the throats of all those who could foresee the tragedy about to unfold, the animal's feet knocking down and trampling the poor little body, the archduke's return besmirched by misfortune, national mourning, the terrible blot on the city's escutcheon. They clearly did not know solomon. He coiled his trunk around the girl's body as if in an embrace and lifted her into the air like a new flag, the flag of a life saved at the very last moment, when it was about to be lost. The girl's weeping parents ran to solomon and received in their arms their daughter, restored, brought back to life, while everyone else applauded, many of them dissolving into tears of uncontrolled emotion, some saying that it had been a miracle, quite unaware of the miracle solomon had performed in padua by kneeling at the door of the basilica of saint anthony. And then, as if the denouement of the dramatic incident we have just witnessed were not quite complete, the archduke was seen to step down from his carriage before helping the archduchess down as well, whereupon both of them, hand in hand, walked over to the elephant, who was still surrounded by people cheering him as the hero of the day, and as he would continue to be for a long time afterwards, for the story of the elephant who saved a little viennese girl from certain death will be told a thousand times and elaborated upon a thousand times more, even now. When the people realized that the archduke and archduchess were approaching, silence fell, and the crowd made way for them. Shock was still evident on many faces, some of the onlookers were even having difficulty drying their tears. Fritz had descended from the elephant's back and was waiting. The archduke stopped and looked him straight in the eye. Fritz bowed his head and saw before him the archduke's right hand, open and expectant, Sir, I do not dare, he said, and held out his own hands, dirty from continuous contact with the elephant's skin, who was, nevertheless, still the cleaner of the two, since fritz could not remember when he'd last had a proper bath, whereas suleiman cannot pass a pool of water without plunging into it. When the archduke still did not withdraw his hand, fritz had no alternative but to shake it, his hard, calloused mahout's skin touching the fine, delicate skin of a man who had never even had to dress himself. Then the archduke said, Thank you for avoiding a tragedy, But I didn't do anything, sir, suleiman deserves all the praise, That may be so, but you, I imagine, must have contributed in some way, Well, I did what I could, sir, I wouldn't be a mahout otherwise, If everyone did what they could, the world would doubtless be a better place, If your highness says so, it must be true, You're forgiven, there's no need for flattery, Thank you, sir, Welcome to vienna and I hope vienna deserves both you and suleiman, you'll be happy here. And with that, maximilian went back to his carriage, leading the archduchess by the hand. Charles the fifth's daughter is pregnant yet again.

THE ELEPHANT DIED less than two years later, when it was once more winter, in the final month of fifteen hundred and fifty-three. The cause of death was never known, at the time there were no blood tests, chest x-rays, endoscopies, mri scans or any of the other things that are now everyday occurrences for humans, although less so for animals, who die with no nurse to place a hand upon their fevered brow. As well as skinning solomon, they cut off his front legs so that, once duly cleaned and cured, they could serve as recipients, at the entrance to the palace, for walking sticks, canes, umbrellas and sunshades in summer. As you see, kneeling before the archduke did solomon no good at all. The mahout subhro received from the hands of the steward the part of his salary that was owing to him, to which was added, by order of the archduke, a rather generous tip, and with that money, he bought a mule on which to ride and a donkey to carry the box containing his few possessions. He announced that he was going back to lisbon, but there is no record of him having entered the country. He must either have changed his mind or died en route.

Weeks later, the archduke's letter reached the portuguese court. In it, he informed them that the elephant suleiman had died, but that the inhabitants of vienna would never forget him, for he had saved the life of a child on the very day he arrived in the city. The first reader of the letter was the secretary of state, pêro de alcáçova carneiro, who handed it to the king, saying, Solomon has died, sir. Dom joão the third looked surprised at first and then a shadow of grief darkened his face. Summon the queen, he said. Dona catarina was quick to arrive, as if she sensed that the letter brought news of interest to her, perhaps a birth or a wedding. It was clearly neither a birth nor a wedding, for her husband's face told quite another story. Dom joão the third said softly, Our cousin maximilian writes to say that solomon. The queen would not allow him to finish, I don't want to know, she cried, I don't want to know. And she ran off and shut herself in her room, where she wept for the rest of the day.

If Gilda Lopes Encarnação had not been Portuguese leitora at the University of Salzburg, if I had not been invited to talk to her students there, and if Gilda had not arranged for us to have supper in a restaurant called the Elephant, this book would not exist. Certain unknown fates came together that night in the city of Mozart in order that this writer would ask: "What are those carvings over there?" The carvings were small wooden sculptures lined up in a row, and the first of them was Lisbon's Torre de Belém. This was followed by representations of various European buildings and monuments that clearly marked an itinerary. I was told that they illustrated the journey from Lisbon to Vienna made by an elephant in the sixteenth century, in 1551 to be precise, when João III was on the throne of Portugal. I sensed that there could be a story in this and said as much to Gilda Lopes Encarnação. She thought so too and undertook to help me gather the necessary historical facts. This book is the result of that chance encounter and owes an enormous debt to my providential supper companion, to whom I wish to express my deepest gratitude, as well as my esteem and respect.

JOSÉ SARAMAGO

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